

## An Empirical Study on Schemes of Government of Tamil Nadu for Narikuravar Community

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**Abstract:** *Narikuravars, a Gypsy community are concentrated mostly in northern and central districts. The primary occupation of Narikuravar community is hunting. Apart from that, they are known as bead-people. Narikuravars were included in the list of Most Backward Classes or De-notified communities earlier. After years of struggle for the better education, employment opportunities, and other basic needs they are enlisted as Scheduled Tribes in 2023. The paper tries to explore the socio economic and educational status of Narikuravars in the state of Tamil Nadu. It aims to discuss the schemes and grants of the state government in order to uplift the community, before and after they got the status of Scheduled Tribe. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, child marriage, school dropouts, discrimination are the major issues they are enduring with and most of them are not the beneficiaries of the state government or central government schemes due to their unawareness.*

**Keywords:** Government Schemes, Gypsy Communities, Illiteracy, ITDP, Narikuravars, Poverty, Scheduled Tribes

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### Origin of Gypsies

Gypsies all over the world are considered like refugees who are denied the rights of a normal citizen. H.M.G Grellman, a German philologist found out that one third of the language spoken by the Gypsies are originated from India and Surat dialect has close resemblance to the language of Gypsies. Jat tribe in Indus region spoke the language similar to the Gypsies. Hence, India is believed as the homeland of gypsies by the scholars and philologists. Some of the scholars argue that Sanskrit language has some connection with that of Gypsies' language. There are stories about the wandering tribes named Zotts in the Mohammedan chronicles. Arab authors states that they lived in the Indus valley and continuously endured with the invasion from Arabs. Later, many of these tribes were imprisoned and transported to different places during the period of Walid I and Yazid II. In 820 A.D, these Zotts revolted against the supremacy of Arabs. Women and children fought along with the men. In 834, Prince Motasim suppressed the enemy and put an end to the bloody warfare. Next, Byzantines who were known as Romus took these tribes as captives in 856. According to the Arab chroniclers, Gypsies then called themselves as Roms and this cannot be considered as authentic source. Gypsies in Romania, Spain, Hungary and Russia speak Calo language with one third of the same contains Sanskrit root words. Many scholars suggest that the major exodus of Gypsies can be taken place during the invasion of Alexander, the Great in India. Still, the history of the Gypsies is obscure.

### History of Narikuravars Community

Narikuravars is one of the Gypsy communities living in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. They are considered as marginalized section of the society who is excluded from social, economic and political participation. According to the reports, there are about 8500 families of Narikuravas across the state and the approximate number is 30000. Under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, passed during British rule, Narikuravars were designated as habitual criminals. This act was repealed in 1949 after India gained independence and they were de-notified in 1952. Later they were recognized as Most Backward Class. They have been enlisted as Scheduled Tribes in 2023 by Government of India. Generally, scholars connect the Romani group with Narikuravars. Narikuravars were treated as untouchables and their basic rights were denied. Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and high criminal rate among them make their life even more miserable. They belong to semi-nomadic community and are talented in hunting and bead-making. They often share the stories of their ancestors who shifted from northern parts of India to south. They usually spoke Vagraboli language which is a mixture of Gujarati, Marathi, Sanskrit and Hindi and most of them are fluent in Tamil.

Their folk songs are also in Vagraboli language. English education is non-accessible to them and they are unaware about the government schemes for their welfare.

The major source of income of Narikuravars was hunting. As the Forest department made provisions of strict regulations regarding the hunting, especially the endangered species, they lost their livelihood. Poverty, illiteracy and unemployment added more misery in their lives and gradually some of the Narikuravar youth turned in to illegal activities. In the interview with a Narikuravar woman Anuradha, who is a teacher, she states that majority of the children in their community study only till eighth grade. More than attending schools, Narikuravar children spend their time in selling products like jewellery, toys, herbal oil and so on. Apart from child labour, child marriage is also deep-rooted in their society. Girl child will be getting married at very early age for security reasons as they travel long distances keeping girls alone at home. Before the formation of Narikuravar Welfare Board in 2008, there was one organization called Narikuravar Seva Sangham which came into existence in 1996. The motive of the organization was to provide better standard of living for the community by ensuring quality education to them. Absence of basic infrastructure facilities in their areas results in the lack of access to better health care facilities. Moreover, they are connected with their religious beliefs and associate gods with the illness of children and pregnant women. Less number of trained health workers in rural areas constitutes another major problem.

