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Affirmative Action and the Protection of Interest Groups

Uncounted, Unsettled, Unheard:

The Contemporary Realities of Denotified and Nomadic Tribes in Maharashtra, India: Policy Gaps and the Way Forward



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INTRODUCTION

The history of Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT/NT) in India is closely connected to British colonial policies of criminalisation, surveillance and control. The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 enabled the colonial government to classify entire communities as "criminal tribes," based on the notion that criminality could be associated with community or hereditary identity rather than individual acts. The Act established registration and surveillance systems and empowered authorities to monitor and restrict the movement of communities classified under it. For many itinerant communities, colonial efforts to regulate mobility and establish settlements disrupted existing lifestyles and livelihoods, while exposing them to sustained surveillance and social stigma. This transformed NT-DNTs from economically mobile communities into administratively controlled and socially stigmatised populations, exposing them to police harassment, loss of livelihood, forced sedentarisation and exclusion from mainstream society. (NCDNT, 2008; Major, 1999).

Although the CTA was repealed after independence in 1952 and these communities were formally "denotified," the colonial construction of hereditary criminality left a lasting stigma. Thus, the vulnerability of NT-DNTs was not simply a consequence of poverty; it was historically produced through a process of criminalisation, surveillance, and the disruption of their traditional livelihood systems. As a result, subsequent legislation forcibly alienated them from their traditional occupations and homes. Many communities did not know that, in their humble way, earning a living was a crime; for instance, collecting nuts and berries from the forests (Idate Commission Report, 2017).

India has spent decades trying to identify and classify communities that were historically classified as "criminal tribes", but the problem of classification has not disappeared. The Idate Commission itself worked with multiple categories of state-recognised communities, additional communities and communities requiring further validation. In April 2025, the Union government stated that 268 communities remained unclassified and that a committee under the Vice-Chairperson of NITI Aayog had been constituted to examine their classification.

They have faced many vulnerabilities since the pre-independence and post-independence periods. During the pre-independence period, they faced the severity of the Criminal Tribes Act and other relevant legislation. Because the Laws were stringent, communities faced neglect due to the stigma of criminality and associated problems. Denotified and Nomadic Tribes have suffered from the denial of fundamental freedoms and civil and political rights from the colonial period.

The post-independence policy framework did not adequately recognise or address the diverse social, economic and administrative realities of these communities; as a result, they missed out on many policy provisions. As a result, they lack representation in the socio-economic, educational, and policy spheres. Despite a few welfare measures, their progress has remained slow. They remain among the most socioeconomically marginalised communities and are often invisible across all areas of development. Therefore, we need to understand the issues of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes in detail so they can enter the mainstream of development.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

As far as Denotified Tribes are concerned, they were branded as criminal tribes, known as Vimukt Jatis. Encyclopedia of Social Sciences Vol. 11-12 (1933) defines a nomadic tribe as "a group of people who move from place to place and have a specific traditional means of livelihood". Under the Denotified, Nomadic and Tribes category, there are various subgroups.

POPULATION

The exact population of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNT/NT/SNT) in India remains uncertain because no comprehensive caste-wise enumeration has been conducted since the 1931 Census. The National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (Renke Commission) noted that no authoritative source provided the number of nomadic communities in India and identified approximately 500 nomadic communities, in addition to around 150 denotified communities. The Commission estimated that the combined population of DNT, NT and SNT communities could be more than 100 million, while also emphasising the need for an official enumeration (NCDNT, 2008). According to Ashramshala teachers' estimates, the figure stood at 7.112 million. Assuming an annual growth rate of 1.6 per cent, the estimated population stood at 8.267 million in 2011. In other words, reliable contemporary population estimates remain difficult to establish, partly because the administrative boundaries of the DNT/NT/SNT/VJNT category have evolved through successive commissions, state lists, and classification exercises.

Before we can count them, we have to decide who counts

India has spent decades trying to complete the basic administrative task of identifying its denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities. Counting Maharashtra's denotified and nomadic communities is not just a matter of finding a missing population figure. It first requires deciding who belongs in the category. The National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes was assigned to prepare state-wise lists and examine the communities' inclusion in the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backwards Classes categories. However, the list was explicitly described as a draft and still required further verification and consultation with state governments, researchers, NGOs, and community representatives. The Maharashtra section shows this complexity.

