

Caste Enumeration in India's Next Census: Objectives, Implications, and Challenges

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Caste Census Latest News

- The Union Cabinet has decided that the next Census will include questions on caste to its enumeration of India's population, for the first time in almost a century.

Introduction

- In a landmark shift, the Union Cabinet has approved the inclusion of caste-based data in India's next Census.
- This marks the **first time in nearly a century that caste information, beyond the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), will be collected in a national enumeration exercise.**
- The decision comes at a politically sensitive time, ahead of the Bihar Assembly elections and following growing demands from opposition parties for updated caste-based demographic data to inform welfare and reservation policies.

Historical Background of Caste-Based Enumeration

- Caste data was first collected in India in the **1881 Census under British rule** and continued until the 1931 Census, which remains the last official dataset providing a detailed caste breakdown.
- The 1941 Census did collect caste data, but the findings were never published due to the Second World War. Post-Independence, India officially discontinued this practice, choosing only to count SC and ST populations for administrative purposes.
- However, the 1931 data later formed the basis for the **Mandal Commission recommendations**, which proposed a 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) based on the finding that OBCs comprised 52% of the population.
- **In 2011, the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) was conducted but failed to deliver a reliable caste breakdown**, partly due to its open-ended format which recorded over 46 lakh caste entries, making the data unusable for policy purposes.

Objectives of the Caste Census

- The key goals behind including caste in the upcoming Census are:
 - **Informed Policy-Making:** Updated caste data will help refine the allocation of welfare benefits and development programs based on actual demographics.
 - **Reservation Reassessment:** Current reservation percentages are based on outdated or projected data. The caste census will enable a fresh evaluation of the need and extent of quotas for various communities.
 - **Social Justice:** It is expected to support more inclusive governance by bringing visibility to marginalized and underrepresented communities within the OBC, SC, and ST categories.
 - **Evidence-Based Governance:** Reliable caste data will aid academic research and enable evidence-backed political and economic interventions.

Political Significance and Reversal of Stance

- The inclusion of caste data comes as a surprise given the BJP's earlier resistance to such measures.

- The party has historically criticized caste-based politics as divisive. Yet, after the **Bihar** government conducted its own caste survey in 2023, followed by similar exercises in **Telangana** and **Karnataka**, the national discourse began to shift.
- These state-level surveys revealed that backward classes make up over 60% of the population in many regions, fuelling demands for increased representation.
- In this context, the Centre's announcement appears aimed at regaining political ground, particularly as opposition parties campaign on themes of social justice and demand enhanced reservation caps.

Potential Impacts on Reservation Policies

- One of the most significant implications of the caste census is its potential to alter existing affirmative action policies.
- The current cap on reservations is set at 50% by the Supreme Court. However, data from recent state surveys suggest that OBCs and other backward groups may warrant a higher quota, pushing political parties to demand an increase.
- **In Karnataka, for example, the caste census revealed an OBC population of nearly 70%, prompting calls to raise their reservation from 32% to 51%.** Similar demands are likely to emerge across other states, challenging the legal limit on quotas.

Implementation Challenges

- The decision to include caste in the Census presents several operational and political challenges:
 - **Caste Classification:** Preparing a national-level caste code directory is a complex task, given the regional, linguistic, and sub-group variations in caste identities.
 - **Overlap and Disputes:** Different states maintain their own OBC lists, leading to discrepancies. There is also contention over classifications of certain castes as SC, ST, or OBC.
 - **Political Sensitivities:** Any inclusion or exclusion in caste lists is likely to spark political controversy, especially in election-bound states.
 - **Delayed Timeline:** Although the announcement has been made, the actual Census has not been scheduled. The 2021 Census was indefinitely postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and no new date has been announced.

Way Ahead

- The inclusion of caste enumeration in the national Census marks a major step toward data-driven governance and equitable policymaking.
- While it is likely to provide much-needed clarity on the actual demographic composition of India's various caste groups, the process will require careful planning to ensure accuracy and avoid further social fragmentation.
- Given the political sensitivities and legal implications, the implementation of caste-based policies based on this data may take time.
- However, this decision represents a turning point in India's journey toward a more inclusive governance framework.

Caste Census FAQs

Q1. When was the last time caste was officially counted in the Indian Census?

Ans. The last caste enumeration was conducted in the 1931 Census.

Q2. What is the main goal of the caste census?

Ans. To gather accurate data to inform policies on welfare, reservations, and inclusive development.

Q3. Which states have already conducted caste surveys?

Ans. Bihar, Telangana, and Karnataka have completed caste-based surveys recently.

Q4. How could the caste census affect reservation policies?

Ans. It may lead to demands for increasing quotas beyond the 50% Supreme Court limit.

Q5. What are the key challenges in implementing the caste census?

Ans. Creating a standardized caste code list, managing state-centre discrepancies, and addressing political sensitivities.

Source : TH

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