Scheduled Tribes Status

What is the issue?

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- The Constitution ensures certain protection and benefits for communities deemed as having Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.
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- Social and political mobilisation has led to the increase of number of STs 225 in 1960 to 700 today.
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- As the number of communities demanding ST status expands, it brings the criteria of the recognition and the legitimacy of the process under scrutiny.
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What does the constitution say?

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- The Constitution only states that STs are specified by the President after consultation with the Governor.
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- It does not define or specify a particular criterion.
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- According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the criterion includes
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1. Indication of "primitive" traits,
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2. Distinctive culture,
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3. Geographical isolation,
4. "Shyness of connect" with the community at large &
5. "Backwardness"

Who are Narikuravars?

- Many communities try to prove themselves as meeting the criteria, to avail of the benefits of being accorded ST status.
- One such group is Narikuravar.
- They are a **semi-nomadic tribe**, originating in Northern India before migrating south to Tamil Nadu.
- They share religious, cultural, and political characteristics with many of the **Roma groups in Europe**.
- Traditionally hunters, they were mostly providing security for kings.
- However, once invaders took over they became nomadic and retreated into forests, where they preserved their traditions and freedoms.
- When hunting became illegal, they have lived at the margins of the society in dire poverty, making and selling small ornaments.

What is their present socio-economic status?

- The community struggles with high levels of illiteracy, multiple health challenges, and unemployment.
- Currently, there are about 8,500 Narikuravar families in Tamil Nadu i.e less than 1% of their population.

- The government classifies them as a Most Backward Class community.
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- Classifying Narikuravars as OBCs leads to the assumption that they have a higher chance of being above the poverty line than communities recognised as STs.
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- e.g In 2005, the percentage of STs below the poverty line in rural Tamil Nadu was 32% but that of rural OBCs was only 19%.
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- Due to this classification, they have been competing for access to government benefits with nineteen other larger communities with higher socio-economic status.
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Do they satisfy the criteria?

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- Their nomadism across rural and urban areas is against the criteria of **"geographical isolation"**.
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- Narikuravar sell their products to the community at large. So they might not display **'shyness of connect'**.
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- But since these criteria are not explicit, it is difficult for the community to formulate clear political demands.
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- Their efforts since 2013, on grassroots political mobilisation and hunger strikes have increased awareness of the poor state of the community.
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- It has led to efforts by the Centre to amend the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order of 1950 to include the Narikuravar, Kurivikarran, and Malayelee Gounder among the STs.
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- The bills were introduced in the Lok Sabha in December 2016 and await passage.
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What does it signify?

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- The betterment of obviously disadvantaged groups like Narikuravar rests on discretionary political acts.
- This is because there is no well-developed, transparent criterion and a clear definition of what makes groups eligible for ST status.
- Such criteria with specific economic and social data should be developed.
- It can help compare communities requesting ST status with other STs and to the Indian population at large
- By this greater transparency and confidence in the process can be ensured.

Source: Business Line