The document includes separate lists of denotified and nomadic communities, based on different sources, including the Renke Commission, Maharashtra's state list, and community submissions. If the state is still negotiating the category's boundaries, how easy is it to establish a reliable denominator for measuring deprivation, allocating resources, or assessing whether welfare programs have reached everyone who needs them?

ISSUES FACED BY DENOTIFIED AND NOMADIC TRIBES

Education

For DNT families whose livelihoods involve frequent mobility, children often experience repeated disruption of schooling and changes in school enrolment. Educational attainment among these communities remains low. According to a survey by the National Education Group (NEG) through its Western Zone Resource Centre, covering 11 districts, 317 wadis/vastis, and 28,825 individuals in Maharashtra, the literacy rate among denotified communities was 30%, with 40% among males and 20% among females. The survey further reported that only 16% of youth had reached secondary education, while higher education remained rare (Patil 2021).

Figure 1 shows the number of Primary, Secondary, & Higher Secondary Ashram schools in Maharashtra.

FIGURE 1. STUDENT POPULATION AND EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

S. No	Type of School	Total Numbers	Students		
			Residential	Non-Residential	Total
1	Primary Ashram School	526	57842	73295	131137
2	Secondary Ashram School	296	32550	41246	73796
3	Higher Secondary Ashram School	148*	11840	11840	23680
	Total	970	102232	126381	228613

Source: वमुक्त जाती भटक्या जमाती, इतर मागासवर्ग व वशिष मागास प्रवर्ग कल्याण (२०१७), महाराष्ट्र राज्य (Department of Welfare of Denotified Tribes, Nomadic Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Special Backward Classes, Government of Maharashtra 2017)

As per Figure 1 from the Government of Maharashtra (2017), there were 970 Ashram schools (including Primary, Secondary, and Higher-Secondary Ashram schools) for Denotified and Nomadic Tribe children. Despite the large number of Ashram Schools, many Children from the DNT communities of Maharashtra are still out of school.

According to a survey by Sangharsh Wahini, about 75% of children from NT/DNT communities living in Pal Podas and Pardhi Bedas had never attended school, highlighting the severe educational exclusion faced by some mobile and settlement-based communities in Maharashtra. In terms of accessing schooling, DNT children still face discrimination in school. The dropout rate of DNT children is higher than that of other backward communities. 117369 DNT children dropped out of school in 2013-14. Despite implementing the Right to Education Act (RTE), the situation did not change. The report identified migration, poverty, domestic responsibilities, children's contribution to household income, poor health or disability, and parental attitudes towards education among the factors associated with children remaining out of school (Waghmare, 2015)

Employment

The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes are involved in various occupations. 'In a survey carried out in western Maharashtra in 1990-92, it was found that 53.75 percent of DNT families were dependent on wage Labour, 22.6 percent on service (both public and private sector), the study categorised 9.22% of households under activities that it described as 'criminal activities', a terminology that should be understood in the broader historical context of criminalisation and stigma surrounding DNT communities, including begging, pickpocketing and alcohol distillation, and 4.81 percent on agriculture (Mane, 1997). Agricultural wage labor is an easy-entry occupation, and, like other landless communities, the DNTs are resorting to it as well (Bokil, M. 2002). Another study shows that the share of workers engaged in non-agricultural and agricultural wage work is high (33.7 percent and 24.6 percent, respectively), followed by trade/business and cultivator (10.8 percent and 9.6 percent, respectively). Around 24.7 percent continue with the traditional occupation as a complementary occupation. Around 95 percent of households migrate for more than six months in search of their livelihoods (Kannabiran et al., (2017).

