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Re-Introduce the Caste Question in the 2001 Census

ONE of the arguments advanced against the collection of caste data in census is that it is against the provisions of the Constitution. Let us consider the two relevant Articles in this regard. Article 15 refers to prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and clause (2) thereof provides that "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition . . .", Article 16 provides for Equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State and clause (2) thereof lays down that "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the State".

Thus the Constitution only prohibits any discrimination based only on caste or on the other grounds specified therein like religion, race, sex, place of birth and residence. The Census has been collecting data on religion, sex, place of birth and place of residence. The population figures of Scheduled Castes and Tribes are also required to be collected for the purpose of the constitutional mandate of reserving seats in the Parliament and State Assemblies for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Therefore, there is no reason to construe that collection of data on caste is against the provisions of the Constitution. Creation of a casteless and creedless society is an ideal enshrined in the minds and is not spelt out as a mandatory exercise in the Constitution involving the prohibition of even collection of data on castes and religions.

In many cases, data will have to be collected even about patently illegal matters in order to form an idea about the incidence or prevalence of such activities. Child marriage and child labour are two examples. Both these are violations of the relevant laws in force

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but it would be highly unwise to cite that as a ground for not collecting data on them. On the other hand, concrete data on the extent and whereabouts of their occurrence collected through censuses would be essential to deal with them. Therefore, citing such vague grounds of legality or illegality against the collection of caste data does not hold water.

Caste in India is no doubt highly complex and its number and variety indeterminate. While this may give rise to difficulties and delays in collection and compilation of caste data, there is no difficulty in collecting caste data as such in the census. Let us examine, in proper perspective, what the former Census Commissioners had to say in this regard based on their own first hand experience of caste enumeration. W.C. Plowden who was associated with the 1872 census had made the following observations: "On the subject of caste, the results obtained are by no means commensurate with the labour involved, and, unless some better arrangements are made, it would probably be advisable to omit the column altogether. In the eight reports about 200 pages are devoted to a description of the various castes with some 1370 pages of tables and though there is in them much interesting matter, it is doubtful whether the information thus gained has at all repaid the trouble taken in the compilation". If we carefully study the observations, it will be seen that the crux of Plowden's scepticism was whether the information gained on caste has at all repaid the trouble taken in the compilation. His advice to omit the column altogether was with the proviso : 'unless some other arrangements are made', in view of the then obtaining situation viz. "the results obtained are by no means commensurate with the labour involved". This is quite understandable given the fact that at that time there were no caste-based reservations or other Government policies and programmes based on caste. Collection and preservation of caste data was then just an academic exercise and there was no substantial useful purpose served by the caste data except studies, research and analysis.

The position has changed radically now since independence and fifty years thereafter. In addition to the reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes continuing since independence, reservation in service has now been extended to the backward castes after 1991. Further, Governments have hunched many welfare schemes for the backward classes. There are separate ministries and departments both at the Centre and the States to look after the welfare and development of Scheduled Castes and Tribes and the backward castes. There are also separate corporations and agencies for implementing welfare schemes and providing financial assistance exclusively to such castes. There are constitutionally ordained bodies like the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and the National Commission for Backward Classes and similar State Commissions for Backward Classes. Apart from these instances of State-sponsored affirmative action in favour of the backward castes, the caste composition of the society is assiduously followed in the selection of ministers at the Centre and States, members of the Public Service Commissions, chairman of State corporations etc. and communal rotation is

followed even for some academic offices like vice-chancellors and registrars of universities. Caste composition, encompassing both the forward and the backward, is invariably taken into account by political parties while selecting contestants for the legislatures and local Government bodies all over the country. India's society and polity are steeped in caste in all matters of power, position and patronage and there is no point in turning a blind eye to this reality. Census holds a mirror to contemporary society and mirrors do not lie. It is necessary that questions are asked in the census to get the details of the as-is-where-is condition of the society rather than sweep under the carpet the all-pervasive reality of caste.

It has been argued by some that if the data on backward castes are required for purposes of reservation, collection of census data could be limited to such castes alone and that data on all castes need not be collected. This is not workable and will not yield correct data on backward castes alone for the following reasons.

For the purpose of enumerating the Scheduled Caste and Tribe population, the census enumerator follows the notified list of Scheduled Castes and Tribes for each State, but there is no such uniform and unambiguous list in the case of backward castes (BCs). There are two separate lists viz. a Central list and a State list of BCs. Further, these lists have many inaccuracies and incongruities and other complicating factors which make it infeasible to expect the census to come up with accurate data for the BCs.

Some States have identified BCs based on the income criteria. For instance, in Punjab, 64 communities whose family income does not exceed Rs.3600 per annum and all residents of Punjab whose family income does not exceed Rs.3600 per annum irrespective of the caste, community or class to which they belong and what profession they follow shall be treated as belonging to BC. The Census of India does not ask questions on income for the obvious reason that people will not divulge this information and therefore collection and preservation of income-based caste data is not possible from the census. In Tamil Nadu, "orphans and destitute children who have lost their parents before reaching the age of ten and are destitutes and have nobody else to take care of them either by law or custom, and also who are admitted into any of the schools or orphanages run by the Government or recognized by the Government" are to be treated as BC. Such microscopic investigation into the personal background and family history of the respondents for the purpose of assigning BC status cannot be expected to be done by the enumerator in a massive and time-bound operation like census to be completed within a limited and rigid time frame.

