



Caste Census: The Need and the Concern

This editorial is based on the Article [‘Bihar caste survey data released: A look at the complicated history of caste census’](#) which was published in Indian Express on 04/10/2023. It analyzes the need of caste census.

For Prelims: Census, Socio-Economic and Caste Census, Rohini commission.

For Mains: Significance of Caste Census, Challenges Related to Caste Census, Subcategorisation of OBCs.

The recently released caste survey data by the Bihar government has once again brought the issue of caste census to the forefront. While the Census of India has been publishing data on [Scheduled Castes](#) and [Scheduled Tribes](#), there has been no estimate for the population of [Other Backward Classes](#) (OBCs) and other groups.

What are Census and Socio Economic and Caste census (SECC)?

- **Census in India:**
 - The **origin of the Census** in India dates back to the colonial exercise of **1881**.
 - Census is used by the government, policymakers, academics, and others to capture the Indian population, access resources, map social change, and conduct [delimitation](#) exercises.
 - However, it has been criticized as a blunt instrument unsuited for specialized inquiry.
- **SECC (Socio-Economic and Caste Census):**
 - [SECC](#) was **first conducted in 1931** which aimed to collect information on the economic status of Indian families, both in rural and urban areas, to identify indicators of deprivation.
 - It also collects **data on specific caste names to evaluate the economic conditions** of different caste groups.
- **Difference Between Census & SECC:**
 - Census provides a general portrait of the Indian population, while **SECC is used to identify beneficiaries of state support**.
 - Census data is confidential under the [Census Act of 1948](#), while personal information in SECC is open for use by government departments to grant or restrict benefits to households.
- **The History of Caste-based Data Collection in India:**
 - Caste-based data collection has a long history in India, with information on castes being included upto 1931.
 - **Post 1951, the decision to stop collecting caste data was made** to move away from a divisive approach and promote national unity.
 - However, with changing socio-political dynamics and the need for accurate information,

there has been a renewed call for a caste census.

What is the Significance of Caste Census?

- **To Address Social Inequality:**
 - Caste-based discrimination is still prevalent in many parts of India. A caste census can help identify the disadvantaged groups and bring them to the forefront of policy making.
 - By understanding the distribution of different caste groups, targeted policies can be implemented to **address social inequality and uplift marginalized communities.**
- **To Ensure Equitable Distribution of Resources:**
 - Without accurate data on the population of OBCs and other groups, it is difficult to ensure equitable distribution of resources.
 - A caste census can help in this regard by providing **insights into the socio-economic conditions and needs of different caste groups.**
 - It can guide policymakers in formulating policies that cater to the specific requirements of each group, thereby promoting inclusive development.
- **To Monitor the Effectiveness of Affirmative Action Policies:**
 - Affirmative action policies such as reservations for OBCs and other groups are aimed at promoting social justice. However, without proper data on the population, it becomes challenging to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of these policies.
 - A caste census can help **monitor the implementation and outcomes of such policies,** enabling policymakers to make informed decisions regarding their continuation and modification.
- **To Provide a Comprehensive Picture of Indian Society:**
 - Caste is an integral part of Indian society, influencing social relationships, economic opportunities, and political dynamics.
 - A caste census can provide a comprehensive **picture of the diversity of Indian society,** shedding light on the social fabric and interplay between different caste groups.
 - This data can contribute to a better understanding of social dynamics.
- **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.

What are the Arguments against Caste Census?

- **Reinforces the Caste System:**
 - Opponents of a caste census argue that [caste-based discrimination is illegal](#) and that a caste census would only reinforce the caste system.
 - They believe that focusing on individual rights and equal opportunities for all citizens should be prioritized over categorizing people based on their caste identities.
- **Difficult to Define Castes:**
 - Defining castes is a complex issue, as there are thousands of castes and sub-castes in India. A caste census would **require a clear definition of castes,** which is not an easy task.
 - Critics argue that this could lead to confusion, disputes, and further divisions within society.
- **Leads to Further Social Divisions:**
 - Some argue that a caste census could lead to further social divisions and that it is better to focus on promoting social harmony instead.
 - They believe that emphasizing commonalities among people rather than highlighting differences would be more beneficial for national integration.

What is the Government's Stand on a Caste Census?

- The Government of India in 2021 had stated in [Lok Sabha](#) that it has decided as a **matter of policy not to enumerate caste-wise population** other than SCs and STs in Census.

What is the Role of the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC)?

- The SECC **conducted in 2011** was an attempt to collect comprehensive data on socio-economic indicators along with caste information.
- However, due to concerns over data quality and classification challenges, the **raw caste data collected in the SECC has not yet been released** or utilized effectively.
- An **Expert Group was formed to classify and categorize the raw data**, but its recommendations are still pending implementation.

What can be the Way Forward?

- **Independent studies at district and state level** can be conducted to acquire the data of castes and subcastes at those levels.
- The data must not become a weapon for deepening faultlines and increasing polarisation to win elections. It should not lead to the splintering and shrinking of the very notion of representation in a large and diverse democracy.
- Use of technologies such as [Artificial intelligence](#) and [machine learning](#) can help in analyzing data.
- **Subcategorization of OBCs** to provide representation to underrepresented subcastes of OBCs for which [Justice Rohini commission](#) had recently submitted the report.

Conclusion

While there are arguments for and against a caste census, accurate data on the population of OBCs and other groups is necessary for promoting social justice and ensuring equitable distribution of resources. A caste census can also **help monitor the effectiveness of affirmative action policies and provide a comprehensive picture of Indian society**. It is crucial for policymakers to carefully consider the arguments of both the sides to provide for a more equitable and just society.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the significance and the challenges associated with conducting a caste census in India. Also suggest measures to ensure social justice.

Legal Insights

[Constitutional Position of Caste Based Census by States](#)

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question

Q. Consider the following statements: (2009)

1. Between Census 1951 and Census 2001, the density of the population of India has increased more than three times.
2. Between Census 1951 and Census 2001, the annual growth rate (exponential) of the population of India has doubled.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Ans: (d)

Exp:

- One of the important indices of population concentration is the density of population. It is defined as the number of persons per square kilometre.
- The population density of India in 2001 was 324 persons per square kilometre and in 1951 it was 117. Thus, the density increased **more than twice, but not thrice**. Hence, statement 1 is not correct.
- At the beginning of the twentieth century, i.e., in 1901 the density of India was as low as 77 and this steadily increased from one decade to another to reach 324 in 2001.
- The average **Annual Growth Rate in 2001 was 1.93 whereas in 1951 it was 1.25**. Thus, it increased, but not doubled. Hence, statement 2 is not correct. Therefore, option (d) is the correct answer.

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