CASTE BASED CENSUS: A LEAP TOWARDS INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Caste is a system of birth-ascribed stratification of the Indian society which places certain castes at the top and deprives certain castes in every sphere of life. India runs massive affirmative programmes to level the caste-based deprivations of the weaker sections (SC/STs and OBCs). A new policy in the form of a quota of 10 percent for the economically weaker sections (EWS) has emerged. All the affirmative programmes and a new EWS (economically weaker sections) quota are running on hazy projections and blurry extrapolations in the absence of caste-based data. The issue of caste-based census has surfaced once again in the lie of the forthcoming Census of 2021. This paper addresses the issue of the caste-based census. It advocates for the count of the castes in the census of 2021. It also advocates that the caste-based census is an inevitable move for the Inclusive Society.

Keywords: Caste, Caste based census, Census of India, Social Justice, affirmative programs, inclusive society

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is inevitable to shed light on Indian Caste System to understand the debate of caste-based census or caste census. Caste system is a hierarchy of endogamous groups that individuals enter only by birth (Olcott, 1944). It is a system of birth-ascribed stratification of socio-cultural pluralism and of hierarchical interaction (Berreman, 1967). This system advocates for four-fold division of Indian society in hierarchal order. At the top of the hierarchy, there were Brahmins (teachers and intellectuals) followed by Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers). The Vaishyas (traders) were placed at the third position and the Shudras (menial workers) were at the bottom. Outside of this Hindu caste system, there were the untouchables (Ambedkar, 1990; Srinivas, 1969). The main Varnas were further divided into about 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub castes (BBC News, 2019). Varna means colour which refers to large divisions that include various castes and sub divisions of castes called sub castes. The Indian term of caste is 'Jati' each with its own rules and customs. The various Jatis are traditionally arranged in hierarchical order and fit into one of the four basic Varnas (Bhagat, 2006; Saeed, 2007). In academia, caste is very popular and frequently used for 'Jati' which needs little bit elucidation here.

The term Caste is derived from the Portuguese word 'casta' which refers to breed or lineage or race. It is a hereditary collection of families or group of families which does not permit social mobility of its members. Its basic characteristics is hierarchical stratification of the Indian society which involves ranking of social groups according to birth. It affects one's occupation, marriage and social relationship (Ahuja, 2014). In current scenario, up to greater extent, caste has moved away from the notion of purity and impurity. The experience of humiliation or indignity that was the essence of caste has now been replaced by the experience of exclusion (Guru, 2016). Caste is a fundamental determinant of social exclusion and development, and affects some 20-25 percent of the world's population. Today, absolutely and proportionately, the country's capital wealth such as land, buildings, finance etc; is largely in the hands of the "upper castes" and the "lowest castes" participate in the economy primarily as wage labourers. Access to high status occupations decrease as one passes down the hierarchy (Mosse, 2018). Caste still remains the basic structure within which people live and die (Kumar, 2016). It is worth noting that in modern India, the Indian government introduced a categorization scheme in which the untouchables were categorized as scheduled caste (SC), the backward tribes were categorized as scheduled tribe (ST) and the disadvantaged castes as other backward Classes (OBC). The forward castes (FC) community generally constitute the high castes group. The SC, ST, and OBC comprising the historically disadvantage groups were provided job opportunities by the government through affirmative action (Sankaran, Sekerdej, Von Hecker, 2017).

When Caste is so vital factor in the Indian social system, an obvious question arises, how many persons of the particular caste reside in India? It is too difficult to answer. But the reason is so simple. The last caste-based census was conducted in the pre independent India, in the Census of 1931. Since then, there is no caste-based census. Counted or not, caste continued to play a major role in Indian society and hence politics (Daniyal, 2021). The Census of 2011 was very close to it. The then UPA government held Socio-Economic Caste Census in 2011, but the data was not released (The Indian Express, 2021). Now, it is the time for the Census of 2021 (though, it is lagging behind due to covid-19 pandemic). Again, demand for the caste census is pouring from the various quarters. It has become issue of the national debate whether caste should be included or not in the Census of 2021. The present paper addresses this issue and advocates for the count of the castes in the Census of 2021. It also advocates that the caste-based census is inevitable to make India an inclusive society.

