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## THE INCLUSION OF CASTE IN CENSUS

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### ABSTRACT

*The question of whether or not caste should be included in the census for enumeration has been a focus of controversy and debate for decades. Those who are against inclusion of caste argue that it will accentuate divisive tendencies among the people. On the other hand, there are those who argue for inclusion of caste. Their view is that caste is the fundamental unit of the Indian society. To improve the living conditions of the lower castes and provide social justice, a pan-Indian caste-count is imperative. I will be presenting these 'for' and 'against' arguments in the first section of the paper. Then, there are those who acknowledge the importance and relevance of caste in contemporary times but who argue that an all-India level caste-census is not a feasible option. Census in India is a mammoth undertaking. If you include caste, which is not a concrete, fixed category as the people who argue for caste inclusion assume, then it is going to escalate the problems faced by the enumerators. I will be presenting this set of arguments in the second section of the paper. Why would inclusion of caste create insurmountable problems? In an attempt to answer this question, I will historically contextualize the census operations and examine the problems British officials faced then and compare it with those faced in the 21st Century. This will cover the third section of my paper. I will conclude it by presenting the suggestions of social scientists on how to tackle this problem.*

**KEYWORDS:** Caste, Census, Jati, Varna.

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## INTRODUCTION

A census is the procedure of systematically acquiring and recording information about the members of a given population. It is a regular, official count of a particular population (Shepard and Greene 2003; Sullivan and Sheffin 2003). The term is used mostly in connection with national population and housing censuses. The United Nations defines the essential features of population and housing censuses, and recommends that population censuses be taken at least every 10 years. The United Nations recommendations also cover census topics to be collected, official definitions, classifications and other useful information to coordinate international practice (United Nations 2008). 2

In the Indian scenario, the census is the most important source of data, widely used for social and economic planning purposes in the country and for researchers in the field of demography, economics, sociology etc. Census operations in India have been acclaimed as the world's biggest administrative exercise. Although records exist of census operation carried out in India as early as 300 BCE under the leadership of Kautilya, and during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries as documented by Abul Fazl in Ain-i-Akbari, the modern census operations began only during the British Raj during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The first pan-Indian census was conducted in 1881 under Lord Ripon. The censuses carried out from 1881 till 1931 by the British collected details of the populace pertaining to religion, language, caste, tribe etc. In 1941, census was not done because of World War II and by 1951, India was an independent nation. Why did the Indian government exclude caste from the census operations? One argument put forward is that to prevent the resurgence of more than four thousand caste and sub-caste identities and the resulting demolition of the secular, democratic foundation of independent India, the enumeration of caste except Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) was stopped from 1951 onwards (Bhagat 2007).

I will fast forward our history and move to the latter half of 1990s when this debate on caste inclusion came to the fore with the government's decision of implementing Mandal Commission's recommendations. It primarily generated a controversy because at the time of the government's decision, census data for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), unlike the SCs and STs, did not exist. Therefore, when a petition was filed in the Supreme Court against the implementation, the apex court asked the central government to determine who were socially and educationally backward, as I have noted below. This prompted scholars to demand that a caste census be undertaken on a pan-Indian scale. The debate took place both inside and outside the Parliament. From academicians to political analysts to politicians, almost everyone argued either 'for' or 'against' the inclusion of caste. Debates were organised by mass media, symposiums were conducted at universities where eminent social scientists addressed the issue. I am now going to present the arguments against caste inclusion, and then the arguments for.

## ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST CASTE INCLUSION

a) The founding fathers of the Indian Constitution envisaged a casteless, classless society for India in the future. Equality of all is the fundamental philosophy of our Constitution. The idea was that if caste was not given any formal recognition, it would wither away in course of time. This is why the caste census was not carried out from 1951 onwards except for the SCs and STs.

b) The inclusion of caste breeds inequality in our caste-ridden society and accentuate divisive tendencies among the people. The secular, democratic polity would be communalised. Caste enumeration will defeat the very purpose of building a secular, welfare state (Pinto 1998). The very reason why the British included caste in census operation was that it was a part of their larger 'divide and rule' policy. We should therefore abandon the idea of caste inclusion in census.

c) Caste enumeration will incite unrealistic demands on the basis of caste population. Instead of making caste the criterion, we should adopt the economic criterion. In fact the Constitution speaks of backward 'classes' and not backward 'castes'. The very fact that the founding fathers of our Constitution used a much broader expression of 'classes' in Articles 15(4), 16(4) and 340(1) is indicative of the fact that they did not have an intent of equating economic status or class with caste. 3

d) The Constitution prohibits the state from discriminating on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, descent, language and residence. By the virtue of this prohibition under articles 15, 16 and 29(2) of the Constitution, caste enumeration in the census is 'unconstitutional'.

Those who argue for the inclusion of caste attempt to counter each and every one of the above arguments. They argue that:

a) The claim that caste enumeration in the census will perpetuate casteism is a baseless apprehension. Despite excluding caste particulars over the last 50 years, there has not been a transformation of our society into a casteless society (Kumar 2000). When you can enumerate language, gender and religion (for gender and minorities reservations), why can't you enumerate caste? After all, caste is another identity, just like language, religion and gender.

b) Caste is the basis on which our entire society is founded. The poverty and backwardness of the SCs, STs and OBCs is the direct result of a historical exploitation and oppression done by the overtly unjust caste system. The Supreme Court stayed the Mandal Commission Report implementation (in 2006) stating that the 1931 Census cannot be a determinative basis for providing reservation to the OBCs. It has asked central government to determine who are socially and educationally backward. For this to happen, we need data that reflects the population of each caste, its educational status, and the representation of caste-members in the public sector jobs and services. This data can be obtained on a national scale only through the census.

c) In India, class identity is associated with a person's caste. The SCs and STs, the lowest in the caste hierarchy, are also the poorest. Caste, wealth, status and learning have been monopolised by the upper castes. Caste has cut across religious boundaries as well. Caste inequality and economic inequality are interwoven in our society to such an extent that the only way to transform it is by recognising it and providing the lower castes with their legitimate rights (Pinto 1998).

d) Though there has not been a collection of caste particulars over the last 50 years, this practice has been in place in case of SCs and STs. If caste is abhorred for inclusion in census of other castes, it should be so even for SCs and STs. No such discrimination can be permitted in the

collection of data. Therefore, the non-collection of data of castes other than SCs and STs is a clear violation of the right to equality guaranteed under articles 14, 15 and 16 of the Constitution (Kumar 2000).

Despite numerous differences, both camps share the following assumptions:

- a) They believe that caste is an unquestionable reality of Indian social life.
- b) This has been so since the earliest times.
- c) The census could map this reality and produce caste-data (Samarendra 2011).

What scholars like P K Misra, A M Shah argue is that despite the need for caste data, census is not the most feasible option for addressing the issue. The reasons for their particular position include:

- a) The question, “what is your caste”, is a particularly problematic one. It elicits different answers depending on the context. It may vary from a varna name to an endogamous group’s name. Each answer is appropriate in its own right but which one is relevant for census purpose has not been settled (Misra 2007).
- b) The word ‘caste’ has more than one equivalent in Indian languages. For instance, in Gujarati, there are five words for caste: ‘jat’, ‘jati’, ‘jnati’, ‘varna’ and ‘kaum’. Each has more than one meaning. ‘Jati’ alone denotes sex, religion, sect within a religion, caste, tribe, race and lineage depending on the context (Shah 1998). How does the responder know in what context the enumerator is posing the question and what answer he or she is expecting?
- c) In case of migrant castes, when members of a particular migrate to another region, they often get a new name, which will usually be in the local language. It will add to the number of castes already existing (Misra 2007).
- d) Above all, what has been most visible is that certain castes tend to disguise themselves as SCs, STs or OBCs in order to reap the benefits provided by the government. How reliable will be such data, presuming they can be generated?
- e) In the context of inter-caste marriages, do all members of the household belong to the caste of the ‘head’ of the family? What about the children born to inter-caste marriages where the wife hasn’t accepted the husband’s caste? Which caste do they belong to?

