



- The census contains information about the number of people, their age, sex, occupation, educational level and the like.
- While pre-colonial states also conducted censuses, this was usually for the limited purposes of taxation and conscription to the army (Anderson 1991: 169 for the Malayo-Javanese context)
- The enumeration of caste too was not entirely a new practice introduced by the British colonial government : the Manusmriti, Kalhana's Rajatarangini and the Ain-i-Akbari, all have lists of castes.
- However, the census, in terms of scale, the kind of information collected, and the variety of administrative uses to which it is put, can be traced to the modern bureaucratic state.
- For the British colonists in particular, the census was seen as an essential tool to understand, and thereby control, the large and diverse Indian population.
- Caste and religion were viewed as important sociological categories which would explain a variety of other issues — including what we now clearly recognise as unrelated factors like insanity, intelligence, desire and ability to fight in the army etc.
- While religion continues to be enumerated in the census, caste (for categories other than scheduled caste and scheduled tribe) has disappeared from it.
- Caste was a key census variable from 1871 to 1931. The census of 1931 was the last census to provide tables of the distribution of population on the basis of caste.
- Although caste returns were collected in 1941 they were not tabulated owing to war time economy measures.
- In 1951, apart from data on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, limited caste returns were collected from other 'backward castes'. However, the results were not published and were only made available to the First Backward Classes Commission (Roy Burman 1998; Galanter, 1984: 164).
- The constituent legislative assembly framing the Census Act of 1948 decided not to include the component of caste on the grounds that the portrayal of India as a land of many castes, languages and religions had been used by the British colonial authorities to claim that Indians would never be able to unite and govern themselves and therefore needed the British to rule them.
- However, the government continued to record information on scheduled castes and scheduled

tribes, in order to monitor the success of various government programs to improve their situation.

- In the run up to the 2001 census, there was a fresh debate over whether a person's caste should be recorded in the census
- One view was that it was necessary to include caste so that the economic and social status of each caste could be measured, while the other view was that it would be difficult to identify castes and such enumeration would unnecessarily enhance 'casteism'.
- Eventually, it was decided not to include caste in the census.

CASTE IN THE CENSUS

- The term caste is commonly accepted as having originated from the Portuguese term castas to describe breeds, species, tribes etc., and refers both to the four classical varna categories and to the jatis or the specific local units in which people identified themselves.
- In the 17th and 18th centuries, there was considerable fluidity both at the level of jatis and varnas.
- Economic differentiation, migration and ecological difference all played a role in creating new castes or enabling people to change their caste identities, through fission and fusion of jatis.
- In the unsettled conditions following the breakup of the Mughal empire, many chiefs of adivasi ('Scheduled Tribe') or low caste background became kings in their own areas.
- They claimed Rajput or Kshatriya (warrior) status and employed Brahman priests to invent suitable genealogies for themselves (Sinha, 1962).
- Dirks (1993), argued that the separation of religion and politics and the ritual exaltation of the Brahman over the Kshatriya in south India is a product of the colonial period.
- As colonial rule became more entrenched, the colonial administrators needed to know and understand their native populations in order to govern them.
- In the 19th century, 'race' became a scientific preoccupation with many studies carried out to classify races.
- The decennial census, along with the series of Imperial Gazetteers, Ethnographic Surveys, Settlement Records etc. played an important role in promoting certain ideas of caste and race.
- Caste and religion were seen as key categories with which to explain 'native' behaviour