2.0 CENSUS OF INDIA: MEANS TO KNOW INDIA AND ITS PEOPLE

India is recognized for its unity in diversity and the census gives the citizens a chance to study this diversity (The Telangana Today, 2021). The Indian Census is the most credible source of information on population characteristics, economic activity, literacy and education, housing and household amenities, urbanization, fertility and mortality, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes population, language, migration, disability and other socio-cultural and demographic data (Census of India, 2011). The census data provide the wealth of information to conduct research on socio-economic issues of the country. Further, Indian Census is the report card for reviewing India's progress in the last decade. It also monitors the ongoing schemes of the government. It is worth mentioning that census operation in India is conducted by the office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner under the ministry of home affairs (Census of India, 2011).

In the modern time, the evolution of census in India goes back to colonial period. The first census based on a direct survey of population took place on 1 January 1853 in the North-Western Provinces. In the following decade census was also held in several other provinces including Oudh and Punjab. It was neither a regular nor a pan-Indian affair (Samarendra, 2011). A systematic and modern population census in its present form was conducted between 1865 and 1872. The year 1872 has been accepted as the first population census of India. But it was not synchronous. In India, the first synchronous census was conducted in 1881. Since then, censuses have been conducted uninterruptedly once in every ten years. The Indian Census is one of the largest administrative exercises undertaken in the world (Census of India, 2011). The enumeration of caste started from the census of the North- Western Provinces in 1865. It continued to be prominent part of the colonial census till 1931 (Samarendra, 2011). The objectives to enumerate caste in the census were limited. Caste was expected to identify the communities and to facilitate classification of the population into agricultural and non-agricultural categories. Moreover, information about certain castes was also supposed to help in checking customs like infanticide prevailing amongst them (Plowden, 1867 cites Samarendra, 2011).

In India, there are other sources of the data to study India. These are National Sample Survey (NSS), National Family Health Surveys (NFHS), District Level Household Survey (DLSH), India Human Development Survey (IHDS) etc. All these sample survey data bear the shortcomings of sample data. In a sample survey, only part of the total population is accessed for the information on the particular topic. For instance, in the National Sample Survey, every round is devoted to a particular topic. Similarly, the National Family Health Survey focuses on the child and reproductive health and so on so forth. Further, in the sample survey, data on sub-population and for small geographical areas may be too unreliable to be useful. The sampling error is the integral part of the sample survey data. It may be minimized but cannot be fully rectified. Contrary to these, census is the complete enumeration of the population. It provides accurate information for many subdivisions of the population. Census data releases in every ten years. The sample survey data fill this durational gap. But the sample survey cannot be substitute for the Census.

3.0 COUNTING CASTE: INEVITABLE FOR THE INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

The very first argument to count caste in the census starts with instances from the censuses of the other countries on the globe. In the countries wherein censuses are conducted periodically, its population is counted by its prominent composition characteristics. For instance, the prominent composition characteristics of USA population is its race/ethnicity. So, U.S. Census Bureau counts its population by race/ethnicity. Major race/ethnicity of USA population are White, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Multi Races, American Indian and Native Hawaiian. In Britain, Census of England and Wales, 2011 counted its population by following ethnic groups: White, Mixed, Asian, Black and other ethnic groups. Singapore is one of the countries of diverse population. Census of Singapore counts its population by its ethnicity viz, Chinese, Malay, Indian and other so on so forth. The prominent composition characteristic of Indian population is its caste. So, Census of India is supposed to count its population by its prominent composition characteristics i.e., caste. Unfortunately, Census of 1931 was the last in the series that counted the caste. Now, it is high time to the count caste in the coming Census of India, 2021 to answer the question asked at the outset.

Second, both Mr. Senart and Sir H. Risley had used a term 'common occupations' while defining a caste (Ambedkar, 1917). In his definition of caste, Macdonell (1914) pointed out four characteristics to distinguish one caste from another caste. These four characteristics are as follows- (1) it is hereditary (2) it is endogamous, (3) its members profess to follow the same occupation, and (4) its members do not eat with members of the other castes. In these classical works on caste, occupation is one of the prominent characteristics. Specific castes were associated with specific occupations. For instance, the Brahmins were associated with priestly works and the Shudras were associated with menial works. But what were the social and economic circumstances one hundred years back, may not be necessarily the same in the current time. Nevertheless, there should be a valid document to elucidate the degree of diversification of occupations amongst the castes in India. But there is dearth of valid documents in this line.

