

Backward Castes Census: An Outmoded Idea

While backward castes need to be profiled, the census is not the best method to do so. For, objective data is difficult to come by due to the concept of caste changing according to the context and the impossibility of enumerating small but significant changes when attempting to take a large, overall picture.

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The Supreme Court's stay on the implementation of 27 per cent quota for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in central higher educational institutions has once again brought to the centre stage the issue of reservation based on caste.

There cannot be any disagreement that wherever backwardness exists and in whichever form, it has to be removed. The question is how to go about it. One of the ways this society has decided to resolve the problem is to make reservation for those classes which are considered to be backward. The vital question is how to determine who is backward? The government has used the 1931 Census data for determining the backward castes, because in the subsequent censuses except for scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs), caste enumeration was given up. The apex court in the present case has pointed out that the 1931 data base is not valid for determining backward castes in 2007. The implication of this observation is that much has changed in the intervening period. Further the suggestion is that the caste data of 1931 should be updated by another survey. In the opinion of this author it is neither possible nor desirable to attempt this.

One of the most comprehensive sources of demographic, social, economic and educational data in India is the census

which is conducted every 10 years. Started in 1872 it became a little more systematic from 1881. It has continued since then except for 1941 when owing to the war its operations were curtailed. Since it got started many new entries have been added to it. It generates "over five million tables" says the registrar-general of census. The task of covering the entire Indian population in the shortest possible time is stupendous and the addition of so many more entries has added to its difficulties. Till 1931 castes of the people were also enumerated. After India became independent this practice was given up except for the SCs/STs. The first census in the new millennium was conducted in 2001. Census authorities were gearing up the machinery to undertake the massive task and had already conducted the household survey when some scholars and persons active in public life raised the demand that caste also should be enumerated. The former chief minister of Karnataka, M Veerappa Moily made an appeal to the then prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to include caste/community in the Census 2001 (*The Hindu*, August 30, 2000). Earlier the Madras Institute of Development Studies, in collaboration with the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore and the University of Mysore, organised a two-day seminar (July 21 and 22, 2000) at Mysore to discuss this issue.

The overwhelming consensus in the seminar was that enumeration of caste should be done. Further the opinion was that since census is already overburdened and enumeration of caste would require a certain degree of expertise the task might be handed over to an independent agency through an appropriate legislation. The resolution however did not examine what validity such data would have if delinked from the census. Also what would be the focus in such an enumeration? However one got the distinct impression that the deliberations in the seminar were principally influenced by the concern for determining backwardness of different castes for the purpose of positive discrimination.

Arguments For

(i) Caste is a "reality" in the social, political, economic and cultural life of this country. It should be properly reflected in the census. Caste enumeration will give reliable and firm data on the members of each caste and hence would help in identifying their backwardness and "forwardness". This in turn would help in revising the list of backward castes. It has been argued that the recommendations of the backward classes commissions in various states were struck down by courts because they were not backed by adequate scientific data. It has also been argued that in the absence of "correct" data the dominant groups among the backward classes have cornered the lion's share of reservations, leaving nothing to the most backward and deserving sections.

(ii) Carrying the argument further it is stated that if such "correct" data were available all manipulation of social reality could be checked.

(iii) Caste enumeration would help in understanding social change in India particularly land relations in rural India.

(iv) Caste is not the only divisive force in the society. There are others like religion, language and gender. If these can be enumerated in the census why not caste?

(v) Caste has not been enumerated since the last 76 years but that has not helped in eliminating it.

(vi) Some even argue that it is the vested interest of the members of some castes, which is preventing the enumeration of caste in the census. The fear is that such enumeration will expose the monopoly of

certain castes or cluster of castes in services and political institutions.

Arguments Against

(i) The framers of the Indian Constitution were influenced by the idea that the future Indian society should be casteless and classless. Though this is not explicitly stated in the Constitution, the philosophy of equality and dignity to all pervades it. Perhaps the thinking was that if caste was not given any formal recognition it would wither away in course of time.

