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TOPIC: CASTE CENSUS

A caste census is not a silver bullet for social justice

1. Introduction – The Current Debate

- India is witnessing a growing debate over the **need and role of caste enumeration** in the national Census.
- Traditionally, Census data have guided policies on health, housing, education, and employment—not focused heavily on caste.
- The Narendra Modi government's decision to include **caste enumeration in the upcoming Census** has garnered both hope and suspicion.
- While it is seen as a long-overdue step to gather data for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), critics argue the **disproportionate focus on caste data may distract from actual policy action**.

2. Rationale and Justification for a Caste Census

- Supporters argue a caste census provides an **empirical foundation** to assess the social and economic status of caste groups, especially OBCs.
- It can **strengthen legal arguments** for reservations and targeted welfare by backing them with credible statistics.
- A disaggregated census can help uncover **intra-OBC inequalities**, especially for **Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs)**.
- It can support **data-driven affirmative action**, enhancing the efficiency and legitimacy of public policies.
- However, this enthusiasm must be tempered with realism—**data alone cannot bring justice** without effective action.

3. Risks of Over-Emphasizing Census Data

- Elevating the role of the Census as a **prerequisite for delivering justice or designing policy** is a flawed and risky approach.
- The Census should be seen as a **routine institutional activity**, not a political tool.
- **Registrar General of India** is responsible for collecting neutral and factual data—not for influencing policymaking or governance.



- Using Census data as the sole basis for policy **risks politicising the institution**, weakening its credibility.
- In a politically polarised environment, **preserving the objectivity** of Census operations is essential.

4. The Role of Political Leadership and Policy-Making

- The responsibility for designing and implementing welfare schemes **lies with political leadership**, not Census officials.
- Policies should be framed using the **best available data**, including from NSSO, NFHS, and NCRB—not delayed waiting for new Census figures.
- Treating data as the primary driver of reform **ignores the importance of political intent, public mobilization, and ideological conviction**.

5. Historical Context – Data Not Always Central to Policy

- Many landmark social justice measures were implemented **without detailed statistical backing**:
 1. **Reservations for SCs/STs**
 2. **Mandal Commission implementation for OBCs**
 3. **Land reforms post-Independence**
- Even the **10% EWS reservation** by the Modi government was introduced **without any commission or comprehensive data**, proving that **data is not always a precondition for reform**.
- Since Independence, **SCs and STs have been regularly counted** in the Census and their social exclusion documented in national surveys.
- Yet, major reforms to improve their representation and economic mobility **remain limited**.

6. Evidence of Inequality and Underrepresentation

- Data from **NCRB** shows a steady rise in crimes against SCs and STs.
- **SECC and Bihar Caste Survey** confirm deep economic vulnerabilities among OBCs.
- Most OBCs work in the **informal economy**, lacking job security or upward mobility.
- Despite this data being available, **no major national policy reforms** have been introduced to address these issues.
- In private sectors like **IT, corporate leadership, and media**, representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs remains **abysmally low**.



- Even in government-run institutions, these groups face **underrepresentation in higher education, judiciary, and civil services.**

7. Political Will Is the Real Engine of Social Justice

- While data is useful, **policy change is driven more by political will and public pressure.**
- Democratic institutions and leadership must show **moral courage and political imagination** to uplift the marginalised.
- A caste census can **highlight the need for reform**, but it **cannot implement change on its own.**
- **Data can inform, but only leadership can act.**

8. Conclusion – The True Test for the Government

- The real challenge for the current government is **not collecting more data**, but **translating available data into action.**
- Social justice requires **bold, inclusive, and transformative policies**, not just enumeration.
- **Without political commitment**, even the most robust data will remain ineffective and unused.
- The editorial concludes that **a caste census is not a silver bullet**—it must be part of a larger political and moral effort to achieve equity and justice.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-caste-census-is-not-a-silver-bullet-for-social-justice/article69590611.ece>