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### Schemes of Tamil Nadu Government for Narikuravars

Government of Tamil Nadu has declared schemes for Most Backward Classes which included Narikuravars also till 2023. The main objectives of the government were poverty alleviation, employment generation and educational upliftment. 20% reservation has been provided by Tamil Nadu Government for the Most Backward Classes or De-notified communities which will further contribute to the socio-economic advancement of Narikuravars. Government has ensured various scholarships and hostel facilities and also supplied bicycles, uniforms for these communities. According to the report of Ministry for Backward Classes and Minority Welfare, Rs. 345.13 lakh has spent for the pre-matric scholarship for the community in 2018-19. Free education is arranged in degree, diploma and professional courses if the parent of the beneficiary is earning less than 2 lakh annually. Provision of incentive scheme for rural girl students has given to reduce the rate of school dropouts. Across the state of Tamil Nadu, the government is running more than 1300 hostels to help the students pursue studies without any hurdles. Newspapers, textbooks and guides are given free of cost to the students in the hostels. Every year three medical check-ups will be conducted in the hostels. Basic amenities like T.V, inverter, grinder, mixer, bed-sheets are also ensured in the hostels.

Apart from the educational upliftment, schemes for economic development have launched by the state government. Distribution of sewing machines and iron boxes for the rural families with annual income less than 40000 and urban families with annual income less than 60000 rupees. House sites have assigned to the homeless people who belonged to Most Backward Classes and de-notified communities. Government of Tamil Nadu has sanctioned many assistance programmes through the welfare boards to each community. The welfare boards will guarantee accident reliefs, old age pensions, death compensation, maternity assistance, scholarships for school and college students. State government has authorized the creation of Narikuravar Welfare Board in 2008 with the headship of Backward Class Minister. Financial assistance is provided for the self-employment on individual basis or group basis. Rs.7500 will be given to individual and subsidy of 1,25,000 to the group. Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Economic Development Corporation was created in 1982 and got registered under the Companies Act 1956. The main objective of this body is to ensure the provision of loan in low interest rates to the target community. New Swarnima Scheme for Women has set up to promote the spirit of self-reliance. One lakh rupees will be sanctioned to the beneficiary with 5% rate of interest. Other than this, general term loan scheme, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, microcredit for men, loan cum subsidy scheme for small and marginal farmers for the creation of irrigation facility were initiated under Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Economic Development Corporation. After the judgement of Supreme Court of India in Indra Sawhney Vs Union of India case, Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission started to function from 1993 onwards with a retired High Court judge as its Chairman. The Commission will look after the issues related to the community and revises the list of Backward Classes.

In 2023, Narikuravars got the Scheduled Tribe status as the President gave the assent on 2 January. It has been declared a victory by the Narikuravar community, who stated that “this is the first time our request has been officially approved by the Indian government and passed both houses of Parliament. We are thankful to

the politicians who engaged in this matter. It is widely agreed by all the people and the politicians that this step was necessary for the welfare of the people.” Now the community will be able to get the benefits of schemes designed for the advancement of tribal communities. Tamil Nadu Government has implemented Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP) in 10 areas which also included seven districts where we can find the percentage of tribal population fifty percentage or more. Pachamalai, Kolli hills, Kalrayan Hills, Jawadhu Hills, Sitttheri Hills, Yelagiri Hills are some of them. Comprehensive Tribal Development Programme was started in 2018-2019 and Government allocated fifty crore rupees. Under this initiative, skill development programmes, infrastructure development projects, education upliftment programmes, economic development schemes etc have encouraged through TAHDCO in order to bring the tribal forefront. Special Central Assistance to Tribal Sub Plan has initiated by Ministry of Tribal Affairs to the state governments and it emphasise income generating activities in agriculture and small industries. This aims to raise the living standards of tribal people. 60% of the funds of SCA is allocated for economic development programmes, 30% for infrastructure development in tribal areas and 10% for training ST youth in skill development. Government of India has issued the allocation of 10% of SCA as incentives to state governments and Tamil Nadu is receiving this amount since 2004-05. Moreover, there is a provision in the Constitution of India for providing grant-in-aid from the Consolidated Fund of India for the welfare of the tribal population. The main focus was on development of infrastructure which covers roads, electricity, shelter, pure drinking water and so on. But, since 1998-99, a part of this funds has started to use for Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) to ensure quality education for tribal students. EMRS are functioning in seven districts of Tamil Nadu- Kanchipuram, Villupuram, Vellore, Namakkal, Salem, Nilgiris and Tiruvannamalai. Under this article central assistance will be extended to the state government as 10% incentive for advocating innovative schemes to uplift tribal communities in respective states. This is to build health centres, awareness camps, devise new agricultural technology in tribal areas and sign boards indicating proper barter rates. Government of India has identified Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) and has sanctioned grants-in-aid every year for their emancipation. The tribal communities under the purview of PVTG still follow primitive agricultural technology and they are illiterate and economically backward. Under this scheme, distribution of drinking water facilities, beehive boxes, brick kilns and other infrastructure development activities have undertaken. Both pre-matric and post-matric scholarships have launched by the Government of India to help the students of ST community to pursue their studies. Narikuravars were provided by a lot of schemes from the Government of Tamil Nadu and Central government.