The caste-based census may fill this gap. Census of India classifies main workers into four categories of economic activities- (1) cultivator (2) agricultural labourer (3) worker in household industry, and (4) other workers. These economic activities may be extended up to the desirable level viz, salaried in public and private sectors. The salaried persons in public and private sectors may be classified into grades A, B, C and D. Thus, one may easily analyse the diversification of the occupations across the castes. Say for example, a person of particular caste is working as salaried employee in private or public sector. It is easy to know his/her job grade and comes to know the diversification of the occupations of the castes. The same exercise may be carried out for the workers engaged in unorganized sectors. At present, it is not a difficult task. There are numerous advanced soft wares (SPSS, SAS, STATA, R and Python) to accomplish exercise within few seconds. The fourth category of main workers may be specified. Hence, caste-based census is an utmost important step to test changing relationship between occupations and the castes in India, if any.

The third reason to count caste in the census is to know how many persons don't have any caste. In its schedule, Census of India has one column of religion. Six religions viz. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain with their code numbers are listed in the question (Q.7 in the census of India schedule). If the person says that he/she has no religion, there is an instruction to record 'no religion' (Census of India, 2011). After addition of caste column in the census schedule, similar kind of exercise may be carried out to know the caste of the person. Here comes if and but due to the nature of the question as caste (or sub caste) types are in the several thousands. If the person says that she/he has no caste, there should be an instruction to record 'no caste'. It will provide the number of persons who don't have any caste. The total number of persons with 'no caste' will be an indicator of casteless society. There is a pretty chance for false reporting of 'no caste'. There may be one indirect follow up question to address the issue of false reporting. It will be 'would you allow your unmarried family members to marry any caste?' The answer to this question will solve the issue of false reporting of 'no caste' up to greater extent. Anyhow let the data come first.

The fourth reason to count caste in census is 10 percent quota for economically weaker sections (EWS) or forward castes/ upper castes in government educational institutes and jobs. Whether it is justified or not. Whether it is in accordance with fundamental principles of reservations enshrined in the constitution of India or not. It is not the point of discussion here. The economic criteria have been framed to identify the persons eligible for EWS quota. Persons from

households with annual income below Rs. 8 lakhs, households owning agricultural land below 5 acres in rural areas, a house above 1000 square feet or a 100-yards plot or below in a notified municipal area or a plot of 200 square yards or below in a non-notified municipal area are eligible for EWS quota (Reddy et al, 2019). It is also well-known fact that persons belonging to non-SC/STs and non- OBC category popularly known as general category (upper castes/forward castes) are eligible for economically weaker sections quota of 10 percent. But one question remains unaddressed. How many are the total population of persons belonging to general category (upper castes/forward castes) in India? There is no answer to this question as there is no count of this section of Indian population. Here, the legislation granting a 10 percent quota in government employment and educational institutions for upper castes/forward castes become questionable. How has the government arrived at the figure of 10 percent without any proper and through documentation by a duly constituted commission to count upper castes/forward castes population (EPW, 2019)? This question must be addressed and to address this question, caste count is inevitable.

The fifth and the most important reason to count caste is the idea of the justices -social, economic and political enshrined in the constitution of India. Among these justices, the social justice is the foundation stone of the Indian constitution. It denotes equal treatment of all citizens without any social distinction based on caste, colour, race, religion, sex etc. It means absence of privileges being extended to any particular section of the society and improvement in the conditions of backward classes (SCs, STs, and OBCs) and women as well. It is a dynamic device to mitigate the sufferings of the poor, weak, Dalits, tribals and deprived sections of the society and to elevate them to the level of equality to live life with dignity (Suvarnakhandi, 2020).

In the Indian constitution, there is provision to implement the social justice through affirmative actions. The architecture of India's affirmative actions is based on caste. India runs massive policy and programs based on caste (Daniyal, 2021). But there is no recent data on caste except of the SC/STs population as caste census was last held in 1931 and discontinued thereafter (The Indian Express, 2021). From backward classes, the population of SCs/STs is counted in periodic census of India. Further, SC/STs population is counted by caste or subcastes in the same periodic census. But the population of the other backward classes (OBCs) is not counted. So, there is no any recent valid document to know the total population of the OBCs residing in the country except Census of 1931. Without duly documented data of the OBCs population in India, how affirmative actions will be formulated for them? Without knowing the exact population of OBCs, how the idea of social justice will be materialized? Public polices or affirmative actions formulated on the basis of hazy projections and blurry extrapolations will not yield adequately. So, it is utmost need to count castes and hence OBCs population to materialize the idea of social justice and for making India an inclusive society.

4.0 HYPOTHETICAL FEAR VS LOGICAL ANSWER

Since the demand for counting castes in census are pouring from the various quarters, oppositions not to count caste are coming even with greater momentum. There are many schools of thoughts that oppose the caste count in the census. One school of thought laments that we are talking of casteless society and at the same time we are demanding for caste-based census. According to this school of thought, counting caste will increase casteism in the society.

