

Vanniyars

The Supreme Court of India on March 31st, 2022 struck down the 10.5 per cent reservation provided to Vanniyars, a mostly backward community (MBC) in Tamil Nadu, in government jobs and admissions in educational institutions.

The Supreme Court observed that reservation violated the fundamental rights of equality, non-discrimination and equal opportunity of 115 other most backward communities (MBCs) and de-notified communities (DNCs) in Tamil Nadu.

Just who are the Vanniyars and what was the issue regarding their reservation in Tamil Nadu politics?

This article will give details of the above question within the context of the IAS Exam

Who are the Vanniyars?

The Vanniyar (also spelt as Vanniya) are a community found in the northern part of Tamil Nadu. They were formerly known as *Palli*. Historically considered a lower caste, they have been trying to gain upward mobility since the 19th century.

Like most of the peasant castes designated as Shudra have made mythical claims that their ancestors were descendants born from the flames of a fire sacrifice. Many Lower castes use a process of Sanskritization to get upward mobility by creating such fire myths.

As per Alf Hiltebeitel, a Columbian Professor of Religion, History, and Human Sciences at George Washington University in Washington DC, USA, South Indian society at the time did not recognize either the Kshatriya and Vaishya varnas. Instead the society was divided into Brahmins and Shudras and untouchables. As such the Vanniyar were designated as Shudra

Nonetheless, communities in the region frequently sought to prove a historic higher status, based on myth or occasionally probable history.

The Pallis put forth a petition during the 1871 Indian census to recognise them as part of the Kshatriya varna. To this effect they even formed many caste organisations such as the Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam in Madras in 1888.

In 1931, through a process known as Sanskritization, they had the term Palli removed from the Madras census and instead the term *Vanniya Kula Kshatriya* appeared. The change in their status was reflected with the adoption of such practices as vegetarianism and prohibition of widow remarriage. They were even claims of descent from the Pallava dynasty

Because of the significant population size, the Vanniyars wielded significant political clout in Northern Tamil Nadu. They were mostly working in the agriculture sector during the economic boom of Tamil Nadu, but the rising debt crisis which affected agriculture, forced them to find work as labourers in Chennai and Neighbouring Bangalore.

Previously designated as Backward Classes, they were now designated as a Most Backward Caste after a series of successful agitations in the 1980s that granted them about 20% reservation. The main focus behind these agitations was to avail government benefits for the community.

What was the issue behind the reservation for the Vanniyar?

The reservation for the Vanniyakula Kshatriya was provided as per the Most Backward Classes and Denotified Communities Act, 2021. The grounds of challenging this reservation were the following:

- The second Tamil Nadu Backward Commission in 1983, held that the population of Vanniyars was found to be 13.01% of the state's total population.
- Hence the provision of 10.5% internal reservation within the 20% MBC quota was considered disproportionate and unfair to other communities
- The reservation was challenged on account of it being passed just hours before the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) came into force in February 2021.
- It was further argued by the petitioners that the enactment of this reservation was hasty and politically motivated

The Tamil Nadu government argued that an elected government cannot be denied its right to exercise its power to make a policy to legislate any law during its tenure. The government further assessed that it was empowered to pass such a law in providing internal reservation. It quoted an example of a 2007 enactment through which Backward Class Muslims were provided a separate reservation

What was the argument of the Supreme Court?

The court said there was no assessment or analysis done prior to the 2021 Act to back the claim that the Vanniyakula Kshatriyas were relatively more backward than the other MBCs and DNCs.

The court underscored that "while caste can be the starting point for internal reservation, it is incumbent on the State government to justify the reasonableness of the decision [to provide quota to a particular community] and demonstrate that caste is not the sole basis".

“Equal laws would have to be applied to all in the same situation, and there should be no discrimination between one person and another. The classification should never be arbitrary, artificial or evasive,” the court held.

Frequently Asked Questions about Vanniyar

Which caste is the majority in Tamil Nadu?

Adi Dravida are numerically the largest SCs with a population of 5,402,755, constituting 45.6 per cent of the state SC population. They are followed by Pallan 2,272,265 (19.2 per cent), Paraiyan 1,860,519 (15.7 per cent), Chakkiliyan 777,139 (6.6 per cent) and Arunthathiyar 771,659 (6.5 per cent)

Is Vanniyar and Vanniyakula Kshatriya the same?

Vanniyakula Kshatriya means the community of Vanniyakula Kshatriya (including Vanniyar, Vanniya, Vannia Gounder, Gounder or Kandar, Padayachi, Palli and Agnikula Kshatriya), as notified by the Government under the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

What caste is Vanniya Kula Kshatriyar?

Vannia Kula Kshatriya is a **feudal caste** found across South India. They are present in large numbers and preach Hinduism. The name Vanniyar is derived from the Tamil word 'Vanni' which means fire, valor or strength.