



Caste Census: A Need of the Hour or a Tool of Appeasement?

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The great leader of backward castes, Babu Jagdev Prasad Kushwaha said - 90 out of 100 are exploited and 90% belongs to us (backward castes). It goes without saying that the backward castes have been and are still exploited under the inhumane caste system, but to provide a remedy, it is pertinent that we have a figure of what part of the society is suffering the brunt of exploitation. For that, there has to be a precise estimation of what percentage of the population is 'backward'. The caste based census is one such exercise which will provide a precise figure of the number of people who belong to backward or the oppressed castes.

I. Introduction

The demand for a caste census has been raised time and again by people from several walks of life. From the political parties and eminent scholars to the members of the Parliament, a broad spectrum of the populace is vouching for a caste census to be conducted at the earliest. But at the same time the government has shown hesitancy in holding a caste based census stating the fear that the country would be divided and also pointing to the inaccuracy of the data collected in the socio economic and caste census 2011. What explains this anxiety of the state? Is there really a need for a caste census or is it just a way to appease the backward castes and garner political fame? To fetch answers to these questions and to understand the intricacies of the issue let us dwell deep into the issue of the caste census.

Census Vs Caste Census

In lucid terms, a census is a comprehensive count of a population or group of people at a point of time based on a set of specific characteristics. It contains information about the population's demographics, like age, sex, occupation, and so forth. Under Viceroy Lord Mayo, the census process in India began during the colonial era in 1872, and the first comprehensive

census was carried out in 1881. Census has been used by the government, policy makers and academicians to capture the dynamics of the population, analyze social changes, conduct delimitation exercises and so on. In India, census has been a decennial exercise i.e. conducted after every 10 years, it has been conducted 15 times till 2011 by the Registrar General and the Census Commissioner under the ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. The COVID epidemic caused the next census, (which was scheduled for 2021) to be delayed. A caste census is being demanded in order to provide a breakdown of the Indian population in terms of numbers and percentages that would include all castes in addition to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

2011 Socio-Economic Caste Census

The 2011 Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) conducted under the UPA government under Dr. Manmohan Singh was the first to produce detailed data on households in both rural and urban areas. There were some things which made the SECC 2011 a noteworthy exercise. It was carried out in 640 districts using handheld electronic devices and was India's first paperless census. Since India's 1931 census, this was the first caste-based count ever conducted and data on manual scavenging and the number of transgender people in India were gathered.

In an affidavit filed with the Supreme Court on September 23, the Union government denied conducting a Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC). With the exception of those customarily carried out for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the affidavit maintained that a caste census was both impractical and "administratively difficult and cumbersome." The affidavit was produced in response to a writ petition that the Maharashtra government filed, requesting guidance from the Union government on how to collect data on the



Backward Class of Citizens (BCC) in rural India during the 2021 census.

It is important to note that the data collected during the SECC 2011 has not been released yet. The SECC-2011 states that there are 46 lakh different castes. The government argues that because the total number cannot reach this large by exponential means, the census and the data set as a whole are incorrect, rendering them unusable for policymaking or reservation-making. For these reasons, it has refused to provide even the SECC-2011's raw caste data.

Need for a Caste Census

Amidst the growing clamour and contestations over the issue of the caste census, it is pertinent to ponder whether a caste census is really needed? Is it something which is the need of the hour? Will it do any good to the public and the policy makers?

Or is it only a means for the opposition parties to exert pressure on the administration and a means of appeasing the backward castes?

Well, there are plenty of opinions over this issue but in my opinion, conducting a caste census is really important and it should be conducted at the earliest. A caste census is not only required to know the figures of different castes but it will also address many pertinent issues.

A caste census would help to address the problem pertaining to lack of data on backward castes because without the data, India's social equality programmes cannot be successful. The OBC population was pegged by the Mandal Commission at 52%, but other sources have estimated the OBC population at 36 to 65 percent. In addition to clearing up the mystery surrounding the size of the OBC population, the census would yield a wealth of demographic data (sex ratio, mortality rate, life expectancy), educational data (male and female literacy, ratio of school-going population, number of graduates), and policy-relevant data about economic conditions (house-type, assets, occupation) of the OBCs.

The Rohini Commission, which was established to consider how to fairly redistribute the 27% OBC quota, found that there are approximately 2,633 castes that are covered by the OBC reservation. Among the OBCs, there is a

second, even more neglected category known as "Extremely Backward Castes," yet the Center's 1992 reservation policy ignores this reality.

Because caste includes an emotional component, a caste census will have political and social repercussions. The topic of whether caste counting reinforces social identities has been brought up. Due to these effects, nearly ten years after the SECC 2011, a substantial portion of the data is still unavailable or has only been made partially available. Although a caste census may not be in line with the ideal of a casteless society, it might be used to rectify social injustices. Research on the question of who requires affirmative action and who doesn't, as well as the effectiveness of this policy, may be conducted objectively with the help of caste data.

