

National Commission for Backward Classes

ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLAND BENCH

FINDINGS

Case: Request for inclusion of the caste/community '**Karen**' in the central list of Backward classes for Andaman & Nicobar Island.

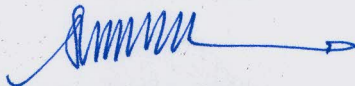
I. REQUEST

This case arises from the request received from the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment to examine the inclusion of Karen caste/community in the Central List of OBCs for the UT of Andaman & Nicobar Island. This request was with reference to the representation received by the Ministerial delegation during their visit to A & N Islands.

II. PUBLIC HEARING

2. The Andaman & Nicobar Island Bench of the Commission consisting of Hon'ble Members, Sh. M.S Matharoo and Smt. Neera Shastri, held a Public Hearing in respect of this request at Port Blair on 22nd July, 2005. At the Public Hearing, the UT was represented by Sh. P.K Goel, Secretary (Tribal Welfare), Ex Officio Member Secretary, Sh. S.A Awaradi, Director (Tribal Welfare), Sh.A.L Singh, R.O (TW), Sh Jameel Baksh J.R.O (TW), Smt. Sobha K Unnithan, SA(TW), Smt Preetam Kumari Nanda, Chairperson A & N SWAB, Member, ex Officio and Sh. Roop Narayan, as non official Member.

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III. FACTS

3. The position with regard to this caste/community as reflected in different lists is as follows:-

Mandal List	:	Not included
State List	:	Not Included (Recommended for OBCs status by A & N Commission for OBCs and is under consideration by A & N Administration)
Central List	:	Not included

4. At the public hearing, Smt. Freeda George, representing Karen Youth Organisation, submitted that they are basically a tribe and have already applied for tribal status in the state and since they haven't received any reply from the State Department they made a request to the Ministerial delegation. She further, submitted that their community has no educational facilities for upliftment of their caste/community in the educational field, either in seat reservation for pursuing higher education in Government educational institutions and thereby they are unable to compete with others. She appealed the Commission to know whether they have any stand in this respect as for linguistic minorities.

5. Hon'ble Members, Sh. M.S Matharoo and Smt. Neera Shastri, stated that their case is being heard on the basis of the representation submitted by them to the Ministerial delegation during their visit to Island, and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has asked the Commission to ascertain the situation for their status in the Central list. It was also clarified that the UT Commission has already made a recommendation and it is under consideration of the Government and whether they wanted tribal status or otherwise.

6. Smt. Freeda George, submitted that very few people belonging to their caste/community are educated and very few children complete schooling. No seats are reserved for them in any of the Government educational institutions. Most of them are educationally and socially backward, with very few representation in Govt. service and lags behind others in the uplift of their caste/community. She further added that they have already tried much for Tribal status, but as they had not received any reply from the state Department, they would opt and accept for OBC status in the Central list for the UT of Andaman & Nicobar Island.

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7. On query from Hon'ble Member Sh.M.S Matharoo, to speak out their case for inclusion in the Central list, they replied that they were agreeable to accept for an OBC status in the Central list and would pursue for a ST status at UT level in future.
8. Smt. Freeda George further submitted that their total population is about 2000, and are settled in Andaman & Nicobar Island. Out of which about 70 are Government servants, 2 Gazetted officers, 2 Graduate lecturers, 2 Range Officers, 14 primary school teachers, 2 clerical staff, 40% of the population are educated, 25% of the women are educated, 1 female M.A., B.Ed without job, 2 graduate B.ED and running tuition centers, having no professional business man, mostly labourers doing private jobs and their land holdings as 2 acres with cultivation of paddy, vegetables, etc.
9. The Bench took note of the '**Karen**' caste/community as described in the Ethnographic Accounts .

In the "People of India : Andaman & Nicobar Islands", Vol.-XII, by K.S. Singh, pp.87-95, Karen is described as below:-

The Karen of the Andamans are Burmese immigrants; they were first brought here by the British Government of India, with the help of Christian missionaries in 1925. In 1926-27 regular settlers started coming to the islands. Originally brought to work in the Forest Department, they were subsequently allowed land for their own settlements. Initially 200-250 nomads from Southern Burma, mainly food-gatherers and hunters, were brought to the Andaman. Some had occasionally done paddy cultivation in their own land. After their arrival here, they were provided with free rations for one year and subsequently, given land to cultivate, mainly at Webi in Mayabundar tehsil in the North Andamans and later they moved to Deopur, Latao, Lucknow, Base camp, Burmaders, Panighat, Karmatang-9 and Karmatang-10. Only Christians were brought for settlement to the Andamans and they came under the supervision of Rev. Lugyi (a Karen).

According to the 1951 census there were 384 Karens. They speak their own dialect, Karen and use the Burmese script. They also speak Hindi with outsiders and use the Roman and Devanagari scripts to correspond with government offices. The Karen enjoy the Local status given them by the Andaman and Nicobar administration.

There in the Andamans are two groups of Karen, the Sgaw and the Pwo. Their dialects vary, otherwise they are one community. They do not recognize social classes and any Karen can employ another Karen for doing some work in exchange for some other kind of work, but never for payment of wages.

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The Karen in the Andamans are primarily agriculturists. They reside in permanent villages where there are both landowning and landless families. Besides agriculture, some of them engage in other jobs and some earn through daily wage labour. Fruits and vegetables are grown in kitchen gardens attached to their houses.....Hunting and fishing are usually practised as group enterprises. Almost all families keep poultry, mainly for their own consumption. Some keep cows and sell the milk.

The Karen are generally endogamous..... Inter-religious marriages are on the rise too. Adult marriage is the general rule. Women marry between 15 to 25 years and men between 25 to 30..... Monogamy is considered the ideal and polyandry and polygyny are prohibited..... Divorce and remarriage are permitted for both males and females. In recent time, however, the divorce rate has come down as has the frequency of remarriage.