### Impact of Government Schemes on Narikuravars' Life

Narikuravars have been recognized as Most Backward class till 2023 and got the status of Scheduled Tribes recently. They have been included in the list of the communities who are beneficiaries of government schemes before and after 2023. In spite of the government initiatives, their lives are marginalized and degraded even today. Studies in different districts on this community reveal that they remain backward as they confront with many social and economic issues. A study on the Narikuravar community in Asakulam region in Villuppuram district, Tamil Nadu in 2017 highlights that 78% of the Narikuravars there indulge in bead-making and the rest of them opted hunting as their livelihood. Majority of the respondents earn 5000 rupees monthly and only 7% earn more than 10000 rupees in a month. Their annual income ranges between 50000-70000 according to the studies which will place them below the poverty line apparently. Majority of them responded that poor families are their main customers compared to high class families and obviously they won't spend huge amount for the products of Narikuravars. In Pudukkottai region, the average monthly income is 4000 rupees. They will be unable to pursue education or get access to better health care with such a meagre amount. In Chennai region, most of them are garbage scavengers. More than 70% of them are expecting government support like loan facility in order to start their own business. This clearly indicates their unawareness of government schemes or they are not accessible for the same.

The educational level among the Narikuravar is very poor according to the studies. Many of them never had an opportunity to study and some of them dropped out the school after completing primary education. The number of Narikuravars who pursue higher studies or professional courses stands very low. In Pudukkottai district, studies show that only 7% have gone to high school and 1% got higher education among Narikuravars. But we can't ignore the generational change in the education qualification as the children in the community are educated than their parents. Their illiteracy, low educational level and less proficiency in English language became major reasons for their unawareness about the government schemes. Narikuravars

recognize themselves as nomadic community and this becomes an obstacle for government officials to give proper message to their address. Without education and awareness, they are lacking skills in calculating their profit or planning the family budget.

Politicians often neglect the community and approach them only during election heat starts. In Chennai region, Narikuravars complain that government didn't come to rescue them or provide compensation during floods when their homes shattered. They also argue that the procedures to follow are too complex to understand and to obtain the beneficiaries of government schemes; and also the officials are demanding more documents to submit. Moreover, computer literacy is an adequate requirement as every procedure is getting digitalized these days.

Apart from all these they confront with discrimination in the society to a large extent. Narikuravars are often regarded as thieves and kidnappers. In schools, work areas and even hospitals, they are treated as untouchables as people will keep distance from them. The isolation from both the government and society make them more marginalized and oppressed class.

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### Suggestions and Conclusion

Narikuravars, a semi-nomadic community in the state of Tamil Nadu got the status of Scheduled Tribe in 2023 after prolonged struggle. Despite the government schemes, the community remains uneducated and backward even today. Education lays the foundation for the change and will bring more productive lives. Provision of better education to more children of Narikuravar community with reducing dropout ratio in schools will eradicate illiteracy among them. They can access to scholarships, libraries, hostel facilities and other basic amenities provided by the government. Schools and colleges can ensure admission to the students belong to Narikuravar community. Under RESCAPES programme, students and faculty of different colleges can adopt the areas of the community and develop it socially and economically through training the youth, skill development programme, building schools, free tuition, introduction of technology, encouraging computer literacy, giving awareness on government schemes, establishing health clinics and so on. Narikuravar women can be focused and empowered through ensuring employment opportunities, loan facilities, skill development training etc. Government should take more initiatives to decentralize its programmes and make it more people-oriented and less complex. Government can popularize the products of Narikuravar by launching markets both offline and online. Awareness should be provided to the society to end the social stigma against Narikuravar community and more initiatives from the side of society can bring them to forefront.

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