The greatest caste-based affirmative benefit scheme in the world is administered by India. Caste identities are used to grant reservation in educational institutions and government positions. Caste and tribal identities are the basis for the Scheduled Castes (SCs), also known as Dalits, whose quota is 15%, and the Scheduled Tribes (STs), whose quota is 7.5%. The B. P. Mandal Commission determined the Other Backward Classes' (OBCs') backwardness on the basis of caste, hence the greatest reservation mandate for OBCs - 27% is caste-based. The reservation for OBCs is not based on their proportion of India's population, unlike the quotas for Dalits and STs, which are proportionate to their populations as determined by censuses held every ten years.

OBC quota was set at 27% since there wasn't enough room as total reservation was limited to 50%. The OBC population was projected to be 52% of the population by the Mandal Commission. This is why Akhilesh Yadav, president of the SP, and other leaders demanded - "*jiski jitni sankhya bhari, uski utni hissedari*" (every caste group should get representation proportionate to their share in population). Caste information was gathered in the last census conducted by the British colonial authority in 1941, but the results were not made public. Following independence, the government only gathered and released SC and ST caste data for the 1951 Census. The first independent Indian government, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, reportedly overturned the caste census programme in 1951, according to the government's



testimony before the court. According to the government's affidavit, "a caste-wise enumeration in the Census has been given up as a matter of policy from 1951 onwards, so, castes other than scheduled castes and scheduled tribes have not been enumerated in any of the Census since 1951 until now." But even though the data was never made public, the Manmohan Singh administration decided to gather caste information as part of the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) in 2011.

Since there is no current caste census data, 2021 welfare policy formulation will be based on the caste estimations from 1931. Politicians will probably receive new and updated data from a caste census.

The administration claimed that technical difficulties prevented them from conducting a caste census in their affidavit from last week. The Maharashtra government's appeal for data on the Backward Class of Citizens (BCC) to be gathered for the Census 2021 prompted the Center's position before the Supreme Court. Since that time, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), a rival party and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) have resurrected calls for a caste census to be conducted concurrently with Census 2021. The Center stated that the population census is not the "perfect instrument" for obtaining information on caste and asserted in an affidavit dated September 21 that conducting a caste census would be difficult in practice. There must be more than one caste for the caste system to exist. There must be other castes for one to engage in caste practises. Caste is always already taken into account in this "practicing of caste," and this action causes a person to locate the other in relation to one's caste. According to Babasaheb Ambedkar, "ascending order of reverence and descending order of disdain" is how one would locate themselves in the caste system using this numbering. For instance, one would need to know the surname in order to determine someone's whole name. Surnames are a good indicator of caste. Most Indians alter their behaviour or attitude when they learn a person's caste location. A person may find this behavior change to be supportive or degrading.

In today's institutions, Hindu castes and higher castes are disproportionately represented. Marginalized castes lead a social existence that is akin to death. Such castes hardly ever appear in contemporary institutions. The anti-caste

movement, which included Ambedkar's call to "Educate," the Dalit Panthers, Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, Dalit Mahasabha, the Mandal agitation, and several more undocumented efforts, have ensured their existence through instilling the value of education in the underprivileged people. The purpose of the caste census is not to determine a caste's numerical strength. Rather, the caste census provides information about the whereabouts of various castes in contemporary social structures. The illusion of the national imagination, or the apparent community of the nation, is exposed by the caste census. In the social, political, and economic institutions of the country, are all castes on the same page? Census data exposes nation-building myths, particularly those relating to the politics of economic and social progress. The census shows us the progress made by each caste. Are the marginalized castes receiving their legally mandated part in the national institutions? What effects do the government's plans and programmes have on the disadvantaged populations? The listing of castes will reveal the answers to questions of this nature.

This line of reasoning was also emphasized by the electronic media. In the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha and the 2017 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, the BJP accused the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) of concentrating their campaigns just on Jatavs and Yadavs, ignoring the rest of the Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes, which directly aided the BJP's campaign. Let's imagine that the Jatavs and Yadavs of UP, respectively, have been entirely uplifted by the politics of the BSP and SP. This implies that none of them should have any social or economic backwardness. However, a random study in the state would show that while the Jatavs and Yadavs may have improved in terms of political consciousness or mobility, respectively, there has been minimal advancement in terms of economic and social mobility.

