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GENERAL STUDIES 2: POLITY

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TOPIC: CASTE CENSUS

What counts in caste census

1. India's New Caste Census Move

- The **Modi government**, traditionally opposed to caste-based enumeration, has now expressed support for a **caste census**.
- This marks a significant shift in BJP's historical stance, where **caste politics was seen as a threat to Hindu unity**.
- The announcement holds deep **symbolic value**, indicating formal **state recognition of caste-based inequalities** after decades of official reluctance.

2. Political Strategy Behind the Shift

- The decision is seen as a **tactical move to expand BJP's base among non-dominant OBCs (Other Backward Classes) and SCs (Scheduled Castes)**.
- It reflects the BJP's attempt to **counter Mandal-era parties** (like RJD and SP) by appealing directly to numerically significant backward groups.
- Comes with the **risk of alienating upper-caste voters**, who have historically formed BJP's core support base.

3. BJP's Historical Stance on Caste

- In the **1990s**, BJP **opposed the Mandal Commission recommendations**, branding caste reservations as divisive.
- Leaders like **L.K. Advani** launched the **Rath Yatra** in response to VP Singh's caste mobilization.
- Over time, BJP **pivoted to co-opt OBC and Dalit leadership**, using both symbolic and electoral strategies to **build a broader social coalition**.

4. Implications of the Caste Census

- **Electoral Timing:** The announcement coincides with upcoming **state elections in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh**, raising questions about political intent.
- **Internal Tensions:** BJP risks **fracturing its social coalition**, as upper-caste groups may feel threatened by increased caste-based mobilization.



- **Domestication of Mandal:** BJP seeks to **absorb and redirect Mandal-era social justice politics**, using its own framework of development and nationalism.

5. Societal and Policy Implications

- **Data-Driven Governance:** A caste census could enable **targeted affirmative action**, resource allocation, and representation in proportion to actual demographics.
- Could address the “**creamy layer**” concerns and help identify **truly disadvantaged sub-castes** within the broad OBC and SC categories.
- Historically, both **BJP and Congress governments avoided caste enumeration**, fearing social unrest and political complications.

6. Concerns and Counterarguments

- **Risk of Reinforcing Divisions:** Critics fear a caste census could **re-solidify hierarchical identities** and disrupt national unity.
- **Counterpoint:** Caste already shapes Indian life—from **village layouts to matrimonial alliances**. Ignoring it doesn't erase its influence.
- The census can offer **objective insight** into invisible exclusions rather than furthering divisiveness.

7. Lessons from the Mandal Commission Era

- In 1990, the **Mandal Commission** recommendations (27% OBC reservation) triggered mass protests and altered Indian politics.
- **Unintended Outcomes:** While BJP initially opposed Mandal, the **subsequent Hindutva mobilization (Ram Janmabhoomi)** leveraged the upheaval for broader appeal.
- **Long-Term Impact:** Mandal empowered backward castes and **permanently reshaped caste consciousness** in Indian politics.

8. Structural Challenges

- **Internal Fragmentation:** Not all OBCs or SCs are equally marginalized. **Dominant sub-castes** often capture a disproportionate share of benefits.
- **Representation Issues:** Without sub-categorization, the **numerical strength** of a caste may not translate into equitable representation.
- **Need for Social Justice Framework:** The focus should be on **backwardness alleviation**, not just on **numerical quotas** or tokenism.

9. Alternative Models and Alliances



- Examples like **BSP's Bahujan-Savarna alliances** in UP show that **cross-caste coalitions** are possible even in a deeply stratified society.
- A well-executed caste census could inform more **inclusive coalition-building strategies** that avoid elite capture within caste groups.

10. Way Forward

- **Data Utilization:** The value of the caste census depends on how the **data is used**—for **empowerment** or **electoral arithmetic**.
- **Design Matters:** The **questionnaire structure, categories, and transparency** will reflect the sincerity of the government's intent.
- **Political Accountability:** Success will require **institutional follow-up**, not just headline-making announcements.

11. Broader Policy Impact

- If used effectively, the caste census could lead to **evidence-based policymaking, better reservation frameworks, and targeted welfare schemes**.
- Has the potential to address **systemic exclusions** rather than merely benefitting vocal or dominant caste groups.

12. Conclusion

- While the BJP's **motives may be strategic**, the caste census—if implemented sincerely—can **catalyse structural transformation** in Indian society.
- Its success will depend on whether it is used to **uplift the most marginalized**, or simply to **reconfigure political alliances**.
- Like Mandal, the caste census may have **far-reaching effects** that go beyond its immediate political context.

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