

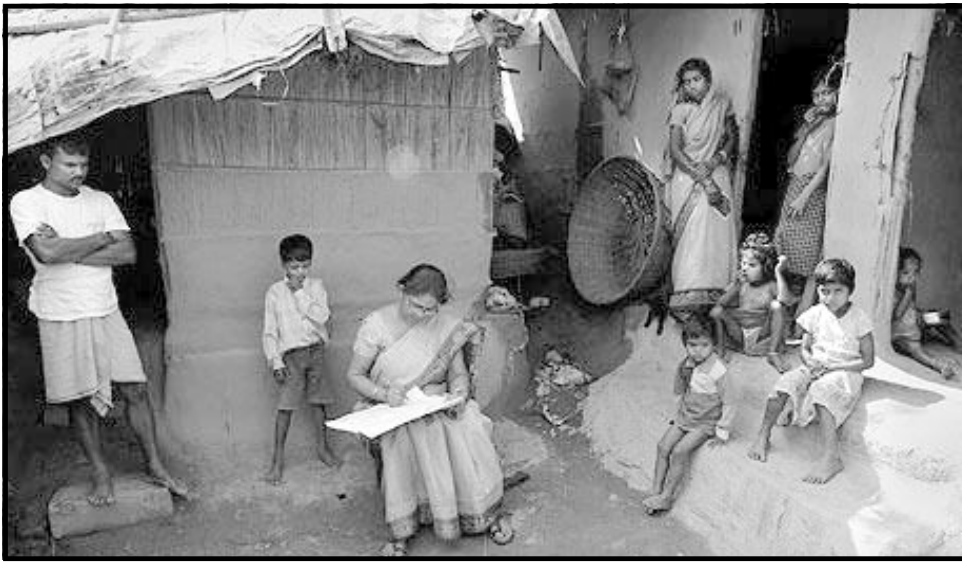
**Caste, Census, Democracy  
Different Perspectives**

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# Editorial

The debate on the caste census has come to a head in the context of the 2011 census. This debate has been going on in academic and political circles over the past twenty years. Two developments in the early 1990s mark the beginning. One, the report of the Mandal Commission in the year 1991; two, the beginning of economic liberalization during the same period. It is possible to read the debate in relation to three spheres: the state, the social and the political.

In the state domain, the liberalization process shifts the emphasis of development and economic growth to the private sphere. Due to this, availability of resources for redistribution in welfare measures come under various constraints: downward pressure on employment and wages, and the informalization of the economy, lead to increased impoverishment. The norm of equality and citizenship that was promised under the development state comes under attack.

In the social domain, the question of identity emerges as the primary focus in the nineties with two markers – one, interrogation of the state on the norms of equality and citizenship, and two, demand for enumerable representation in political bodies, state institutions, educational opportunity and access to public goods. In the initial years, the identity movements were extremely successful because they maintained control over both normative and substantive aspects of their politics. Over a period of time however, the normative dimension loses its strength, resulting in the weakening of the identity movements.

In the political domain, the underprivileged sections who hitherto passively received the state's welfare measures begin to interrogate the state on both the norm of justice and on substantive benefits. The strength of the 'lower' castes expresses itself in a series of

powerful attempts to wrest justice from the administrative sphere to the political sphere. In the wake of the loss of control over resources, the state seeks to restrain the operation of justice to the distribution of public goods merely on quantitative considerations. For the purpose of redistribution on quantitative principles, the state needs to determine target populations through an enumerative sense of justice which remains on purely instrumental grounds. In this context, the debate on the caste census represents two related political strands: one, the democratization of society through the annihilation of caste and the other, a more efficient redistribution of goods by the state. In a genuine political process, these are the poles of a continuum. However, the debate on the caste census today appears to be leaning towards an instrumental sense of justice through the redistribution of goods.

It is our argument that the debate on the caste census should keep alive democratic and normative principles so that it resists falling into the purely enumerative logic of the state. Thus we suggest that the OBC and Dalit political movements and their arguments for the caste census maintain and strengthen their sensitivity to the contradictions within their respective communities.

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Six articles have been selected for this broadsheet on the basis of the different perspectives they bring to the problem.

Durgam Subba Rao's essay is a historical and critical review of the caste census beginning in the nineteenth century. He argues that the caste census is a counter hegemonic process which exposes masked form of upper caste dominance through the ages. He shows how the different kinds of census brought to light different kinds of oppression, and thus constituted forms of democratic social knowledge.

K. Satyanarayana argues that the caste census is resisted by the upper castes for the fear of being exposed in their disproportionate control of resources.

Ravi Varma Kumar takes the Constitutional provisions for recognition of Backward Classes as his basis and argues for a census that counts OBCs.

Sonalde Desai uses social inequality as the basis of her argument and proposes that the caste census should be conducted with a progressive outlook. The author suggests instruments and methods to ensure that the initiative is successful.

V.K Nataraj argues against the caste census on two grounds: one the impossibility of the empirical and conceptual exercise; and two, because it would serve no purpose in the context of the emerging neoliberal state.

Satish Deshpande and Mary John summarize and take issue with the different arguments in the debate. In the short term, they rationalize the caste census and its benefits, and they address the different criticisms of the operational difficulty in conducting the census. In the long term they ponder over the democratic potential of the caste census for Indian society.

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This broadsheet on the caste census intends to bring to the front two important principles for the readers. One, the effective distribution of resources to the people in proportion to their numbers should be freed from the grip of the dominant elite in the state. Two, the democratic potential of the caste census in the long march towards the annihilation of caste should be kept firmly in view.

**G. Krishna Reddy**

*On behalf of the Guest Editorial Group*

Caste is still the foundation of the Indian social fabric and the record of caste is still the best guide to the changes in the various social strata in Indian society.

**Dr. Babasaheb B.R. Ambedkar**

**Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and  
Speeches Vol. 5 pp 6-7**

We welcome letters of comment and criticism in response to this issue. Kindly address your letters to:  
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2-2-18/49, D.D. Colony, Amberpet, Hyderabad 500013. Email letters may be addressed to  
broadsheet@anveshi.org. Responses will be published in the following issue of the broadsheet,  
provided the content is found to be free of abusive language, hate speech and personal allegations.

# Caste Arithmetic Must Be Revealed

■ Durgam Subba Rao

The British colonial rulers, who slowly took over this country over 250 years, exploited it, initially through the business of the Company and later through the collection of land revenue. The rulers saw the rural social structure as an integral part of land relations. They tried to understand rural society through agricultural labour and production. The Sepoy revolt of 1857 had opened their eyes. They quickly understood the impact of land, caste and religion on the people. Intensive research was conducted by the British sociologists and anthropologists on caste restrictions, religious practices, and on the inseparable relation between caste and religion. Much ethnographic research was also conducted.

In the Madras Presidency, volumes like the District Manual, Gazetteers, Population Census Reports, etc., were published two or three times before 1857. These publications were internal documents made by the lower level administrators. But after 1857, in the regions under their (British India) control, the Zilla Manuals and Gazetteers were prepared with special concentration on the land relations and the social systems of those regions. These initial records like those of the country's population, caste, religion, men-women, children-elders etc., were the seeds of the census.

The foremost social scientists who researched caste are William Hunter, Herbert Risley, Edgar Thurston, and J.H. Hutton. These are the British administrators who led the population census/caste census in this country. Under their command, the caste population census took place six times with an interval of ten years, from 1871/72 to 1931, i.e. for six decades. For the first time in 1871/72 the nation wide statistics of caste, traditional practices etc., were collected. During the first two census, i.e. in 1871/72 and 1881 the emphasis was on varna and after that, the population census took place giving importance to jati. As there was no clarity in the varna, especially with the absence of Kshatriya varna in the Southern

states, many castes submitted forms to claim their belonging to the Kshatriya varna. Not only that, in Risley's period (1891, 1901 and 1911) during the caste census, because of the priority accorded to 'caste status' in the census, many castes submitted petitions to enhance their caste status. Violence broke out due to attempts at inter-caste comparison and claims about superior status, and some castes also quarreled with the Brahmin caste for hegemony. Such contradictions of 'quantity' that broke out in those sixty years (1871 to 1931), led finally to the exclusion of caste from the census after 1931 (1941 onwards).

Inclusion of caste in the population census brought about massive changes in the country's politics. The inner character of the Brahmin caste which held political power for a thousand years, and continued social dominance for another two thousand years by hiding caste behind varna and varna behind religion, was unmasked by the caste census. The cunning nature of Brahmanism which 'divided and ruled' the country's population by creating a ladder in the name of caste came to light. This happened, not only because of the caste census but also to a great measure because of the researches in anthropology, sociology, anthropometry, ethnography, philology, indology and linguistics.

