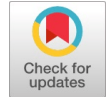




Counting to Zero: How Caste Census Navigates the Contradiction of Recognition and Annihilation

Paladugula Dhanraj



Abstract: This article examines the multifaceted dimensions of the caste census debate in India, exploring the paradoxical nature of counting caste in a society that aspires to transcend caste divisions. Drawing on historical analysis of colonial census operations and contemporary case studies from Bihar and Telangana, the study navigates the complex intersection of social justice imperatives, constitutional principles, and political realities that shape this controversial demographic exercise. The research examines how modern caste enumeration evolved from colonial administrative practices and analyses the methodological, ethical, and legal challenges associated with contemporary efforts to count caste. While proponents argue that comprehensive caste data is essential for evidence-based policy interventions to address persistent socioeconomic disparities, critics contend that such enumeration risks reinforcing the very social divisions it aims to overcome. The article pays particular attention to recent state-level caste surveys and their implications, including the Bihar High Court judgment that reaffirmed constitutional limits on reservation policies despite the availability of demographic data. Through this analysis, the study reveals how caste census initiatives embody a fundamental tension between recognition and transcendence—between acknowledging caste as a persistent social reality requiring measurement and the ultimate goal of creating a society where caste no longer determines life opportunities. The article concludes by proposing a balanced approach that reconciles data collection with constitutional values, emphasising methodological rigour, transparency safeguards, and a multidimensional understanding of social disadvantage that can guide India's path toward meaningful social equality.

Keywords: Caste Census, Social Stratification, Reservation Policy, Data Privacy, Constitutional Principles, Social Justice and Backwards Classes

Abbreviations:

ICR: Intelligent Character Recognition
SECC: Socio-Economic Caste Census
RGI: Registrar General of India
BC: Backwards Classes

I. INTRODUCTION

In the heart of India's democratic aspirations lies a profound paradox: can a society committed to moving beyond caste divisions ever accomplish this goal without first thoroughly understanding the very system it seeks to transcend? The question of conducting a comprehensive caste census in India represents one of the most complex and

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contentious issues in contemporary Indian politics and social policy. It sits at the intersection of historical legacies, constitutional principles, statistical methodologies, and competing visions for India's social future.

The colonial origins of modern caste enumeration cast a long shadow over this debate. When British administrators first attempted to categorise and count India's diverse social communities in the 19th century, they transformed fluid, localised social identities into rigid, administratively verifiable categories [1]. This colonial taxonomy fundamentally altered how caste was understood and experienced across the subcontinent. Today's discussions about caste census cannot escape this historical context—every modern attempt to count caste carries echoes of this colonial heritage [2].

Yet the imperative for accurate data on India's social reality remains compelling. With marginalized communities continuing to face systematic disadvantages—from educational access to employment opportunities, from asset ownership to political representation—calls for evidence-based policy interventions grow increasingly urgent [3]. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar once observed, understanding a social problem thoroughly is the first step toward addressing it effectively. The caste census represents a potential tool for bringing hidden disparities into the light of public discourse and policy consideration.

The states of Bihar and Telangana have become important laboratories for understanding both the potential and pitfalls of contemporary caste enumeration [4]. Their recent surveys have demonstrated how caste data can reveal previously obscured demographic realities while simultaneously becoming battlegrounds for political contestation [5]. These state-level experiments raise crucial questions about data reliability, political manipulation, privacy concerns, and the constitutional implications of translating demographic findings into reservation policies.

This article examines the multifaceted dimensions of the caste census debate in India. It explores the historical context of caste enumeration, analyses contemporary controversies, evaluates competing arguments about its necessity and risks, and considers potential paths forward that might reconcile the seemingly contradictory imperatives of acknowledging caste while ultimately transcending it. At stake in this debate is not merely a technical demographic exercise but India's broader journey toward realizing the constitutional vision of social justice and equality of opportunity.

II. CASTE CENSUS IN INDIA

The formation of modern caste identity in India can be traced to colonial census operations [6]. Research reveals the contemporary understanding.



