

The implications of caste enumeration

While there is a vast political leadership who came through the lanes of OBC politics, there has also been a concentration of certain OBC communities in these spaces. The upcoming Census, with caste enumeration, could create a window of opportunity for the inclusion of those communities who have been left behind

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RAMA SHANKER SINGH, SARTHAK BAGCHI



Congress workers take part in a rally to celebrate the Centre's decision to include caste enumeration in the upcoming national Census, in Noida, on May 2. | Photo Credit: PTI

Numbers are the basis of governance; without them, the state loses confidence. In government offices, one may see that every item — electrical panels, fans, chairs — is meticulously numbered and logged, forming the foundation of administrative records. Thus, governments categorise and quantify all things. As Arjun

Appadurai said, every commodity has its own social and political life — this principle also applies to the census of humankind.

Since the emergence of the modern state in India, populations have been enumerated. The first colonial Census conducted in 1872 generated statistical data, allowing the British to control India and regulate every aspect of Indian life. While the Census was seen as an administrative enumeration, a statistical activity more than a political act of a reorganisation of groups, the introduction of the caste Census by H.H. Risley made the Census into a political instrument in a way it had never been used before. Risley had a dramatic influence on the rise of caste organisations and the exploding production of literature about the caste system from all over the subcontinent.

Caste count pre-Independence

In the late 19th century, upper-caste Indian elites sought political reforms and representation from the British. The Census figures enabled the colonial government to reshape India's complex social and cultural fabric through revenue taxation, education, and new opportunities generated in universities, public services and of course legislative bodies. This eventually led to the creation of a supporter base among upper-caste Indian elites for the British.

However, with time, subaltern communities also began seeking access to education and political representation. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's emergence after the 1930s, challenged upper-caste hegemony, creating space for Dalits or the Backward Classes, as they were known then.

While the Government of India Act, 1935 and the Indian Constitution brought dignity and equality to Dalits and Adivasis, thousands of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) were overlooked by the Constituent Assembly during this pivotal moment.

Defining the OBC category

In 1953, the Kaka Kalelkar Commission was established to identify OBC communities and propose welfare measures. In its 1955 report, the commission identified as many as 2,300 communities as OBCs. However, the report was not implemented due to vague criteria and lack of political consensus. In fact, the report received negative feedback from the then Congress Home Minister G.B. Pant, who thought that the emphasis on caste demonstrated "the dangers of separatism" and was "the greatest hindrance in the way of our progress toward an egalitarian society."

During this period, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia articulated a contrarian but transformative vision — “We should follow a new principle that merit comes from opportunity. Sixty per cent of the high opportunities of the country should go to 90% of India’s population — Shudras, Harijans, backward castes of religious minorities, women, and tribals. This principle should be applied to the most competitive exams and I reject the Prime Minister’s (Jawaharlal Nehru) arguments, which rest on the deceptive foundation of merit and qualifications,” as articulated in the *Rammanohar Lohia Rachanawali*, a compilation of the works of Ram Manohar Lohia.

After Lohia’s intervention, the Mandal Commission in its 1980 report recommended a 27% reservation for OBCs in central government jobs and educational institutions, noting that OBCs constitute approximately 52% of India’s population, on the basis of the 1931 caste Census data. In 1990, the V.P. Singh government allowed the partial implementation of Mandal Commission reports, generating much political heat across the country. However, the ensuing debate around reservations for the backward classes also raised the issue of a lack of new and more relevant data for more accurate policymaking, giving momentum to the demand for a caste census from this period on.

Incidentally, between the Kaka Kalelkar Commission and Mandal Commission, the Mungeri Lal Commission was set up by former Bihar Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur in Bihar, which also recommended reservations for the backward classes.

The impact of the Mandal report

The implementation of the Mandal Commission report has significantly changed the contours of OBC politics in the country, hastening the dominance of the backward castes, especially the intermediary castes. There is now not a single party in India which can oppose OBC reservations. Even in the 2024 parliamentary elections, reservation (or the perceived threat of its removal) was a key issue.

Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been garnering strong support from OBC and Scheduled Castes within the broader Hindutva framework. To reclaim this support, regional parties have expanded their social and electoral base, and have been tirelessly demanding for a Census where caste is also enumerated. In Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party led by Akhilesh Yadav, has created a fruitful alliance with backward classes, Dalits, and minorities, by emphasising on proportional representation for castes. The party secured 37 Lok Sabha seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Uttar Pradesh. Recently, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi admitted that the party failed to prioritise OBCs and other reserved categories in

the past and that they are ready to amend it. As part of the INDIA alliance's Lok Sabha election agenda, he advocated for a Census where caste is enumerated, aiming to consolidate Congress's traditional voter base while also appealing to OBC, Dalit, minorities and Adivasi constituencies. This, he said, will be like a comprehensive "X-ray" of Indian society.

While there is a vast political leadership who came through the lanes of OBC politics and have reached high positions in political parties and legislative spaces, there are fault lines in it. There is a concentration of certain communities in these spaces, especially of intermediary and extremely backward castes. **The new Census, with caste enumeration, could create a window of opportunity for the inclusion of those communities who have been left behind. This Census will extend beyond OBCs, encompassing other subaltern communities and minorities. It will also bring out the number of privileged castes.** It will reveal demographic compositions, and, if economic data like land ownership is included, the social roots of India's economic inequality. For smaller Scheduled Castes and OBCs lacking prominent leaders, this Census will offer a vital opportunity for visibility and advocacy, as land reforms and economic equality efforts have failed, deepening caste-based oppression and marginalisation. It will also give voice to, and more importantly, numbers of denotified and nomadic communities.

An electoral agenda

If one looks at the recent victory of the BJP in Haryana, Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh, one understands how the BJP has attracted small communities to its fold. Social scientist Badri Narayan has been highlighting this phenomenon for a long time now. In Bihar, where Assembly elections are due later this year, the BJP would want to use its recent decision to conduct a caste count in the upcoming Census, along with the symbolism of honouring Karpoori Thakur with a Bharat Ratna Award, to effectively mobilise the Extremely Backward Classes (EBC). This is to bolster its own social base and improve its political standing, taking the wind out of its ally Nitish Kumar, who has been basking in the glory of carrying out the caste survey in Bihar earlier and has been the beneficiary of EBC support so far. Through the proposed caste enumeration with the Census, the BJP will try to reshape the caste realities of India and consolidate its appeal among a largely untapped voter base. It will try to cement its presence in States where it was a non-dominant player at best. Other national and regional parties will likely pursue similar strategies, but their success to find a foothold in these realigned caste realities will depend on their leadership and party organisation.

Rama Shanker Singh is an independent historian and author of the book Nadi Putra: Uttar Bharat mein Nisahd aur Nadi. Sarthak Bagchi teaches in Ahmedabad University.

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