After this, caste came forward as the most effective element in the country's politics. 'Caste' became stronger by the day as an alternate name for poverty, suppression, social boycott, superiority, domination, social status and honour. Whether right or wrong, caste became a focal point for the country's politics. It is for this reason that Brahminical sociologists even today accuse the British of creating caste, whereas in fact caste and religious conflicts were used cleverly to continue power and exploitation both by the Brahmin class on one side and by the British on the other side, and both gained equally.

The then census commissioner Herbert Risley considered 'caste' and religion as the two

important factors that controlled civil society. On the other hand, during 1890 itself, with the emergence of Robert Caldwell and Dr. Gustav Oppert's Dravidian language theory, Risley importantly linked caste and race, and used the caste census in research on the Arya and Dravida races, to bring out different aspects such as 'caste status', caste-work/occupation and traditional practices.

Caste population census brought out many issues to light. The most important among these was the Brahmins *unrelenting* hold on the country's social system. During this time itself knowledge about Gautama, Yagnyavalkya, Narada's Dharma Smritis and most importantly Manu's Dharmashastras came into light. Using the Smritis and other laws as the basis, Brahmins held their unrelenting authority and propagated the Brahminical tradition. With the help of the British, they revived Brahminical Hinduism. The collection of information on traditional caste practices helped ethnography and caste history: evolution, status, caste-occupations, caste-purity, purity and impurity, caste neatness, untouchability, endogamy, the main features of caste in social division, official hierarchy, touchability, untouchability, work obligation for some, prohibitions to few, opportunities to others, the absence of the right to choose an occupation, restrictions on marriage and many such aspects, became the central focus of sociological study to a large extent through the caste census.

With gathering of gender (women-men) census, suppression and discrimination of girl children and women came to light. For example in Northern and Western India, because of the low rate of women/girl child population among the upper castes, it came to light that girl child killings are more prevalent among the upper castes. Likewise, the population statistics of outcastes (untouchables, later known as scheduled castes) and Scheduled Tribes came to light. Based on the community population census, through Minto Morley reforms in 1909, special constituencies were created for the Muslims. After that in 1935, Dr. Ambedkar achieved the establishment of special constituencies for the Scheduled Castes. On the other side, with the emergence of the Dravidian language theory and movement, Madras province was established under the leadership of Periyar. With caste becoming a political issue, the non-Brahmin movement in Madras and the Dalit movement in Bombay province took shape simultaneously and with interlinkages under

the leadership of Periyar and Dr. Ambedkar. We cannot say that these are the results of caste population census alone, but we may certainly say that among the other factors that influenced these movements, the caste census was one as well. Caste increased political competition and later became the reason for *political inclusion* in this period (1871-1931) itself. Beside this, the Bahujan movement under the guidance of Mahatma Phule (1848) was another event. The Adi- Dharma movement of Dalits in Punjab and the Namasudra movement in West Bengal (1891) progressed rapidly, but due to the country's partition, those two movements became invisible.

Due to the caste census new castes came into *existence*. For example, by 1922 new castes such as the Adi Andhra and Adi Dravida were revived/ reformed in South India. In the same manner, the Palli caste changed their name as Vanniya caste – Kshatriyas. The occupational toddy tappers changed their names from Shanar to Nadar. Not only this, caste violence took place at many places in South India for entry into Temples and due to the competition with the Brahmins for status.

Caste consciousness and awareness increased tremendously during the period 1900-20 in South and West India especially in the Madras and Bombay provinces. The demand for rights, respect, authority, position and entry into the Temples for the backward and untouchable castes strengthened. The movement to recognize the educational, economic social and political backwardness of non-Brahmins began. The caste census made it evident that Brahmins occupied the lion's share in the fields of education and employment. With this the Justice Party government issued communal GOs in 1921, 1922 and 1926 in the Madras province. Caste debate started in the field of education and employment. Reservations were initiated in the Madras province and before that in the Kolhapur princely state in 1908 (by Chatrapati Sahu Maharaj). On 10<sup>th</sup> December 1926, Sir Pitti Tyagarayasetty and Nayakar released "Non-Brahmin Manifesto".

This caused fury among the Brahmin classes. Hindu Mahasabha demanded that the caste population census should be discontinued. The anxiety that caste consciousness will destroy the concept of "Indian Nationalism" arose among the Brahmin-Baniya classes of the Indian National Congress. This perspective is repeatedly even today in the writings of the followers of the Brahmin sociologist G.S. Ghurye. The transformation of caste awareness and Bahujan theory (through Mahatma Phule-

Periyar- Ambedkar movements) into a competitor to Brahmin Nationalist theory became the main reason for their trembling. When untouchables emerged as Scheduled castes and Adivasis as Scheduled Tribes, in separate identity categories, Gandhi himself entered the stage. He strengthened Hindu religion through Bhagavadgita, in a way that was different from the Hindu extremist positions of Tilak and Savarkar. Using the theories of varnashrama dharma, karma philosophy, Rebirth and inherited occupation, as a honeyed knife, he succeeded in his attempt to bring the backward classes who were half the Indian population, into the Hindu fold. After that the backward classes obtained a religious support for their backwardness. The backward classes have to ask the question, "What did Gandhi and Congress do to the BCs?" In this manner, using the support of Hindu religious philosophy, Gandhi cleverly blocked the manifestation of the united organizations proposed by Mahatma Phule for Shudra (OBC) and Ati-Shudra (SC, ST) castes. On the other side, as early as 1930 attempts were made to Hinduise Dalits through "the Harijan movement and the temple entry movement" so Mahatma Phule's and Dr. Ambedkar's philosophies do not influence the SC and BCs. Reservations were also prevented from benefiting the BCs and a massive conspiracy unfolded to prevent SC and BC unification. In 1939 at the Madras Assembly the Congress leader P. Satyamurthy strongly opposed reservations saying that "the country should not be divided in the name of caste", and demanded the stoppage of the caste census. From different sides, the Brahminical group and the Congress observed the danger of BCs moving out from their clutches, and increased their pressure on the British. With that from 1941 onwards caste census was removed from the population census. Almost after 60 years, the implementation of Mandal Commission report in 1990 brought awareness among OBCs all over India. With that from 1991 onwards, demand for including caste census in population census started and reached its climax by 2001. Now in 2011, in the context of the population census, and the Supreme Court direction, the central government is rethinking the demand of OBC leaders to include the caste census in the population census. It has formed a ministerial committee for this purpose. Maybe the day of including caste census in the population census of 2011 is near.

It is a scientific principle that quantitative transformation will increase power. This

quantitative transformation may lead to a qualitative change that will accelerate BC consciousness. This may hasten the achievement of political power of the unity of depressed Bahujans such as SC, ST, BC, and Minorities on the basis of Mahatma Phule-Periyar-Ambedkar philosophy.

**The account of different castes census percentage of various districts that were merged in Andhra Pradesh (year 1921)**

Upper castes	percentage
Brahman	3.0
Kapu*	15.2
Kamma	4.8
Komati	2.7
Kshatriya	1.2
Velama	3.0
Total	29.9
Scheduled castes	percentage
Madiga	7.3
Mala	9.7
Total	17.0
Others	percentage
Muslims,	
Christians etc	7.0
Total	7.0
Backward castes	percentage
Baliya	3.0
Boya/besta	0.7
Chakali	4.2
Devanga	2.1
Dudekula	0.4
Goundla	2.0
Gavara	0.4
Golla	6.3
Idiga	1.0
Jangam	0.4
Kammara/ Vishwa Brahmana	2.1
Kummari	0.9
Kurma	1.3
Munnurukapu	0.8
Mangali	1.3
Mutrasi	3.3
Sale	2.9
Telaga	5.2
Uppara	0.6
Waddera	1.8
Others	5.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>46.1</b>

SOURCE: Census of India, 1921, and Census of H.E.H. Nizam's Dominion, 1921. Taken from G. Ram Reddy, 'the Politics of Accommodation: Caste, Class and Dominance in Andhra Pradesh', in Francine Frankel and MSA Rao (eds), *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order, Volume I*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, p.269.

Excerpted from *Bahujana Kerataalu* May-June 2010, pp 6-8.