Impact of Various Legislations and Economic Policies

Wildlife Legislations

Their livelihood depends on traditional occupations like animal rearing; using wild animals for street entertainment, including snakes and monkeys, and begging in the name of

God. After independence, laws such as the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 made it difficult for nomadic tribes to carry animals. Eventually, this led to a ban on using wild animals for entertainment. Regulatory and anti-begging laws have also affected traditional livelihood practices among some nomadic communities, particularly those whose livelihoods historically involved itinerant performance or begging. Under the Wildlife Protection Act, using wild animals for entertainment became a crime (Bokil, M. 2002). Animal Cruelty Act The 1960 Act has also imposed restrictions on the use of animals for entertainment purposes. Environmental and forest legislation has disregarded nomads' ecological connections by restricting their access to natural resources.

Economic Policies

In addition, after 1991, economic liberalisation and associated changes in markets and regulation have contributed to the erosion of some traditional occupations and livelihood practices of these communities in the state of Maharashtra. This has impacted their livelihood pattern. For instance, a large number of these communities are now forced to work as labourers on daily wages (Bokil, M. 2000).'

Budget Allocation and Expenditure

Despite the significant socioeconomic vulnerabilities faced by DNT/NT communities, concerns were raised regarding the adequacy of budgetary support for their welfare. In March 2013, representatives of nomadic communities in Maharashtra protested the state's 2013–14 budget, arguing that allocations for Vimukta Jati and Nomadic Tribe schemes were inadequate and should be proportionate to these communities' population (Times of India, 2013). Official Maharashtra government records, however, report an outlay of ₹2718.3 million in 2013–14 for the broader welfare category covering Vimukta Jati and Nomadic Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Special Backwards Classes. This difference also illustrates the difficulty of identifying VJNT-specific expenditure within broader budgetary categories (TOI,2013)

In the Union Budget presented on 1 February 2019, the Government of India announced measures for the welfare of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities. Following Cabinet approval on 19 February 2019, the Development and Welfare Board for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities (DWBDNCs) was constituted on 21 February 2019 (Department of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2020). At the state level, the Maharashtra government has introduced several measures for Vimukta Jati (VJ), Nomadic Tribes (NT) and Special Backwards Classes (SBC), including scholarships, hostel facilities and other welfare provisions. In January 2019, the state government also announced an allocation of ₹3000 million to the Vasantrao Naik Vimukta Jati and Nomadic Tribes Development Corporation for the subsequent three years (India Today, 2019).

These measures demonstrate that DNT/NT communities have increasingly been recognised within government welfare and development frameworks. However, the scale and continuity of budgetary support remain important considerations when assessing the effectiveness of these interventions. The table below presents plan-wise budgetary allocations for DNT, NT, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes across India's Five-Year Plans from 1951–2012, providing a historical perspective on government expenditure and policy attention toward these communities.

FIGURE 2: MAHARASHTRA: BUDGETARY ALLOCATION AND EXPENDITURE RELATED TO VJNT COMMUNITIES

Period/ Year	Scheme/ Budget Head	Outlay/ Allocation (₹ million)	Expenditure (₹ million)	Coverage/Note	Source
2nd Five-Year Plan (1956–61)	Backward-class welfare programme	₹2.62	-	Broader backwards-class allocation; included measures for Vimukta Jatis and other backward classes. Not VJNT-only.	Maharashtra Gazetteer – Social Welfare / Planning records
3rd Five-Year Plan (1961–66)	Backward-class welfare programme	56.1	-	Broader backwards-class welfare programme, figure should not be interpreted as VJNT-only.	Maharashtra Gazetteer Department
2013–14	Welfare of VJNT + OBC + SBC	2,718.9	2,555.3	Combined VJNT/OBC/SBC welfare category; annual figures.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2014–15
2014–15	Welfare of VJNT + OBC + SBC	3,455.4	2,091.2	Final/annual figure reported in the subsequent Economic Survey. Earlier interim figures were ₹1899.7 million outlay and ₹966.8 million expenditure up to December.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2015–16
2015–16	Welfare of VJNT + OBC + SBC	3,455.4	947.1	Expenditure reported up to December 2015, therefore not directly comparable with full-year expenditure.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2015–16
2016–17	Tanda/Wasti Sudhar	250	199.8	VJNT-related settlement/area development scheme providing basic infrastructure.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2018–19
2017–18	Tanda/Wasti Sudhar	470	308	VJNT-related settlement/area development scheme.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2018–19
2018–19	Tanda/Wasti Sudhar	1100	479.9	VJNT-related settlement/area development scheme.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2018–19
2019–20	Tanda/Wasti Sudhar	-	236.6	Expenditure reported up to January 2020; scheme provides basic facilities in VJNT and SBC settlements.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2019–20
2019–20	Foreign scholarship for VJNT, OBC & SBC students	-	10.3	₹10.3 million disbursed to five beneficiaries up to January 2020.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2019–20
2020–21	Other Backward Bahujan Welfare Department total departmental schemes	35,326.3	23,869.3	Department-wide figure, not VJNT-specific; includes multiple communities and schemes.	Maharashtra OBC Bahujan Welfare Department Budget
2021–22	Other Backward Bahujan Welfare Department total departmental schemes	57,578.2	46,856.3	Department-wide figure, not VJNT-specific.	Maharashtra OBC Bahujan Welfare Department Budget
2022–23	Other Backwards Bahujan Welfare Department total departmental schemes	56,561.6	48,526.9	Department-wide figure, not VJNT-specific.	Maharashtra OBC Bahujan Welfare Department Budget

