

The impact of classifying denotified tribes | Explained

How many denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic tribes have been comprehensively categorised by the Anthropological Survey of India and Tribal Research Institutes? What will be the impact on SC, ST and OBC reservations? How many communities were classified for the first time ever?

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Members of the Adi tribe dressed in their traditional attire during the Hiyom Banggo Unying Gidi festival 2025, at Pessing in Siang, Arunachal Pradesh on January 28. | Photo Credit: ANI

The story so far: The Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) and Tribal Research Institutes (TRI) across the country have for the first time comprehensively categorised 268 denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic tribes that were thought to have never been classified before. After a three-year study, the AnSI and TRIs have recommended the inclusion of 179 of these communities in the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes lists. At least 85 of these communities are being recommended for a classification for the first time ever. The study also found that 63 communities that had never been classified were “not traceable” anymore — meaning that they had likely assimilated into larger communities, changed their names, or migrated to other States.

Why was the study needed?

Ever since the Criminal Tribes Act of 1924 was repealed in August 1949, after which communities notified as “criminal” had been denotified, successive commissions have tried to classify these communities, starting with the First Backward Classes Commission headed by Kaka Kalelkar.

Since then, the Lokur Committee (1965), the Mandal Commission (1980), the Renke Commission (2008), and the Idate Commission (2017) have tried to classify such tribes across the country. However, they have fallen short of being able to identify all such communities.

The last Commission tasked with this was the one headed by Bhiku Ramji Idate, which submitted its report in December 2017. In this report, it had listed a total of over 1,200 denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic tribes across the country, apart from which, it said there were 267 communities that had never been classified. The Idate Commission’s report had noted that previous commissions had never been able to classify these communities, recommending strongly that the classification work be completed as soon as possible. To this end, the Prime Minister’s Office constituted a Special Committee in February 2019, headed by the Vice Chairperson of the NITI Aayog, consisting of Mr. Idate, Dr. J.K. Bajaj of the Centre for Policy Studies, and the Director-General of the AnSI as members. This Committee gave the work of classification to the AnSI and TRIs, which began work on the project in February 2020, submitting a report in August 2023.

What is the need for categorisation?

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment had in a December 2022 report said that it had repeatedly flagged the government’s “inability to take necessary action” on the speedy categorisation of these communities. “Delay in locating them would increase their suffering and they would not be able to get benefits of the prevailing schemes meant for the welfare of SC/STs,” the House panel said.

S. Narayan, Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Social Sciences in New Delhi pointed out that the issue with wrong categorisation began with some of the first Censuses ever conducted by colonial administrations. “There were many instances of tribes being classified as castes and vice versa. Many of it may have had political considerations behind it and this continued after Independence as well.” He added that while the act of including communities in SC, ST, OBC lists may be political, when one applies an anthropological lens to it, the classifications are bound to be different.

Further, community activists and experts like Dr. B.K. Lodhi, who also assisted the Idate Commission in its work, said that in the absence of a complete list of denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic communities across the country, it has been very difficult to organise the communities and its peoples. “Some are classified as SC, ST, OBC, some of this is also incorrect. And beyond this, there are hundreds that have not been classified.”

What will be the impact?

Now that almost all denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes are closer to being classified than ever before, one impact has been political. Community activists across U.P., Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat are pushing hard to question the premise of classifying these communities as SC, ST, and OBC altogether, with an eye on reservations.

Within the Development and Welfare Board for De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities, there are now two strands of thoughts. One calls for the completion of the classification process so that all denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes get benefits meant for them as per the classification of SC, ST, or OBC, including that of reservation. The other calls for creating a separate classification altogether — for denotified tribes in the form of a Schedule in the Constitution. Secondly, depending on what action the government takes on the recommendations on this study, it will make it easier for State governments to initiate the process of inclusion if they so decide to do it.

What next?

While the AnSI and TRIs have completed the ethnographic study, this report remains with the Special Committee headed by the Vice-Chairperson of the NITI Aayog. Officials have said that this committee is now “scrutinising” the recommendations and will soon prepare a final report, on which the Government will take a call.