- The entire framework of native conduct of individuals are largely determined by the rules of the group to which they belong.
- For the purposes of legislation, of judicial procedure, of famine relief, of sanitation and dealings with epidemic disease, and of almost every form of executive action an ethnographic survey of India, and a record of the customs of the people is as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants (Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India in the Home Department (Public), Simla, 25 May 1901).
- Thus colonial authorities used caste to explain insanity, the latter “being a disease associated with the socially higher and economically more provident classes” (Census of India, 1921, Vol. I, Part I: 209); to help in the recruitment of ‘martial races’ to the army; or to determine which groups had a propensity to crime (thus creating the category of ‘criminal tribes’).
- However, recording caste in the census was not an easy task. Successive Census Commissioners described the caste tables as the most troublesome and expensive part of the census, pointing to the vague and contextual nature of responses (Census of India, Risley, 1903:537; Census of India, Yeatts, 1941:20).
- Yet, upto 1931, it was seen as a necessary part of the demographic record and essential for governance.
- The consequence was a form of systematisation that slotted people into arbitrary, often untrue to their experience, but separate, mutually exclusive and thereby enumerable categories.
- In 1881, in Madras presidency alone, the inhabitants returned 3208 different castes, which through grouping were reduced to 309 (Report by the Officers appointed to Consider the Suggestions for a General Census in India in 1881, National Archives Library).
- Further, a census systematisation could not allow a person to have two castes or two religions. Even when religious syncretism was recognised, it was dismissed as “the essentially primitive character of the religion of the illiterate and uncultured masses”.
- At the same time as the census authorities standardised and reduced the number of castes, they also insisted on recording all sorts of sub-castes in an effort to appear fully scientific and to cover the entire social space.
- They argue, therefore, that caste and religion censuses hardened caste and religious identities (Cohn, 1990; Pant, 1987; Appadurai, 1993; Kaviraj, 1992).
- Cohn noted that by asking questions about religion, language, literacy, caste, occupation etc., the census ‘objectified’ culture and took it out of context.
- Appadurai argued that the “deadly politics of community...would not burn with the intensity we now see, but for contact with the techniques of the modern nation-state, especially those having to do with number “ (Appadurai, 1993:
- Statistics on identities became important as communities demanded guarantees and benefits from the government on the basis of numbers.
- Representation which means, ‘standing on behalf of’ came to be confused with representativeness which means, ‘coming from a particular community (see Appadurai, 1993: 332; see also Kaviraj, 1992).
- Thus, for example, the idea came to gain ground that Rajputs should and would vote only for a Rajput candidate, Hindus for a Hindu candidate and so on. This perspective continues to govern the way political parties distribute tickets.
- However, not all caste mobilisation can be blamed on the census alone, and the mobilisation around the census was only one of the forms which public activity took.
- Often, census figures themselves were products of caste mobilisation rather than creating it. For example the number of Maithili speakers varied quite dramatically between 1901, 1951 and 1961, depending on the strength of the Maithili language movement, and the extent to which people identified themselves as Maithili, rather than any changes in population per se (Burghart, 1993: 787)
- Conlon notes that his attempt to trace changes in educational and occupational status for Chitrapur Saraswats between 1901 and 1931 floundered on the fact that this was a period of a caste unification movement between Chitrapur Saraswats and Gaud Saraswats
- In the recent past, Sharad Kulkarni has pointed out that the context of reservations had created problems of reliability in the 1981 census data when several non-tribes with similar sounding names to tribes returned themselves as tribals.
- It is not just perceptions about the advantages of being seen to have larger numbers (e.g. the Maithili example) but also individuals’ perceptions about the advantages of returning a particular status that influence figures.
- The object of mobilisation changed over time, as the purposes of the census changed.
- Wider political events determined both the use to which census data would be put, and public reaction to it. Thus, the comparative numbers of

CENSUS & IDENTITY

- Much of the recent social science literature on caste and the Indian census has followed Michel Foucault’s theoretical perspective which emphasises the role of ‘technologies’ of government (i.e. administrative procedures) in creating identities.

Hindus and Muslims became an issue in the 1931 and 1941 census due to the communal award (in legislatures) and the prospect of partition;

- The need to disaggregate speakers of different languages in multilingual talukas became necessary in the 1951 census as the basis for a linguistic reorganisation of states.
- Finally, from 1921 onwards, economic issues achieved greater importance
- As the nation developed, the differentiation between castes was comparative statistics between countries, which ranged the population figures of one country against that of another, with its accompanying indices of literacy, occupations, degree of urbanisation, etc.
- Much depends on how 'the nation (or rather dominant groups within the nation), defines itself at any given point of time, and as this changes, so do identities, and indices of progress.