The nuclear family is the norm among the Karen. Joint families, though not the rule, are quite common in the Karen community.....The head of the family looks after its smooth running and help resolve economic and other problems.....The rules of inheritance follow both male and female lines as regards ancestral and self-acquired property. There is no hard and fast rule regarding the sharing of property, the economically weak get the major share. Both married and unmarried female members get a share of property, though there is no rule regarding the amount.

Karen women work in the fields, though they are not allowed to plough. They also take up other jobs, though a majority of them are engaged in domestic chores. Women take part in family decision-making, and keep a knowledge of tradition and custom alive by passing it onto the children.....There is no woman representative in the gram Panchayat. But they do exercise their vote.

Baptism marks one of the most important events in a Karen's life. It is believed that the individual who is baptised is rid of original sin through this sacramental bath and thereafter joins the company of God. They believe that baptism brings forgiveness of sin and also 'eternal life'. Among the Karens, as among other Christians, baptism also marks an occasion for naming the child. The grandparents, parents or pastor name the new born.

The gram panchayat elects five members for the nyaya panchayat, which has judicial functions. All the head of the gram panchayat are ex-officio members of the Block Development Committee. The B.D.C. elects, from among members, the members of the Pradesh Council, which is a state level unit.....The traditional council used to impose fines and also boycotts by the community. Decisions were made orally. Karen women now have a right to take part in the panchayat. Through political activities, the Karen now have links with other communities.

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The Karen are Protestant Christians. In the North Andamans, all of them are members of the Baptist mission. The head of the family conducts regular prayers in his house.....Karens attend church on Sundays, and observe festivals like Good Friday, Easter and Christmas. They also celebrate festivals before sowing their fields and after harvesting. There are four Karen and non-Karen priest..... The priest alone is eligible to give a marriage certificate. He gets paid in cash for his services.

The Karens (both men and women) are adept at basket making. The basket (phosa, taw) are largely meant for storing paddy and rice and are made from Bamboo and cane. The Karen also make their own agricultural implements, fishing traps and nets, and bows and arrows, although, now, they can buy them in the market.

The Karen interact with other communities in politics, public functions and panchayat work. Some Ranchi are also members of Karen Church committees.


K.S. Singh, People of India, National Series Vol.VI, "India's Communities" pp.1581-1582.

A community in the northern areas of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, they were brought by the British from Burma in 1925 as forest labourers. Karen is derived from the Burmese word, Kayin (ka-ya), the name by which they call themselves. The population according to the 1951 census was 384. The Karen language, considered to be the language of lower Burma, bordering Thailand, is their mother tongue and Hindi is their link language. They use the Devanagari script. They enjoy the Local status, a category framed by the Andaman and Nicobar Administration. The Karen have two subgroups namely Pwo Karen and Sgaw Karen based on language differentiation which do not observe any social restriction and hierarchy amongst themselves. They are an endogamous community who observe monogamy and adult marriage as their norms.....

Primarily, the Karen are agriculturists and most of them are landholders and cultivators. Some of them have taken up service as their economic pursuit. They have adopted modern techniques of agriculture for better crops.....The Karen accept and exchange water and Kachcha and pucca food with other communities. The lease out their lands to the ranchi and Bengalee cultivators. Sometimes they engage people from Ranchi in their house either for domestic or agricultural work..... They are keen to impart modern education to their children. They also accept allopathic medicines whenever needed and their attitude towards family planning is favourable.

10. The Bench observed that the caste/community in terms of caste system is primarily identified/linked with traditional occupation of 'agriculture'. At present the caste/community is engaged in private jobs, mostly work as labourers. They are socially and educationally backward. As such the caste/community deserves to be included in the Central List of OBCs.

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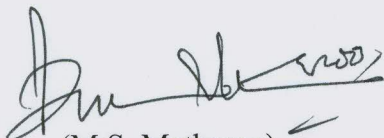
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The A & N Commission for OBCs has already recommended the case of 'Karen' for inclusion in the UT list of A & N Island and it is under consideration of the Government.

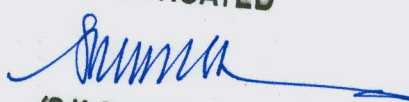
IV. FINDINGS

11. From the evidence and documents presented at the time of public hearing and also on a perusal of ethnographic literature by eminent authors, the Bench find that the "Karen" caste/community of Andaman & Nicobar Island is a minor community with the primary occupation of agriculture and private work, mostly as labourers. They are socially and educationally backward. Therefore, the "Karen" caste/community be included in the Central List of Backward Classes for Andaman & Nicobar Island at entry No.1 as follows:-

" 1 . 'Karen'


(M.S. Matharoo)


(Smt. Neera Shastri)

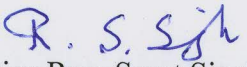
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V. ADVICE OF THE COMMISSION

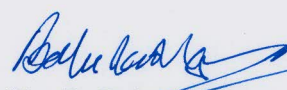
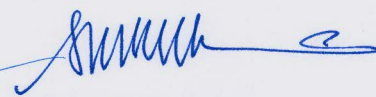
12. The commission considered and agreed in full with the findings of the Bench for Andaman & Nicobar Island and decided to tender the following advice to the central Government under section 9(1) of the NCBC Act, 1993 for action by the central Government under section 9(2) of the Act:-

“Karen” be included in the Central list of Backward Classes for Andaman & Nicobar Island at Sl. No. 1 as follows: :-


“1. “Karen”


(Justice Ram Surat Singh)

 
(M.S. Matharoo) (Smt. Neera Shastri)

 
(Dr. B. Baburao Verma) (S.K. Purkayastha)

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