

CASTE CENSUS AND ITS CONSCIOUSNESS

Tracing the Socio-Political Significance Since Colonial Era

Dr Rubina Mittal & Pravin Kumar Singh

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**CASTE CENSUS
AND
ITS CONSCIOUSNESS:**

**TRACING THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE SINCE
COLONIAL ERA**

About Us



The World Intellectual Foundation (WIF) is a global non-profit, non-partisan think tank headquartered in Delhi. It works on diverse topics and themes to promote global Peace, Prosperity, and Sustainability.

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- b. Mother Earth Is Terminally ILL**
- b. Human Potential or Capital**
- c. Civilization By Design**



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Director of Research and Innovation

Dr. Rubina Mittal is an accomplished professional serving as the Director of Research and Innovation at the World Intellectual Foundation (WIF). She is a Professor of Operations Research at University of Delhi.

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Beyond her professional accomplishments, Dr. Mittal actively engages in promoting Gandhian values globally through her role as a core member of Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, an organization chaired by the Prime Minister of India. She also serves as the Co-Chair of the Education Committee at the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry and holds an executive position within FICCI's Education Committee. As a trustee on Sleepwell foundation, she has developed many popular skill development courses at their skill centre in Khurja. Her diverse involvement in various influential organizations, makes her an invaluable asset to the World Intellectual Foundation and a significant contributor to the advancement of knowledge and societal progress.

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With an extensive legal career spanning over 23 years at the Allahabad High Court, Ms. Sinha has embarked on a transformative journey into the Social Sector. Demonstrating a commitment to alleviating the sufferings of the underprivileged, she has founded her own foundation. Ms. Sinha brings her wealth of legal & spiritual expertise to WIF, where she has joined a project focused on examining the operations of various social and cultural organizations worldwide.



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Nitesh is a dedicated team member with a keen interest in technology-oriented initiatives. His forte lies in graphic design, making him the creative force behind our visual endeavors.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent debates surrounding the inclusion of caste in Census have served to crystallise the competing narratives about social stratification in Indian society. One side holds that historical fault lines along caste, tribe and religious lines persist and may well have been aggravated in modern India; the other side asserts that, while caste remains an important dimension of modern social life, its relevance is mostly limited to selection of marriage partners and has little importance in shaping material inequalities. Let us examine the relevance and complexities in conducting a caste census through the annals of censuses, its relevance and contemporaneity.

The research paper aims to delve into the historical evolution and socio-political implications of caste census in India, tracing its journey from the colonial era's first-ever census in 1881 to the most recent census in 2011. Focusing on the caste survey in Bihar, the paper explores the motivations and political agendas behind this initiative and its potential impact on other states and the central government. The study critically analyse the positions of major political parties, ranging from left to right-wing ideologies, in their advocacy for or opposition to caste census, shedding light on the tussle for legitimacy in the realm of social justice and reservation policies.

The research also aims to explore the broader societal implications, focusing on the impact of caste census on social consciousness and public perceptions regarding caste-based disparities. Through an in-depth analysis, the paper aims identify challenges in conducting accurate and unbiased caste census and offers policy recommendations for addressing these challenges.

In conclusion, this research paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of caste census in shaping India's socio-political landscape, offering valuable insights into the challenges faced and the future prospects of this critical aspect of Indian society.

Source: Forward Press





CAST

1.1 THE IMPERIAL STATISTICAL ENDEAVOUR IN COLONIAL INDIA

The word "caste" has its origins in the Portuguese and Spanish word "casta," which means "race" or "lineage." The Portuguese and Spanish explorers and colonizers used this term in the 16th century to describe the hierarchical social divisions they encountered in India.

In ancient India, society was traditionally divided into different occupational groups based on one's occupation and social status. These divisions were not initially as rigid as they later became. The Portuguese and Spanish, however, interpreted these divisions through their own lens of social hierarchy and applied the term "casta" to describe these groups.

In the aftermath of the Great Rebellion of 1857, the British administration in India faced a glaring realization: their understanding of the Indian populace was woefully inadequate and disjointed. In the 1860s, attempts were made to systematize and collect statistical knowledge of the demography being ruled by them.



OUT

"THE FIRST CENSUS OF INDIA MARKED A SIGNIFICANT MILESTONE IN THE COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION'S EFFORTS TO UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEX SOCIAL FABRIC OF THE SUBCONTINENT."

Although the idea of conducting an all-India census had been contemplated since the mid-1850s, various regions in India had already seen regular surveys and attempts at census-like data collection. The Madras presidency, for instance, had conducted censuses in specific areas before implementing a five-yearly district-wise population survey in 1851.

Source: Bharata Bharati



CASTE

However, the plans for an all-India census in 1861 were disrupted by the Great Rebellion and were further delayed due to concerns about unrest and potential misunderstandings regarding the census officers' intentions. It was not until 1871-1872 that the first comprehensive census of India took place, although it had its flaws and limitations, leading to subsequent decennial censuses being more widely recognized.



Caste, Varna and the Colonial construct of India



Source: Scroll.in

One of the significant difficulties was the classification of the population based on religion and caste. The census aimed to create standardized procedures and categories for enumeration across India, but this proved challenging, especially when it came to defining religious and caste distinctions. The Varna system, a traditional hierarchical classification, was initially used to categorize the population into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. However, this classification was insufficient and did not accurately represent the diverse and intricate social realities of India.

Enumerators struggled to accurately classify castes due to the immense diversity and the absence of a uniform classification system. The occupation-based approach was adopted for lower castes, but even this method had its limitations, as formal caste titles often did not correspond to actual occupations. Furthermore, social status and caste identity were highly fluid and contested, leading to discrepancies and contradictions in the data collected.

In the 1881 census, provincial enumerators were instructed to focus only on caste groups with populations of 100,000 or more, abandoning the earlier notion that caste was unimportant. The census commissioner, W. C. Plowden, viewed the census as a foundation for further research into the subject of caste. The total population was categorized into Brahmans, Rajputs, and "other castes." The majority of the "other castes" were further divided into 207 groups, each consisting of at least 100,000 people.

Source: Census Digital Library



However, enumerators faced difficulties as the data highlighted the importance of sub-caste groupings, leading to a proliferation of actual caste groups. Many "great" castes were, in fact, occupational categories with little administrative utility.

Despite the challenges, there was a growing confidence in devising a better classification scheme. Efforts were made to standardize caste names and organize them hierarchically, often based on Varna or occupation.

In summary, the enumeration of caste in the colonial census was marked by challenges related to the complexity of caste identities, leading to various classification attempts based on Varna, occupation, and functional affiliations. Despite the difficulties, colonial authorities persisted in their efforts to categorize and understand the intricate social structure of India.