SOCIO ECONOMIC CASTE CENSUS

- The purpose for collecting caste-wise data in the decennial Census is to understand the contours of inequality.
- These data are crucial to understand how caste intersects with class, gender, and regionality to structure access to resources.
- The collected caste data should be publicly available for use.
- In this regard, the caste data would continue the existing practice of the Office of the Registrar General of India to make Census data publicly available.
- Caste was among the details collected by enumerators during the decennial Census of India until 1931. It was given up in 1941, a year in which the census operation was partially affected by World War II.
- In his report on the 1941 exercise, then Census Commissioner of India, M.W.M. Yeatts, indicated that tabulation of caste details separately involved additional costs.
- Many people have linked the caste census to the mindset of the British era of "Divide and Rule", but are they aware that some 200 years before British rule, between 1658 and 1664, the Home Minister Munhata Nainsi of the Marwar kingdom ruled by Maharaja Jaswant Singh Rathod conducted the first caste census
- R.A. Gopaldaswami, the first Indian Registrar-General of India, said in the 1951 report: "The 1951 census was not to concern itself with questions regarding castes, races and tribes, except insofar as the necessary statistical material related to 'special groups' & certain other material relating to backward classes collected and made over to the Backward Classes Commission."
- 'Special Groups' has been explained as referring to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Anglo-Indians

and certain castes treated provisionally as 'backward' for the purposes of the census. This implies that BC data were collected, but not compiled or published.

- While SC/ST details are collected as part of the census, details of other castes are not collected by the enumerators.
- The main method is by self-declaration to the enumerator. So far, backward classes commissions in various States have been conducting their own counts to ascertain the population of backward castes.
- Some commissions in the public domain suggest that these panels use methods like distribution of questionnaires, meeting with representatives of stakeholders, touring relevant areas and localities, & in some cases, such as the J.A. Ambasankar Commission in Tamil Nadu and the Venkataswamy Commission in Karnataka, door-to-door enumeration.
- The SECC 2011 had two components: a survey of the rural and urban households & ranking of these households based on pre-set parameters, and a caste census.
- Many community leaders argue that knowing the precise number of the population of each caste would help tailor the reservation policy to ensure equitable representation of all of them.
- Caste is a piece of information people seem most enthusiastic to elicit from each other before anything else.
- Political parties have caste-based cells and caste arithmetic becomes the basis on which tickets are allotted.
- Every caste recognises jati panchayats, has its mahasabhas and often, caste-based armed forces (senas) are constituted. Thousands of publications are brought out across the country to invoke caste sentiments in people.
- In our country, caste hounds us from the moment we are born to our death. Whether birth, marriage or last rites, caste dictates how all these rituals should be conducted.
- Every government document asks us our caste category. People are instituted on jobs and reserved seats during elections based on their caste identity certificates
- Political parties battling for the caste census cite the need for caste-wise data to justify the extension of reservations to various communities.
- According to some scholars India's fundamental mistake in its battle to overcome caste was not doing a caste census.
- According to these scholars, formal blindness to caste in a casteist society results in a denial of the web of caste-based privileges that continue to funnel opportunities to those at the top of the caste hierarchy.

- They point out that while the very term 'caste' has come to be associated with 'lower castes', the SCs or the OBCs, the upper castes tend to appear "casteless"
- They argue that in order to abolish caste, it is essential to first abolish caste-derived privileges, and in order to do that, the state must first map castes and their socio-economic status privileges/deprivations.
- The 2011 caste census collected data on all castes, and not just of the OBCs. Though the demands of the OBC-dominated political parties typically focus on expanding the socio-economic mapping of the census from the SCs and the STs to include the OBC castes, they want the caste census to cover the upper castes as well.
- The idea of a national caste census might be abhorrent when the stated policy is to strive for a casteless society, but it will be useful to establish statistical justification for preserving caste-based affirmative action programmes
- It may also be a legal imperative, considering that courts want 'quantifiable data' to support the existing levels of reservation.
- Political parties with their base in particular social groups may find a caste enumeration useful, if their favoured groups are established as dominant in specific geographies
- A caste census need not necessarily mean caste in the census. It may be an independent exercise, when its ultimate aim is to find the correct blend of equity & distribution and not the electoral purposes