In some States the same community has been included in lists of both SC/ST and BC. In such cases the census cannot provide disaggregation between SC/ST and BC figures of such castes. Phonetic similarity in the names of some BCs with some other non-BCs is another serious problem which the enumerator cannot solve at the time of collecting data. It should not be the function of the enumerator to identify or categorize a community or individual as BC based on his own subjective Judgment. For all these

reasons, correct and complete data cannot be expected to be generated from the census in respect of BCs alone.

If the enumeration is limited to the BCs alone, there is every likelihood of widespread complaints of underenumeration, whether perceived or imagined, from many communities, given the exaggerated claims of numerical strength advanced all these years by many caste groups. However accurate the enumeration, it will not be possible to dispel such misgivings when the enumeration is limited to some castes alone. On the other hand, if the caste enumeration is exhaustive and covers the entire population, no complaints of underenumeration will sustain since all persons would have been covered under one caste or another as returned by the respondent, without omission, and there will be no question of underenumeration of any caste.

The name of the caste of all persons including those belonging to SC, ST and BC can be collected through the inclusion of a single question in the census schedule. Of course, those who do not want to answer the question on caste should have the liberty to do so and the entry in such cases will be "caste not stated" just as is already done in the case of those who do not want to give a religion where the entry is "religion not stated" and tabulated accordingly. Thus conscientious objectors to the question on caste will not be compelled to answer it and the percentage of such entries will give an indication of the proportion of people who repudiate caste.

The enumerator will enter the name of the caste exactly as reported by the respondents without any change, without any disputing and without exercising any subjective judgment. The total number of castes returned is likely to reach or even exceed the figure of 100,000 for all-India. In the People of India (POI) Project undertaken by the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) recently, 68,000 different caste names had been identified. As compared to POI which was a limited survey, the census covering the entire population is certain to throw up an even larger number of caste names including sub castes, synonymus, phonetic variations etc. However, the census organisation has neither the obligation nor the mandate to classify or group the various castes reported and hence the census should only compile and tabulate the caste data as reported. It should be left to a specialised agency like the Anthropological Survey of India to attempt any classification and grouping required by the concerned user Ministry of the Central and State governments.

The caste-wise break-up of the population will facilitate cross-classification with various social, economic, cultural and demographic characteristics and thus provide a wealth of data on the levels achieved by each community in various indices like literacy and education, work characteristics, age at marriage, fertility, infant and child mortality, death rate etc. This will help governments and social organisations to give special attention to backward communities in achieving social and economic progress in the identified lagging indices. A valuable caste-wise sociological database of the entire population will also become available to conduct further studies and research. To give

just one example, the household size and composition data from the 1991 census show the growth of nuclear and joint families. While caste is a crucial factor having a bearing on household composition, in the absence of caste-wise and tribe-wise break up of the data, a valuable opportunity to study this vital sociological aspect of household size and composition has been lost. Many of the socio-cultural aspects of the Indian society are strongly related to and correlated with the three thousand year old institution of caste, and we are losing out on a wealth of data disaggregated on the basis of castes and tribes.

There have been strident and persistent demands since 1991 for inclusion of the question on caste in the census from various quarters including Chief Ministers, Backward Class Commissions, social organizations etc. Writs have also been filed in different High Courts. A case filed in the Kerala High Court at the time of the 1991 census was disposed of with the direction to the Government of India to consider the question of inclusion of caste at the 2001 census. A writ has recently been filed in the Karnataka High Court by a former Law Minister of Karnataka and others seeking directions of the High Court to include caste in the 2001 census questionnaire. Only a small section has been opposing the inclusion of caste. Some have even made alarmist predictions that if caste is included in the census there will be self-immolations all over the country on a much larger scale than post-Mandal. Such fears have no basis as will be vouchsafed by those who have their finger on the pulse of the people at large. While the anti-Mandal agitation was against job reservation affecting the very bread and butter of apprehensive youth, mere collecting of caste data in the census will entail no such opposition.

After the post-independence euphoria when caste was at a low and it was vainly thought that caste had been cast off, the course of democratic India has seen the resurgence of caste in the polity through the decades with the wheel turning full circle and caste awareness reaching a high in the post-Mandal 1990s. The first census thereafter in 2001 is therefore indubitably the right time to re-introduce the caste question in the census questionnaire and fill the glaring sociological data gap. The 2001 census schedule is about to be finalised and all interested parties from all round the country should now urge the Prime Minister, Home Minister and Government of India to take such a decision. Generations of data users both in Government and in academic, will appreciate and applaud this timely step just as multitudes have been gratefully utilising the rich ethnological data preserved for posterity in the pre-independence census reports.