JOURNEY POST-INDEPENDENCE

The census is **by far the most important source of demographic data** which is widely used for social and economic planning in the country.

Census enumeration in each country is done mainly with two objectives in mind:

- To record facts about demographic and other related socio-economic attributes of a population, and
- To construct a characteristic demographic and socio-economic space by introducing new categories and/or replacing the earlier ones for the purpose of data collection.

"A CENSUS OF THE POPULATION IS NOT ONLY THE MOST EXTENSIVE AND MOST PUBLIC ACTIVITY RELATED TO POPULATION DATA, IT ALSO PROVIDES THE LARGEST AMOUNT OF DATA USED BY RESEARCHERS, POLICY-MAKERS AND ADMINISTRATORS."

Each social and political system employs various categories to designate socio-economic and political contours as it wishes to articulate and promote them. The nature and detail of data on ethnic, religious and other minority groups is chiefly determined by the current political discourse of a country. If the discourse aims at accommodating differences along various ethnic religious and tribal lines, then the population data would also reflect such differentiation.

Source: Agence France-Presse



"WITH A LONG HISTORY OF MORE THAN 130 YEARS NOW, THE INDIAN CENSUS IS ONE OF THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE IN THE WORLD."

As expected, the census has also undergone notable changes in categorisation as well as details of data. Under the British rule till 1947, the Indian Census Organisation had employed many more categories for census purposes as compared with those in the post-British period. The differential in the number of categories used in this regard is a manifestation of the basic difference in the political discourses of the ruling classes during the British and the post-1947 periods. The political agenda since the departure of the British in 1947 has been essentially homogenising which also gets amply reflected in notable reduction in the number of ethnic/religious groups as well as the number of population attributes of religious communities for census taking during this period.

On the other hand, the British rulers of India had no political compulsion, like that of the Indian state now, to go for a homogenising discourse. In fact, it suited the political interests of the British rulers to highlight more and more seams in the Indian society. Hence, for their administrative reasons as well as in antiquarian interests, they opted for collection of population data for many more groups of people as separate entities, whether these were religious, tribal, caste or other groups.

In order to increase/decrease socio-economic visibility of a community through census counts, the ruling class usually adopts three methods. One, selecting enumeration categories in such a way that only those attributes of people/population find mention, which suit the reigning political class. Two, providing more details of data and more space for discussion on various socio-economic and demographic attributes of the "mainstream" political groups. Several examples to this effect could be cited from the successive censuses of India both during the British and post-British periods.

It is well-known that enumeration of detailed demographic and socio-economic data on various religious and ethnic groups is a prerequisite for their in-depth understanding and proper socioeconomic planning. In this context, notwithstanding its varied interpretations and resultant implications, the Census Organisation of India deserves credit for publishing detailed data on religion from the 2001 Census after a lapse of six decades.

***"THE POLITICAL INTEREST IN SOME MATTERS TAKE
PRECEDENCE OVER THE NATIONAL INTEREST."***

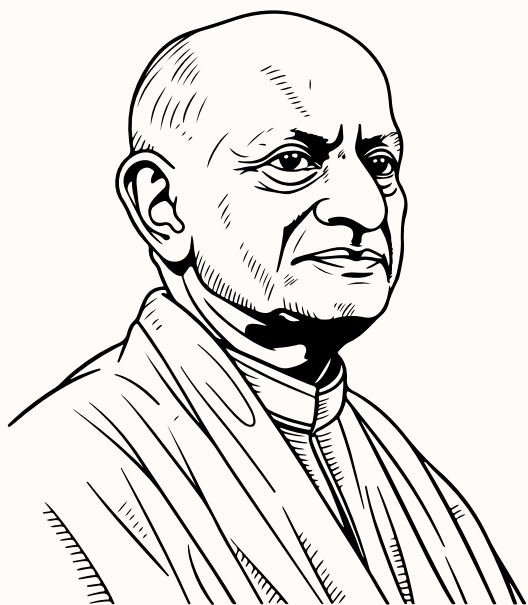
Almost all the major national political parties, particularly the Congress and the BJP, along with main parties of the Hindi belt, aim at erasure of socio-cultural difference in the country. Their political discourses privilege all-India structures over regional, and the mainstream over the "marginal".

Population data visibility is also affected by characteristic delineation of census/administrative areas used as units of data aggregation. The boundaries of most of such areas have been strongly gerrymandered to serve the political agenda of the state. For example, most of the areas of tribal concentration, having more than 50 per cent share of tribal to total population, in central India have been variously bifurcated to fall in three or even four states as per the 1956 linguistic reorganisation of the states in the country. The main purpose of this type of gerrymandering was to dilute demographic and, hence, political strength of tribals so that they would not make up a sizeable share of population capable of making any meaningful political impact in any of the concerned states of the country.

However, since early 1990s both the Congress Party and BJP have come to realise that instead of opposing regional sentiments directly, these could be harnessed to political benefit by creating smaller states. The emergence of three new states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttaranchal was due to the changed political perspectives of the country's major political parties in this regard. The politics of the country has become so competitive that even "a few seats either way can now topple state and even central government".

Accordingly, now even the smaller regional parties find themselves capable of tilting the balance of power for or against the central government. In this context, the change in attitude of the major political parties could be called a part of invention and confirmation of truth, which is a major mechanism for the permeation and "the legitimation of hegemonic forms of power". Moreover, India is also finding itself more confident to fight back any separatist movement as it has quite successfully done in many areas in the past few decades. Besides, as the "tribal" areas have already got flooded with non-tribals during the last four-five decades, there remains little danger of emergence of politically assertive tribal discourse(s) at present. In this context, it is not unlikely that some more new states might emerge both in the tribal and non-tribal areas of the country.

AT THE CENSUS CONFERENCE HELD FROM FEBRUARY 23 TO MARCH 1, 1950, THE THEN DEPUTY-PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL ANNOUNCED THAT CASTE "WILL NO LONGER BE A PROMINENT FEATURE IN THE 1951 CENSUS".



Some of the census categories as adopted in the post-British India fall in line with the state's essentially linear narrative. Sensitive census categories not only reflect such a narrative, but also work to strengthen its homogenising thrust still further. For instance, census data by scheduled caste category has helped the state to subdue to some extent the forces of regionalism by opening up a new option for a section of people to organise themselves by this caste group which cuts across virtually the whole length and breadth of the country.

With the change in the political discourse in the post-1947 period, there has also occurred a notable change in the nature of population data collected in the country.