PUBLICATION OF CASTE CENSUS 2011 DATA

- In an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court recently, the Union govt said that , conducting a Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC), stating that a caste census was unfeasible, "administratively difficult and cumbersome".
- It first explains why it cannot make public the caste data collected under the SECC-2011. Then it argues that the judiciary cannot direct the government to conduct a caste census because it is a "policy decision" not to do so, and the judiciary cannot interfere with government policy. And finally, it elaborates on why it is neither practical nor administratively feasible to attempt a caste census.
- The government acknowledges that the SECC-2011's caste data of 130 crore Indians have been with the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for five years.
- Due to flaws in the data, it was decided to form an expert committee headed by the then Vice-Chairman of the NITI Aayog, Arvind Panagariya.
- But since other members of the committee were not named, the committee never met, and as a result, no action was taken on the raw data to collate it into publishable findings.
- The flaws in the data stem primarily from the fact that no registry of castes was prepared before conducting the 2011 caste census. This resulted in mistakes by enumerators, who spelt the same caste in dozens of different ways.
- In Maharashtra, the existing SC, ST and OBC categories, as per government records, are only 494. But the 2011 caste census yielded 4,28,677 castes.
- While the State's population was 10.3 crore, about 1.17 crore (more than 11%) were found to be of 'no caste'.
- Also, 99% of the castes enumerated had a population of less than 100 persons
- The total number of castes as per the last caste census of 1931 was 4,147, the SECC-2011 showed the presence of 46 lakh different castes.
- While the Central list contained 2,479 OBC castes, there were 3,150 OBC castes as per the lists of all the States and Union Territories taken together.
- If a caste-related question is included, it would "return thousands of castes as the people use their clan/gotra, sub-caste and caste names interchangeably
- Since enumerators are part-timers with 6-7 days of training and "not an investigator or verifier", "it would be difficult to meaningfully tabulate and classify caste returns."
- According to Govt., the preparatory work for a census starts three to four years earlier. As for the census, the questionnaires have already been finalised and field-tested. It is, therefore, not possible to add additional questions about caste now.
- The academicians seem to confuse data collection and data analysis. The latter can be done at a later stage with much careful thought and after wide consultations whereas the first step of data collection can be done without problems with trained enumerators.
- Unlike in the case of the SCs and the STs, there is no constitutional mandate for the Registrar-General and Census Commissioner, India, to provide the census figures of the OBCs and the BCCs
- It has cited the 2014 Supreme Court judgment setting aside two orders of the Madras High Court directing the Centre to conduct a caste census.
- As per this Supreme Court judgment, what information to collect in a census is a policy decision of the govt, & it was "legally impermissible" for the court to dictate to the govt what policy it ought to follow.
- In 2016, the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India informed the Standing Committee on Rural Development that 98.87% of the data on individual caste and religion was "error free".