Answer to this school of thought is that counting of religion in the census is never blamed for spreading religious hatred. Then how counting of caste will increase casteism? Caste is caste whether counted or not, it has been playing its roles in the Indian society since centuries and likely to play its role in the future as well. The second school of thought opposes caste-based census saying that it is a difficult task to collect and manage huge amount of caste-based data. The answer to this school of thought is that the census already documents huge amount of data pertaining to religions, languages, socio-economic status of Dalits, Adivasi and different tribes. Then, why not to count other backward classes (OBCs) and forward castes/upper castes? This is baseless argument to hide the actual population of OBCs and forward castes/upper castes of the Indian society. The Census of India is eminently capable of undertaking caste enumeration (EPW, 2010). In the 21st century, the age of information technology, it makes no sense to say that it is difficult task to collect and manage caste-based census data.

The third school of thought is sceptical about misuse of this large database. To them, biometric based Aadhar data, the world's largest biometric database is an example. This data is more sensitive than caste-based census data. In reply to an RTI query, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) stated that Aadhar data is fully safe and secure and there has been no data leak at UIDAI (The Economic Times, 2018). When the world's largest biometric database will be kept safe and secure by the government of India, then there must not be any if and but to keep caste-based census data safe and secure. The fourth school of thought is concerned about the complexities of the caste count due to its large number. The OBC list is considerably longer than SC and ST lists and hence yielded a list of 7, 372 castes (Desai, 2010). There are several castes in general categories (upper castes/forward castes) across the length and breadth of the country. Despite this, state governments are capable of issuing EWS (economically weaker sections) certificates for eligible upper castes/forward castes or general category. They also issue creamy layer certificates for OBCs and Caste certificates for SCs/STs as well. It means, state governments as notified by the central government do possess the information of the entire castes residing in the territory of its specific states. So, there seems no any complexity in counting caste in the forthcoming census.

The fifth and the last school of thought includes the persons who have monopoly in public services and educational institutions. As per existing constitutional provisions, reservation is provided to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) at rate of 15 percent, 7.5 percent and 27.0 percent respectively in case of direct recruitment on all India basis by open competition (Government of India, 2016). It is worth to mention that the population of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are 16.6 percent and 8.6 percent respectively (census of India, 2011). In the top bureaucracy (at the post of joint secretaries) in the central government, the Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribes have merely 4.73 percent and 3.27 percent representation against its population of 16.6 percent and 8.6 percent respectively. Similarly, other backward classes (OBC) have merely 6.9 percent representation at the post of joint secretaries. Contrary to this, the forward class have whopping representation of 85.1 percent at post of the join secretaries (table 1). The divide between the backward castes and the forward castes is quite wide in case of the secretaries in the central government. The Scheduled Castes (1.1 percent) and the Scheduled Tribes (3.4 percent) have acute under representation in the top bureaucracy (at the post of secretaries). The matter becomes graver for the other backward classes (OBC) as there is no representation of this section of the population. Contrary to poor representation of the backward castes (SCs, STs

and OBCs), the forward castes have whopping representation by 95.5 percent (table 2). The representation of the backward castes (SCs, STs and OBCs) is even not satisfactorily at the post of the teaching staffs in the colleges and universities across the length and breadth of the country. SCs, STs and OBCs have 8.6 percent, 2.3 percent and 32.3 percent representation at the post of the teaching staffs in the colleges and universities.

Table 1: Social category wise representation of joint secretaries (top bureaucracy) in the central government

Social categories	Total Population (%)	total number of Joint Sectaries	Percentage of joint secretaries	Deficit/surplus (%)
Scheduled Castes (SC)	16.6	13	4.73	-11.87
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	8.6	9	3.27	-5.33
Other Backward Classes	*No valid document*	19	6.9	-
Forward Castes	*No valid document*	234	85.1	-
Total		275	100	-

Source: The Print (2019)

On the other hand, the forward castes have 56.8 percent representation in the same public service (table 3). The recent valid data is available for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes from the Census of India, 2011. So, one may easily come to know the under and over-representation of the Scheduled populations (SCs and STs). For instance, the representation of the backward SCs and STs in the top bureaucracy (at the post of join secretaries and secretaries) in the central government is far behind the figures established by the constitution of India. This is the case of the systematic exclusion of these populations from the top bureaucracy and educational institutions.