With the sole exception of the latest population Census in 2001, data on religion have been limited to the count of males and females only, while those on castes have been notably curtailed. Significantly, beginning in 1951 for five successive censuses no data were published on occupational/industrial structure, and literacy rates of various religious groups, which are so essential for a meaningful understanding of demographic structure of any area/people. Moreover, there has been an increasing delay in the publication of data on religion, i.e., 1971 Census data on religion were published just after one year in 1972, the 1981 data after three years in 1984, and those from 1991 Census were published after five years in 1996. The growing lag between the census enumeration and the publication of data on religion, simultaneous with increasing computerisation by the Census Organisation, could solely be attributed to political considerations.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

CENSUS IN INDIA

1931

Conducted by the British Raj, this is the only census that collected caste data for every respondent.

1941

Caste Information was collected during the census, but this was during WWII so it wasn't made public

1948

Government of India passes the Census Act

1951

The first census to be conducted in Independent India

1953

PM Nehru constitutes the First Backward Classes Commission led by the Kaka Kalelkar

1955

Kalelkar report submitted

1961

Census Conducted



1971

Census Conducted

1979

PM Desai constitutes the Second Backward Classes Commission led by the BP Mandal



1980

The Mandal Commission submits its report



1990

PM V.P. Singh implements the Mandal Report

1981

Census Conducted

1991

Census Conducted

1993

The National Commission for Backward Classes is established



2001

Census Conducted with no caste column

2011

The Socio Economic & Caste Census was conducted

2017

Rohini Commission set up for the sub-categorization of OBCs



2.1 CENSUS THROUGH THE LENS OF RELIGION

Religion has been a regular and an important item in Indian census since the first census in 1871. However, the details of religion data have varied over time primarily in tune with the socio-political agenda of the rulers.

For the censuses conducted during the British rule, detailed data were collected about different religions, castes and tribes in the country. For instance, the 1931 Census had also published data on literacy by religion and age for several religious communities and sub-communities: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Christians, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Jews and tribals, etc.

Apart from their effect on the details of data on religion, political factors also played a significant role regarding accuracy of census returns in this regard. For instance, at the 1941 Census, there were complaints about biased enumeration of religious communities in Punjab and Bengal. The Hindus alleged that the Muslim enumerators had underenumerated the Hindus, while the Muslims had the same complaint against the Hindu enumerators for undercounting the Muslims.

The religion of tribal people has also been a difficult issue for census purposes. For instance, the British Indian Census category "variously labelled as "primitive", "animist" and "tribal", which counted around 2.5 to 3 per cent of the population has been counted as Hindu in the post-British period. Now the question arises whether all these people have got converted to Hinduism since 1931? The answer to this question would be certainly in the negative notwithstanding the fact that there has also been a gradual trickling in of tribal people to Hinduism since 1947. Consequently, accuracy of data on tribal population leaves much to be desired.

There was a need as well as a demand for including a question on OBCs in the 2001 Census. But the then central government of the country at the time of 2001 Census did not permit its inclusion, as it might not go in line with its long-term political calculus. Contrary to the earlier held view, the ruling party of the country at that time seems to have come to believe that data along more caste lines also carry the potential for weakening/diluting what is now being called the political mainstream of the country.

In contradistinction, its new assessment seems to hold that data on religion not only help to weld together and strengthen the mainstream, it also could be used, as is commonly done, for scapegoating some of the religious group(s) in order to enhance the vote bank of the ruling party.

The release of census data on religion after every census invariably raises communal and political temperatures in India. It was virtually ignored that Muslim fertility rate has come down significantly during recent years following nearly the same pace of transition as that of Hindus. This underlines the huge potential of socio-political misuse of religion data by vested interests. Under this scenario, it becomes difficult to accept that the quality/accuracy of census data would remain uncompromised, particularly concerning politically sensitive issues like religion and language. Similarly, quality of data also comes to suffer due to the lack of work commitment on the part of quite a good share of census enumerators, particularly those who feel themselves being compelled to do this task.



2.2 CENSUS THROUGH THE LENS OF CASTE

Right from the beginning of the census in India in 1871, there have been strong views for and against collection of data on castes. The support for or opposition to census data by caste transcends Left-Right dichotomy as both “Left liberals and upper-caste Hindu Rightists” could be seen joining on both sides of the fence. Those who support inclusion of caste for census purposes argue that since caste is an inseparable feature of India’s social life, it deserves to be reflected in the census returns. The opponents believe that caste data would work to erode the imagined solidarity of Hindu society. It is alleged that it is mainly the people from upper castes who are against census by caste, while those from lower castes invariably welcome such an effort.

Caste data were also collected for all the religious groups, including the Christians, in the 1871 Census. However, as the protestant missionaries were opposed to inclusion of caste for the Christians, this practice was discontinued for them at the 1881 Census. Similarly, as the Muslim League was ideologically "against the mention of 'caste' among the Muslims", the list of caste for the Muslims gradually got shortened after 1921. Consequently, there was no mention of any caste among the Muslims for the 1941 Census.

The benefits of caste reservation in the legislatures, government jobs and for admission to educational institutions were initially given to the Hindus only when the reservation policy was first introduced in 1950. The Sikhs were brought under the purview of this policy in 1954 and the Buddhists much later in 1990. In other words, the government's reservation policy for weaker castes has worked to perpetuate caste system not only among the Hindus, but also among the people of other two religions, i.e., Sikhism and Buddhism which, in principle, are basically against the caste system as found in Hinduism. Thus, by diluting opposition to caste system among

these two religious communities, the reservation policy for and the census count of scheduled castes as a category has contributed toward homogenisation, or one could say Hinduisation, of India's religious minorities which is said to be in line with the political agenda of the country.

It is notable that in the Indian setting, people of almost all religions are marked by caste divisions notwithstanding the fact that non-Hindu religions do not admit of; at least in principle, the caste system. Had the objective of the reservation policy for scheduled castes been solely economic, it could have easily been framed on economic criteria which would have rightly covered weaker sections from amongst all the religious communities, including the Hindus, in the country.

At the time of the introduction of reservation policy for scheduled castes in 1950, the Sikhs had a difficult choice to make. Keeping in line with negation of caste system in Sikhism, if they had not accepted the prevalence of caste system among them, then it was very likely that a large share of Sikh scheduled castes would have opted for the Hindu fold to get the much needed socio-economic benefits of reservation policy.



Source: Agence France-Presse

On the other hand, if they admit of the caste system, as they did quite quickly, it would not only go against the basic tenets of Sikhism, but would also push Sikhism closer to Hinduism as was planned and expected by the country's mainstream leaders. Interestingly, it is now the Muslims and Christians only, who are not covered by the caste reservation policy notwithstanding the fact that a very large share of the followers of these two religions are the converts from weaker castes in India. No wonder, the pace of upward mobility in these strata among the Christians and the Muslims has been quite indifferent and the pace of conversions to these religions has come down sharply, virtually to naught, in recent decades.

