



Need For Caste Census

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This article is based on **To ensure justice, a caste census is essential** which was published in the Hindustan Times on 23/08/2021. It evaluates the need for the caste census in India.

The caste system is India's nemesis and has severely restricted the country's ability to realise its immense potential and become a great nation in science, technology, knowledge, art, sport and economic prosperity.

Studies suggest that **94% of marriages are endogamous; 90% of menial jobs are performed by the deprived castes**, whereas this figure is reversed in white-collar jobs. This abysmal lack of caste diversity, especially at the decision-making levels in various sectors — the media, the judiciary, higher education, bureaucracy or the corporate sector — is weakening these institutions and their performance.

It is indeed strange that while caste plays such a dominant role in our social, economic and political life, no credible and comprehensive caste data exists for more than half the population of our country.

- **Benefit in Policy Making:** The purpose of a caste census is not merely geared to the reservation issue; a caste census would actually bring to the fore the large number of issues that any democratic country needs to attend to, particularly the number of people who are at the margins, or who are deprived, or the kind of occupations they pursue.

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.

- **Also Reveal Privileged Section of Society:** Caste is not only a source of disadvantage; it is also a very important source of privilege and advantage in our society.
 - We have to stop thinking of caste as being applicable to only disadvantaged people, poor people, people who are somehow lacking.
 - The opposite is even more true: caste has produced advantages for certain communities, and these also need to be recorded.
- **Caste Has Important Position in Indian Society:** While census data has been captured for **Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes**, religions and linguistic profiles, there has been no profiling of all castes in India since 1931.

Since then, caste has assumed an increasingly important position in our lives, and our reliance on inadequate data has also increased.
- **To Address Prevalent Inequalities:** Unequal distribution of wealth, resources and education has meant an acute shortage of purchasing power among the majority of Indians.

As a democratic nation, **we cannot forcibly overthrow the system**, but we need to address it in a democratic, scientific and objective manner.
- **Constitutional Mandate:** Our Constitution too 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.
- **To Burst the Myths:** There are a lot of myths which actually deprive a large number of people, particularly on the margins.
 - Let's take the case of Karnataka. For a long time, there were claims that among the castes, the Lingayats are the most numerous.
 - But a lot of other studies have brought out that this may not be true, and these kinds of myths lead to the argument that given that this is a caste which is numerous, it has to be constantly placated. These myths can be debunked through a caste census.
- **Reduce Inclusion and Exclusion Errors:** With accurate data of castes, most backward castes can be identified.

Some have benefited so much across the years, while there are people in this country who have not benefited at all.
- **The Supreme court has time and again asked governments** to provide the data related to castes; however, this has not been possible due to the non-availability of such data.
 - As a result, our national life suffers from mutual mistrust and misconceptions among different castes.
 - All such commissions have had to rely on data from the last caste census (1931).

Associated Challenges With Caste Census

- **Repercussions of a Caste Census:** Caste has an emotive element and thus there exist the political and social repercussions of a caste census.
 - There have been concerns that counting caste may help solidify or harden identities.
 - Due to these repercussions, nearly a decade after the SECC, a sizable amount of its data remains unreleased or released only in parts.
- **Caste Is Context-specific:** Caste has never been a proxy for class or deprivation in India; it constitutes a distinct kind of embedded discrimination that often transcends class. For example:
 - People with Dalit last names are less likely to be called for job interviews even when their qualifications are better than that of an upper-caste candidate.
 - They are also less likely to be accepted as tenants by landlords. Thus difficult to measure.
 - Marriage to a well- educated, well-off Dalit man still sparks violent reprisals among the families of upper-caste women every day across the country.

Way Forward

- India needs to be **bold and decisive** in tackling caste questions through data and statistics in the **way the United States (US) does to tackle race issues**, by collecting data around race, class, language, inter-race marriages, among other metrics.

This data provides a mirror to the State and society of the US in which they can see themselves and take decisions to do course corrections.
- **Creation of National Data Bank:** The **Sachar Committee Report** recommended setting up a national data bank.

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.

Conclusion

With every passing day and increasing social awareness, the urgency to do away with the caste system is being sharply felt. Dr. BR Ambedkar stated that if India had to attain a place of pride among the comity of nations, caste would have to be annihilated first.

The 21st century is the right time to solve India's caste question, which would otherwise extract a heavy price, not just sociologically, but also politically and economically, and make us fall behind in the development index.

Drishti Mains Question

Caste plays a dominant role in our social, economic and political life, still no credible and comprehensive caste data exists. Comment.