Period/ Year	Scheme/Budget Head	Outlay/ Allocation (₹ million)	Expenditure (₹ million)	Coverage/Note	Source
2023–24	Yashwantrao Chavan Mukt Vasahat / Vaiyaktik Gharkul Yojana	-	685.4	VJNT-specific housing scheme; 8,031 dwelling units sanctioned during 2023–24.	Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2023–24
2023–24	Other Backward Bahujan Welfare Department total departmental schemes	82,523.8	68,063.4	Department-wide figure, not VJNT-specific.	Maharashtra OBC Bahujan Welfare Department Budget
2024–25	Other Backward Bahujan Welfare Department total departmental schemes	101,242.3	95,396.2	Department-wide figure, not VJNT-specific.	Maharashtra OBC Bahujan Welfare Department Budge

The budgetary figures indicate that government support for VJNT communities has been provided through multiple and changing budget categories, making it difficult to assess the continuity and adequacy of VJNT-specific expenditure over time. Earlier allocations were part of broader backwards-class programmes, while later figures include combined VJNT/OBC/SBC categories, specific schemes such as Tanda/Wasti Sudhar, and, from 2020–21 onwards, department-wide budgets that are not VJNT-specific. Although departmental expenditure increased substantially in recent years, these figures do not show how much was allocated to, or spent on, VJNT communities. The figure therefore highlights not only the question of how much is allocated, but also a significant transparency and accountability gap in disaggregated reporting, which makes it difficult to assess whether public expenditure is reaching VJNT communities and producing meaningful improvements in their socioeconomic conditions.

Issues Associated with Women

Since these communities are mobile, measuring or analysing women's empowerment is a major challenge. 'The DNTs are mainly patriarchal communities. Elderly males' authority is considered supreme. They have a very strong caste or tribal council. Almost all decisions about their domestic and social life are negotiated in the caste council (Bokil, M. 2002). Women in Denotified and Nomadic communities face significant barriers to education and social inclusion. The Idate Commission reported that around 60% of women from the DNT and NT households covered in its survey had never attended school, while none of those who had attended school had progressed beyond secondary education. These educational disadvantages intersect with wider challenges of poverty, insecure livelihoods and limited access to

public services. Recognising the specific vulnerabilities faced by women from these communities, the Commission recommended greater attention to their education, health, and economic opportunities, as well as creating a dedicated mechanism within the National Commission for Women to address their concerns. However, the diversity of DNT and NT communities means that these challenges should not be treated uniformly; women's experiences vary by community, location, livelihood, and degree of mobility (NCDNT, 2017).

