

Politics of caste census: From historical lenses

The current debate on the caste census gives an opportunity to the Indian state to be reminded about the core value of social justice enshrined in the Indian Constitution and its framework in order to assess the demands of caste census and its policies



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The census is not merely a head count. This gives an identity to one and all in the modern nation state. Not only this, the census broadly gives an opportunity to all communities as well as castes to assess the extent to which they have received their participation and share in the constitutional government institutions at the Central and State levels and in the development schemes and programmes in the present and past. This group identity also creates a measure for assessing the participation and share of the community vis-a-vis other groups, communities and castes through their enumeration in the census. This description of the salient features of the census in the Government documents and textbooks is rather value neutral.

At a deeper level, if we evaluate the census critically in history, this had been one of the factors for the identity politics, especially the caste-based representational politics since the inception of the enumeration of population of India in which political parties, social groups and the government remained the key players. The first all-India decennial census in the year of 1871 was based on the *varna* consisting of *jati* as the major indicator for classification of the enumerated data by the colonial administrators like Risley, Nesfield, Baines, etc. Subsequently, *jati* instead of *varna* remained one of the key indicators in the census of the years of 1881, 1891, 1901 till 1931 even while the nature and form of the classification of the enumerated data underwent change in multiple ways.

On the basis of the data and the impact of the enumeration, the colonial administrators deeply realised that reference to *jati* in the Indian society is central, and it is the root of the identity among different social groups. It is notable that Nicholas B Dirks, a Dutch scholar and the author of "*Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*", beautifully articulated the impact and implications of the caste census during late 19th century. He showed that the emphasis of caste in the decennial census had given rise to increasing agitation over caste denomination and the assignment of social status among the caste groups. The colonial census might have reinscribed a Brahminical idea of caste but, ironically, in doing so it gave rise to competitive politics that began to make caste the basis of political mobilisation on a new scale.

The caste census eventually turned out to be the foundation for the architecture of governance and administration of the colonial state during late 19th and the beginning of the 20th century as well. The colonial state presented itself in a neutral role among the people but it manipulated the competitive politics of castes cleverly for consolidating its hold on the administration and governance.

Against this background, Dr BR Ambedkar, a great icon of social reform in the 20th century, presented the caste census in a new perspective in colonial India. He made it a base for social mobilisation and politics. But soon, he identified the limitations of the representational politics and framed the issues and questions in the broader framework of social justice. Subsequently, the social justice became the core

value of the Indian Constitution which was manifested in the enactment of the provision of reservation for SCs and STs in proportion to their share in population as per the caste census.

Enactment of the provision of reservation for SCs and STs gave rise to the new kind of politics of social justice for the other backward castes led by Ram Manohar Lohia in post-independence India. In the 60s and 70s, the slogan of SANSOPA firmly exhorting that the Backwards must attain Sixty out of Hundred (*sansopa ne baandhi ganth pichda pawe sau mein saath*) became the major slogan of the mobilisation of OBC politics. Though this slogan emerged from the commonsensical statistics, its grounding was provided directly or indirectly by the census data. Not only this, this remained a central factor in the confrontation and negotiation between the governments and the political parties, especially the socialist parties. As a result, provision of reservation for the OBCs in the Central Government jobs became a milestone as an outcome of the politics of social justice.

The contradictory role and purpose of the caste census in colonial and post-colonial India that comes to fore gives an insight that the headcount of *jati* in itself does not have a special meaning. Indeed, on one hand, the underlying objectives and politics of the caste census had been crucial in shaping the caste-based identity politics in a narrow sense. In contrast, on the other hand, this shaped the idea of social justice and the constitutional provisions of modern India as well.

In this context, it is worth reiterating that caste is a hierarchical social institution which is based on heredity and its ideology and values get reproduced from generation to generation in the society. Not only this, mere invocation of caste identity has remained a barrier in development and governance of post-independence India. As a fallout of this, most who first and foremost became victims are those who are situated at the margins of the horizontal base of all caste groups.

The current debate on the caste census gives an opportunity to the Indian state to be reminded about the core value of social justice enshrined in the Indian constitution and its framework, in order to assess the demands of caste census and its policies.

Simultaneously, all political parties have an opportunity to take forward the legacy of social justice in their voices and opinions for the caste census if they are truly committed to the cause of empowering all situated at the margins. Otherwise, its implication would be for raising of voices and opinions which would generate confrontation and competition within and across the castes. In this sense, the future of the politics of the caste census is likely to be entrapped in the past legacy which was constructed by the colonial state in the late 19th century.

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