Dhangars' Demand for ST Status

Why in news?

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Following the Maratha agitation for reservation in Maharashtra, the Dhangar community's demand for ST status has also gained momentum.

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Who are the Dhangars?

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- Dhangars are a shepherd community who live mostly in Western Maharashtra and Marathwada.
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- They make up about a crore of Maharashtra’s roughly 11.25 crore population (9%).
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- They do play a key role in election outcomes of the state’s Lok Sabha and Assembly seats.
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- The four LS seats regions are Baramati, Madha, Solapur, and Satara.
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What is their demand?

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- Dhangars are currently on the list of Vimukta Jati and Nomadic Tribes (VJNT) in Maharashtra.
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- However, they have been demanding Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the past several decades.
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- They claim that Dhangars in Maharashtra are the same as those who are called “Dhangad” elsewhere in the country.
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- Notably “Dhangad” are listed as a Scheduled Tribe.
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- It is said that a typographical error had led to the community’s name being recorded as “Dhangar”.
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- **Reservation** - Maharashtra has 52% reservation in all.
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- In this, SCs and STs have 13% and 7% respectively, and OBCs have 19%.
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- The Vimukta Jati/Denotified Tribes, Special Backward Class, and Nomadic Tribes together have 13%.
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- Dhangars are, notably, a ‘Nomadic Tribe’.
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What is the government's stand?

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- The state had in 2015 got the assistance of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in this regard.
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- TISS was asked to establish whether Dhangars meet the criteria to be identified as ST.
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- In effect, this meant establishing whether Dhangars were the same as Dhangads.
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- This is to prevent any future legal challenge to Dhangars being moved from VJNT to ST.
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- The TISS study is in an advanced stage and the government too has reiterated it's commitment to the Dhangars.
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What is the challenge?

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- Almost all parties had, in the last two decades, supported the inclusion of Dhangars in the ST category.
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- However, they face the opposition of the Scheduled Tribes (STs).
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- STs are unwilling to allow the dilution of their quota by the inclusion of a large community like the Dhangars.
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- ST MPs and MLAs have said that Dhangars could be included only if the overall ST quota is increased.
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Source: Indian Express

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