The problem of collecting caste information is so complex that the census data, even if collected successfully, will not be reliable. It is unreasonable to expect the caste enumerators, usually ill-paid primary school teachers and class-C government servants to grasp all the complications of caste and collect reliable information in such a short time (Shah 1998).

Ravivarma Kumar, an eminent constitutional expert and lawyer, says, “It is indeed not a very difficult matter to collect caste details in the census operations. The necessary columns are already there and no structural alterations are required in the forms and schedules” (Kumar

2000). This exemplifies the kind of crude, simplistic assumptions made by those who argue for and against inclusion of caste, without taking into account the problems facing the enumerators. Many members of the intelligentsia and even some academics tend to think that caste is like age and sex about which the census organisation can collect information easily.

But caste does not really have the kind of fixity and rigidity often attributed to it. A M Shah laments that this has been, in fact, the burden of much of sociological and anthropological research that has developed during the last 50 years or so (Shah 1998).

As noted above, the enumeration of caste is a highly complicated task, unlike that of religion or gender. To understand the cause of this problem, we have to first dissect 'varna' and 'jati' from 'caste' and then historically contextualise the census operations.

### **THE OBJECT OF OUR FOCUS - CASTE OR JATI?**

One of the most important facts of India's social structure often overlooked is that communities have been found to be dynamic and socially mobile. Both colonial and Indian scholars have agreed that the boundaries of Indian communities have historically remained fuzzy, fluid and dynamic (Bhagat 2007). The lack of clarity in the boundaries could also be attributed to the fact that fusion among communities as well as the fission of a particular community has taken place (as noted above due to migration, changing of name, recognition by caste after change of faith and so on).

The English word 'caste' is derived from the Spanish and Portuguese word 'casta' which stands for 'race, lineage or breed', according to the Oxford English dictionary. When the Portuguese came to India in 1498, they employed this term to the Hindu social groups they encountered. Scholars (including sociologists) have interpreted caste as an equivalent of varna or/and jati. For instance, we have noted from the 'Varna and Caste' article of M N S

Srinivas that he distinguishes varna from caste (thereby implicitly equating caste with jati). However, Marriott and Inden differ from Srinivas. They argue that 'jati' could mean all sorts of things which the category of caste doesn't stand for.

Scholars have tried to define caste as an endogamous, ethnic, occupational, ritual or racial division. Underlying these definitions are two assumptions: that caste actually exists and can be observed in society, and that it has a fixed boundary implying that communities called castes across India have something in common (Samarendra 2011). Now, we know that caste and varna are not the same. So, I will proceed to examine whether jati and caste imply the same. Jati, in vernacular languages, stands for professional, linguistic, religious, tribal, endogamous, and even gendered communities. Endogamy does not uniformly characterise all the communities. Which of these jatis should be considered castes then?

### **CENSUS IN BRITISH INDIA**

In order to get an answer to the above question, first, we need to look at the origin of census operations in India and then analyse how caste is related to the census. Benedict Anderson considers census as one of the institutions of power (Anderson 1991). Several reasons could be

cited as to why the British started census in India. For administrative purposes, a clear knowledge of the composition of Indian society was necessary for the exercise of control and accumulation of capital. The colonial rulers understood the exigencies of the role of knowledge in maintaining power and tried to classify and then codify the Indian society (Bhagat 2007). This is resonant with Foucault's thesis.

The aim of the census was to count the population and classify it under different categories like age, sex, religion, caste, occupation etc. The conduct of these two interrelated processes depended on the fulfilment of certain prerequisites:

- a) An entity to be counted had to be definite and discrete with no overlapping boundaries.
- b) Classification required the formulation of classificatory principle(s), which would be derived from the defining attribute(s) or essence of the entity (Samarendra 2011).

