

Branded by Birth

Nomadic communities are one of India's most backward groups. In the Alwar district of Rajasthan, they have been agitating to secure their constitutional rights, under the banner of the Gomantoo Vikas Panchayat. This panchayat of nomads was mobilised by Ratan Katyayani through his NGO, Mukti Dhara. He tells Rita Anand that nomads are keen to settle but require shelter, livelihood and social acceptance.

What is the present status of India's nomadic communities?

We have about 200 nomadic communities but since they are not enumerated separately in the Census, it's hard to give exact figures. The British passed the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 and branded them criminals by birth. In 1952, this Act was revoked but was replaced with the Habitual Offenders Act. The only change is that this Act targets individuals and not communities. The old mindset which sees these people as criminals, continues.

According to our estimates, there are about five or six crore nomads in India for whom freedom has no meaning. There are frequent violations of their human rights and most of them have never voted. In Europe, the Roma (gypsy) community which traces its origins to northwest India, has also faced severe racial discrimination for centuries. They have been called the lost children of India. The accelerating political integration of central and east European countries into the European Union is offering them an excellent opportunity to get better legal protection. Countries keen to join the EU have to meet stringent conditions pertaining to human rights.

Why do nomads want to settle?

They have lost their traditional means of livelihood and are surviving in a destitute state. The development of road and rail transport has left the Banjaras stranded. The songs of the Bhopas or the entertainment provided by the Nats finds few takers. The Wildlife Act of India took away the livelihood of the Bawarias who were skilled hunters. For the nomad in Rajasthan the desire for a home is all-consuming. Since they cannot furnish a permanent address they have been left out of the mainstream in every way. But wherever nomads try to settle they are hounded, their huts burnt and they are often thrown into prison on false charges. The worst sufferers are women and children. They have no access to healthcare and women give birth out in the open. The Nats are selling their girls because of poverty. There are objections raised by the village community when they try to cremate their dead in the local cemetery.

What has the government done to help nomads settle?

The government has not tried to find them a source of livelihood or provide housing. There is no national level rehabilitation policy either. But the state has innumerable laws which it cannot implement. Small plots of fallow land are distributed to local landlords in collusion with the administration while the destitute nomad runs from pillar to post to secure a *patta* (land right). We need better governance and transparency in administration.

What has Mukti Dhara done about this state of affairs?

We cannot wait for the government any more. Our slogan is, 'the government's land is our land'. We are trying to rehabilitate about 50,000 nomads by getting them ration cards, voting rights and land rights. Mukti Dhara issues an identity card to each nomad. We are also getting them listed as living below the poverty line. We have helped them organise their own panchayat called the Gomantoo Vikas Panchayat. Village Bamanwas is the first settlement where nomads have secured *pattas* after a prolonged agitation. This struggle was primarily led by women. The Gomantoo Vikas Panchayat is asking the government to give *pattas* to nomads and provide civic facilities, including clean drinking water, to their settlements. The panchayat

- has also requested that pensions be given to widowed nomadic women and nomads be listed officially as below the poverty line.

How do you propose to tackle the issue of livelihood?

Integrating the nomads into a rapidly globalising world is the biggest challenge we face. But

we intend to emphasise traditional skills. We would like to see the Bhopas become part of the music world. The Gadiya Lohars can be merged into the metal industry or helped to become small-scale entrepreneurs. The Banjara women are good with embroidery and could be linked to the garment sector. The Bawarias can rear livestock, especially poultry. The Nats are natural entertainers. If the nomads do acquire land we can link them to the agro-processing sector. The nomads have traditional skills in medicine. The Saperas know a lot about antidotes for snakebite. We could get the pharmaceutical industry interested.

What is the kind of future action which needs to be taken?

The government, village community and society need to be made aware of the issue so that there are no violations of rights and an atmosphere of humanity is built. IAS and IPS officers should work with NGOs during their training period. It must be made the responsibility of the district magistrate to ensure that nomads do not need to wander. We have also been saying that the nomadic community is the most backward in India and they should be listed separately.

Q&A



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