

‘Boom Boom Maatukarars’: Addressing Statistical Invisibility

A Survey of the Nomadic Tribe in the Thiruvarur District, Tamil Nadu

Summary

A welfare state must essentially be a statistical state too. Any welfare governance requires reliable empirical data to plan and design policies. This is why most states strive to have in place some functional statistical apparatuses like the census and survey. It is however, not all inclusive. Very often, those who cannot come under the structural purview of these statistical exercises are overlooked and excluded from welfare networks. One such group that has been historically sidelined are the Boom Boom Maatukarars. As the existing administrative systems do not acknowledge the community as deserving recipients of the welfare schemes because of lack of statistical survey data, the community faces systematic discrimination in availing relief; failing to benefit from most existing policies. Since the Maatukarars practice a nomadic way of life they have been largely statistically invisible, not finding a place in the formulation and implementation of welfare and alleviation schemes of the state.

Therefore, Vanavil in collaboration with the Centre for Social Justice and Equity at Madras School of Social Work has undertaken this comprehensive survey among the Boom Boom Maatukarars in the Thiruvarur District. The purpose of the study is to collect and disseminate micro-data on this group so that the state can plan for targeted development programs and policies exclusively for this community.

Time Line

The survey was conducted in Katchanam, Mannargudi, Thiruthuraipoondi, Muthupettai, Srivaniyam panchayats from 19th February to 10th March 2024

Team

Ms. Revathi R– Advisor
Ms. Vardini M S– Principal Investigator
Mr. Solairaj R– Co-Investigator

About the Collaborator

Vanavil is a grass-root organization based in Nagapattinam that works for and among the nomadic tribal people of Tamil Nadu. The goal is towards disseminating the research findings through reports, academic articles, and media stories to initiate conversations and advocate for changes in policies and practices.



Background

The Nomadic Tribes are groups of people who are not settled in one location and travel in caravans to various places for pastoral activities, trade, transport of goods and as performing artists and craft workers. Sections of the nomadic tribes have been musicians, acrobats, soothsayers, singers and artisans. The nomadic, semi-nomadic tribes and de-notified communities constitute 10% of the total population in India (Idate, B. 2017). This population comprises many caste groups, tribes and unlisted communities who were affected by the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. More than 466 communities (Idate, B. 2017) were notified as criminal tribes by the British Colonial Government from 1871 to 1931 and a majority of them were placed in settlements which were open prisons. The one thing that is common to all the de-notified and nomadic tribes is the fate of being branded ‘born’ criminals (Devy, G.N. 2004). Even during and after the Indian independence the notified tribes were still under surveillance and within the settlements created by the British government. It was only in August 31, 1952, that these tribes were de-notified and gained their freedom. Though the government de-notified them, it passed the Habitual Offenders Act in 1952 to keep vigilance on the previously criminalised tribes. The stigma of being labelled as criminals stuck with them and posed many difficulties for them in claiming their rights as citizens. Lack of any prescribed identity proof or domicile makes them a fringe group not yet covered within the state sponsored welfare networks. This has compelled them to resort to begging, rag picking or any small petty itinerant trading. Further, majority of the NT/DNT/SNT communities are not included within the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution which deals with the duties of the state towards tribes and castes enlisted in the schedule.

About the Community

The Boom Boom Maatukarars' are a nomadic tribal community predominantly found in regions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The group customarily engages in alms seeking through soothsaying. Traditionally, the men in the community parade their carefully decorated performing bull around and offer soothsaying and story-telling to the people of the town. In return for their services they usually receive a handful of rice, millets or pulses. Camped near water bodies or temples, the Maatukarars travel in small groups with bulls which are donated to them by villager or temples for a week before moving on to a new place. The group additionally also boasts singers and musicians who make their own musical instruments; women who are skilled in making palm mats, handicrafts and epicycle pouch bags.

Over time however, the group has adopted new alternate ways of earning their livelihood. With most of them having lost their bulls to penury and destitution, the community grapples with the struggles of continuing in this occupation. At present, most community members are engaged in different income-generating activities, although a few of them still continue to practice their semi-nomadic vagabond way of life.

Methodology

The study is designed to execute a survey of the selected households in Thiruvarur district of Tamil Nadu. Since this particular nomadic community is numerically sparse and geographically dispersed, it has been decided that all habitations one the district where this community has settled down or is based in will be covered in the study. The survey covered six densely populated hamlets with approximately 559 tribal households. Accordingly, a detailed survey tool was prepared using the kobo toolbox framework using which the enumerators collected information and subsequently a detailed report was formulated .

Process

Step 1 - Collection of Existing Data and Interview Schedule Design:

- Collaborate with the District Revenue Department to gather and organise existing data.
- Develop a comprehensive and culturally sensitive questionnaire in consultation with experts and community leaders.
- Identify an appropriate tool for deploying the questionnaire, ensuring accessibility for data enumerators.

Step 2 - Training of Field Data Collectors:

- Identify and train field data collectors, ensuring cultural sensitivity and privacy considerations.
- Provide comprehensive training on using the questionnaire with expert guidance.

Step 3 - Data Collection:

- Plan and execute the census survey across designated regions.

Step 4 - Data Analysis:

- Conduct a thorough analysis of the collected data, focusing on housing, education, and issuance of community certificates.

Step 5 - Report Generation and Policy Recommendations:

- Compile findings into a comprehensive report highlighting key trends, challenges and opportunities within the Boom Boom Maatukarars.
- Formulate policy recommendations to address identified needs and contribute to the overall development and well-being of Nomadic Tribal communities.

Research Outcomes

- ❖ Making a nomadic community statistically visible;
- ❖ Providing data repository on a previously excluded nomadic community;
- ❖ Extending policy inputs for better governance.