The census was a pan-Indian project. The success of this project depended on consistency in the criteria of identification and classification of communities. The enumeration of caste started from the provincial census of North-Western Provinces (NWP) in 1865 and continued till 1931.

The point to be remembered here is that the British understanding of caste was based on the Sanskritists' interpretations of the scriptures which had the varna model. But the anthropologists and colonial officials realised that the varna model did not present the way caste was practised in reality. Consequently, the caste list generated of every province was different from that of other provinces because locally bounded, heterogeneous jatis were present in that area. Thus the census was faced with a contradiction: its lists attested to the heterogeneity of the jatis, its processes demanded homogeneity from the communities to be enumerated. The very purpose of the census was in jeopardy as questions arose about the viability of deducing all-India figures from the provincial reports (ibid). 1881 is remembered as the year in which the first pan-Indian census was carried out. It also marks a defining moment in the project in the history of census in India, because for the first time, we find an attempt on the part of the colonial officials and rulers to unwrap the essence of caste and its features on which castes can be enumerated, classified and compared across 6.

India. In 1891, the then census commissioner, J A Baines, wrote that caste referred to "status or function" that was perpetuated by "inheritance and endogamy" (Baines 1893; quoted in Samarendra 2011). Two interpretations of caste were at play around this time: The 'functional' theory propounded by Ibbotson, Crooke and Nesfield; and the 'racial' theory put forth by Risley, who tried to classify castes based on the tenet of 'social precedence' on a pan-Indian scale and failed. The existence of divergent jatis implied the absence of a single scale to measure status or construct hierarchy. No pan-Indian classificatory table was presented in the report on the census of 1901 (ibid).

It should be noted in this regard that during the 1881 census, the colonial administration decided that only those castes which had a minimum population of 100,000 would be classified; after 1901, following the failure of Risley to construct a pan-Indian classificatory table, as noted above, the British gave up the practice of classification, instead they listed castes alphabetically. In 1931, as we know, the last caste-count took place. Thus, after six decades of enumeration, the

colonial administration and census officials failed to come up with the criteria to identify caste and classify these groups.

Padmanabh Samarendra, in concluding his paper, argues that, caste cannot be equated with varna or jati. Varna has not been empirically verifiable; jatis have never had a uniform identity in the Indian society. Caste thus is fundamentally different from both varna and jati.

A pan-Indian caste system in its empirical avatar emerged towards the end of the 19th Century mainly because of the British efforts (ibid). Why I have taken up this issue and elaborated it is because this is the problem that faced our census officials during the last census in 2011; what Professor Samarendra has argued in his paper remains very much relevant in today's context. At this juncture, it should be remembered that the Depressed Classes as a category was created by the British. This was later reformulated and bifurcated as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution. One could always question, "Okay. What about it?" The categorisation does not have an inherent problem per se. But it becomes a problem in conjunction with the inclusion of caste in census. I will explain what I mean through the following example - Consider the case of the Vanjara community. The Vanjaras are listed under the OBC category in Maharashtra, SC category in Karnataka and ST category in Andhra Pradesh. Now, if you are enumerating caste on a pan-Indian scale, where do you place the Vanjaras? Are they OBCs, SCs or STs? This is not something I am making up. It is an actuality. I am not trying to take sides here and argue that the idea of caste inclusion is not practical. I am just presenting the problem that the census authorities are facing. I will give another example. Consider the Gurjar or Gujjar community. During the 6th to 12<sup>th</sup> Century period, they were primarily classed as Kshatriya and Brahmin and many of them converted to Islam during the Muslim conquest of the Indian subcontinent (Sharma and Sharma 1992; Nau 2003).

