



# Stigma To Strength: The Historic Outlook Of Denotified Communities In Tamil Nadu

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## Abstract

The Denotified Communities (DNC) of Tamil Nadu has experienced a profound shift from historical stigma to gradual empowerment. Branded as "**criminal tribes**" under British colonial rule, these communities faced decades of systemic discrimination, legal persecution, and social exclusion. Their **denotification in 1952** marked the beginning of their long struggle for rehabilitation and recognition. A significant milestone was the establishment of the **DNC Welfare Board in the 1970s**, which addressed grievances, promoted education, and facilitated political representation. Despite these efforts, challenges persist, including socio-economic disparities, educational barriers, and continued marginalization.

**Keywords:** Denotified Communities, Tamil Nadu, Criminal Tribes Act, Social Stigma, Rehabilitation, Social Justice, DNC Welfare Board

## Introduction

The **Denotified Communities (DNC) of Tamil Nadu** has undergone a striking transformation, evolving from a history of systemic marginalization under British colonial rule to a determined pursuit of empowerment in independent India. Branded as "**criminal tribes**" by colonial authorities, these communities were subjected to relentless discrimination, social exclusion, and legal persecution. Their very existence was policed, their livelihoods restricted, and their mobility curtailed. However, the year **1952** marked a turning point—their **denotification** signaled the formal end of their criminalized status and the beginning of efforts to reintegrate them into mainstream society. Tamil Nadu's government swiftly

recognized the urgency of their rehabilitation, embedding DNC welfare within the broader **social justice framework** of the state. Under the leadership of the Chief Minister, dedicated policies emerged to ensure the social, economic, and educational upliftment of these historically oppressed groups. The **Department for Backward Classes and Minorities Welfare** became instrumental in institutionalizing these initiatives, ensuring sustained governmental focus. The creation of the **DNC Welfare Board in the 1970s** marked a critical milestone in this journey. Tasked with addressing historical injustices, fostering educational opportunities, and securing political representation more than just a welfare mechanism, it became a **symbol of the state's commitment** to dismantling centuries-old prejudices and providing the DNC communities with pathways toward economic self-sufficiency and social dignity. The trajectory of Tamil Nadu's DNC communities is not merely a story of governmental policies but a **broader narrative of resilience, resistance, and transformation**.

### **Denotified Communities (DNC) of Tamil Nadu**

During the British colonial rule, various social groups across India were branded as hereditary criminals. They were subjected to intense surveillance, severe restrictions, and harsh repression. In some regions, dominant upper-caste groups exploited them for crimes such as theft. Many tribal communities were also classified under this category. Even in Tamil Nadu, historical evidence suggests that several intermediate castes were labeled as criminal tribes. In the northern districts, resistance movements emerged against this classification, leading to political shifts. Denotified Communities (DNC) refer to social groups that were previously classified as "**criminal tribes**" under the **Criminal Tribes Act of 1871** during British colonial rule. These communities were subjected to systemic oppression, surveillance, and social exclusion, as the colonial administration presumed them to be inherently criminal by birth. The Act led to severe restrictions on their mobility, economic activities, and civil rights, branding them as social outcasts.

In **1952**, five years after India's independence, the **Criminal Tribes Act was repealed**, and these communities were officially **denotified**—removing their criminal classification. However, the stigma associated with their historical status persisted, leading to continued discrimination, economic deprivation, and social alienation. In Tamil Nadu, the **Denotified Communities Welfare Board** was established in the **1970s** to address their historical disadvantages and facilitate their integration into mainstream society. Today, the Tamil Nadu government recognizes various **DNC groups under the Most Backward Classes (MBC) and Scheduled Caste (SC) categories**, ensuring targeted welfare measures such as educational support, reservations in employment, and financial assistance. Despite these efforts, many DNC communities continue to struggle with poverty, lack of access to education, and social acceptance, highlighting the need for sustained affirmative action and policy interventions.

The term “**Sīrmarapinar**” denotes individuals associated with an esteemed lineage or elevated socio-cultural status. Consequently, your text has been refined accordingly to align with this nuance: During British colonial rule, numerous social groups across India were systematically designated as **hereditary criminals**, a classification that subjected them to relentless surveillance, stringent controls, and oppressive punitive measures. In certain regions, dominant upper-caste factions instrumentalized this categorization, coercing these communities into illicit activities such as theft. Many tribal groups were subsumed within this framework of criminalization. In Tamil Nadu, historical records reveal that several **intermediate and marginalized castes** were similarly stigmatized as criminal tribes.

