

Caste Enumeration in India's 2027 Census: Rethinking Data Collection for Inclusive Policy

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Caste Census Latest News

The Central Government has announced that the next Census would take place in 2027 and that it would collect information on castes.

Introduction

- India is preparing to conduct its next decennial Census in 2027, with a significant change: the inclusion of caste enumeration.
- This marks the **first such effort since 1941** and aims to provide data that could help bring marginalised communities into the policy mainstream.
- However, experts and statisticians argue that to fulfil this ambitious goal, a fundamental restructuring of the current Census design and methodology is essential.

Timeline and Process of the Upcoming Census

- The Census will be conducted in two key phases:
 - **House-listing Phase (2026):** Scheduled between April and September 2026, this phase will record data about dwelling units and household amenities.
 - **Population Enumeration Phase (2027):** This phase will collect demographic, social, and economic data, including caste-related information.
- Caste enumeration will occur during the second phase, which represents a marked departure from earlier Censuses that did not record comprehensive caste data, except for Scheduled Castes (SCs).

Significance of Caste Enumeration

- India last attempted caste enumeration in the 1941 Census, but the data was never processed due to the outbreak of World War II.
- The last usable caste data, therefore, dates back to 1931, making it grossly outdated for modern policy use.
- The Union government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has justified this inclusion as a measure to integrate marginalised communities and enhance targeted policymaking.
- However, questions remain whether the current Census framework can deliver on this promise without substantive changes.

Limitations of the Existing Census Framework

- The **current format of the Census questionnaire, based on the 2021 draft, only gathers caste data for SCs.**
- To make caste enumeration meaningful, experts argue the need to collect data for all castes (excluding Scheduled Tribes), accompanied by adjustments in enumerator training, software tools, and data processing protocols.
- Moreover, key socio-economic indicators like employment, education, age at marriage, and place of birth are currently not cross-tabulated effectively with caste information.
- Existing questions on unemployment, migration, and childbirth suffer from conceptual ambiguity and low data quality, reducing their usefulness for caste-based policy analysis.

Suggested Reforms for Enhanced Data Collection

- **Linking Household Data with Demographic Information**
 - One major reform proposed is the integration of housing and asset-related questions from the house-listing phase into the population enumeration phase. This change would:
 - Reduce data linkage errors arising from a 6-9 month time gap between phases.
 - Enable accurate correlation between caste and access to housing, electricity, and sanitation.
 - Improve coverage in urban areas, which often suffer from higher omission rates.
- **Making the Questionnaire Leaner**

- Several questions have become outdated or redundant due to rapid social and technological change. These include:
- Ownership of mobile phones or computers.
- Household access to bank accounts.
- Streamlining the questionnaire would allow enumerators to focus on collecting accurate responses to more impactful variables.

- **Ensuring the Utility of Collected Data**

- Despite the Census providing caste-wise data for socio-economic variables for decades, such data has rarely informed the identification of Most Backward Castes (MBCs) or shaped welfare schemes beyond reservation frameworks.
- For caste enumeration to be genuinely transformative, the data must be analysed and integrated into broader public policy processes.

Challenges in Collecting Caste Data

- While Census data can be a vital tool, it also faces logistical and methodological hurdles, such as:
 - Self-identification inconsistencies across castes and sub-castes.
 - Lack of standardised caste lists.
 - Enumerator biases and recording errors.
- Nevertheless, in the absence of any other large-scale, uniform data source, the Census remains the most feasible mechanism to gather caste-wise socio-economic data across India.

Way Forward

- To ensure the 2027 Census lives up to its potential, policymakers must:
 - Redesign the questionnaire to capture more granular and relevant data.
 - Improve enumerator training and digital tools for data collection.
 - Integrate caste data with other critical indicators such as literacy, employment, housing, and migration.
 - Commit to using the data beyond reservation quotas for broader social and economic reforms.
- If executed thoughtfully, this exercise could provide India with a rich dataset for evidence-based policymaking aimed at inclusive development.

Source : TH

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