

POLICY
PIVOT



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The idea of caste enumeration, as emphasised by social reformers from Phule to Siddaramaiah, is rooted in the broader struggle for dignity, recognition, and rights of all

Stepping Stone of Equality?

India's decision to conduct a caste census after nearly a century may rekindle the fight for social justice, offering an opportunity to address entrenched inequalities through data-driven policymaking

The French Revolution's resounding declaration that "all humans are born equal" starkly contrasts with the harsh reality of inequality that pervades our lives. While the Indus Valley Civilisation may have been casteless, it was likely not classless. The ancient Indian society, as reflected in the Vedas, organised itself into four varnas – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras – laying the foundation for the complex Indian caste system. This system has evolved over centuries, influencing every aspect of Indian life.

The issue of caste census in India has recently gained prominence following the central government's decision to include caste enumeration in the upcoming decennial census. Pioneering anti-caste social reformers like Mahatma Phule and Jyotirao Phule successfully persuaded the British to acknowledge caste as a crucial factor in policymaking, particularly in education and employment. This led to the colonial government's pan-Indian caste enumeration in 1881, marking the beginning of caste-based data collection. The last successful exercise of this kind took place in 1931. Although some open-ended questions were included in the 2011 census, the government found the data unusable due to various limitations.

The Significance of the Decision

The recent decision to conduct a caste enumeration will enable 1.4 billion people to identify themselves by their castes in the census for the first time in nearly a century. BR Ambedkar, in his submissions to the Simon Commission and during debates in the Constituent Assembly, emphasised the need for a comprehensive caste census to pave the way for the ultimate abolition of caste hierarchies. He firmly believed that empirical data are essential for forming targeted policies that address the specific needs of the marginalised communities.

The idea of caste enumeration, as emphasised by social reformers from Phule



Caste enumeration is a means to achieve social equality and human dignity, not an end in itself

to Siddaramaiah, is rooted in the broader struggle for dignity, recognition, and rights of all. In the context of increasing emphasis on representation, equitable resource distribution, and the Sustainable Development Goals' focus on leaving no one behind, caste enumeration has become a sheer necessity to strengthen democracy and inform policy formulation. By understanding the demographic distribution of different castes, policymakers can design targeted interventions and monitor ongoing programs more effectively.

The 20th century saw a surge in caste census efforts, driven by political movements advocating for the rights of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) following the Mandal Commission's recommendations. Although the 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) collected caste data, it was not fully utilised. The United Progressive Alliance government gathered data but did not act upon it, while the Bharatiya Janata Party led National Democratic Alliance government set up the Justice Rohini Commission to explore ways to utilise the data for OBC benefits. Its findings remain unused, and the exercise has been criticised for lacking transparency and accountability.

Caste Enumeration: Critical Dimensions

The recent decision has raised eyebrows, as it seems to contradict the Hindutva ideology that the government purportedly upholds. Proponents of Hindutva view caste census as detrimental to their mission of homogenising Hindu society, fearing it will highlight divisions and disparities within the community. Some believe this decision is a calculated move to gain electoral mileage, particularly in the impending Bihar and Uttar Pradesh elections. Others argue that the government is attempting to consolidate its vote bank by appeasing specific caste groups.

Policy Implications

The data generated from the caste census will help policymakers understand and address social inequality, mobilise resource distribution, and provide opportunities among different caste groups. This will enable targeted interventions and informed decision-making, ultimately contributing to the achievement of the twin objectives of Vikshit Bharat and Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas. By identifying areas of disparity and deprivation, the government can redesign programs that address the specific needs of marginalised communities, promoting

inclusive growth and development. It is important in the context of the commitment of the national government to implement Sustainable Development Goals

Key Concerns

Past censuses have revealed the complexities of the caste system, with arbitrary classifications and incorrect enumerations. The 2011 SECC recorded over 46.7 lakh caste names with 8.2 crore errors, highlighting the challenges involved. It is essential to uphold the constitutional ethos of equality enshrined in Articles 14 and 21 while conducting this exercise. The government must ensure that the data collection process is transparent, inclusive, and free from biases.

Conclusion

Historical experience shows that caste can be a slippery slope for politicians. The Meiji restoration in Japan ended feudalism and unleashed modernity, leading some to believe that the caste system is a stumbling block for India's progress. Although India had a chance to reform under Mahatma Gandhi, the abolition of untouchability remained a distant dream. Ambedkar's call for overhauling Hinduism failed to gain momentum due to various socio-political factors.

Caste enumeration is a means to achieve social equality and human dignity, not an end in itself. While it requires a significant overhaul of society, delivering a strong blow to the caste system seems like a billion-dollar question due to its high social and political significance. The government must demonstrate its commitment to using the data to promote inclusive growth, address disparities, and ensure that the benefits of development reach all sections of society. Only then can caste enumeration fulfill its promise of contributing to a more equitable and just society which was promised by those who fought for freedom and was envisioned by the illustrious architects of our Constitution

Views expressed are personal