The northern districts, in particular, witnessed resistance movements that not only contested these classifications but also precipitated broader political transformations communities enduring the residual burden of this historical vilification include the **Kanmari** people. Residing in **Kunichampattu**, a village near Puducherry, they persist in their struggle against systemic discrimination. Despite their historical marginalization, they remain custodians of a distinct cultural heritage, continuously asserting their dignity and striving for rightful socio-political recognition. Kunichampet, a village in Villianur Taluk of Puducherry, recorded a population of **5,692** in the 2011 Census, with **2,838 males** and **2,854 females**. The literacy rate stood at **73.10%**, with a notable gender disparity—**male literacy at 82.69%** and **female literacy at 63.65%**. Scheduled Castes comprised **23% of the population**, amounting to **1,309 individuals**. Regarding the **Kanmari** community, specific statistical data is not readily available in official records. The **2011 Census of Puducherry** enumerates various Scheduled Castes but does not explicitly mention the Kanmari, indicating that they might not be formally recognized as a distinct group or could be classified under a broader category. For precise and up-to-date information on the **Kanmari community in Kunichampet**, engaging with **local administrative bodies or community organizations** is recommended, as they may hold more comprehensive and recent demographic insights.

The **Criminal Tribes Act** was repealed in **1952**, and denotified communities were included in **Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Most Backward Classes (MBC), and Other Backward Classes (OBC)** categories. However, the socio-economic impact of colonial policies persisted, forcing many DNTs into **low-income occupations** such as **daily-wage labor, street vending, and manual scavenging**. Despite **20% reservation in education and employment** alongside other marginalized groups, **denotified communities continued to face systemic discrimination**. Police surveillance practices continued for years, compelling members of DNTs to **sleep in police stations or public shelters**, a rule that even applied to **elders and newlyweds**. Interestingly, **not all Kallar communities**—one of the most affected by the Criminal Tribes Act—were subject to these restrictions. While **Kallar populations in Sivaganga and Madurai** were classified under the Act, those in **Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, and Nagapattinam** were exempt. Public outcry and legislative efforts led to **the complete repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act**, with **68 communities officially "denotified" and reclassified as "Reformed Communities."**

In 1979, under M.G. Ramachandran's (MGR) government, Tamil Nadu reclassified these 68 communities from caste-based to class-based categories, placing them within MBC and DNC classifications instead of SC/ST designations. This shift made Tamil Nadu the only Indian state to recognize DNTs as a class rather than a caste, leading to exclusion from central government reservation benefits. As a result, protests erupted across Tamil Nadu demanding a separate 10% reservation for these communities.

- The Tamil Nadu government rescinded the 1979 order in 2018, reclassifying them as "Reformed Tribal Communities" for central government welfare schemes.

The shift from Denotified Tribes (DNT) to Denotified Community (DNC) led to severe setbacks:

- **Loss of Free Higher Education:** Until 1979, DNTs received full tuition waivers, but the DNC reclassification resulted in their exclusion from indigenous student benefits.
- **Denial of Central Government Funds:** Special funds designated for DNTs were no longer accessible to those classified under DNC in Tamil Nadu.
- **Lack of Dedicated Officers & Financial Institutions:** While other states (e.g., Maharashtra, Karnataka) appointed dedicated DNT officers and created special financial institutions for economic advancement, Tamil Nadu did not.

The 2015 DNT Commission recommended a uniform classification of DNTs across India, yet Tamil Nadu continues to use the DNC label, preventing its communities from accessing national welfare schemes. Additionally, as per Education Rule 92, indigenous students were eligible for state refunds on education fees, but due to terminology changes, DNTs lost these benefits. In contrast, states such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka have separate reservations for DNTs, acknowledging their indigenous status and historical marginalization. Tamil Nadu's reclassification to DNC has denied them similar recognition. The historical reclassification of Tamil Nadu's Denotified Tribes reflects a complex intersection of colonial legacy, social justice policies, and contemporary political decisions. While the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act was a landmark moment, the shift from DNT to DNC has led to policy failures, loss of entitlements, and continued marginalization.

To address these issues, Tamil Nadu must:

- **Restore DNT status** and ensure uniform classification with other Indian states.
- **Reintroduce central government welfare benefits** lost due to the 1979 reclassification.
- **Establish separate reservation quotas** for Denotified and Reformed Communities in education and employment.
- **Create financial institutions** dedicated to DNT economic empowerment.
- **Appoint a dedicated DNT officer** to oversee welfare and policy implementation.

