



Vicharata Samuday Samarthan Manch

VSSM is an organization which came into being with mission to give social identity, citizen's right, education, health facilities, housing, livelihood and basic facilities of daily life to Nomadic and De – Notified tribes

THE NEVER-ENDING STIGMA OF BEING 'DE-NOTIFIED'

Decoding De-notified

In the past, some of the Nomadic Tribes were also part of the royal armies. They were the brave soldiers from the impermanent armies of the kings who matched their steps with the state army. They fought battles with equal gallantry and readiness to be martyrs. The warriors from these impermanent armies were not paid any remuneration. Instead they were given unrestricted rights to loot the neighboring states as much as they wished. With the advent of the British the rights of the kingdoms diminished and such tribes became jobless. But, their image remained intact. The British saw them as habitual offenders and communities that needed to be closely monitored and regulated. Thus, under the Criminal Tribes Act (Act XXVII of 1871) made it mandatory for all including the elderly and women from such communities to attend a roll call (notify) twice a day, every day at the local police station. In case they travelled they had to inform the police station at their destination. The Act armed the police with wide ranging powers. It was not until 1952, when the Act was repealed that these communities were liberated from such a Criminal Tribes Act. They no longer need to notify the police and thus began to be known as **De-notified tribes**.

The communities were liberated from the government's punishment but the social punishment of neglect has, till date, remained intact. In Gujarat, 12 communities including Vaghari (Devi Pujak), Dafer, Sandhi, Miyanaa, Vagher, Dheba, Mey, Chara, Chuvaliya Koli (of Kutchh's Rapar block) Bafra, Hingora are listed as De-notified tribes.

Just round the corner from Ahmedabad is a village called Oad-Kamod. 24 families from



Vasfoda, Devipujak and Meer communities from the Nomadic and De-notified tribes have been living on the outskirts of this village since last 17 years. The traditional sources of earning livelihood have become obsolete for these communities. Weaving baskets from bamboo is not sustainable for the Vasfoda families instead they sell plastic tubs and baskets, the Meers no longer find their occupation of singing and playing drums profitable

hence beg for living, the Devipujaks either work as manual laborers or beg for living. The children of these communities also set out to beg with their parents. As is common in majority of the settlements of Nomadic and De-Notified Tribes across the state, the families of this settlement also did not have any identity proofs, were treated as social outcastes by other communities, had not been part of any revenue village nor did they

enjoy any rights of being the citizens of this country.

VSSM began working with this settlement in the year 2009. The foremost initiative was that of an Alternate School for almost 30 + children between the school going ages of 6 to 14 years from the settlement. Ilaben Bajaniyaa took charge of the activities in the settlement. Under her care the children began their tryst with schooling. The number of children attending the Alternate School increased gradually with her nurturing. In 2012, 13 girls from the settlement were enrolled in the Doliya Girls Hostel.

The processes of acquiring various citizenry documents were also initiated along with the education initiative. The lobbying for their rights had to be intense because the



opposition from some of the feudal communities in the village of allowing these families to settle in the vicinity of the village was severe.

One-day police from Aslali village that falls 7 kilometers from the Oad-Kamod came to the village and started inquiring what they were doing in the area. They asked them to vacate the

place as early as possible or else they force would be used. The families got worried. Ilaben was informed about the developments. She assured them not to worry, no untoward thing would happen. However, the police came the next day and kept coming repeatedly until they took eight men from the settlement to Aslali police station. As soon as Ilaben received the message she reached the police station. On inquiring why were they brought here but the police cared the least to reply. But when Ilaben introduced herself as VSSM team member the attitude of police mellowed down.

Why are these men brought here? Ilaben asked

'It's a routine formality, we have to record their names as they do not belong to the village,' replied one of the police officer.

Ilaben called Ms. Mittal Patel, Managing Trustee of VSSM and briefed her about the situation. Mittal spoke to the police directly. The police cited the same reasons.

'I don't belong to Ahmedabad but am staying in the city since last few years. I have never been taken to the police station to record my details.' Mittal questioned the police.

The police officials had no reply to the question Mittal posed. They released the men immediately. VSSM's intervention enabled the release of the detained men however, there are thousands of settlements where VSSM has not reached yet and it is possible that hundreds of men might be rotting in jails for crimes not committed by them. The laws like the Criminal Tribes Act that have long ceased to exist but, its use and misuse continue to haunt the Nomadic and De-notified tribes.

The vested interest groups consisting of village leaders, builders, land mafia, politicians, police etc. gang-up together and work overtime to make sure these community groups do not empower themselves. They constantly intimidate these communities by using their powers. The realization that once these communities become part of the village they will be allotted residential plots, agricultural land etc. makes these groups go to any extent possible to prevent it from happening. Human greed partnered with laws that the executive interpret as they wish makes lives of such marginalized Nomadic and De-notified communities a living hell.

Mittal Patel
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