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'Nomads want to settle down'

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EVERY Indian city has its share of impoverished street entertainers. They can make monkeys jig and bears dance, or a snake sway to a lilting flute. Sometimes in a park you will see a little girl doing acrobatics or walking on a tightrope high in the sky.

Such traditional performers belong to a broad cluster of communities that come under the category of denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes (DNTs/NTs). For historic reasons these communities are amongst the poorest in India today.

At one time, communities like the Banjaras, Sansis, Pardis, Nats, Gadiya Lohars freely roamed through forests, pastures, villages and towns. Herders went in search of pastures while itinerant traders bartered spices, honey, salt and other products. Footloose musicians, acrobats, fortune tellers entertained the people.

But in 1871 the British branded these wandering souls as criminals by birth under the Criminal Tribes Act. They were suspicious of tribal communities without an address because they could not keep tabs on them. The British also wanted to extend their writ over forests.

In 1952 the government abolished the shameful Criminal Tribes Act or 'denotified' these communities. But in 1959, the government enacted a Habitual Offenders Act which activists say is biased. They have asked for its repeal.

Such tribal communities are India's invisible people. They don't have ration cards or voter ID cards or access to education, shelter and livelihood.

Civil Society spoke to **Balkrishna Renake**, chairman of the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, which comes under the Union government's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

Is there a desire among DNTs/NTs to settle?

Yes, there is. More than 90 per cent of DNTs and NTs want to settle as they are tired of roaming. Their first and most important need is to have a secure livelihood so that they don't go hungry. The second is the facility of shelter. Along with these, education facilities are required. Residential government schools should be established for them. Such schools should also provide vocational education. All these are the government's responsibilities. There should be time bound programmes to

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provide the DNTs and NTs shelter and livelihood.

How can they earn a livelihood?

Their professions should be changed and modified. They should not become destitute and be forced to beg. People from such communities can become exemplary artists and performers. Their skills should be made market oriented so that they can earn not only money but respect. For example, nats who perform dance for a living can become professional dancers. Similarly snake charmers could be taught to extract snake venom.

Their skills should be linked to land, water and forests. Then their skills which are now considered their weakness may be converted to their strength. A cultural academy and research institute of their arts can be established.

There is also a need to extend the employment guarantee scheme to them. It can be linked to skill building. So they could earn money from the employment guarantee scheme for three to four years and alongside learn enough skills to become self-reliant and earn a living on their own.

What is the census awareness about the number of

DNTs/NTs?

As per our estimate, the number of these most vulnerable and destitute people must be about 100 million. It is very difficult to tell exactly how many such people there are as they are spread over SC, OBC and general categories. The last census on caste basis was done in 1931 and we have extrapolated some data from it and from our own special surveys.

Should there be a separate list for them so that they can avail of reservation?

Yes, I would advocate for it, since in some states some of them are in the OBC category and in other states they are in the general category. For example, the Banjaras are listed as OBCs in UP and Maharashtra and as ST in AP and Karnataka.

Should there be private sector reservation for them?

In the new economy, doubtlessly, the role of the private sector is very important. But reservation for them is not the answer as most of them do not have even the bare minimum skills to take up jobs in the private sector. They don't have the capacities to avail of this reservation. There is the danger that others will falsely acquire their caste certificates to corner this facility. The current need is for skill building and capacity development through quality, vocational education. Reservation in the private sector may be provided to the next generation.

Should the Habitual Offenders Act be abolished?

This act is as good as dead as it is not applied on caste and community basis any longer and the police never invoke it. The first need is to provide them citizenship, so that they are able to enjoy all legal rights including forming gram sabhas and gram panchayats. Then, the Prevention of Atrocities Act should be extended to them. Finally, the Minimum Landholdings Act may be applied to them.

There must be some existing laws that could help?

On the contrary, some laws made for the welfare of the country and society at large are quite painful for them. For instance, because of the Wildlife Protection Act, many people belonging to these tribes like those who perform acrobatics with monkeys and bears, are now considered criminals. Similarly those who depend on selling traditional medicines can be harassed under the Drugs and Magic Act.