

Caste Census

September 25, 2021

In response to the plea by the Maharashtra government seeking a direction to the Census Department to collect information on Backward Class of Citizens (BCC) in the 2021 enumeration, the Centre has told the Supreme Court that such an exercise “would not be feasible” and that “exclusion of information regarding any other caste”, apart from SCs and STs, “from the purview of census is a conscious policy decision” and has effectively ruled out a caste census in 2021. In this context, it is prudent to know about caste census and its effects in detail.

In news: No caste census, conscious policy decision: Govt to Supreme Court

Placing it in syllabus: Society

Dimensions:

- History of caste census
- Arguments against it
- Arguments for it
- Last caste census and redundancy
- What needs to be done ?

Content:

History of Caste Census:

Caste Census is the demand to include the caste-wise tabulation of India’s population in the upcoming exercise.

Caste Census in Colonial Era:

- The First Census conducted in 1871 included questions about caste. This data was then used to divide and conquer India.
- It first privileged Brahmins as interpreters of Indian culture and then targeted them as the root of caste-

based oppression and inequality.

- This classification was also a source of anti-Brahmin movements of 20th century
- Every Census until 1931 had data on caste.
- The practice was stopped by the British with the 1941 Census, citing financial constraints. The Indian government did not pick up the dropped parameter.

Caste data published in the Census post-independence:

- Since the first exercise in independent India in 1951, India has published separate data on Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).
- The Census does not include data on other castes.
- The Government of India had decided on the policy of official discouragement of caste.
- It was decided that in general, no race/ caste/ tribe enquiries should be made and such enquiries should be restricted to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes notified by the President of India in pursuance of Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution

Why the demand ?

The demand to include caste in Census is not new. The debate heats up almost every decade in the run up to the activity.

The demand for a caste census arises from the fact that there is no documented data on different castes within the Other Backward Classes (OBC) in India, and other classes.

Arguments against it:

- In an affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court recently, the Union Government effectively ruled out a caste census in 2021
- The Government of India has decided as a matter of policy not to enumerate caste-wise populations other

than SCs and STs in the census.

Potentially Divisive

- The caste census will give rise to caste-based division.
- As India seeks to eliminate and weaken the notion of caste, a caste census would only strengthen it.

Operational difficulties and Feasibility

- Population Census is not the ideal instrument for collection of details on caste
- Some sections of people believe that Caste is a very important source of privilege and advantage in our country. On the other hand, some sections of people feel disadvantaged by revealing caste-based information.
- The many Operational difficulties can compromise the basic integrity of Census data and the fundamental population could itself get distorted

Non-uniformity and Multiplicity of lists of Other Backward Classes (OBCs)

- Unlike the SC and ST list, which are exclusively Central subjects, there are multiple state and union territory lists of Other Backward Classes (OBCs).
- While there are 2,479 OBCs in the country as per Centre's list, the numbers as per state and union territory lists are 3,150.
- In some states, orphans and destitutes are included as OBCs, it said. In some other cases, SCs converted to Christianity are listed as OBC

Politically-motivated Distortions:

- Since Castes/ SEBCs/ BCs/ OBCs have become an integral part of politics, motivated returns through organised and surreptitious means cannot be ruled out.
- Such motivated returns can seriously influence the

Census results and even put the Census process in jeopardy

Arguments for it:

Promotes Rational Decision Making:

- A caste census, which will generate exhaustive data will allow policymakers to develop better policies, implementation strategies, and will also enable a more rational debate on sensitive issues.

Promotes Democratic Policymaking:

- Advocates of its inclusion believe that the activity will be a pro-poor exercise which will help plan better and more targeted welfare schemes in the country.
- A caste census would actually bring forward the large number of issues that any democratic country needs to pay attention to.
- For instance, this census will reveal information regarding caste-based marginalisation, deprivation, the kind of jobs pursued by a caste, etc.
- So, the caste census is nothing but the collection of data that is necessary for any democratic policymaking.

Rationale for Reservation Policy:

- Some proponents also suggest that a Caste Census will also help reservation policy makers have a more accurate idea of the affirmative action needed.
- While this data is currently available for SC and ST population, the OBC population is estimated widely as per the number noted by the Mandal Commission at 52%.
- The Justice Rohini committee was appointed in 2017 to look into the sub-categorisation of the OBC communities; however, in the absence of data, there can be no data-bank or any proper sub-categorisation.
- All commissions have had to rely on data from the last

caste census (1931). There have been substantive demographic changes since then and therefore, the data has to be updated.

Constitutional Mandate:

- Indian Constitution also favours conducting a caste census.
- Article 340 mandates the appointment of a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes and make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by governments.

Recommendation of the Sachar committee:

Sachar committee was formed to examine the socio-economic and educational status of the Muslim community in India. In its report, the committee mentioned that the availability of data on religion was useful in highlighting the relative deprivation of minorities. So, similar data on caste is also desirable to identify vulnerable sections within castes.

Last caste census and redundancy:

- A separate Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) was conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development in rural areas and the Ministry of Housing & Urban Poverty Alleviation in urban areas in 2011.
- It was the largest exercise of the listing of castes and has the potential of finding inequalities at a broader level.
- SECC was a tool to identify beneficiaries of state support and it is open for use by Government departments to grant and/or restrict benefits to households.
- However, the SECC data excluded caste data and was published by the two ministries in 2016.
- The raw caste data was handed over to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

- The ministry formed an Expert Group under former NITI Aayog Vice-Chairperson Arvind Pangaria for the classification and categorisation of data.
- The public data eventually released gave numbers of different castes in India but not the population-wise data as was the demand.
- Only the details of the economic conditions of the people in rural and urban households were released. The caste data has not been released till now.
- The Centre said that an analysis of the data showed “that the caste enumeration...was fraught with mistakes and inaccuracies” and “is not reliable”.

What needs to be done?

If India has to emerge as a confident and strong nation, it must shed its hesitancy and ostrich-like escapism in conducting a caste-linked socio-economic census. This will kick-start a process that will eventually take the caste system away from an Indian.

A caste census without data integrity would be much worse.

Instead of going behind the caste based census, the government can subclassify the Backward Classes like in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal etc. This will provide the benefit to intended beneficiaries.

Since the government has already appointed Justice G Rohini Panel on Sub-categorisation of OBCs. The Panel has to fast pace the sub-classification process.

The government can use technologies like Artificial Intelligence and machine learning to assess the SECC data and condense them into meaningful categories and some important caste-based information. This will provide the necessary time to analyse the need for a caste census.

Mould your thought: Caste Census is a must for governance in a

heterogeneous Indian society. Critically Evaluate.

Approach to the answer:

- Introduction
- Define Caste Census
- Discuss how caste plays prominence in Indian Society
- Discuss the advantages of conducting a Caste Census
- Mention the disadvantages of a Caste Census
- Suggest alternatives, if any
- Conclusion