Translated from the Telugu by Kaneez Fathima

# Will India Become a Caste Society if Caste is Counted?

■ K. Satyanarayana

Why is there so much opposition and anxiety among some sections of the Indian elite – particularly among its upper-caste intellectual class – on the question of enumeration of caste in the Census of India 2011? My answer is simple: India would legally become a caste society. The formal recognition of caste as a national category implies that the Indian state is going beyond the constitutional recognition of caste as a category to measure disability (i.e., untouchability, atrocity, and social backwardness). The Indian constitution views caste as a source of disability or discrimination, and laid down a set of clauses to root out these practices of inequality. It assumes that caste is an exception to Indian social life and will fade away. In other words, the constitution conceives the Indian citizen to be a casteless individual and it bars acknowledgment of ascriptive ties. Though the constitution is categorical about eliminating disabilities caused by caste, it is vague about the status of the caste groups in Indian social life. However, the decision to enumerate caste would mean a legal acceptance of caste groups – especially lower caste groups such as Other Backward

Classes (OBC) – as legitimate political actors. This implies that India would legally become a caste society; the Indian elite are shocked by this implication and the larger social transformations that might follow this legal acknowledgment of caste.

The view that Indian society is a caste society is not a new perception. The Dalit and other anti-caste social movements asserted the centrality of caste in Indian society. It was Phule and Ambedkar, the two prominent voices in the colonial period, who argued that caste determines status, wealth, knowledge, and power in Indian society. It was again in the post-emergency period, that a new generation of dalit writers, critics, scholars, and activists not only reiterated that India is a caste society but also articulated a new notion of caste. They critiqued and rejected the elite view of caste as a singular entity that causes divisions in society and advanced a new concept of caste as a source of everyday experience of violence as well as an identity for mobilization. In fact, the tremendous pressure to recognize caste as a national category begins with the rise of the contemporary Dalit movement in the context of mass killings of Dalits in the 1970s and 1980s. In the context of

atrocities on Dalits, the Congress Government enacted the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. This Act signaled an important change in the legal view of caste. While the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955 recognized “untouchability” – not caste – as a cause of disability, the SC/ST Act, 1989 identified “caste” as a cause of atrocity, and caste related atrocities as national crimes. The Supreme Court also came under public pressure during the Mandal agitation during the period of 1991 to 1993, and accorded legal sanction to the category of caste as a national entity (Indra Sawhney vs. Union of India, 1992). Therefore, the demand for enumerating caste in the Census 2011 is a demand of the Dalits and the OBCs who are consolidated as social groups and operate as a force in contemporary society.

The Indian elite are defending the idea of India as a homogeneous entity and neutral space beyond ascriptive identities. They represent themselves as a special group of Indian citizens (“meri Jaati Hindustani”). This group is a small minority of English-educated urban elite – mostly upper caste intellectuals and some politicians – who view caste as divisive and evil. This group includes yet another small section of liberal and left-oriented intellectuals who advance the view that enumeration of caste in the Census will prevent a meaningful and complete transformation of India as a democratic society. They view the debate on caste only as an issue relating to reservations or other policy issues related to SC/ST/OBCs. Both of these sections of the elite represent themselves as casteless people (i.e., true Indians) and stigmatize Dalits and OBCs

## CHRONOLOGY OF CENSUS IN INDIA

Pre-Independence Period	1866 Census of Calcutta City
1824 Census of Town of Allahabad	1872 Census of House Registrar
1827-28 Census of City of Banaras	1881 1 <sup>st</sup> Modern synchronous Census of entire British India except Kashmir
1827-28 Complete Census of City of Dacca	1891 2 <sup>nd</sup> Census
1836-37 Census of Fort St. George Presidency	1901 3 <sup>rd</sup> Census- Exhaustive analysis of Caste-occupations were recorded
1849 Local quinquennial returns of population	1911 4 <sup>th</sup> Census- Census on Christians
1851-52	1921 5 <sup>th</sup> Census- Caste, Tribe or Race information collected
1856-57 Periodical stock taking of people in Madras Presidency	1931 6 <sup>th</sup> Census- Depressed Classes, Language, Religion and Age was ascertained
1861-62	1941 7 <sup>th</sup> Census- on Literacy
1866- 67	Post independence period
1852 and 1865 Census of North Western Province	1951 8 <sup>th</sup> Census- Population was estimated
1867 Census of Central Province	1961 9 <sup>th</sup> Census-Ethnographic Survey
1867 Census of Berar	1971 10 <sup>th</sup> Census-Rural and Urban
1855 and 1868 Census of Punjab territory	1981 11 <sup>th</sup> Census-Basic amenities
1869 Census of Oudh	1991 12 <sup>th</sup> Census- Rural and urban, religion and mother tongue
1863 Census of Madras City	2001 13 <sup>th</sup> Census- Name of the Caste and Tribe, and infrastructure facilities
1864 Census of Bombay City	2011 14 <sup>th</sup> Census

as caste people. They never concede that the recognition of different castes and therefore, the existence of different social groups in the country is an important decision in and of itself.

One must take note of the Dalit critique of the dominant conceptions of caste. The literary and activist writings and academic scholarship of Dalits underscore the view that caste is a source of everyday discrimination, brutal forms of violence, dehumanization, and inequality. This scholarship, drawing on experience, simultaneously brings to light the role of caste as a marker of privilege, caste arrogance, social worth, and power, and dismantles the view that secular/modern Indian citizens are casteless. It also challenges the dominant singular view of caste as only an instrument of social divisions and also the perception that caste identity is only an identity of the lower castes. To the surprise of academic pundits, caste is mobilized as an identity of assertion in the public sphere as well as in the electoral domain. These innovative ways of invoking caste raise the question of conceptualizing caste as a critical concept and as a key category to comprehend and assess social change in India.

The Indian Census is a key domain of representing Indian identity. The Central Government claims that the Indian Census provides comprehensive demographic and socio-economic data and is also the "only source of primary data at village, town, and

ward levels." This data is the basis for delimitation/reservation of constituencies at the levels of Parliament, Assembly, Panchayats, and other Local Bodies. However, this significant data contains no record of caste since 1931. The Census categories of population groups include only religious communities, language groups, SC and ST population, and male-female ratio; caste is only recorded as an exception which is indicated by the SCs and STs. The other sections of the people have no record of caste; the Indian Census remained truly "Indian."

Given the symbolic and political significance of a national census and lack of data on caste, a demand for inclusion of caste was raised in 2001. The then National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government rejected this demand. This time, the oppressed caste groups are determined to challenge the homogeneous and monolithic view of India in our Census and argue for recognition of the existence of diverse social groups in India. The Census constructs aggregate national categories and therefore, the production of caste as an aggregate category and the redefinition of India as a caste society are politically significant. The Dalit and other oppressed caste groups realized the importance of engaging with the institutions of a modern liberal democracy like India and therefore, the demand for caste census is a strategic position. They would certainly welcome a revolution, a land distribution program, or even a new paradigm of enumeration. But they have no luxury to wait for these larger social transformation projects nor do they have the power to completely

restructure this whole enumeration process right now.

The enumeration of "the caste of each member of the household" – not only OBCs – in the Census would make India a caste society and open up a number of new questions. The Census may provide data to make visible the privileged status of certain caste groups and their numbers. The comprehensive caste data may activate demands for increasing the percentage of reservation to each category of the SCs, STs and the OBCs, and the reservation percentage – currently at a ceiling of only 50 percent – may be challenged. The new caste groups may demand more than reservations and welfare schemes and raise fresh questions of redistribution of land, wealth, and power. There may be many Mayawatis who master the game of numbers and change the national election scene completely. The most significant process that the caste census would churn out is the de-essentialization and politicization of caste through a meaningful public debate beyond the academic domain. This process may involve caste tensions, the rise of new ruling classes (including the OBCs), and the total displacement of the existing ruling sections of the Indian elite. This process of democratization will be full of contradictions and surprises; the Indian elite are not yet ready to experience this transformation.