Table 2: Social category-wise representation of secretaries (top bureaucracy) in the central government

Social categories	Total Population (%)	Total Sectaries	percentage of secretaries	Deficit/surplus (%)
Scheduled Castes (SC)	16.6	1	1.1	-15.5

Scheduled Tribes (ST)	8.6	3	3.4	-5.2
Other Backward Classes	*No valid document*	0	0.0	-
Forward Castes	*No valid document*	85	95.5	-
Total	-	89	100.0	-

Source: The Print (2019)

Table 3: Social Category-wise distribution of teaching staff in colleges and universities), All India

Social Categories	Total Population (%)	teaching staff (%)	deficit/surplus
Scheduled Castes (SC)	16.6	8.6	-8.0
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	8.6	2.3	-6.3
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	*No valid document*	32.3	-
Forward Castes/upper castes	*No valid document*	56.8	-
Total	-	100	-

Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, 2018

But there is no recent valid data of the OBCs and the forward castes. Due to the scarcity of recent valid data of these two segments of the Indian population, it is not possible to know their (OBCs and forward castes) under and over-representation in the public services and in educational institutions. The very idea of social justice is centered around the representation of every stratum of the Indian social fabric. Without recent valid data, it is not possible to implement the idea of social justice enshrined in the constitution of India. To have recent valid data of these populations, there is need of enumerate of these populations in the census. The enumeration of caste will expose the dominance and privilege certain castes continue to enjoy in social, cultural, political and economic spheres- despite the rhetoric of equality and promises of social justice and a level playing field (The Indian Express, 2021). The same school of thought is sceptical about breaking of 50 percent cap of the reservations put by the apex court of the land. As the B P Mandal Commission had estimated the total population of OBCs to 52 percent using data from the last caste census in 1931 (Daniyal, 2021) and recommend for 27.0 percent reservation for them in government educational institutions and jobs. But the National Sample Survey Organisation of 2007 estimated the OBC population to be 41 percent only (The Federal, 2021) which is not likely to be true as compared to the Mandal Commission's estimate. So, there is a need of valid estimate of the population of the other backward castes and to meet this aim, the caste-based census is inevitable.

Once the caste-based census data comes into existence, there will be questions on the present equation of the reservation. The very of school of thought bears the fear that OBCs will ask to increase its quota (in government educational institutions and jobs) as per newly available caste-based census data. Here, the dominance and privileges enjoined by the certain castes in every sphere will come into danger. Further, 50 percent reservation cap set by the apex is likely to be broken. The caste-based census has potential to attack on the dominance and privileges that enjoyed by the certain castes. The ascriptive privileges enjoyed by the certain castes will weaken. So, the dominant group is vehemently opposing the caste-based census by making several excuses. Such mindset is against the idea of the justices -social, economic and political enshrined in the constitution of India. It will hinder the process of making inclusive society. Unless and until every section of the Indian society has its due shares in social, cultural, political and economic spheres, the process of making India an inclusive society will remain incomplete. So, in the greater interest of inclusive development of the Indian society, the caste-based census is inevitable.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The issue of caste-based census has erupted in the lie of the forthcoming census of 2021. There is no consensus on it either in the parliament or outside the house. The supporters and the opponents of the caste-based census have their own arguments. Caste is a vital factor in the Indian social system. India's affirmative actions are based on caste. India runs massive policy programmes for the upliftment of the backward sections (SCs/STs and OBCs) based on caste. But the sorry state of affair is that there is no caste count except SCs/STs since Census of 1931. As per B.P. Mandal Commission's estimate, OBCs (other backward classes) makes a large share of the total population of the country. But there is no any recent valid enumeration of this section of the Indian population.

A new policy focus took place in the form of 10 percent quota for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in the government educational institutions and jobs. The very 10 percent quota for EWS has not been based on the valid population enumeration. It is an arbitrary quota allotted to EWS without any valid documentation of population of that category. Public polices or affirmative actions formulated on the basis of hazy projections and blurry extrapolations will not yield adequately. Moreover, despite the rhetoric of equality and promises of social justice and a level playing field, certain castes are enjoining the ascriptive privileges whereas certain castes still remain deprived. The caste-based census has potential to weaken the ascriptive privileges enjoyed by certain castes. The caste-based census will also pave the way for the equal distribution of the national resources across every stratum of the Indian society. Unless and until every stratum of the Indian society has its meaningful shares in social, cultural, political and economic spheres, the process of making India an inclusive society will remain incomplete. It is utmost need to conduct caste-based census to make India an inclusive society.

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The authors declare that this research paper has not been published previously. Authors agree that accepted papers will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or in any other language, including electronically.

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