The decline of tigers and certain other species in the Indian jungles worries the government, which keeps track of the tiger population, preventing certain creatures from being extinct. The government is concerned that tigers must survive. Many castes are mobile and satellite, like the Dakkali who are nomads. In many states, their population wouldn't exceed a few thousand. Since the majority of them lack any identification, they are not state recipients. By counting them and



making sure they receive social benefits, the government can demonstrate its concern for these satellite castes. If there were no caste census, castes such as the Dakkali would vanish. Understanding caste social mobility in India is the goal of caste censuses. It also serves as a register for the amount of influence Brahmanism and Manu's laws have on castes in India. Additionally, it would demonstrate the extent to which the Constitution or a constitutional state applies to various castes as well as the degree to which societal and governmental institutions have adopted constitutional mandates. In other words, it illustrates how castes situate themselves in relation to contemporary nation-states and social institutions like caste. Not conducting a caste census means maintaining inequality among those who are disadvantaged by systems like caste. Joint research by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, and Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU) revealed similar results. A 2018 study titled "Wealth Ownership and Inequality in India: A Socio-Religious Analysis" discovered that "Of the total national assets, the highest 41% is owned by upper caste Hindus followed by 31% by OBC groups, whereas the lowest among STs and SCs, each owning 3.7% and 7.6% of the total assets, respectively." It clearly reflects that in India, the hierarchy of the caste system is reflected in the way the wealth is distributed. We need precise statistics on the population of different caste groups and their socio-economic situation in order to address these concerns, which are essential for the general and holistic prosperity of our country, as the wealth of the country is distributed along caste lines.

A detailed examination of SECC surveys reveals that they suffer from unclear data variables, poor data capture (especially with regard to the caste variable) design, and a lack of organization. It should come as no surprise that the data is still not available for public use or review. Due to the lack of SECC 2011 data and any other alternative data, the demand for caste-based headcounts (or the inclusion of a caste column) in India's decennial census is becoming louder by the day. Though in its current form it may not provide enough information to meet the data requirements for inclusive social policymaking, a caste column in the census would be a great place to start. In actuality, it provides comprehensive data on a few variables, such as family assets (common consumer goods) and caste, as well as education (now restricted to SC and ST groups only). Nevertheless,

it would fall short of providing a comprehensive solution to every unsolvable issue about representation and backwardness, particularly with regard to OBCs.

The statistics will continue to contain many gaps regarding contentious topics like income, wealth, representation in elite positions, involvement in caste-based occupations, etc. and the country would still be ignorant of the socio-economic backwardness of people who are born into particular social groups. The argument being made is that, even with the addition of a caste column, the Census of India as it currently stands will be of limited utility and not be able to address most of the key topics that proponents of the caste census hope to address. The only option is a full-fledged caste census along the lines of SECC 2011, which needs to be carefully planned, meticulously designed, and thorough in terms of socio-economic characteristics.

The Narendra Modi administration at the centre, according to Nitish Kumar, should rethink its demand to forgo conducting a caste census. The leader of the RJD, Tejashwi Yadav, has written an opinion article for a significant newspaper. Tejashwi Yadav had also sent letters to non-BJP parties pleading for their backing for the caste census.

MK Stalin, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, has also backed a caste census, and both his party and the DMK have written to the government and allies to support it. Both the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh reiterated their demand for a caste census.

Are there legitimate concerns regarding a caste census?

A caste-based census has been criticized for causing a number of concerns. The first is directly tied to the reality that upper-caste people have benefited most from government initiatives on education, the economy, and development. A caste-based census will expose this fact, posing a danger to the hegemony of the Brahminical ruling class. The hard-core Hindus view a caste-based census as a danger to their much-cherished vision of "Hindu" unity since it will reveal its Brahminical foundation. A caste-based census is seen in the Hindutva worldview as a plot to undermine "Hindu society", akin to their opposition to a separate electorate during the colonial era. The caste-based census will disprove the assertion made by many neo-liberal proponents that capitalism and its



variants are the greatest potential system for eradicating caste. The wealth difference between upper-caste groups and other caste groups has, if anything, only widened over the past 30 years of economic liberalization, according to the studies conducted. In the end, will the caste census strengthen caste and widen rifts in a nation already riven by conflict? The simple response to this fear is that caste has existed prior to the census and the census gathers information on sex disparity and illiteracy rates, among other things. This does not imply that the census gives them legitimacy, caste counting only serves to track society's perception of caste identity; it does not undermine the goal of making our country caste-free.

II. Conclusion

Caste-based censuses are urgently needed and ought to be carried out as soon as possible. It will, not only, provide a precise enumeration of various castes specially the OBCs, but will also serve as a credible database for formulation of the policies directed at social empowerment. Census is a potent instrument for reducing socio-economic inequality. Therefore, it's critical to comprehend the vital role that the census plays in democracies. It is more than just a tiresome data collection task done every ten years, it offers the statistical framework through which the State can develop its social goal for the ensuing ten years. The response of the government in its detailed affidavit citing 'technical difficulties' and 'inauthenticity of the 2011 SECC data' as the reasons for not conducting a caste-based census seem to be a deliberate attempt to delay this much needed and pertinent exercise. It is encouraging that more political parties, including some who support the NDA administration, are raising the demand for a caste-based census, but it is unclear if this will lead to a census or if the demand would go unfulfilled.

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