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Caste- The Multidimensional Issue in India

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Abstract

The upcoming caste census in 2027 is going to be a tricky affair as there are too many caste, identities that are fluid in nature & the ever-rising demands for representation will let the exercise to be an easy one. The issue of caste has many repercussions in the field of health, education, income, job, social identity & the political dynamics related to the modern day living. If we trace the history of vaccination, it was caste factor only which was a big obstacle in the promotion of small pox vaccination in India during the British era. Further, the uprising of 1857 revolt has also a strong caste angle. The Mandal Commission was central to the caste dynamics. Elections & elected representatives consider the factor of caste as the single most priority.

In this scenario, the article traces the history of caste, its dynamics, its present & its future implications in the nation. The commission set up by the Government of India & various other initiatives are touched upon in the article. The article suggests & predicts a better prospect in the caste perspective in the future for the nation.

Index Terms - Caste, OBC, ST, SC, Commission, Census, SECC

INTRODUCTION

On tracking the history of caste census in India it is seen that the process started from the British era. The following table gives the details with the time lines.

Table 1- Caste Census Journey¹

Year of the activity	Details of the activity
1881	Census started in India capturing caste
1931	Last census of the British era
1951	First census in independent India that did not include caste but included ST/SC categories
1961	Nationwide caste-count not done but states were allowed to make list of Other Backward Castes (OBC) if states wished
2011	Socio Economic Caste Census (SECC) conducted
2016	SECC report published without caste data because of quality issues
2025	Census 2027 announced & it will include caste census
2026	2027 census ongoing & data to be published in early 2027

On April 30th, 2025 the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) approved the caste census for the census 2027. As mentioned in the table given above India collected caste data in 1931, 1941 but the 1941 data was not released so the latest caste data is 1931. The SECC in 2011 census identified Below Poverty Line (BPL) households as well as their caste in order to entitle the family for various social benefits. The SECC process costed the nation to the tune of ₹ 5,0000 million but the data was never released. In a meeting of census officials in February 1950, the home minister Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel mentioned that in the upcoming census caste will not be a prominent feature.^{2,3,4}

The research tool of 1951 census had 14 questions that sought information on nationality, religion & special groups. The omission of caste in the 1951 census led to the formation of Kaka Kalelkar commission in January 1953 to look after the demand for reservation & other affirmative actions for the Other Backward Castes (OBC). Kaka was a social reformer, journalist, Member of Parliament (MP) from Rajya Sabha & his full name was Dattatreya Balkrishna Kalelkar. On March 18th, 1953 president Rajendra Prasad formally inaugurated the commission. The challenge was lack of caste data. The Registrar General (RG) of census provided the estimated population of the OBC for different states to the commission. The estimate showed that 115 million Indians belonged to 930 backward castes whereas the commission prepared a list of 2,399 castes as backward based upon the total population of India 361 million as per the 1951 census. The commission did not take responsibility, finality & reliability for the estimates provided by the RG. The commission also received estimates from communities that were basically guess work. The caste wise statistics of the 1941 census reports were also not compiled on a uniform basis & the commission did not find it useful. The report of the commission was submitted in 1955 but never implemented. Hence, there was no caste census till 2011. The central government was not clear for the final criteria of backwardness whether 'economic' or 'caste'. In 1963, the union government advised the states to use the economic criteria.^{2,3,4}

As the demand to implement the Kalelkar commission grew, the second OBC commission was formed by Morarji Desai headed by Bindheswari Prasad Mandal who was the scion of the erstwhile Murho Estate of Bihar & he was also the 7th Chief Minister (CM) of the state. Indira Gandhi received the Mandal commission report in 1980. The report also suggested a caste census which was implemented partially in 1994 & 2009. The entire suggestion of the commission is likely to be taken up in the 2027 census.^{2,3,4}

Literature Glance

People who availed caste reservation benefits often mention that caste follows them like a shadow. As the census has kicked up since 1st April 2026, the task related to caste enumeration is also alike to counting shadows. The famous slogan of Kanshiram, founder of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) on caste 'greater the number, greater the share' comes to the mind. One only hopes that the caste issue & the related enumeration exercise will bring the social justice in front & becomes the centre of Indian politics while others view it as a step towards modern casteless society. However, the cross-cutting fact is that the enumeration will be a challenging task. Caste is also cast in stone as it is not because of the sheer number of caste names but also the caste identity is fluid in nature. A person's caste identity can be related to a tribe, ethnic group or occupational groups. An example is Yadav where the caste is created by people that have occupations related to bovines. Hence, the sub groups under Yadav can be Ahirs, Gops, Goallas which with time these separate identities have become part of one caste.^{5,6,7}

Census is a rigid exercise & the data collection tool cannot have overlapping identities. It will be difficult to fit castes into a neat box in the research tool. This issue was faced by the enumerators in 1881 census. The enumerators of the colonial era prepared a list of castes & fit the population willy-nilly into the data collection tool. Similarly in the early 20th century, it was difficult to find a common schema to tabulate caste identities. The respondents needed to give their self-identities across India during data collection. At

that time, names of castes varied widely across the nation & enumerators faced a stiff challenge to classify these castes under common heads. This exercise continued till 1931 & over 4000 (Four Thousand) castes were identified. This was not because castes had increased but enumerators changed how they classified groups & on the other hand respondents responded by asserting local or regional caste identities.^{5,6,7}