(ii) Right from the very beginning, the census authorities faced numerous difficulties in enumerating castes in census. For many of those difficulties they could never find suitable solutions. Their definition of castes/communities kept on changing from one census to another and a result of this there has always been serious doubt about the accuracy/comparability of data. They must have heaved a sigh of relief when enumeration of caste is given up.

However let me quickly refer to some of the difficulties in enumerating caste in the census.

(a) *Concept of caste*: The question "what is your caste", may elicit different answers depending upon who is asking the question and what is the context. Often the answer may vary from giving the varna name to the endogamous group's name. Each answer is appropriate in its own right but which one is relevant for census purpose has never been settled. The caste complexity has grown over the years on account of fragmentation, localisation, internal mobility and built-in ambiguity.

(b) *Attempt to change caste names*: There are innumerable cases all over the country of castes changing their names. This is done (i) to raise their status, (ii) to get rid of the earlier name which is despised, (iii) out of fear of the dominant caste of the region, (iv) there could be a variety of other region-specific reasons too.

(c) *Use of multiple names*: There are instances where some castes are known by several names at the same time, which one is to be enumerated in the census has been a problem particularly because the answers of the informant are not uniform.

(d) *Confusion owing to change of faith*: There are a large number of castes which have changed their faith. Some of the members of the community continue to identify themselves with their pre-conversion names, some with new names and some

hyphenate their old and new names.

(e) *Communities which are part Hindu/Christian*: There are communities in which a section continues with their traditional religion and another section with the religion to which they have been converted. The problem is that in one census the converted section gets enumerated as Indian Christians along with other Christians. In subsequent censuses the name of the community gets added to their new religion, making it difficult to get a proper idea of the size of the community.

(f) *Migrant castes*: It is observed that when members of a caste migrate to another region, often they get a new name. The new name is in the local language. Thus a new addition of name is made in the list of castes.

(g) *Phonetic resemblance*: Often phonetic resemblance in the names of two distinct castes has led to their merger in enumeration.

(h) *Disguising as another caste*: A phenomenon of far reaching consequence is being noticed almost all over the country. It has been observed that certain castes disguise themselves in the identity of some backward/scheduled castes to claim the benefits the latter are entitled for. This is a deliberate device which became more pronounced after area restrictions for reservation were removed in 1976.

(i) *Aggregation of castes*: In order to make the list concise, the census authorities aggregated castes. That is how many new names emerged in the list of castes.

The above are some of the difficulties which have been identified on account of either intensive investigations conducted by social anthropologists or availability of sound knowledge of a particular region. There must be many more difficulties. Some of the difficulties are almost impossible to sort out at this stage. It may be noted that caste has never been a static phenomenon. There has been vertical as well as horizontal mobility in the caste system. Owing to various secular developments vertical mobility has lost much of its significance now but its horizontal spread has gained some social, economic and political importance. The caste as was known in 1931 perhaps does not exist. It has shed many of its roles and has acquired new ones. The occupational specialisation of the castes, inter-caste exchange relations, etc, are fast disappearing. The present-day castes have more political roles. One must also face the tutored responses from the informants. To this if the difficulties identified above are added, caste enumeration in the census becomes almost impossible.

For argument's sake, if we are able to remove all the difficulties and we know exactly who is who, who will have the authority to implement that knowledge? The census does not authorise enumerators and rightly so to enter what they have been told by the informant even if there is a checklist which informs him otherwise. Once an entry has been made no correction can be inserted at a later date.

Portrayal of 'Reality'

The argument that there is a crying need for projecting the ground reality which is required for planning, development and to determine the target groups cannot be overstated. Even agreeing with that argument there are some serious issues to be considered. First, is the census the right means to get that kind of data? Second, with increasing realisation in social sciences that all so-called "realities" are constructed, it is not possible to get into a discourse on this subject here; however it is now well recognised that all observations are situated in subjectivity. In order to have some understanding and communication, human beings arrive at inter-subjectivity agreement. This inter-subjectivity agreement is critically dependent upon perception (maybe vested interest in the present case) and variability of the phenomenon. In case of caste, we now know that there are opposing perceptions and a great degree of variability, and therefore to arrive at inter-subjectivity agreement on caste is a near impossibility.