Without decisive action, the historical injustices faced by Denotified Tribes will persist, depriving future generations of the opportunities needed to **break free from systemic marginalization and achieve socio-economic mobility**.

### Demographics and Socioeconomic Indicators

Tamil Nadu is home to **Denotified Tribes (DNTs), Semi-Nomadic Tribes (SNTs), and Nomadic Tribes (NTs)**, with approximately **10 lakh individuals** belonging to these communities. Some of the major DNT groups in the state include **Narikoravar, Kuruvikarar, Kattunayakan, and Vannaan**. Despite constitutional safeguards, DNTs remain among the most **economically and socially disadvantaged communities** in Tamil Nadu.

- **Literacy Rate:** The **average literacy rate among DNTs is approximately 40-50%**, significantly lower than the state average of **80.1%** (Census 2011).
- **Livelihood Patterns:** Traditional occupations such as **hunting, fishing, pastoralism, and fortune-telling** have declined due to legal restrictions and socio-economic transformations, forcing many into **daily wage labor, rag-picking, and street vending**.
- **Access to Welfare Schemes:** Studies indicate that **less than 20% of DNT households** have full access to government welfare schemes due to **lack of proper documentation and social stigma**.

### Cultural Resilience and Heritage Preservation

Despite centuries of systemic discrimination, **DNTs have preserved their unique cultural identity** through:

- **Folk Arts and Oral Traditions:** Communities such as the **Narikoravar** are known for their **storytelling, folk songs, and traditional jewelry-making**, while groups like the **Kuruvikarar** specialize in **fortune-telling and animal husbandry traditions**.
- **Religious and Ritualistic Practices:** Many DNTs follow syncretic traditions, worshipping **local deities** and practicing **animism** alongside mainstream Hindu practices.
- **Environmental Knowledge:** Their **sustainable living practices**—rooted in deep ecological understanding—continue to influence local knowledge on **herbal medicine, hunting techniques, and natural resource management**.

### Towards Social Inclusion and Cultural Recognition

In contemporary Tamil Nadu, efforts to **document, protect, and promote DNT culture** is gaining momentum. The **Denotified Tribes Welfare Board** has been working towards **economic empowerment and social inclusion**. However, **representation in education, employment, and governance remains inadequate**.

- **Targeted educational initiatives** to enhance literacy and vocational skills.
- **Policy-driven economic opportunities** to support **sustainable livelihoods**.
- **Greater cultural representation** in mainstream narratives, ensuring that **DNT contributions to Tamil Nadu's history and heritage** are recognized.

The cultural roots of Tamil Nadu's Denotified Tribes **stand as a authentication to their endurance and identity**. **Preserving and promoting their heritage** is not just an act of historical justice but a vital step toward building a **more inclusive and diverse society** that acknowledges the richness of all its communities

## Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Denotified Communities in Tamil Nadu reflects a transition from systemic **stigmatization to resilience and empowerment**. Branded as "**criminal tribes**" under colonial rule, these communities endured **decades of oppression, forced surveillance, and socio-economic marginalization**. However, post-independence reforms, legal reclassifications, and grassroots movements have gradually paved the way for their **recognition and reintegration** into mainstream society. Despite legislative efforts, including the **repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act (1952)** and the introduction of **affirmative action policies**, structural inequalities persist. The **reclassification from Denotified Tribes (DNT) to Denotified Communities (DNC)** in Tamil Nadu has led to **policy gaps**, depriving many of their rightful access to central welfare schemes. This bureaucratic oversight has fueled **continued struggles for social justice, economic inclusion, and educational opportunities**. Yet, the **resilience of these communities is evident** in their cultural heritage, political mobilization, and demands for equitable representation. Movements advocating for **reservation policies, economic upliftment, and legal redress** signal a growing recognition of their historical injustices. The **revocation of the 1979 order in 2018**, reinstating their rights under "Reformed Communities," is a step forward—but further **policy interventions, awareness, and institutional support** are essential. Moving forward, the **full transformation from stigma to strength requires multi-pronged efforts**—inclusive development policies, active political representation, and cultural acknowledgment. Recognizing the historical injustices inflicted upon Denotified Communities and **addressing their contemporary challenges** is not just a matter of policy—it is a commitment to **social justice and historical reparation**. Tamil Nadu, with its legacy of **progressive reforms**, has the potential to set a **national precedent** in ensuring these communities are not only **remembered for their past struggles but celebrated for their contributions** to the social and cultural setup of the state.

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