The colonial caste census solidified & freeze dried the rigid but not entirely inflexible hierarchy of caste as they added their prejudices & value judgements to the mix classifying entire communities as criminals, warriors, nomads etc. This problem is being addressed in census 2027 through public awareness & self-declaration by the respondents. During the Socio Economic & Caste Census (SECC) in 2011 attempted at examining the caste numbers. The exercise revealed 46 lakh caste names & the survey had to be abandoned due to quality issues. Academicians are of the opinion that a standardised list is prepared & the list will create broad categories for respondents to relate or identify with these categories. For instance, Other Backward Caste (OBC) is not a caste but actually a category created by the nation or the state.^{2,5,6,7}

The issue does not end here as there is a truth angle. During the colonial census, it was seen that people declared themselves as being of a higher caste than the one they were part of. This was a bid to escape stigma & reclaim dignity. The Paliyas of West Bengal were considered unclean but declared themselves as Rajvanshis, who were considered as Kshatriyas. Currently, the Paliyas face a threat of extinction. That's why the challenge is that if someone is not on the list of castes which the state or nation decides to recognise & enumerate you are in the category of others or the invisible category. The census 2027 aims to settle quota claims also.^{5,6,7}

Some experts opine that the census could put to rest claims & counter claims of backwardness that have come up recently. For example, the land owner group or the landed elites such as the Marathas in Maharashtra & the Jats in Haryana demanding reservation. The headcount can be a tool to verify such claims. The Kammas & Reddys in Andhra Pradesh & the Patels in Gujarat have claimed OBC status in the recent past. It is certain that these groups will emerge as influential land owners post census & will be obviously out of the reservation gambit. Contradictions related to caste will also be addressed by the census 2027. Yadavs & Jats are recognised as OBCs in Bihar but not in Rajasthan. Similarly, the Lingayats are OBC in Karnataka but not in Maharashtra.^{5,6,7}

In 2015, the Karnataka government conducted SECC & some of the above-mentioned challenges & the precursors of these challenges surfaced up. The Vokkaliga caste in the state of Karnataka blankets many endogamous castes within itself & these do not have any interaction with each other. Being clubbed together do not reflect their sociological reality accurately but it does reflect an administrative reality. The administrative reality refers to the reality of how people want to be seen by the state itself. Most caste surveys end up as a counting game only. A Kumbhar (Potter) is a part of the Lingayats & this caste can access only 5% of reservations in Karnataka but on being identified only as a Kumbhar will help someone access 15% of reservation benefits. In census 2027, every community has the right to self-identify their caste.^{5,6,7}

All these initiatives will help the enumerators to start from a base & not from Zero. They have to tread carefully to handle such complications as mentioned above. The nation & the states have existing caste lists. The Kaka Kalelkar Report or the Backward Classes Commission Report of 1955 brought out 2399 communities as backward, 837 communities as most backward while the Mandal commission of 1980 brought out 3743 communities as OBC lists. In addition, the central government creates & issues the Scheduled Caste & Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) list that is implemented by all the states of India. As mentioned above, states like Karnataka & Bihar have conducted a caste census in the absence of a nation level census since 2011 till date or the year 2026.^{5,6,7}

Reflections

The census 2027 is like a magic box or pandora box as it is expected to throw a lot of issues related to caste. Some people who usually push back the caste issue think that the census data will catalyse the demand for reservations from newly anointed backward communities. Simultaneously it will also create resistance from those communities who are already on the reservation list but are not socially & economically backward as before. Obviously, there will be unforeseen political exigencies that will force political leaders to include more castes in the reserved category & at the same time they are expected to depict resistance/reluctance towards pruning the list. Further challenges will add to the judgement of Indra Sawhney in 1992 that upheld the principle of using caste as a primary indicator of social & educational backwardness for reservation purposes. The judgement also capped reservation at a ceiling of 50%. Hence the political will of the central government has to deal with such challenges in the caste census. Connecting data collection with the pressure of a policy decision will eventually burden the neutrality of the upcoming census.¹⁻⁸

Experts also point out that a caste census primarily is not a tool to provide social justice to weaker & deprived sections. In-fact, the caste system has segmented the Indian society vertically, horizontally, circularly & peripherally. This segmentation defeats the purpose of the nation itself as it has created baseless hierarchies based simply on birth. This process has put the burden of misery on the majority of the population. The focus on the caste system through the caste census will lead to heightened dissension in society further strengthening this social evil.¹⁻⁸

Upper caste anxieties are likely to flare up & lead to more discussion on the under privileged upper castes. The merit vs reservation debate will pick up after the census & there is a clear-cut opposition from the upper castes regarding the upcoming census. One example is that influencer Anuradha Tiwari's videos with #BrahminGenes is going viral rapidly & the followers count are surging gradually since last year.⁹

Conclusions

Let caste not become a minefield after the census 2027. The census will not have drop down menu of castes in the research tool. The tool will focus on four options only. Respondents have to self-identify their caste for the enumerators.

Under the notified 40 question population schedule, the caste inquiry is listed as question number 10 providing an open text field for respondents alongside specific options for SC, ST, No Caste or Opting Not to Declare. All the entries are protected information under the Census Act, 1948.

This census will be India's first digital enumeration exercise and the article aspires that the caste variable will lead to progress of the nation & the society at large.

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