Today, Gurjar population can be found mainly in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Delhi, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The Gujjars are also found in the states of Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. The problem arises here. The Gurjars of Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh are classified as OBCs. The Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir are classified as STs. In case of Jammu & Kashmir, they were classified as STs vide the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act 1991. If you are enumerating caste on a pan-Indian scale, where do you place the Gujjars? Under OBCs or STs? It should be noted in this context that violent protests broke out in Rajasthan in 2006 because they were placed under the OBCs and were not granted ST status. The inclusion of caste in census can have socio-political consequences.

If the above cases are illustrative of one kind of problems plaguing the census officials, they are then facing another kind of problems- logistical problems. This has been raised by a section of sociologists and other users of census data like economists who are sceptical of the efficiency of the census authorities in making the consolidated data public. Their cynicism is justified considering the fact that several tabulations including the all-India tables for STs from the 1991 Census were not available even after eight years. Notwithstanding the substantial growth of Information Technology or IT industry in India in the 21st Century, their concern is if huge caste data would ever be processed and made available with a feasible time frame - perhaps the data would be obsolescent even before they publish it. A broader, more fundamental question that has

been raised concerning the dissemination of census data is whether or not potential users beyond the small circle of bureaucrats and demographic researchers are really able to gain access to the census data. In response to this, some have argued that census data shouldn't be singled out in the context of logistics and especially utilisation by the public, since most official statistics remain underutilised for development purposes.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one section of social scientists has suggested that data on caste should be collected by social scientists and research institutions rather than the state. Dissidents point out that only the state has the resources and the capacity to conduct such a massive exercise-private institutes can hardly match this. But the protagonists' argument is that the census apparatus simply would not be able to handle so much complexity on such a large scale.

Aggregation and consolidation of caste data across regions and states are almost insurmountable, since castes with the same names have different socio-economic statuses in different parts of the country. On the other hand, it is pointed out that such problems are not unique to caste but affect almost all the major variables enumerated in the census including occupation, language or even religion (Deshpande and Sundar 1998).

The argument is that in any case, imperfect data would still be better than no data at all. In response to the problems of aggregation, they suggest that no consolidation be attempted beyond the state level: this would also better reflect the realities of caste as a local institution, given that 86 percent of all castes are localised to single states (ibid). They cite the states of Karnataka and Gujarat as examples where detailed caste surveys are undertaken and Tamil Nadu where caste censuses have been successfully carried out.

The other section which comprises social scientists like A M Shah, P K Misra, former Census commissioner B K Roy Burman etc. tend to argue that the decision to count castes will result not in the collection of facts as such but intervention in social processes at different levels and it may have unintended consequences. P K Misra concedes that several scholars are critical of his position and they argue that if caste is not recognised in a formal manner, it amounts to consciously rejecting the principles on which caste is based. He also admits that this rejection may sound utopian, but he is optimistic that it is a utopia worth having, which clearly announces one is born free, and with no tags of behaviour, discrimination and prejudices. He says that it is the system of caste that has to go; and caste cannot be eliminated by legitimising it (Misra 2007).

Regardless of our own positions on this issue, what I would like to emphasise is that, in taking a position, we shouldn't neglect the problems and complexities facing the census officials; we should also try to look at the relation between caste and census (or religion and census) by historically contextualising it and analyse what has been the case in the past, what are the problems in the present, the nature of the problems, what solutions are ahead of us, how feasible they are, and what are the prospects for the future. We should avoid making simplistic assumptions arising from commonsensical understandings. The gravity of the issue has to be understood and solutions have to be devised keeping in mind the potential consequences from a particular course of action. In conclusion, I just think we will have to wait for the data to be

available from the 2011 Census. In 2001, they didn't include it. In 2011, after intense political lobby and pressure from both allies and the opposition parties, the PA government consented and caste was included. We will have to see what changes, if any, have occurred in the intervening 80 years since 1931. Only after data is available can we make any definitive statements and accordingly take specific positions on the matter. After all, we cannot make bricks without any clay, can we?

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