Health and Nutrition

Early marriage and childbearing remain important concerns in some DNT and NT communities. The Idate Commission (2017) reported that approximately 8% of women from DNT communities and 7% from NT communities had their first child at the age of 14, highlighting the need for stronger reproductive health, education and child-protection interventions. The survey of DNTs mentioned earlier noted that 90 per cent of DNT women and children were malnourished and lived in unhygienic conditions. The incidence of gastrointestinal diseases caused by eating unclean meat has been quite high (Mane 1997:262). According to a report by the Nirman NGO (2016), Nutrition insecurity remains a significant concern among NT-DNT communities. A study of NT-DNT women in Nashik district, Maharashtra, found that women and children experienced anaemia and inadequate dietary intake, with women reported to be malnourished and underweight (Sarwade, et al., 2020). In Thane district, Maharashtra, NT-DNT community members reported that many households lacked ration cards and consequently could not access food benefits; even when ration cards were available, their usefulness was limited by the fixed-location nature of the Public Distribution System (Public Distribution System- PDS -India's subsidised food-distribution system), which created difficulties for mobile households (Pawar, 2022).

Identity and Documentation

For people whose livelihoods and residences are mobile, documentation is not simply an administrative requirement. It can determine whether the state recognises them as eligible citizens. Many NT-DNT communities still face serious challenges in getting identity and entitlement documents. A field survey from 2013 to 2015 in nine Indian states, covering 1,944 households from 11 NT/DNT communities in Maharashtra, showed that only 63.1% had ration cards, 60.7% had voter IDs, 40.2% had caste certificates, 37.4% had Aadhaar cards, and just 16.4% had MGNREGA job cards (Kannabiran et al., 2018). These figures show that many households remain excluded from formal identification and entitlement systems. This issue is closely linked to insecure housing and livelihoods. The Renke Commission noted that without a permanent home, nomadic communities find it hard to obtain identity documents and ration cards and to be included in electoral rolls. Without BPL and ration cards, they also miss out on welfare schemes and the Public Distribution System (NCDNT, 2008).

FIGURE 3: CLASSIFICATION CHALLENGES OF DENOTIFIED, NOMADIC AND SEMI-NOMADIC TRIBES IN INDIA



THE EMERGING INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO DNT/NT COMMUNITIES

Efforts to identify and classify Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic communities have gradually led to a dedicated institutional framework. In February 2019, the Government of India constituted the Development and Welfare Board for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities (DWBDNC) on the Idate Commission's recommendation. The Board now implements the Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs (SEED), which covers four areas: education, healthcare, livelihoods, and housing (PIB, 2025). The expansion of these interventions marks an important shift from earlier policy approaches that often treated DNT/NT/SNT communities primarily through broad backwards-class categories. During 2025–26, more than 1.10 lakh beneficiaries were covered under various SEED components, with ₹530.6 million released for implementation (PIB, 2026). In Maharashtra specifically, the current SEED dashboard records 702 Self-Help Groups formed, while the health component reports 57,135 e-KYC registrations and 51,521 health cards downloaded; 1,653 applications were also approved under the 2025–26 free-coaching program (DWBDNC). Yet an important contradiction remains: in 2025, the Union government said 268 communities still had not been classified, and a committee chaired by the Vice-Chairperson of NITI Aayog was constituted to examine their classification (PIB, 2025). The state has therefore moved from identifying historically excluded communities towards building dedicated welfare institutions, but the question remains whether these interventions can reach communities whose mobility, documentation, and diverse identities continue to make them difficult for administrative systems to capture.

WELFARE MEASURES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT OF MAHARASHTRA FOR DNT/NT/VJNT COMMUNITIES

The Government of Maharashtra has implemented a range of welfare measures for Vimukta Jati and Nomadic Tribe (VJNT) communities, particularly in education, residential facilities, scholarships, livelihood support, and housing and settlement development.

Key Government Measures Include:

- Vasantrao Naik Vimukta Jati and Nomadic Tribes Development Corporation – provides economic and livelihood support to VJNT communities through financial assistance, loans, and related development programmes (1984).
- Post-Matric Scholarship for VJNT Students – provides financial assistance to eligible VJNT students pursuing post-secondary education, including tuition and examination-fee support.