**Excerpted from India in Transition (online), 2nd August, 2010. Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania.**  
Link: [casi.sas.upenn.edu/lit/satyanarayana.%27?page=3](http://casi.sas.upenn.edu/lit/satyanarayana.%27?page=3)

### **BACKWARD CLASS COMMISSIONS IN VARIOUS STATES**

Sl.No	Name of the State	Year	Committee/Commission				
1.	Andhra Pradesh	1968	Manohar Pershad Commission	7.	Karnataka	1918	Sir L.C. Miller Committee
		1975	Veerappa Committee			1961	Nagan Gowda Committee
		1982	Murlidhar Rao Commission			1975	Havanur Commission
						1985	Venkataswamy Commission
2.	Bihar	1951	Govt of Bihar	8.	Kerala	1961	Viswanathan Committee
		1971	Mungari Lal Commission			1965	G. Kumara Pillai Commission
		1978	Karpoori Tahkur Commission			1970	M.P. Damodaran Commission
3.	Gujarat	1972	A.R. Bakshi Commission	9.	Madhya Pradesh	1980	Ramjee Mahajan Commission
		1981	C.V. Rane Commission			1984	Govt. of M.P
		1987	R.C. Mankad Commission			1961	B.D. Deshmukh Committee
4.	Haryana	1991	Gurnam Singh Commission	10.	Maharashtra	1951	Govt of Punjab
5.	Himachal Pradesh	1951	Govt. of H.P	11.	Punjab	1965	Brish Bhan Committee
		1970	Govt. of H.P			1975	Harcharan Sigh Commission
		1993	Govt. of H.P			1885	Provincial Govt.
6.	Jammu & Kashmir	1967	P.B. Gajendragadkar Commission	12.	Tamil Nadu	1927	Communal Government Order of 1927
		1969	J.N. Wazir Committee			1969	A. N. Sattanathan Commission
		1976	A.S. Anand Committee			1982	J. A. Ambashankar Commission
13.	Uttar Pradesh	1975	Chhedi Lal Sathi Commission				

# Caste Enumeration in Census Constitutional Imperative

■ Ravi Varma Kumar

The last five decennial censuses have eschewed enumeration of caste particulars. The three national commissions and scores of state commissions for backward classes (BC) have found these census data useless in identification of BC. Every time census is taken, this vital data is suppressed rendering the decennial census useless to the welfare of 70 to 80 per cent of the population of BC. This necessitates a review of the practice of excluding caste details in the census.

The word caste could be used in a concrete or in an abstract sense. In the concrete sense, 'caste' means a group of persons or families. In the abstract sense, caste means status or position with occupation (Havanur 1975). For census enumeration caste in the concrete sense is relevant.

[...]

India is not only a union of states, it is also a union of castes, tribes and communities. The Constitution of India has recognized and continued the personal laws of castes communities or tribes that were in force at the time the Constitution was adopted. We also have matriarchal and patriarchal systems. Even the communities which believe in equality by birth, unlike the graded caste system, have come to be divided on lines comparable to the caste divisions. In India, the caste system represents not only a social division, but also a political and occupational division of the society. Therefore, for planning and development, collection of details about castes and tribes in the country is a must. This position was recognized by the government of India in the household schedule pertaining to the social demographic study of villages.

[...]

Babasaheb Ambedkar lamented in his classic work 'Who Were the Shudras',

If people have no idea of the magnitude of the problem (of the shudras) it is because they have not cared to know what the population of the shudras is. Unfortunately, the census does not show their population separately. But there is

not doubt that excluding the untouchables, the shudras form 75 to 80 per cent of the population of Hindus (Ambedkar 1946:9)

## Constitutional Provisions

Right from the first national commission, appointed in 1953, all the backward classes commissions appointed for the purpose of identifying the BC have experienced genuine difficulty for want of caste particulars in the census figures. The commissions' reports have devoted chapter after chapter to this question. All the commissions have strongly recommended collection of this data in the census. These recommendations are not considered till this day but are deliberately suppressed [Kalelkar 1956; Havanur 1975; Mandal 1980]

Under Article 15(4) of the Constitution special provisions can be made for the advancement of socially and educationally BC. It is under this provision that reservations are provided in professional courses to the BC. In order to identify these BC it is important to first ascertain the population of a caste in each state to compare their educational level with the state average. The census should provide BCs as percentages of population, literates, English literates, graduates, doctors, engineers, other professionals and government servants. These percentages can be obtained only if the population figures are available along with the above data. Without this data the social and educational level of a caste cannot be compared with the state's average in order to identify whether a caste or a tribe is backward.

Likewise, under article 16(4) of the Constitution, reservation is provided to BC in state services only if such BC are not adequately represented in the state's services. Adequacy means representation in state's services in proportion to the population of that caste. For this purpose also collection of caste particulars in the census is essential. It is needless to point out here that for want of caste population figures Backward Classes Commissions have resorted to other methods

to ascertain the population figures and such exercises have often resulted in the judiciary finding fault with the methodology and invalidating the classification. One example is the Ramakrishna Singh case (Mysore High Court decision reported in AIR 1960 Mys 338) which lead to the appointment of Nagana Gowda Committee.

Almost all the commissions which have identified the BC and prepared lists have recommended that their lists should be periodically revised with a view to exclude from such lists those classes which have ceased to be backward or for including in such lists new BC. The Supreme Court has also directed such periodical revision to be undertaken. With this object the Supreme Court has directed establishment of permanent commissions for BC (Indira Sawhney v Union of India 1992 SCC(L and S) Supp.1)

[...]

In order to carry out the aforesaid revision of the lists, comprehensive data about each caste included in the list of BC must be secured. Such data should reflect the population of each caste, educational attainment in each caste and the representation secured by members of such castes in the services of the state. This data can be obtained on a national scale only through the decennial census. Without such data, it is impossible to delete any caste from the list of BC which has ceased to be a BC.

Article 81 of the Constitution provides for determining composition of the Lok Sabha. It has to be done taking into consideration the ratio between number of seats allotted to each state and the population of that state. Article 82 of the Constitution mandates readjustment and allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha to the states. Both these exercises and the delimitation of constituencies will have to be made on the basis of population figures as ascertained at the preceding census whenever decennial census and figures are published. Similar provisions are also made for state legislative assemblies. However, delimitation of constituencies and all other exercises under the aforesaid provisos were frozen by the 42<sup>nd</sup> amendment to the Constitution which had postponed such exercise until the relevant figures for the first census taken after the year 2001 are published. Now after 25 years the delimitation of constituencies, composition of the Lok Sabha and allotment of seats to each state, reservation of seats in favour of SC and ST will be undertaken. Further, in view of the pending

demand for reservation of seats in favour of women and in favour of BC women, the census data of 2001 census will be important.

From this point of view also it is of utmost importance that the opportunity is not lost to collect caste particulars during the present census. Indeed non-collection of caste data would virtually shut the door against reservation in favour of BC in constituencies reserved for women.

Under Article 243D of the Constitution there is reservation in favour of BC in panchayats. Similarly, under Article 243T such reservation has to be provided in municipalities, though without adequate data about the population of BC in each constituency. The reservation would be arbitrary and may even become a case of gerrymandering. The Supreme Court has already approved collection of population data on BC through a survey made by the state government and such a survey is not unconstitutional (*Anugraha Narain Singh vs State of UP*, judgement of the Supreme Court reported in (1996) 6 SCC 303).

In these circumstances it is of national importance that caste data is collected in the census of 2001. The identification of BC, SC and ST and reservation of constituencies for BC women is entirely dependent on this enumeration.

#### Objections and Answers

There is a vigorous campaign against collection of caste particulars in the census. The principal ground for opposition is that it will increase casteism in the society. This is a baseless apprehension. Excluding caste particulars over the last 50 years has not brought about any transformation of society into a casteless society much less has the society become more cosmopolitan than it was 50 years ago. On the other hand not only casteism but also

communalism has taken hold of Indian society and Indian polity over the period.

One of the apprehensions repeatedly aired is that caste enumeration in the census spur unexpected demands on the basis of caste population. A question to be asked here is, who is afraid of such a demand. It is only a caste which has hitherto held a monopoly of national wealth and other resources including education and services, that is afraid of such demands being raised. Indeed it is with the specific object of ending the monopoly of any caste over the country's resources that there is a necessity to collect caste particulars in the census. Apprehensions raised to the contrary are necessarily by those vested interests who have hitherto held a monopoly over educational opportunities and the services of the state and want it to continue.

The Constitution prohibits the state from discriminating on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, descent, language and residence. One argument goes that it is because of this prohibition that caste enumeration in the census is impossible by virtue of prohibition imposed under Articles 15,16 and 29(2) of the Constitution. This assertion has been convincingly met by the Havanur Commission:

It is to be noted that Articles 15,16 and 29(2) prohibit the state from making discrimination against any citizen on grounds not only of caste, but also religion, race, sex, place of birth, descent, residence and language... The logic or the reason that is applied in the abolition of caste particulars would also have been applied in matters relating to religion, race, sex, place of birth, descent and language....Is it not discriminatory against Hindu castes if particulars of

castes are not enumerated?  
[Havanur 1975-334]

Though the census operations have not collected caste particulars over the last 50 years in respect of all the castes, they continue to collect caste particulars in respect of all the tribes and castes which are scheduled under Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution. In Karnataka alone there are 101 castes listed as Scheduled Castes and 49 tribes/castes listed as Scheduled Tribes. For collection of demographic figures uniform parameters are required to be applied to all castes and tribes. If caste is anathema for a census of Hindu castes it is so even for SC and ST. No such discrimination is permissible in collection of census data. It is therefore clear that non-collection of caste particulars in respect of Hindu castes and tribes while collecting such particulars in respect of SC and ST is a clear act of discrimination violating the guarantee of equality under Articles 14, 15 and 16 of the Constitution.