The Socio-Economic Caste Census of 2011 was the first census after 1931, which included the enumeration of caste. After the 2011 Census, the then government of India decided against releasing the caste data to the public citing the complexity and sensitivities regarding the caste data. It was a comprehensive initiative aimed at

gathering data regarding the socio-economic status of diverse communities in India.

Intriguingly, while detailed information concerning the economic conditions of households was made public, the specific caste data gathered during this census has remained undisclosed till present times. The secrecy surrounding this data has sparked speculation, with conjectures suggesting that its political sensitivity might have deterred its release. One plausible reason for this reluctance could be the apprehension of antagonizing dominant and influential castes, whose perceived strength in the population might not align with the data, potentially leading to social and political unrest. This underlying fear might have played a pivotal role in withholding the caste data, reflecting the intricate interplay between politics, social dynamics, and data transparency in India. It is important to note that this decision was made based on these considerations and the government's assessment of what would be in the best interest of the country.

CASE STUDY: CASTE SURVEY OF BIHAR INSTIGATING THE COMPETITIVE NARRATIVES

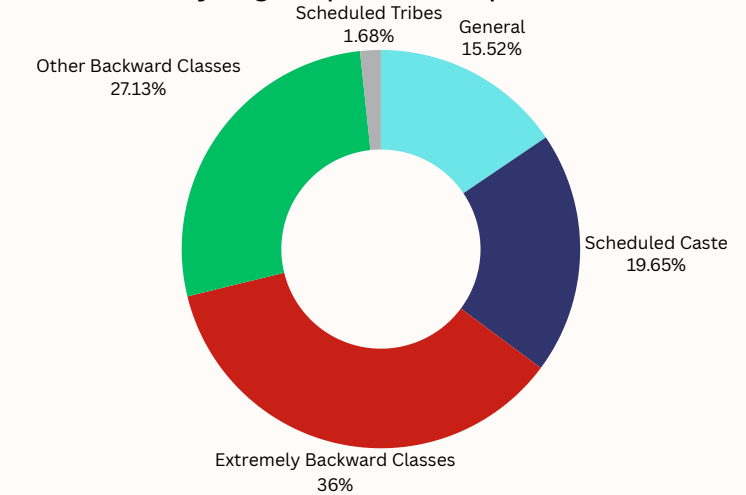
Of late, the Bihar government published the 'Bihar Caste-based Survey 2022', which shows that extremely backward classes (EBCs) and other backward classes (OBCs) together add up to nearly 63% of the 13-crore population, making it the largest caste group in the State.

In August of this year, a two-phase counting exercise was conducted, which involved approximately 264,000 enumerators gathering information on 29 million registered households. The survey form assigned distinct codes to each of the 214 castes mentioned, and the survey was divided into 17 points in order to determine the socio-economic characteristics of the population.

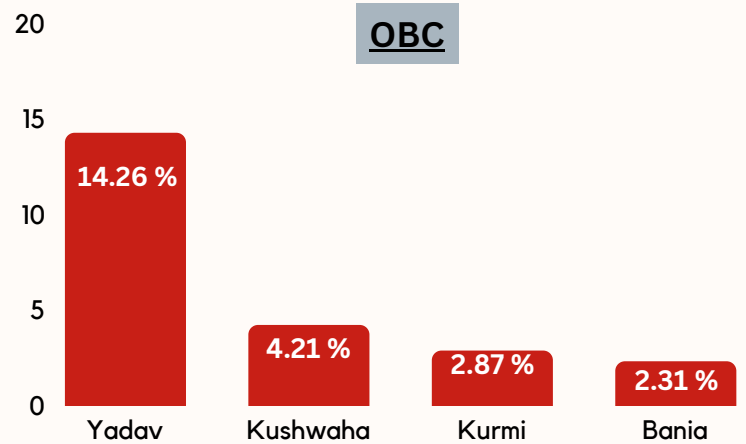
According to the survey, the EBCs, which consist of 112, castes make up the largest portion of the population in the State, accounting for 36.01% of the total.