- Meritorious Scholarship for VJNT and SBC Students – provides scholarships to meritorious students from VJNT and SBC communities studying at the secondary level 1966.
- Savitribai Phule Scholarship for VJNT Girls – provides educational support to girls from VJNT communities, including students studying in secondary classes 2003-2004.
- Vasantrao Naik Merit Awards – provides awards to meritorious VJNT students who achieve first position at the state or board level in the SSC and HSC examinations, encouraging higher education 2015-2016.
- Maintenance Allowance for VJNT and SBC Students in Professional Courses – provides financial support to eligible students pursuing professional courses and residing in eligible hostels.
- Vocational Training and Skill Development – provides vocational training and related fee-reimbursement support to eligible VJNT and other backwards-category candidates to improve employability and skills.
- Ashram Schools for VJNT Students – the government supports residential Ashram Schools for VJNT students at primary, secondary and higher-secondary levels, providing both educational and residential facilities 1954.
- Vasantrao Naik Tanda/Wasti Sudhar Yojana: The Vasantrao Naik Tanda/Wasti Sudhar Yojana, a Maharashtra government programme intended to improve infrastructure in settlements of nomadic communities, including drinking water, electricity, roads, drainage, sanitation, and community infrastructure 2013-2014.
- Yashwantrao Chavan Mukt Vasahat / Individual Housing Support – provides housing assistance to eligible VJNT families, particularly those living in inadequate or kutcha housing conditions.
- Higher-Education Hostel and Residential Support – Maharashtra provides residential and accommodation-related assistance to eligible students from VJNT and other backward communities pursuing higher education in 2023
- Educational Support through Voluntary Organisations – historically, the government has supported voluntary organisations in providing educational facilities for VJNT students, including Vidyaniketan/Public School initiatives.
- Economic and Entrepreneurship Support through VJNT Development Corporation – financial assistance and credit-linked programmes support self-employment, small businesses and livelihood activities among eligible VJNT beneficiaries.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

The evidence presented in this article suggests that the challenges faced by Denotified and Nomadic Tribes cannot be addressed through education or welfare schemes alone. Their contemporary marginalisation is interconnected with historical criminalisation, uncertain classification, insecure livelihoods, mobility, inadequate housing, weak access to documentation and social protection, health and nutritional vulnerabilities, and limited institutional representation. A comprehensive DNT/NT policy framework must address these dimensions together.

- **Identification, Enumeration and Data Systems**

Maharashtra should strengthen the identification and enumeration of DNT/NT/SNT communities through participatory and regularly updated population data systems. Community representatives, researchers and civil-society organisations should be involved in validating community lists and population estimates. A disaggregated database should capture information on population, mobility, housing,

education, occupation, documentation and access to welfare schemes. This would make it easier to identify excluded households and assess whether government programmes are reaching the intended population.

Portable Documentation and Social Protection

Documentation and social-protection systems should become more portable so that mobility does not prevent access to ration cards, identity documents, healthcare, education and employment schemes. Mobile or settlement-level facilitation centres could help households obtain caste certificates, Aadhaar, voter IDs, ration cards, birth certificates, and MGNREGA job cards. Welfare entitlements should also be accessible across districts and migration locations.

Livelihoods, Employment and Entrepreneurship

Livelihood policy should move beyond short-term skill training towards employment, apprenticeships, credit, market linkages and support for both traditional and emerging occupations. Document and support existing traditional skills and occupations where communities wish to continue them, while developing pathways to new livelihoods for households seeking economic diversification. Financial assistance through development corporations should be linked with business mentoring, market access and employment opportunities.

Housing, Land and Basic Infrastructure

Housing interventions should combine secure shelter with water, sanitation, electricity, roads and other basic services. Settlement-development programmes should prioritise communities living in insecure or inadequate housing and ensure that infrastructure reaches smaller and dispersed settlements. Where appropriate, housing interventions should also address residential tenure and access to essential documents, since insecure residence can create further barriers to accessing government services.

Health, Nutrition and Reproductive Healthcare

Health and nutrition require particular attention through mobile and community-based services, with specific provisions for women, children and reproductive healthcare. Outreach should include maternal and child health, nutrition, immunisation, sanitation, anaemia prevention and access to health insurance. Health services should reach mobile populations and settlements that remain distant from permanent public-health facilities.

