

# SAWAR, SAWARA AND SAUNRA: ONE AND THE SAME TRIBE NOW

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The ruling Congress in Chhattisgarh and its main challenger, the BJP, are both claiming credit for the latest approval. **SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA**

Soon after he joined a government job as a teacher in Bastar in 2010, Shivprasad Bhoi, now 39, was asked to get his Scheduled Tribe certificate attested. What he then presumed to be a simple exercise turned out to be a nightmare. A spelling variation in the name of his tribe, Sawar, eventually resulted in his dismissal from service 15 months later. He did not get paid for his services during the period and has not found another job ever since.

“Not having my ST certificate turned out to be a huge impediment. Seeking help from government officials and Ministers proved futile. I kept insisting I was from the Sawar tribe, but the spelling variation meant nothing could be done. I was left with no choice but to return to farming,” says Mr. Bhoi.

Last week, the Union Cabinet approved the inclusion of spelling variations for 11 tribes on the list of Scheduled Tribes of Chhattisgarh and ‘Sawar’ or ‘Sawara’ was one of those. According to Shammi Abidi, Commissioner, Scheduled Tribe Development Department, and Director, Tribal Research and Training Institute (TRTI), the decision will impact nearly one lakh people across Chhattisgarh.

Mr. Bhoi is still hoping for retrospective relief when the note gets parliamentary approval and presidential assent but admits that the chances are slim. However, he is relieved that many others from these tribes may not meet the same fate as him.

## A long process

The ruling Congress in Chhattisgarh and its main challenger, the BJP, are both claiming credit for the latest approval. However, it came through a long process fraught with challenges, say community leaders and others who have worked closely with these tribes over the last decade and a half.

“The system is such that the burden of proof lies with the applicant who wants a certificate issued or attested. Most miss out because they are illiterate and did not know what was entered in the documents they had been issued or had inherited from their parents. Some families didn’t even keep the documents. In certain cases, the pronunciation changed the entire word. For example, if a teacher misheard something at the time of admission or the sub-divisional magistrate got the spelling wrong at the time of issuance, it just stuck,” says G.M. Jha, a former Deputy Director at the TRTI headquartered in Nawa Raipur.

P.L. Sidar, president, Chhattisgarh Sawar Sawara Samaj Sangh and one of the key figures of this campaign for inclusion of synonyms, explains: “Saunra and Saonra have been approved as synonyms of Sawar and Sawara. We are a tribe that is native to the eastern districts such as Raigarh or Mahasamund and we had better exposure due to education because of our lands falling on important train and bus routes. There are nearly 3 lakh Sawaras and we are numerically the second-largest group after Gonds. However, we are the ones most affected.”

Mr. Sidar said all such communities endured countless “trials and tribulations” for over a decade and a half.

He explains how a “non-issue” turned into a big stumbling block due to officials’ lack of understanding and indifference. “Articles 342 (1) and (2) of the Constitution give clear direction on who is deemed to be an ST and who can be included. However, around 2004, the then director of the TRTI issued a book that wrongly interpreted a Supreme Court order and the terms ‘synonym’ and ‘synonymous’ in it. This then became a reference point for officials across districts and they started rejecting applications with spelling variations that stemmed from phonetic variations. Often, the poor and illiterate tribals would have no recourse against outright rejection or intense scrutiny even if their case was genuine. They would abandon the pursuit altogether,” says Mr. Sidar.

Uday Pando, the regional president of Sarva Vishesh Pichhdi Janjati Samaj Chhattisgarh Pradesh, adds that community leaders started recognising this problem in the mid-2000s and approached the State Scheduled Tribes Commission, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes and regularly interacted with Ministers and MPs to highlight it.

Mr. Pando hails from the Pando tribe that is native to the Sarguja region and is among the 11 whose spelling variations had been listed by the Centre recently. However, the rectification was not easy as there were no clear guidelines for anthropological and ethnographic studies until 2013, adds Mr. Sidar.

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