Organization and promotion of an oppressor or exploiting caste is definitely a naked act of casteism and requires to be condemned by every right-thinking person and the social scientists are right in condemning it. But when the oppressed and exploited castes organise themselves it is a legitimate activity like any trade union activity. They also have the right to demand through census a proper head count of all oppressors and all those exploited.

[...]

[Paper originally presented at the seminar at University of Mysore, jointly organized by Madras Institute of Development Studies and Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bangalore on July 21-22, 2000]

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#### NATIONAL LEVEL COMMISSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

##### 1953 *First Backward Classes Commission called Kaka Kalelkar Commission*

- Identified 2399 Backward Castes or Communities out of these 837 were classified as Most Backward
- Treated all women class as backward
- Reservation of 25% for OBCs in Class-I; 33.3% in Class-II; 40% in Class-III; and 40% in Class-IV
- Undertaking caste-wise enumeration of population in 1961
- Census operation should be carried out on various topics of sociological importance
- Census Offices must have Ethnologists and sociologists along with economists
- Census slips should carry 'caste' in separate column
- Ministry for the advancement of Backward Classes

##### 1978 *Second Backward Classes Commission or B.P.Mandal Commission*

- 27% reservation for OBCs
- Educational Concessions
- Financial assistance to obtain vocational training
- Financial Cooperative societies
- Progressive Land Legislation
- Backward Classes Development Corporations at the Central and State level
- Central Assistance for the implementation of measures to OBCs



# Caste and Census: A Forward Looking Strategy

■ Sonalde Desai

[...]

Opponents of inclusion of caste in the census argue that for a society which seeks to abolish caste-based inequalities, a census that inquires about caste identities is a retrogressive step since it is more likely to solidify caste-based divisions than to obliterate it. Following Benedict Anderson's argument that censuses played an important role in creation of imagined communities that transcend face-to-face associations (Anderson 1983), many scholars have argued persuasively that colonial censuses created caste as enumerated communities (Das 2003) and solidified hitherto fluid identities (Dirks 2001). Resistance to this reification of social difference often emerges in the form of reluctance to collect caste data. In many ways, this reluctance is similar to that observed in collection of racial statistics in other cultures (Zuberi 2001).

While there is some justification to this argument, we are now living with the aftermath of these political processes. In modern India, vast quantities of research have documented caste-based inequalities in many dimensions of well-being, including income, education, health and access to employment (Govinda 2002; Thorat and Newman 2009; Desai et al 2010; Deshpande 2000). If these inequalities are not simply imagined but reflect social processes that deserve public policy attention, then incorporating questions about caste in census is imperative. However, it is easier to suggest that caste be counted (eg, the EPW editorial of 22 May 2010), than to devise an accounting framework. Much of the difficulty emerges from lack of clarification regarding the purpose of this accounting.

## Why Collect Caste Data?

The most recent demand for a count of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) has come from a powerful OBC lobby that hopes for an increase in OBC reservations if the count turns out to be higher than expected. The 27% reservation for OBC is based on the estimate by the Mandal Commission that OBCs form about 52% of the population and since all OBC families are not poor or "backward", a quota limit set at about half the estimated population

makes sense. However, the Mandal Commission's claim of 52% of the population as being OBC, was based on somewhat flimsy empirical evidence and if the Census 2011 identifies more than 52% of the population as being OBC, this would bolster the claims for higher representation. Successive rounds of National Sample Survey (NSS) have documented the number of individuals identifying themselves as OBC at 36% in 1999-2000 and at 41% in 2004-05. Hence it is unlikely that the actual count will exceed 52%. However there exist other, less partisan, arguments for a caste census. Social background continues to define privilege and lack thereof in Indian society resulting in demands for positive discrimination from marginalized groups. Unfortunately, these demands are continually stymied by lack of data. What data exist from sample surveys continue to document disparities in education, income and standards of living between different socio-religious communities. The India Human Development Survey (IHDS), documents substantial disparities in different markers of human development across different social groups. This nationally representative survey of 41,554 households was organized by researchers from National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and University of Maryland and was carried out in 2004-05.

The IHDS is not unique in documenting these disparities. A vast number of studies based on NSS, National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and other sample surveys have documented inequalities between scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), OBCs and forward castes. However, utilization of survey statistics is by no means adequate for evidence-based policy design. Survey data suffer from two shortcomings. First, even in large surveys such as the NSS, sample sizes get extremely small once we begin to compare groups on several dimensions of disadvantage. For example, if we wanted to address the question of whether Christian dalits are disadvantaged like other dalits or whether they are closer to the general Christian population, this question cannot be easily answered due to the small number of Christian dalits in various surveys. Any

advocacy for affirmative action for Muslim OBCs also suffers from this constraint. The only sensible way of collecting data for these smaller communities is to rely on a nationwide census.

Second, advocacy for refining reservations is even more affected by lack of recent data. Castes have been notified as belonging to SC, ST or OBC categories largely (although not solely) based on outdated data from the 1931 Census. This is particularly true for castes identified as SC, ST or OBC in the early years of reservations. Since a caste, once notified rarely seems to lose this status, their subsequent economic prosperity, if any, remains unnoticed. Where disadvantage is associated with social distance and discrimination, such as with dalits or adivasis, this is not particularly relevant. Even middle class dalits and adivasis continue to suffer from disadvantages and social exclusion (Desai and Kulkarni 2008; Navsarjan Trust and RFK Center 2010). However, where disadvantages are associated with historical exclusion from access to education or productive resources rather than active discrimination, as with some of the OBC communities like the jats, the situation is more fluid. Some OBC communities may continue to be economically disadvantaged; others may be on par with the forward castes. Under these situations, obtaining accurate data for better targeting of benefits is crucial.

If inappropriate inclusion of some castes in reserved category is a problem, exclusion of others from benefits is also problematic. A substantial proportion of forward caste families also suffer from socio-economic disadvantages. Whether these disadvantages reflect social class or are due to some castes being particularly disadvantaged cannot be ascertained without better data. Only accurate data reflecting modern Indian reality would allow us to answer the question of whether there is greater variation within or between castes on various dimensions of material disadvantages. If there were greater variation across castes, this would bolster claims for caste-based affirmative action and reclassification.

[...]

## What would it take ?

If we were to design a full caste census, what would it look like? Hitherto, the census approach has been to take the official list of castes and tribes falling under the SC and ST categories and confirm with the respondents whether they belong to one of these. An alternative to this highly structured approach is a fully flexible approach in which the households are asked to provide their caste

identification, enumerators would write it down fully and then classify it at the data entry phase. Both of these are extremely difficult in practice. For a structured approach we must start with a list of castes and as of now no such list exists for the whole population. A flexible approach has a potential for turning into a classification nightmare...

Some of these issues were debated at length in working groups set up in preparation for the 2001 census but their deliberations were ignored subsequently. One possible strategy for a caste census may be to adapt the strategy used for the creation of industrial and occupational classification systems. The occupational classification system provides an interesting illustration. In 2004, a new system of National Classification of Occupations (NCO-04) was developed which contains the following hierarchical structure: Division (10), Subdivision (30), Group (116), Family (439), Occupation (2,945).

Under this schema, a bidi furnace operator would be classified with a code 7.416.45, where the major division is seven (craft and related workers), subdivision is 74 (craft and related workers excluding metal workers, building workers and textile and printing workers), group is 741 (food processing and related workers), family is 7,416 (tobacco preparers), and occupation is 7,416.45 (bidi furnace operator). However, if the respondent were to say that he engages in some highly specialized task within bidi preparation that is not included in the list (for example, counting and making bidi bundles), he could be classified as 7.416.90, tobacco worker not elsewhere classified. This classification scheme both provides ease of classification when data are being collected and ease of analysis so that we may aggregate or disaggregate data depending upon the level of detail desired.