Then there is another dimension. Social scientists, in order to claim the status of science for their subject have made themselves believe that social data was lying out there, like a physical "reality". The only thing which they needed was appropriate tools to pick it up. Thus they kept on refining their techniques of data collection. This refinement, unfortunately, apart from many other things, meant collection of quantitative data, that is reducing the data to binary mode. But as is well known much of social reality lies and that too not firmly in between the so-called two polarities, sometimes even beyond – neither this nor that, in between or do not know or do not want to know or pretend not to know and so on. This in-between situation may also not be clear; it may be hazy, confused and reluctant. It may suffer with the load of history and some may even be keen to make history and depart from known positions. The investigators particularly

in the case of censuses and surveys neither have time nor scope for such subtleties. They cannot be bothered with in-between situations. They want firm answers to their questions. Hence more often than not in such censuses and surveys a "reality" is created. It is possible to argue that there is nothing like the social reality. If there is something like social reality it has many shades. It can be elaborated in a discourse and not in making definitive statements.

If this be so, it needs to be asked as to why a group of highly trained social scientists argue that enumeration of the caste is necessary to capture the ground "reality" notwithstanding the insurmountable difficulties in conducting such a census.

Recently the Anthropological Survey of India conducted a project called "People of India". The study arrived at a certain number of communities in India. But if one just shifts their premise one would get a totally different number. Even when there is awareness of such differences, people would keep on quoting one figure or the other. Or take the question of race. Till recently the world populations were neatly classified into racial groups. Now people have begun to realise how absurd were those classifications. In such efforts the overriding concern is to establish the dominant/majority/high percentage aspect, the rest goes into the marginal/negligible bin. It should be appreciated that the marginal is not negligible and is significant in the functioning of the system. What is intended to be emphasised here is that the micro vibrations are equally important which tend to get neglected in an attempt to have a gross view.

It has been repeatedly pointed out that there is a need to prepare profiles of each caste to determine the backwardness. First, if that be the objective, census is not the right forum for such an exercise. Second, in almost all the regions of the country there has emerged a battle between the major castes for dominance. The demographically marginal castes have to support one or the other dominant caste for their survival. The leaders of the dominant castes control all levers of power. There is no way that they would allow any weakening of their base on account of some "objective" data. The then chairman of the Backward Classes Commission of Andhra Pradesh, related in the seminar organised in 2000 many instances as to how fierce had become the battle to get a "backward" tag. Almost all castes barring Kammas, Jains and Anglo-Indians in Andhra Pradesh,

tried to claim before the commission that their castes were "most backward" and were under-represented in government services and in political institutions. They put such inflated estimates of their respective populations, which when added became four times the state's actual population. No guarantee can be given to counter such organised "cooking" of data. No wonder the last census data on language has not seen the light of day.

The existing census data on caste is so much mixed that it cannot even be used as a benchmark to get an idea of social change. Therefore if the objective is to find out what changes have taken place in the caste situation different kinds of studies will have to be planned.

However we may try to whitewash the caste system, it cannot be overlooked that it is based on certain principles which cannot be supported under any circumstances in the modern world. It is based on the principle of inequality. One is born to a caste which cannot be changed. A caste is supposed to be tied down to a certain occupation, status, expected behaviour and various other norms. Birth in a caste is based on the karma of the previous birth and in order to get a higher status in the next birth, one is expected to abide by the norms of the caste in which one is born. It can be argued that by not recognising caste in a formal manner (not enumerating the caste in census is one attempt in that direction) the nation is consciously rejecting all those principles on which caste is based particularly the one which is based on primordial ties. Through this rejection the attempt to establish a casteless society may sound utopian, but it is a utopia worth having, which clearly announces that one is born free and not with tags of behaviour, discrimination and prejudices. They have to be wiped out.

Some mobility within the caste system has been noticed. This mobility is within the system, and is based on hierarchy, and discrimination, and is not worth supporting. It is the system, which has to go. One can anticipate that where angels like Buddha, Jain saints, Sikh gurus, Basava and numerous others had a limited success, there will be resistance and objections when one talks of elimination of caste. Caste cannot be eliminated by legitimising it. **EFW**

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