TELLING NUMBERS

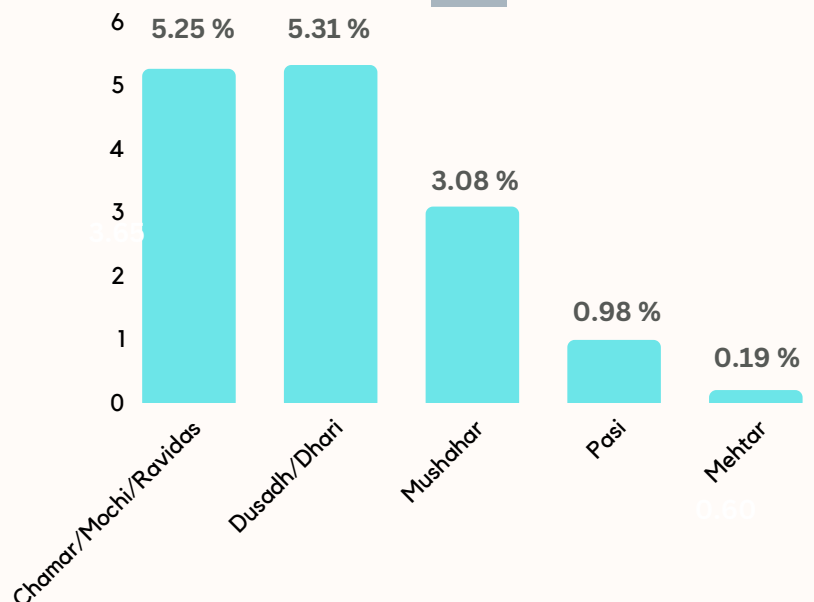
How major groups stack up in Bihar



OBC



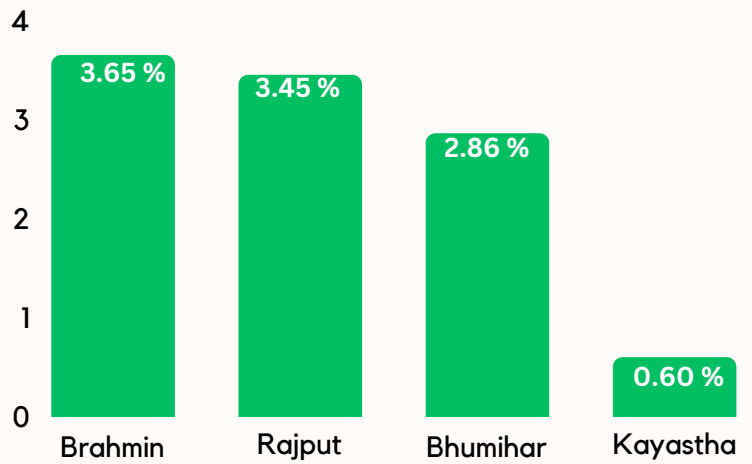
SC



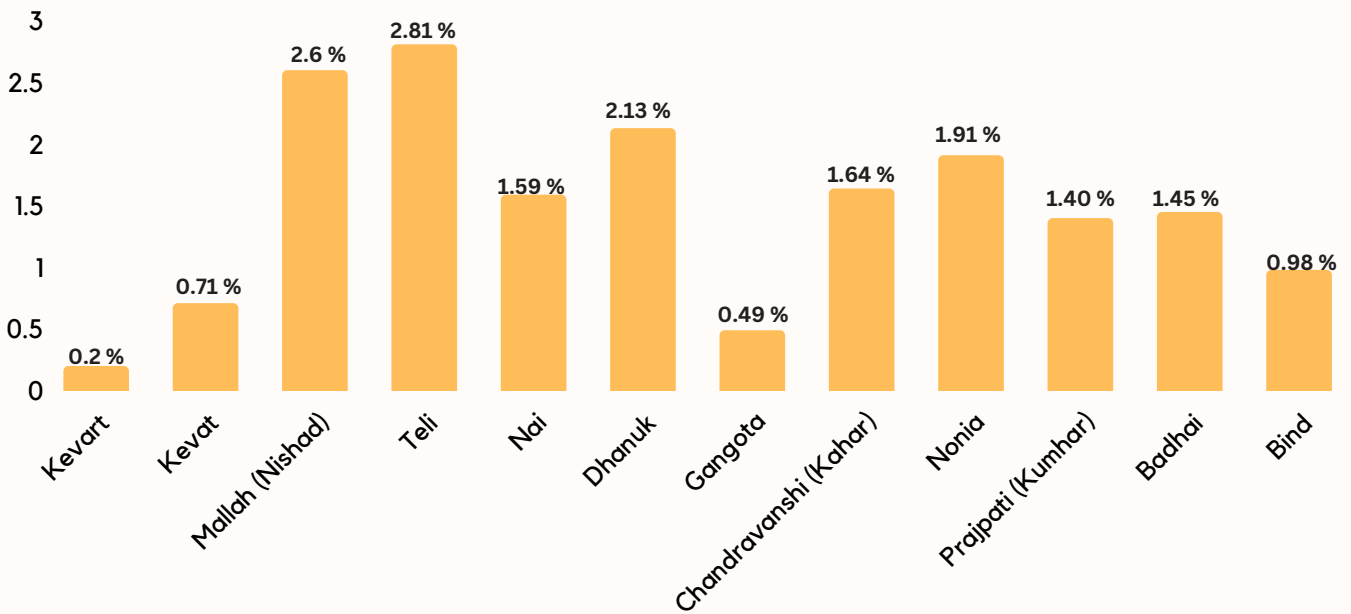
Source: Govt. of Bihar

The OBCs, consisting of 29 castes, are the second largest group, representing 27.12% of the population. The Yadavs, with 14.26% of the population, have the highest position under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. The Scheduled Castes population is set at 19.65% whereas the number of the general unreserved population is 15.52%.

GENERAL



EXTREMELY BACKWARD CLASSES



RELIGION-WISE

HINDU

81.99%

ISLAM

17.7%

CHRISTIAN

0.05%

BODHH

0.085%

SIKH

0.01%

JAIN

0.009%

THIRD GENDER: 0.0006%

Source: Govt. of Bihar

MANDAL COMMISSION

The exercise has instigated a spark of discourse in the political corridors to the extent of polarising the communities to their political goals.

The politics of identity — based on reservation and backward caste assertion that allowed socialist parties like JD(U) and RJD in Bihar, and SP in UP, to dominate these states for a quarter century — has all but run its course. The Mandal-kamandal dichotomy was blunted by the arrival of Narendra Modi on the national scene, and the new BJP reached out to the OBCs with its mix of Hindutva and welfarism.

The findings of the caste survey conducted in Bihar may offer the JD(U)-RJD alliance a chance to reinvigorate their efforts in mobilising the backward classes. The Opposition INDIA coalition could utilise the survey as a means to exert pressure on the BJP to conduct a comprehensive caste census across the entire nation in the near future.

The survey results will amplify the clamour for increasing the OBC quota beyond 27% and for a quota within quota for the EBCs. The Justice Rohini Commission, which had been examining the question of “sub-categorisation” since 2017, submitted its report at the end of July — its recommendations are not yet public. The Bihar survey may well push other states to carry out similar exercises.

The survey data will also reopen the longstanding debate over the 50% ceiling on reservation imposed by the Supreme Court in its landmark ruling in *Indra Sawhney v Union of India* (1992). The ceiling was imposed to ensure “efficiency” in administration, and courts have since blocked several attempts by states to breach it.

RJD and JD(U), along with the Congress, demonstrated the efficacy of reciprocal vote transfers by securing victory in 178 out of 243 seats in the 2015 Bihar Assembly elections. Based on the survey results, the combined population of EBCs, OBCs, and SCs constitutes over 82% of the state's population. This demographic is a significant voting bloc that will be fiercely contested.

A NEED FOR SUB-CLASSIFICATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

4.1 What is sub-classification?

“Sociological reality dictates that not all communities that form part of a reservation category are equally backward. Any reservation category does not form a ‘homogenous group’ and differences inter se exist. While determining if a community should be added to a reservation category, the only question is whether the community is backward as per the criteria determined. The relative backwardness of a community with respect to other communities in that category is not considered for providing reservation.”

Accordingly, state governments have gone ahead with sub-classification of SEBC communities. At least 10 states, including Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and West Bengal have categorized backward classes, each in their different ways; the detailed manner of sub-classification can be found. The National Commission for Backward Classes (a statutory body before the 102nd Amendment) had in 2015 suggested that sub-classification be done for OBC reservation, into three categories – Extremely Backward Classes (Group A), More Backward Classes (Group B), Backward Classes (Group C). However, no action was taken on this report.

In 2017, the President appointed a commission under the chairpersonship of Retired Justice G Rohini to “*Examine Sub Categorization of other Backward Classes under Article 340 of the Constitution*”. While the Commission was supposed to submit its report by 12th January 2018, it submitted its report after 13 extensions on 31st July 2023. The findings of the Commission have not been made public yet. However, during its discussions, the Commission examined the 1.3 Lakh central government employees and seats in central educational institutions under the OBC reservation up to 2018. It found that there are 2,633 communities in the OBC list. Out of these, 10 castes benefitted the most, finding representation in 24% of the seats. 38 castes contributed to another 25% of the seats. On the other hand, 983 communities did not find any representation in these 1.3 Lakh seats.