What would it take to come up with such fine-grained classification system for caste enumeration? Once again, the processes through which occupational and industrial systems are developed offer some insights. A possible analogous process might be the following:

- Obtain a list of jatis residing through the length and breadth of India. This could be done in surveys such as the NSS, NFHS as well as other unrelated surveys sponsored by the government. This should be the last question in any survey so as not to distort other responses and would simply provide one line for writing down the full caste name.
- This list should be augmented using various other sources where caste data are available such as marriage advertisements, lists of caste associations and so on. The list can be combined with the caste list from the 1931 census to create a superset.
- This broad list can be taken by sociologists and anthropologists to come up with a classification schema following the occupational classification approach outlined above with sub-castes grouped within broader castes and allowing space for the possibility that the enumerator may encounter a caste for which no predefined category is specified.
- In creation of the caste classification system two issues should be kept in mind. First, caste system should be treated independently from religion allowing for the possibility that we will collect sufficient information to identify Muslim OBCs (or Christian Brahmins). Second, place of residence should be recorded to allow for a creation of district specific caste list.
- This caste classification list should be sorted by district so that the enumerators can be given

two lists. One list containing about 100 castes most frequently found in each district, and a second list containing all castes found throughout India. Given the geographic clustering of castes and tribes in various regions of India, it seems likely that in about 80% of the cases, respondents would only need to refer to the district specific list of castes and tribes. For example, Garasias will only rarely be found in West Bengal but frequently in Gujarat and Rajasthan.

- Once this classification list is developed it should be tested by incorporation in large nation wide sample surveys.
- This can then be incorporated in the 2021 Census.

As we look at the complexity of creating a full list of jatis and subjatis and including it in an enumeration system, it is clear that is unlikely that at this late date any data collection system can be designed for its incorporation in the 2011 Census that could do justice to the complexity of Indian social organisation and would meet the policy demands for data. However, unless we start thinking about this now, when the national attention is centred on the importance of caste data, it is unlikely that we will be ready even by 2021. If we start now, it is not unrealistic that we may be able to obtain caste information in 2021, 90 years after the 1931 Census when caste data were last collected. Fortunately, by 2021 technological advances will allow each enumerator to carry a handheld device or Personal Digital Assistant with her to avoid her having to flip through pages and pages of caste list to find a classification code for the Dasha Shrimali Modh Banik respondent she is likely to encounter in Surat but not in Shillong.

**Excerpted from EPW July 17, 2010 Vol XLV, No.29 pp 10-13**

The Hindu social order, based on 'Varna' concept claims its divine origin, is hierarchically structured like Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras in descending order. With passage of time one more Fifth caste/category called 'Panchamas' emerged whose nomenclature has changed from epoch to epoch as 'Mlechha', 'Atishudras', 'Avarnas', 'Antyajias', 'Chandalas'. 'Nishads', 'Paraiyah', etc.

The last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century gave a new awakening among the 'Atishudras' about their socio-political conditions. To improve their socio-economic conditions, through various Associations they challenged the oppressive social arrangement and demanded civic and political rights to lead life of human dignity and self-respect.

At the time of Census from the last decades of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the 'Atishudras' castes asked for change in their caste names. Chandals of Bengal demanded that they wanted to register as 'Namasudras'. The 'Paraiyahs' of Madras Presidency sought to be called as 'Adi-Dravida', 'Adi-Andhra', and 'Adi-Kannataka'. The 'Chamars', 'Ramdasias', 'Raidasias' of Northern Provinces as 'Adi-Dharmi', and 'Adi-Hindu' ect.

The Colonial Government considered them to find out a common term based on their commonness of their socio-economic conditions and the very root thereof i.e. 'Untouchability' or 'Untouchables'. And in this search expressions like 'Depressed Classes', 'Suppressed Classes' or 'Backward Classes' were widespread circulation in British India and Princely States.

**Harijan:**

The expression 'Harijan' or 'Gods People' first used by the poet saint of Gujarat Narsinh Mehta and that was adopted by Mahatma Gandhi during the 1930's. However, because of history of the origin of the term 'Harijan' its use is rejected by the Scheduled Castes. In the Constitutional and Legal terminology the term doesn't find any place. Hence Government of India issued necessary circulars to all concerned not to use the term 'Harijan' in official documents and dealings.

*Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Circular Dated, 10<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1982.*

# Why the Census should Not Count Caste

■ V.K. Nataraj

This is a brief response to the article on caste enumeration by Satish Deshpande and Mary E John (SD-MJ) ("The Politics of Not Counting Caste") and the EPW editorial ("Why We Must Count Caste", 22 May). Both make out a strong case for caste enumeration.

The principal focus here is on what numbers can achieve and whether they can help policy formulation and implementation.

The demand for numerical certainty (assuming that it is feasible, a highly doubtful prospect to which we shall return later) should be appraised against the background of recent developments in the economy and polity. Today, what we witness is a steady withdrawal of the State from several spheres of development. A major consequence is that the State has ceased to be the leading employer, a status which it enjoyed until about two decades ago. Therefore little purpose will be served by collecting the numbers of the "socially and educational backward classes of citizens" in the language of Article 15(4) of the Constitution or "backward class of citizens which in the opinion of the state is not adequately represented in the services under the state" (Article 16(4)).

The proposed numerical exercise would have had justification in the heyday of the State as the lead player in the field of employment and education. In both areas the state has willingly and readily withdrawn from this role. In fact, this dilution in the State's role is one of the pivotal points of the economic reforms which officially commenced in the early 1990s.

One cannot resist making the point that the proponents of the enumeration in the 2011 Census do not provide even a sample list of the

programmes that are specifically aimed at the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Further, we need to remember that there is a well argued case for universalizing some important programmes aimed at the poor such as the Public Distribution System. It is therefore difficult to see how numbers can contribute to policy formulation and/or to improve implementation.

There was as a time when in the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, in particular, positive discrimination (reservations in common usage) had a major role to play in making available opportunities to the OBCs specially in engineering, medicine and a few other similar courses. However, with the enormous increase in the number of colleges offering these courses there is almost a glut of seats and instances of places going unoccupied are not rare. In respect of two areas where the State was in the lead, and for some decades virtually the only player, its place is getting marginalized. In addition, given the orientation of policy in recent times the thrust is towards more privatization. It is therefore reasonable to voice strong doubts in this context about the claim that determining the numbers of the OBCs will help formulation of government policy.

The EPW editorial goes further and asserts that the knowledge of numbers of every caste in the country will "deessentialise" caste. While no one should doubt the wisdom of "deessentialising" a blot on our social landscape the question is whether a census enumeration will achieve this. A related point is that if members of a caste were to be enumerated would it universalize the caste equation instead of restricting it to the lower castes. Again, the aim is laudable but there are

difficulties which are rather more intricate than what are airily dismissed as "logistical". In the first place there appears to be an assumption that the caste structure is a static, unchanging behemoth which is actually far from the truth. Distinguished sociologists have drawn attention to the manner in which changes take place within caste. This is well documented and there is no need to dwell on it here. Of more relevance to our present concerns are two equally important issues.

The first is that it is the difficulty in determining who the OBCs are that has led to the vast mass of litigation on positive discrimination. There is comparatively little litigation seeking implementation of positive discrimination but an enormous amount questioning the composition of the OBCs list and the quantum of reservation. That being the case it is hard to discern how the population of an indeterminate category can be ascertained through a headcount. An additional complexity flows from another source. Can it be assumed that respondents know whether they belong to the OBCs? The question is not as inane as it may appear. In states like Karnataka many applicants for engineering/medical education do not mention the name of their caste fearing that they may attract the "creamy layer" barrier. With the threshold for the creamy layer being quite high (and there is a recommendation in Karnataka that it should be raised further) this problem will confront several respondents as well as enumerators. There is a likelihood of respondents not knowing whether they belong to the OBCs.

However, even more questionable is the unstated assumption behind the pro-enumeration lobby, namely, that the OBCs as a group is one homogeneous entity. This is most certainly not true. As urged above, much of the difficulty in implementing reservations stems from determining who constitute the OBC. In addition, there are important internecine wars among them.

Taking Karnataka again as an example, the present struggle is between the dominant castes such as the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, on the one hand, and the groups in competition with them such as the Kurubas, on the other, who have all the makings of an emerging dominant caste. The pro-enumeration argument fails to recognize this and would

## Scheduled Castes:

The Provincial Government of Bengal proposed the nomenclature the 'Scheduled Castes' in place of 'Depressed Classes'. Thus the meaning of the expression 'Scheduled Castes' was given in the First Schedule, Chapter 2 Section 26 of the Government of India Act 1935.

The Government issued the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order 1936 listing out therein the Castes and Groups which were to be deemed as 'Scheduled Castes' for the purpose of Government of India Act, 1935. The term 'Scheduled Castes' was taken literally connotes nothing more than the two words convey independently, i.e 'Scheduled Castes or the Castes puts under a 'Schedule'.