- In its report analysing the action taken by the govt on the recommendations made by the committee on 'BPL Survey currently Socio Economic & Caste Census (SECC), 2011', the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, has been quoted as saying that the "data has been examined and 98.87% data on individuals caste and religion is error free".
 - To Maharashtra's plea to reveal the SECC 2011 "raw caste data" of Other Backward Classes (OBC), the Centre said the 2011 Census was not an "OBC survey".
 - It was, a comprehensive exercise to enumerate caste status of all households in the country to identify poor households & implement anti-poverty programmes.
 - Expert Committee headed by the then NITI Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya in July 2015, charging it with the classification of caste names returned in SECC 2011.
 - The Government's affidavit admits that no other member was appointed to the committee. Therefore, neither did the committee ever meet nor did it fulfil its mandate in six years.
 - An action taken report on the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Rural Development on "BPL Survey (currently Socio Economic & Caste Census, 2011)".
 - In this report dated August 31, 2016, the Union government is quoted as categorically stating that the data errors on caste and religion in SECC 2011 accounted for 1.34 crore out of 118.64 crore people, i.e., only around 1%
 - The aggregate number of castes and tribes included in those lists would currently be around 5,000 at the all-India level. For any individual State, the maximum number of castes cannot be above 500.
 - Training manuals for the enumerators can also be drawn up on the basis of a single, consolidated caste list for each State.
 - The Government's affidavit also cites the absence of categorical constitutional or statutory requirements to count castes other than SCs and STs in the Census.
 - Articles 15(4) and 15(5) of the Indian Constitution have explicitly recognised "socially and educationally backward classes of citizens" as a category distinct from SCs and STs and enabled the State to make special provisions for their advancement.
 - Counting the population of these Backward Classes would therefore be very much within the constitutional framework.
 - In the absence of detailed caste data, we fail to name and confront major structural and foundational problems of society; leave space for opportunistic politicians to exploit each caste; and miss the opportunity to craft reasoned, data-driven, and inclusive public policies.
 - Some progressive and anti-caste scholars fear that a full-caste count will further entrench caste identities.
 - A caste census will require all households to think about, acknowledge, and speak about caste identities.
 - Yet, historically outcast groups have already had to provide caste data in all postcolonial Censuses to implement reservations.
 - Another concern is that groups will misuse the caste data. But misuse of caste data already takes place. Private groups with access to money and power regularly collect caste data for their needs. Political parties map the caste and religious composition
 - Census bureau in the U.S., Brazil, and South Africa, with long histories of white supremacy, collect detailed data on race and class to understand the current scope of inequality and develop justice-oriented policies
 - In addition, research on the failed caste count suggests the importance of careful planning to prevent groups from exposing the realities like untouchables among other religious groups, inter-caste and inter-religious households and LGBTQIA+ individuals.
 - The Tamil Nadu govt appointing a commission to formulate a methodology to collect caste-wise particulars of its population. Its not clear that it is a 'survey' or a 'census'.
 - J.H. Hutton, the Census Commissioner in 1931 opined that "It has been alleged that the mere act of labelling persons as belonging to a caste tends to perpetuate the system,". However, he rejects the criticism, arguing that there is nothing wrong in recording a fact, and ignoring its existence is wrong
 - For some, it is "too costly" to enumerate castes. Maybe they should try to quantify the 'cost' of the disrespect, the lack of opportunities, identities, the untouchability, the rapes, the killings and the atrocities of lower castes in our society over all the years since Independence.
- RATIONALISATION OF 50% CAP ON RESERVATION**
- Though upper castes continue to account for 28-29% against 37% of combined strength of OBC MPs and intermediate-caste MPs in the last three parliamentary elections as per the data analysis by the Trivedi Center at Ashoka University
 - The rising clamour for a caste-based census needs to be seen in the wider context of the progressive realisation of the unfinished agenda of the Mandal commission demands.
 - If Mandal was about a battle for job reservation in the 1990s and the reservation in college admission in 2008 was dubbed Mandal II, then this demand

for caste-based census or lifting the cap on 50% reservation heralds the onset of Mandal III

- The demand for caste-based census arises from the continuing deficits of democracy in India. Without the benefit of reliable caste-census data, Mandal Commission estimated the share of the OBCs in India's population to be 52%.
- Reconciling the ideals of equality & equity including institutional well-being in the 1992 verdict in the Indra Sawhney case, the Supreme Court has also judiciously observed that the reservation cap is not sacrosanct; it can be increased beyond 50% under exceptional circumstances.
- In fact, Tamil Nadu's historic 69% quota law — under judicial scrutiny for more than three decades — seems to have become the legal lodestar for States like Maharashtra, Haryana, Telangana, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh vigorously breaching the cap beyond 50% to include agitating non-Mandal communities like Marathas, Jats, Gujjars in the reservation net.
- As a young, energetic, aspirational rising force, focussed on jobs, education and economic development, the Mandal and non-Mandal OBC and EBC castes together will lead to huge demographic and democratic shifts in Indian politics.



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