This goes ahead to show the disparity within various communities of the OBC category. It is important to keep in mind that this exercise has not been carried out for SC and ST categories; hence, there is no information about such disparity.

4.2 What have courts said?

Sub-classification in reservation, especially for SEBC reservation is not a new question.

When the SC was hearing the challenge to the OBC reservations introduced by the VP Singh government in the landmark case of Indra Sawhney v. Union of India, it touched upon this issue. The majority held that there was “no constitutional or legal bar to a State categorizing the backward classes as backward and more backward”. The majority said that as far as the sub-classification is reasonably done the Court’s interference would not be warranted. The Court also illustrated this principle by giving an example:

“To give an illustration, take two occupational groups viz., gold-smiths and vaddes (traditional stone-cutters in Andhra Pradesh) both included within Other Backward Classes. None can deny that goldsmiths are far less backward than vaddes. If both of them are grouped together and reservation provided, the inevitable result would be that gold-smiths would take away all the reserved posts leaving none for vaddes.”

Therefore, the position on sub-classification within the OBC category is clear; state governments have already implemented these at the state level. However, the Courts have not been forthright in deciding sub-classification within the SC category.

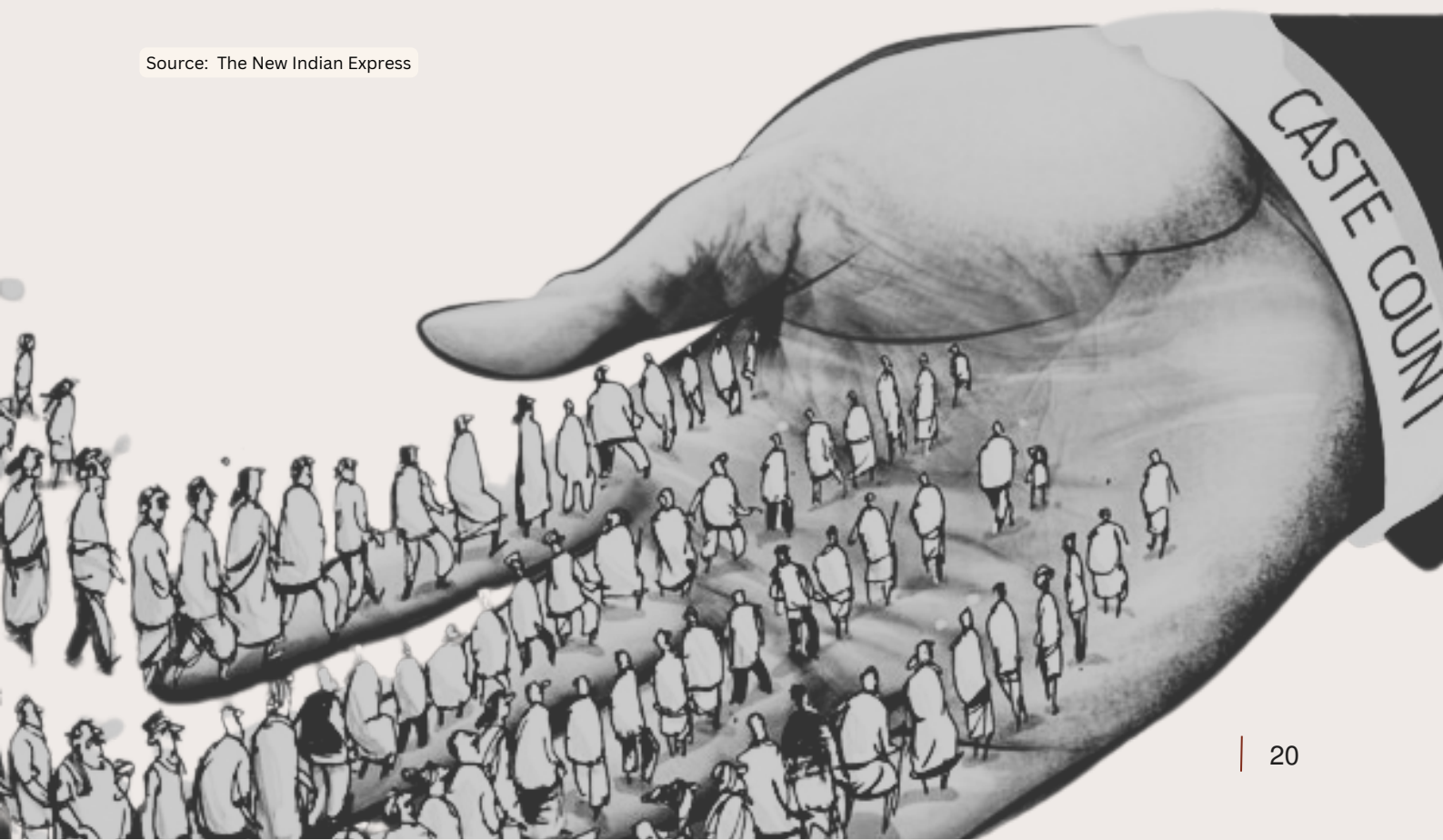
4.3 Sub-classification in SC reservation

There is no reason why sub-classification should be permissible in OBC reservation but not in SC reservation, especially when there is enough proof on record to show the established hierarchy within different SC communities.

4.4 The Role of a Caste Census?

How does the caste census fit into this scheme of sub-classification? A caste census is not supposed to collect data only about the numerical strength of a caste; it is also supposed to cover the social, educational, and economic aspects of the members of a community. An aggregation of this data would provide two important insights – the proportion of a community in the population as compared to their representation in government services (since Article 16(4) speaks of adequate representation) and the relative backwardness of communities within the category. Any sub-classification within OBC and SC categories can be done only after a comprehensive data collection exercise is completed.

