Caste Census

Why in News

Recently, the Union government has filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court claiming that a **caste census of the Backward Classes is administratively difficult and cumbersome.**

- The government's assertion came in response to a **writ petition** filed by the State of Maharashtra to gather Backward Classes' caste data in the State while conducting **Census 2021**.

Key Points

- **Government's Stand Against the Caste Census:**

  - **Unusable data:** The Centre reasoned that even when the census of castes were taken in the pre-Independence period, the data suffered in respect of **"completeness and accuracy"**.

    - It said the caste data enumerated in the **Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC)** of 2011 is **"unusable"** for official purposes as they are "replete with technical flaws".
  - **Not a Ideal Policy Tool**: The government said caste-wise enumeration in the Census was **given up as a matter of policy from 1951.**

    - Further, the Centre explained that a population census was **not the "ideal instrumen**t as many people may not register themselves in the census in the **event of hiding their caste.**
    - This may compromise the **"basic integrity" of the census.**
  - **Administratively Difficult:** Besides, the government held that, it is too late now to enumerate caste into the Census 2021.

    - Planning and preparations for the census exercise started almost four years earlier and the preparations of Census 2021 are almost done.
- **Arguments in Favour of SECC:**

  - It will be useful to establish **statistical justification for preserving caste-based affirmative action programmes** or welfare schemes.

    - It **may also be a legal imperative**, considering that courts want 'quantifiable data' to support the existing levels of **reservation**.
  - Comprehensive exercise to enumerate the caste status of all households in the country will **help in identifying poor households and implement anti-poverty programmes.**

Census, SECC & Difference

- **Census:**

  - The origin of the Census in India goes back to the **colonial exercise of 1881.**

- Census has evolved and been used by the government, policymakers, academics, and others to capture the Indian population, access resources, map social change, **delimitation exercise**, etc.
- However, as early as the 1940s, W.W.M. Yeatts, Census Commissioner for India for the 1941 Census, had pointed out that "the census is a large, immensely powerful, but blunt instrument **unsuited for specialized inquiry."**

- **SECC:**

  - SECC was conducted for the **first time since 1931.**
  - SECC is meant to canvass every Indian family, both in rural and urban India, and ask about their:

    - **Economic status**, so as to allow Central and State authorities to come up with a range of indicators of deprivation, permutations, and combinations of which could be used by each authority to define a poor or deprived person.
    - It is also meant to ask every person their **specific caste name** to allow the government to re-evaluate which caste groups were economically worse off and which were better off.
  - SECC has the **potential to allow for a mapping of inequalities at a broader level**.

- **Difference Between Census & SECC:**

  - The **Census provides a portrait of the Indian population**, while the **SECC is a tool to identify beneficiaries** of state support.
  - Since the Census falls under the Census Act of 1948, **all data are considered confidential**, whereas according to the SECC website, "all the personal information given in the SECC is **open for use by Government departments** to grant and/or restrict benefits to households."

Way Forward

- Although SECC has its own concerns, **linking and syncing aggregated Census data to other large datasets** such as the National Sample Surveys may help the governments realize the many socio-economic goals.
- Further, independent of census, **a preliminary socio-anthropological study** can be done at the State and district levels to establish all sects and sub-castes present in the population.
- A caste census may not sit well with the goal of a casteless society, but it **may serve as a means of addressing inequities in society.**

Source: TH

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