Article 303 of the Constitution of India says:

"Scheduled Castes means such castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within such castes, races or tribes as are deemed under Article 300A of this Constitution to be the Scheduled Castes for the purpose of this Constitution".

have us believe that the backward classes are one group. In this scenario it is not improbable that there may well be false information furnished. SD-MJ answer this with the argument that the census is there to record what respondents state, its purpose is not to discover the "truth" about caste. And they go further and urge us to accept the view that respondents have no incentive to furnish false information since the census record does not entitle them to any benefit. This, however, misses a point of great relevance.

Caste enumeration is advocated by political parties and some social groups so as to bolster their claim of the support of large numbers in their camp. That this motivation is undisclosed should cause no surprise, but that it is ignored should. The demand for enumeration is largely and powerfully voiced by the intermediate castes and especially by those which are now on the way to establishing claims to dominant status. The protection provided by large numbers will not apply when political/social groups canvass among their folk to return themselves under a particular nomenclature. A recent example from Karnataka illustrates this. The matter concerns a caste called Sadar which itself is divided into subgroups. It so happens that within the dominant caste of Lingayats there is a sub-sect called Sadar. Some officials while issuing certificates of backwardness, most probably deliberately, treated the two as synonymous. There was expectedly a furore and the mistake rectified. This is brought in here only to make the point that census enumerators confronted with this or a similar

situation will record what they are told but the result may be an inaccurate reflection of the true picture. And it would not do to get over this by arguing that we are only concerned with what respondents state.

Amidst all this what about the fate of the numerically very small caste groups? In a democratic system, at least the way our electoral battles are fought, numbers are of immense importance. Given this one wonders what will happen to castes which are very small in number. The first Karnataka Backward Classes Commission with L G Havanur as chairman estimated that there were 88 castes with a population of less than 0.01% of the state population and 347 whose population could not be ascertained. (Needless to state these estimates are subject to error.) If such numbers receive affirmation in a census enumeration, their position will in all likelihood get further marginalized. It is not unlikely that attempts may be made to incorporate them into larger caste groups with which they share similarities. This would have the effect diluting the very essence of diversity which caste enumeration is intended to capture.

Proponents of enumeration believe that enumeration by bringing caste out into the open will help us break with the "caste blindness that the Indian state has followed since independence" (SD-MJ). And after this comes the assertion that the "notion of caste blindness combined the formal abolition of caste in the Constitution with what amounted to a ban on public discussion of caste". The

first surprise is the statement that the Constitution abolishes caste and equally so the argument that there was a virtual ban on public discussion. Hardly any proof is available in support of either assertion.

The one point on which the authors are perhaps right is in the argument that the upper castes generally like to believe that they have somehow outgrown the institution, but here again there is an obvious conundrum which is missed. Caste is freely and increasingly used for political purposes and the dominant and other intermediate castes as also the so-called upper castes are not averse to this. The problem in short stems from "misplaced aggregation" of castes into a supposed homogeneous group.

Lest what has been urged so far be taken as a denial of the importance of caste it needs to be stated that caste is important and recognition of its newer forms necessary for many purposes. It is just that a one-shot question put by untrained enumerators (untrained to spot caste nuances) is not the way to go about it.

The Madras Institute of Development Studies conducted a seminar on this issue in 2000 (with the active participation and assistance of the University of Mysore, the Institute of Social and Economic Change and the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore) at which there was almost a consensus that carefully designed ethnographic studies conducted by an independent agency was the best way forward.

Excerpted from *EPW* July 31, 2010,  
Volume XLV No.31 pp 79-80

**'Depressed Classes':** The term 'Depressed Classes' did not figure in the Census Reports of 1901 and 1911. However, the definition of the term was given by the Government of India in one of its directives to the local Governments. The Home Department Letter No. 351 dated 12<sup>th</sup> March 1916, the Government of India asked all the Local Governments to adopt the following classification when giving statistics for the strength of the 'Depressed Classes':

A. Depressed Classes i.e Untouchables

B. Aborigines and Hill Tribes

C. "Criminal Tribes".

The Commissioner of Education, Government of India, Sir Henry Sharp did not include the 'Criminal Tribes', 'Aborigines', 'Hill Tribes' in his definition of 'Depressed Classes'. He restricted the term to denote the 'Unclean Castes'.

The Southborough Franchise Committee of 1913 adopted the criterion of 'Untouchability' to classify the 'Depressed Classes'.

The discussion on the question of 'Depressed Classes' took place in the Round Table Conference on the basis of 'Untouchability'. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan submitted a memorandum to the Round Table Conference asking specifically that the term 'Depressed Classes/Castes' must be discarded. However, the task of assigning a proper nomenclature and the exact meaning of the term was assigned to the Indian Franchise Committee also known as Lothian Committee. In his note to the Indian Franchise Committee, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar decried the use of the term 'Depressed Classes/Castes', he termed it as 'degrading' and 'contemptuous'.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar suggested that for official use in the new Constitution they might be called as 'Non-Caste Hindus', 'Protestant Hindus', 'Non-conformist Hindus', 'Excluded Castes', and the 'Exterior Castes' or by some such designation, instead of 'Depressed Classes/Castes'.

C.S. Mullan, Census Superintendent, Assam rejected the term 'Depressed Classes/Castes' in its use in the Census operation of 1931. He used a new expression 'Hindu Exterior Castes'.

### Backward Classes

'Backward Classes' are not defined in the Constitution of India. There is an integral connection between Caste, Occupation, Poverty, and Social Backwardness. In India Lower Castes are treated as 'Backward Classes'.

Expressions of 'Backward Class of Citizens' used in Article 16(4), 'Socially and Educationally Backward Classes' of Citizens in Article 15(4), 'Weaker Sections of the People' in Article 46 and the 'Scheduled Castes' in Article 341 and 'Scheduled Tribes' in Article 342 used in the Constitution of Indian.

The expression 'Backward Class' in Article 16(4) takes in Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

"Backward" used in Article 16(4) is wider than "Socially and Educationally" used in Article 15(4) and "Weaker Sections" used in Article in 46.

Reservation benefits are available to 'Backward Classes', which includes Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The first two categories of people have been granted Constitutional benefits while Other Backward Classes have been granted benefits under executive order.

# The Politics of Not Counting Caste

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An obvious and striking feature of the debate on the proposed “caste census” is that it concerns counterfactuals – “what if” scenarios rather than actual facts. It is thus inevitable that both opponents and proponents argue by analogy and assertion, extrapolating from other times and contexts to make their case.

[...]

In short, we must re-calibrate our present, and to do that we need to also ask questions like: What kinds of damage has India suffered because a caste census has not been held since Independence? What is the politics of not counting caste?

[...]

As proponents of a caste census we are certainly not neutral, but we hope to show that it is not the presence of bias – whether our own or of the others – that makes for bad arguments, but rather the absence of care.

[...]

## Implicit Models of Caste and Census

At the risk of oversimplifying, the most common arguments against a caste census are of two broad kinds – those that invoke political-moral grounds, and those that cite insurmountable practical-logistical difficulties. The most common pro-caste census arguments tend to be mostly political-moral, with some practical-logistical counter-arguments against the claims of opponents. Though they may often appear so, pro and con arguments are not necessarily mirror images of each other. However, both are based on implicit ideas about the nature and role of caste and the census.

At least three distinct models of what the Census is and ought to do are at work behind these arguments. The first sees the Census as an extension or analogue of a *welfare programme* or social justice initiative. In this view, the Census is an instrument for rationalizing such programmes, making them more efficient and effective. A second model of the Census is that of a *device for fixing identities*, or creating “compulsory identities”. In this view, the Census will forever fix the caste identity of every citizen and thus comprehensively sabotage the project of creating a universal

Indian citizen. Less common than the previous two but significant in its own right is a third model of the Census as a *gigantic research project* designed to produce the truth about the categories it counts. In this view, the Census is useful only if it is accurate and truthful; otherwise it is a waste or a liability.

While there three are the most commonly employed models, there is also one other model that has either been absent or only fleetingly present in the English media, but has received more play in the Hindi press (as has the caste census debate more generally). This fourth model of the census, familiar to us from the literature on nationalism, is that of a *collective self-portrait*. Like maps, flags and other mnemonic devices, the Census is a representation of the nation; it helps us to concretize an abstractly imagined national community. Seen from this angle a Census is not just about social justice programmes, or fixing identity, or a source of knowledge – it is a collection of our collective identities. Because it is available to all, it offers a chance for all groups to look at themselves in relation to others. Only the Census can provide such an aggregated, comprehensive picture of the collectivities that comprise the nation – no individual or group has the resources or the power to do this.