Source: The New Indian Express

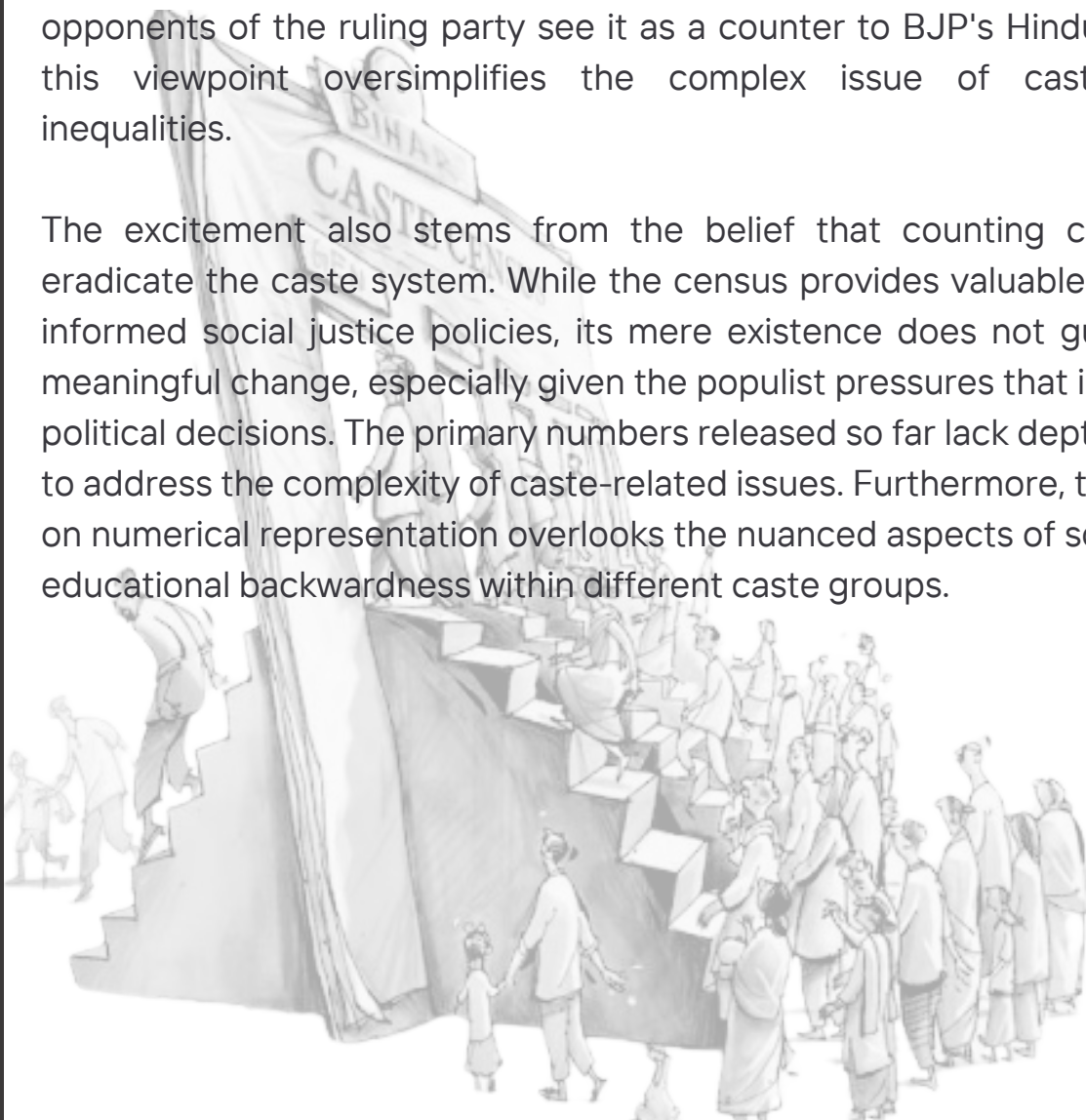


CASTE CENSUS AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The release of initial data from the Bihar caste census has triggered cynicism, anxiety, and excitement, revealing the limitations of our public discourse. The ruling party, while occasionally touting its OBC credentials, has consistently opposed a caste census, claiming it threatens Hindu unity. This opposition, however, raises questions about the government's commitment to informed public policy, especially considering its delay in conducting the census.

Anxiety about the census is prevalent among those who believe ignoring caste will make it disappear. Some fear that a caste census might intensify caste identities and politicize caste issues, reflecting concerns within the Indian state regarding social justice. What is more concerning is the misplaced excitement surrounding the caste census. Some opponents of the ruling party see it as a counter to BJP's Hindutva, but this viewpoint oversimplifies the complex issue of caste-based inequalities.

The excitement also stems from the belief that counting caste will eradicate the caste system. While the census provides valuable data for informed social justice policies, its mere existence does not guarantee meaningful change, especially given the populist pressures that influence political decisions. The primary numbers released so far lack depth, failing to address the complexity of caste-related issues. Furthermore, the focus on numerical representation overlooks the nuanced aspects of social and educational backwardness within different caste groups.



The census data highlights that over 60% of Bihar's population belongs to OBCs, but it does not address the contemporary dimensions of backwardness. The current approach, equating all "Shudra" communities with backwardness, is flawed as it ignores modern social and educational indicators. With the availability of caste census data, it is crucial to move beyond traditional Varna status and consider concrete factors defining social and educational backwardness.

Additionally, discussions have emerged about the inadequacy of the existing 27% reservation for OBCs, driven by the sheer numbers of communities qualifying as backward. However, these conversations lack a principled approach, often focusing solely on numerical proportions. This narrow perspective disregards the impact on political representation and fails to uphold the constitutional idea of mixed electorates.

To harness the potential of caste census data, it is imperative to publish comprehensive socio-economic information about different caste groups. Identifying communities engaged in menial work and precarious employment is essential. Subsequently, utilizing this socio-economic data to redefine backwardness demands patience and diligence. Politically expedient shortcuts and adhering to outdated notions of backwardness hinder genuine progress in social justice policies.

A holistic understanding of backwardness, transcending multiple forms of social discrimination, is crucial. The rigid categorization of more and less backward sections should be abandoned in favour of a dynamic backwardness index. Moreover, incentivizing private employment for individuals with a high backwardness index can promote inclusivity.

In conclusion, merely counting caste is not enough; it requires fundamental shifts in social justice policies. A thoughtful, nuanced approach, grounded in empirical data and a genuine commitment to social justice, is essential to address the complex issue of caste in Indian society.

CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATE OF THE CENSUS

The scheduled Census enumeration in India, initially planned for 2021, has been postponed to 2024-25 due to the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020. This crucial exercise provides essential statistics on human resources, demography, culture, and economic structure at local, regional, and national levels. The responsibility for this decadal census lies with the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Legally, it is mandated by entry 69 of the Union List in the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution and is conducted according to the provisions of the Census Act, 1948. The census process unfolds in two phases: House-listing and Housing Census, followed by Population Enumeration. In the Population Enumeration phase, each individual is documented, capturing details like age, marital status, religion, and mother tongue.

“THE UPCOMING 16TH DECADAL CENSUS OF INDIA, THE 8TH AFTER INDEPENDENCE, WILL MARK A HISTORIC SHIFT AS IT EMBRACES DIGITAL DATA COLLECTION THROUGH A MOBILE APP.”