Women's Empowerment and Protection

DNT/NT women should be addressed through a dedicated gender-responsive component within development programmes. This should include girls' education, reproductive healthcare, nutrition, livelihood opportunities, financial inclusion, self-help groups, legal awareness and protection services. Women should also be included in community-level decision-making and monitoring of welfare programmes. Such interventions should recognise that women's experiences differ across communities, locations and livelihood patterns.

Migration-Responsive Education and Higher Education

Education policy should become migration-responsive, combining residential, flexible and community-based models with mechanisms to prevent dropout and support transitions to higher education and employment. Strengthen portable student records, flexible admission and re-enrolment, seasonal residential facilities, bridge courses, scholarships, and higher-education support. Ashram Schools can remain an important intervention

but should be complemented by alternatives for families that continue to migrate for their livelihoods.

- **Government–NGO Partnerships and Community-Level Implementation**

Government funding and monitoring can be combined with NGO and community-level implementation. Trained social workers can support household-level identification, documentation, school continuity, access to welfare schemes, health referrals and livelihood linkages. Community organisations should participate in identifying needs, implementing interventions and monitoring outcomes so that programmes reflect the diverse realities of DNT/NT communities.

- **Budget Transparency, Accountability and Representation**

Government should strengthen accountability through disaggregated budgeting, beneficiary tracking, outcome monitoring and regular public reporting on DNT/NT development. Where expenditure is combined with OBC/SBC or other categories, government reports should clearly indicate the component reaching DNT/NT communities. An annual DNT/NT Development Report could track allocations, expenditure, beneficiaries and outcomes across education, employment, housing, health, documentation and social protection. DNT/NT representatives should also have a meaningful role in programme design, monitoring and evaluation.

OVERALL WAY FORWARD

These measures should be implemented through coordination between government departments, local institutions, civil-society organisations and DNT/NT community representatives. The objective should not simply be to bring DNT/NT communities into an existing system that has historically failed to recognise them, but to make public institutions more responsive to their diverse livelihoods, mobility patterns and social realities. A comprehensive approach combining recognition, documentation, education, livelihoods, housing, health, social protection, gender equality and accountability is therefore necessary to address the historical and contemporary exclusion of DNT/NT communities.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT/NT/SNT) in Maharashtra shows that their contemporary vulnerabilities cannot be understood through poverty or limited access to welfare alone. Their marginalisation is closely connected to the historical legacy of colonial criminalisation, restrictions on mobility, disruption of traditional livelihoods and continuing social stigma. Although the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952, many communities still face barriers to documentation, education, healthcare, livelihoods, housing, and social protection. At the same time, the difficulty of establishing reliable population figures and the continued existence of unclassified communities highlight the persistent challenge of recognition and visibility.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated and community-responsive approach rather than isolated welfare interventions. Strengthening identification and data systems, ensuring portable documentation and social protection, improving access to education, livelihoods, housing, healthcare and nutrition, and addressing the specific needs of women should form part of an integrated policy framework. Government institutions, civil-society organisations and DNT/NT community representatives should participate meaningfully in programme design, implementation and monitoring. Ultimately, inclusion should not simply mean bringing these communities into

existing systems, but making public institutions more responsive to their diverse livelihoods, mobility patterns and social realities.

KEY TERMS

Denotified Tribes (DNT)	Communities that were historically classified as "criminal tribes" under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act and were formally "denotified" following the repeal of the Act in 1952.
Nomadic Tribes (NT)	Communities historically associated with mobile or seasonal patterns of livelihood and settlement.
Semi-Nomadic Tribes (SNT)	Communities whose livelihoods and settlement patterns involve periodic or seasonal mobility.
Vimukta Jati and Nomadic Tribes (VJNT)	An administrative classification used in Maharashtra for denotified and nomadic communities.
Tanda/Wasti	Terms commonly used in Maharashtra for settlements or habitations associated with some nomadic communities.
Public Distribution System (PDS)	India's government food-distribution system through which eligible households can access subsidised food grains and other essential commodities.
Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)	A Government of India programme providing nutrition, health and early-childhood development services, primarily through Anganwadi centres.
MGNREGA	The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which provides a legal framework for employment in rural areas.
VJNT Development Corporation	A Maharashtra government institution established to support the socio-economic development of VJNT communities through financial and livelihood-related programmes.

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