A comparable effort to list the different models of caste that seem to be at work would yield the following: The first and probably most common model is the one in which caste actually means *lower caste*, roughly in the same way that gender comes to “women” and race comes to mean “non-whites”. In this perspective, caste is about the concerns and problems of the lower castes, including especially reservations, quotas and vote banks. An other model of caste heavily influenced by social anthropology sees it as a *complex meaning-giving institution* of great importance in ordering everyday life. This perspective is concerned to emphasize the complexity of caste and its irreducibility to other social structures like class or ethnicity. A third perspective sees caste as a *web of distributional relations* that determines the distribution of power, privilege and material resources in conjunction with class. From this perspective, caste is necessarily relational – the parts do not make sense outside

of the whole they fit into, although “fit” need not imply harmony and is compatible with conflict. Finally, a fourth perspective on caste sees it as the single most important *obstacle to attaining modernity*. Caste is a peculiarly Indian affliction, one that is based on clearly un-modern values and it prevents us from becoming fully modern and embracing values of individualism and universality.

These sketchy and rather brief “models” of census and caste are clearly too rudimentary for too much weight to be placed on them. They are not meant to be exhaustive – it is surely possible to think of other – but only to indicate the variety of available vantage points. They are all partial, in the sense that the existence of one hardly precludes the others. They are also partial in the sense that they are more or less hospitable to different perspectives on caste, and, more specifically, to different positions vis-à-vis a caste census. In other words, models of caste and census combine to structure arguments for or against a caste census. One could also say that they determine the possibilities and limits of these arguments. It is not our contention that there is any neat or necessary correspondence between these models; rather, our main point is that, when analyzing arguments in this debate, it is useful to look for the implicit models that may be animating them.

[...]

## Logistical challenges

Perhaps the most common argument against a caste census, one specially favored by academics, is that it simply cannot be done. There are many strands to this broad argument and they need to be carefully sifted. The thickest strand combines the research project model of the Census with the complex-meaning-giving-institution model of caste to argue that the capabilities of the former are much too meager to capture the many-sided intricacies of the latter.

One variant of this strand insists that caste is too fluid and polyvalent an identity: the question, “what is your caste?” can have more than one (sometimes several) context-dependent answers. This usually arises from the fact that, at the micro end, “caste” usually subsumes within it other distinct entities like sub-caste, sub-sub caste, etc, and at the macro end may itself merge with other castes to form a larger caste-group (such as Maratha or Lingayat, or broader still, Kshatriya for example). I may answer the question differently depending on whether I am seeking a bride for my son, seeking a favour from some one, or deciding who to vote for. While this is quite plausible, it is still difficult to see why or how this poses a problem for the Census. The typical Indian respondent is not likely to be in any fundamental existential doubt about her

caste, for this is a luxury available only to the upper caste urban elite. As for the context-dependence of caste names, this is not a major problem precisely because the census enumerator's arrival at my door itself represents a very specific context, and my response will simply be whatever I believe to be appropriate for this context. The fact that I may have responded differently in other contexts is irrelevant here.

[...]

It must not be forgotten that since 2001 the Census has had access to technology far superior to that of earlier editions. In particular there is now character recognition software that enables scanning and digitization of handwritten forms, very inexpensive digital storage media, reliable methods of data retrieval, and above all, the possibility of retaining raw data down to the unit level, so that downstream procedures for grouping and consolidation are reversible in a costless manner. What this means in practice is that synonyms are not a problem, nor is the gathering of additional information, which is constrained only by the time available to enumerators to canvas each schedule. Unlike what is often implied by opponents, synonyms are certain to be centripetal rather than centrifugal, that is they will be tightly concentrated, around a central core rather than diverging greatly from it. It is very unlikely that persons with some local knowledge (like the local school teacher who is the most common enumerator) will be unable to recognize the family resemblance common to synonyms.

[...]

#### Large Numbers?

Another puzzling argument presents the very large number of castes that will be returned as a self-evidently decisive objection. For example, the 2001 Census enumerated a total of 1,234 castes in the SC category and 698 tribes in the ST category. Incidentally, between them, the 1971, 1981 and 1991 Censuses returned a total of 1,700 religion names, which were analysed by a working group set up for this purpose. Do these numbers make the SC-ST or the religion data useless? In a country of 1.2 billion people – that is 12 followed by eight zeroes – large numbers are likely to be the rule rather than the exception. As such, they do not signify anything in and of themselves.

[...]

The fact that there are 1,234 SCs in India has no meaning at the all-India level because the schedules are territorial, that is to say, SCs and STs are recognised only in a specific geographical context. In fact, a useful general principle for a caste census is to insist on a conservative strategy for aggregation. The district or even the sub-district or taluka level could be set as the default threshold, with aggregation beyond this point having to be clearly justified.

[...]

#### Political Objections

This brings us to the political objections to a caste census, the lead argument in which is the claim that to count caste is to return to the colonial era of divide and rule. Even within the framework of this argument it is clear that the colonial census did not only divide but provided powerful support for nationalism and the idea of India. On the other hand, one needs to be clear about where one is standing when talking of divide and rule. From the perspective of the vast majority of the Indian population subjected to centuries of elite rule, the existence of a higher power enabled an otherwise improbable revolt against native authority. It is only from the point of view of an elite that sees itself as the "owner" of the nation that any and all subaltern claims for power sharing will seem divisive. Finally, the contemporary context needs to be stressed. What could divisiveness mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when there is simply no future in secessionism and the only agenda is power sharing within existing state jurisdictions or boundaries?

In short, this is a very different time from the mid-20th century when new nations were being born everywhere. It is not just those who are labeled as divisive who have vested interests: calls for unity are seldom innocent and are often anything but altruistic.

[...]

#### Breaking with 'Caste Blindness'

We come now to the models and arguments that we ourselves favour. Our central point is that *not* counting caste has been one of independent India's biggest mistakes. Perhaps this mistake could not be avoided as it only became visible retrospectively. But at least for the last two decades, the damage wrought by this policy of "caste-blindness" has been plainly visible for anyone who cares to see it. Most arguments against a caste census treat the implicit contrast with the status quo as though it were neutral – it is not. In fact, arguments against a caste census need to ask not only if we would be worse off with it, but also if we

are better off without it. The model of the Census we are partial to is that of a collective self-portrait, which, along with a model of caste that emphasizes its role as a distributional axis, yields the argument outlined below. The most important reason to ask for a caste census is because it offers the opportunity to break with the model of caste blindness that the Indian state and mainstream polity has followed since independence. Starting from the premise that caste was to be singled out for abolition, the notion of caste blindness combined the formal abolition of caste in the Constitution with what amounted to a ban on public discussion of caste. The STs and SCs were treated as a regrettable exception to the rule of caste blindness. However, the formal abolition of caste was not accompanied by serious attempts to abolish its substantive privileges and disprivileges. This half-hearted caste-blindness encouraged the perpetuation and deepening of caste inequalities under a supposedly casteless Constitution. Half a century of this perspective brought us to Mandal, or the point where a large plurality of lower castes could no longer ignore the contradiction between their political entitlements and their actual share in the nation.

The flip side of rising caste consciousness among the lower castes was the fostering of the upper caste belief that they had left caste behind and were now casteless. For the most privileged sections of the upper castes this was true in a certain sense because three generations of caste blindness had allowed them to fully encash their caste advantages. They were now in a situation where they no longer needed to invoke caste explicitly, having acquired all the other resources that guaranteed them the "legitimate" advantages of inherited wealth, expensive education and abundant connections among their own kind. It is these groups of upper castes who are the most vociferous advocates of caste blindness today. It is they who believe that the Census is mainly about and for the lower castes and their squabbling about quotas. The collective portrait model of the Census insists that everyone's caste be counted and that the upper castes be denied the anonymity that they have enjoyed under caste blindness. In this sense, a caste census can mark the end of a remarkably unsuccessful phase of India's attempt to transcend caste and inaugurate a fresh initiative.

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#### Dalit

**Etymologically** the term 'Dalit' is inclusive of meanings such as 'broken', 'crushed', 'downtrodden', 'disadvantaged', 'underprivileged', 'dispossessed', 'deprived', 'handicapped', 'abused', 'humbled', 'prostrate'.

The term 'Dalit' first used in journalistic writings as far back as 1931 to connote the 'Untouchables'. However, it gained currency in early 1970s with the emergency of Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. In contemporary usage the term dalit serves as a self description that connotes struggle, self-respect and dignity.