Moreover; it introduces self-enumeration for the first time, allowing citizens to participate directly.

Before each Census, states are required to inform the Registrar General of India (RGI) about changes in notified districts, villages, towns, and other administrative units. The RGI, as the head of the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, oversees the decennial Census and maintains the Civil Registration System. This office advises the Government of India on matters related to birth, death, and marriage registrations and analyses demographic and socio-economic data for policy planning. Boundaries of administrative units are frozen three months prior to the Census, allowing data compilation and preparatory work before the enumeration process begins.

CONSIDERING BOTH ARGUMENTS: THE NEED FOR A CASTE-BASED CENSUS

The debate over the need for a caste-based census in India is a complex one, rooted in historical, social, and political contexts. On one hand, proponents argue for the importance of such data for rationalizing affirmative action, evaluating the impact of social welfare policies, ensuring social justice, and addressing contemporary demands. On the other hand, opponents express concerns about the reinforcement of caste identities, potential misuse in politics, and challenges related to federal governance. Considering both sides is essential in finding a balanced way forward.

7.1 Need for Caste-Based Census:

1. Rationalising Benefits and Assessing Impact: One of the significant reasons for conducting a caste-based census is the rationalization of affirmative action. Current policies are based on outdated data from 1931, which does not reflect the contemporary social landscape. By understanding the current demographics, policies like reservations can be more accurately targeted, ensuring they reach the intended beneficiaries. A socio-economic caste census can evaluate the actual impact of these policies on the marginalized communities.

2. Social Justice and Minimizing Errors: Caste-based data is vital for social justice. It helps in identifying the most backward and deprived castes who have historically been marginalized. Furthermore, it assists in minimizing exclusion and inclusion errors in welfare schemes. For instance, the economic status of different castes has changed over time, and a caste-based census can provide insights into the specific needs of various communities, thereby making reservation policies more effective.

3. Addressing Contemporary Demands and Constitutional Mandate: The demands to expand OBC reservations and include dominant castes like Jats, Kapus, Patidars, and Marathas require empirical support. A caste-based



census can provide the necessary data to make informed decisions. Additionally, Article 340 of the Indian Constitution mandates the investigation of backward classes, and conducting a caste-based census aligns with this constitutional provision.

4. OBC Sub-categorization: The OBC category is diverse, with significant differences in socio-economic conditions among its members. Sub-categorization can ensure that reservation benefits reach the most deserving groups within OBCs. Caste-based socio-economic census can provide the data needed for such classification, promoting more equitable distribution of resources.

7.2 Concerns against Caste-Based Census:

1. Subverting Anti-Caste Struggles: The Indian constitution and various social reform movements have aimed at the annihilation of caste. Conducting a caste-based census might be seen as contradictory to these efforts, potentially reinforcing caste identities in society.

2. Reinforcing Caste Identities and Vote Bank Politics: Enumerating castes might strengthen existing caste identities, hindering the progress towards a casteless society. Additionally, caste-wise data could be exploited for divisive vote bank politics, further fragmenting the social fabric.

3. New Demands for Reservation and Federal Concerns: Publishing data about OBCs might lead to demands for new reservations, creating challenges for policy formulation. Moreover, there are constitutional concerns about states conducting their own caste census, conflicting with the central government's domain over census activities. That is why, of late, the Bihar Survey has to be termed "Caste Survey" not "Caste Census".

WAY FORWARD

Given these complexities, a balanced approach is crucial. While a full caste census might be cumbersome and controversial due to the vast diversity of castes and sub-castes, a caste census with a revised methodology could be a practical compromise to do a scientific study of the demography without further perpetuating the inequities into the society.

Additionally, it is essential to couple any data collection efforts with comprehensive awareness campaigns to counteract the reinforcement of caste identities. Simultaneously, policy decisions based on this data should be made with a focus on uplifting the most marginalized sections of society, ensuring that the ultimate goal of social equity and justice is not compromised in the process.

A nuanced and carefully managed approach to collecting caste-related data can help address social inequalities without undermining the hard-won progress towards a more egalitarian and harmonious society.

In recent years, the debate surrounding the inclusion of caste identities in census methodologies has gained significant traction. Many argue that acknowledging caste is essential for understanding historical injustices, social disparities, and formulating targeted policies.

However, there is a pressing need to evolve these methodologies in a way that dilutes the emphasis on individual caste identities while mainstreaming other crucial indicators on socio-economic dimensions. This balanced approach can generate a more comprehensive demographic profile, helping address governance issues without perpetuating further inequalities based solely on caste identities.

To achieve this, census methodologies must undergo a paradigm shift. First and foremost, it is imperative to transition from an identity-centric approach to a data-centric approach. Instead of focusing solely on individual caste identities, the emphasis should be on collecting data related to socio-economic factors such as education, income, occupation, and living standards. By prioritizing these indicators, policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by different communities, enabling them to formulate inclusive and targeted interventions.

Furthermore, the census methodologies should encourage self-identification while also ensuring confidentiality and data security. People should have the option to identify their caste if they wish to do so, but this information should not be the sole focus of data collection. By allowing individuals the freedom to self-identify, the census can respect the diverse cultural fabric of the society while also gathering valuable data on other vital parameters.

In addition to socio-economic factors, it is crucial to incorporate other indicators that reflect the overall well-being of communities. Health metrics, access to healthcare, infrastructure development, and employment opportunities are vital aspects that need to be integrated into the census methodologies. This broader approach ensures a holistic understanding of the population, moving beyond the confines of caste identities and focusing on the multifaceted challenges faced by different communities.

Moreover, the dissemination of census data should be coupled with rigorous analysis and research. Academia, research institutions, and governmental bodies can collaborate to delve deep into the data, identifying patterns and trends that can inform evidence-based policymaking. This analytical approach helps in understanding the nuanced socio-economic landscape, enabling the formulation of policies that address specific challenges faced by different regions and communities.

Additionally, there should be a concerted effort to raise awareness about the importance of inclusivity and equal opportunities. Education campaigns and community engagement initiatives can play a significant role in promoting social harmony and breaking down caste-based prejudices. By fostering a more inclusive society, the focus can shift from divisive identities to shared goals and aspirations, leading to a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities.

In conclusion, evolving census methodologies to include caste identities while diluting their emphasis and mainstreaming other socio-economic indicators is essential for creating a comprehensive demographic profile. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of the population, facilitating the formulation of targeted policies without perpetuating further inequalities. By embracing a data-centric, inclusive, and analytical approach, societies can address governance issues effectively and work towards a more equitable future for all.


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