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The concept of caste emerged not from traditional Indian social structures but through British administrative practices in the 19th century. The colonial census system attempted to standardize diverse local community identities (jatis) and classical textual categories (varnas) into a uniform, countable classification system. This administrative need for standardisation gave rise to a new concept of caste that was fundamentally different from both the traditional varna and jati systems. Census officials faced persistent challenges in their attempt to create a pan-Indian classification of castes, highlighting the fundamental mismatch between complex social realities and the requirements of administrative categorisation. Despite these difficulties, the census operations effectively institutionalised caste as an empirically verifiable and uniform entity. This colonial construction of caste identity continues to influence both academic discourse and government policy in contemporary India, despite its artificial nature. Particularly significant is the observation that pre-colonial Indian society recognised diverse community identities through jati and religious-textual categories, such as varna, but these were distinct from the modern concept of caste. The study demonstrates how administrative requirements for enumeration and classification fundamentally altered the understanding of Indian social structures, creating lasting impacts on both scholarly analysis and policy formation.

The colonial census operations in India, starting in 1872, played a crucial role in creating and institutionalising modern concepts of caste and tribe through systematic enumeration and classification, which were fundamentally different from pre-colonial social categories [7]. The colonial administrators faced significant challenges in standardising and classifying India's diverse jatis and communities into uniform census categories, resulting in inconsistencies and contradictions in how castes and tribes were defined and enumerated. The census evolved from recording race, religion, and caste in its early years (1872-1941) to focusing solely on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes after independence (post-1951), reflecting shifting administrative and political priorities. The process of categorisation through the census created new social identities and reinforced existing divisions, contributing to the politicisation of caste and tribal identities in modern India.

Census Operations and Political Influence: The study reveals that census operations in India are not merely demographic exercises but are deeply influenced by political considerations [8]. The collection and publication of population data reflect the political agenda of rulers, both during colonial and post-colonial periods. **Categorization and Identity Formation:** The census played a crucial role in creating and institutionalizing social categories. While colonial censuses helped define precise boundaries between communities, post-independence censuses worked to blur these distinctions, particularly for religious and ethnic minorities. **Shift in Census Categories:** The research documents a significant shift in census categorization from colonial to post-independence India. There was a notable reduction in detailed data collection on religion, tribes, and castes after independence, reflecting the state's homogenizing

political agenda. **Religious and Caste Enumeration:** The study finds that upper-caste Hindus generally oppose detailed caste enumeration. In contrast, lower castes support it as it helps reinforce their social identity and potential political strength. Similarly, religious minorities favour detailed religious data collection, while the Hindu majority often opposes it. **Political Impact and Data Manipulation:** The research demonstrates how census data can be manipulated for political purposes, particularly in the enumeration of religious and ethnic groups. This is evidenced through examples from Punjab, where certain religious sects were undercounted or miscategorized to serve political interests.

In a significant contribution to democratic theory, recent scholarship expands our understanding of majoritarianism through Ambedkar's conceptual framework of "majoritarian domination" [9]. The study makes a crucial distinction between political majorities, which are changeable and inclusive, and communal majorities, which remain fixed and exclusionary. Through this theoretical lens, three fundamental mechanisms that characterize majoritarian domination are identified: permanence (where majority status becomes fixed through identity), exaggeration (manifesting as institutional overreach), and confusion (exhibited through conformism and pluralistic ignorance). Central to this analysis is Ambedkar's examination of caste as a social structure that fundamentally impedes the development of a democratic society by fostering a moral psychology of domination and enabling systematic oppression. The research significantly advances classical theories of majoritarian tyranny by demonstrating how social structures fundamentally condition democratic politics, employing comparative analysis across diverse contexts, including India, the United States, and Europe. This framework challenges the assumptions of contemporary democratic theory regarding the composition of political majorities. It offers valuable insights into how social structures can produce majorities that seek to maintain permanent dominance over minorities, thereby undermining democratic principles.

The Indian Constitution's Article 21 fundamentally protects personal liberty, with the Supreme Court interpreting this to encompass privacy rights [10]. The right to privacy is defined as an individual's ability to control the disclosure of personal information, supported by partial legal protections provided by existing frameworks, such as the Information Technology Act and the Indian Penal Code. Challenges persist with digital data collection and unauthorised use of information, highlighting the need for comprehensive privacy regulations. Recent developments, including the passage of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act in 2023 [11], demonstrate India's evolving approach to data protection. Despite progress, the country continues to struggle with creating robust enforcement mechanisms that can effectively safeguard individual privacy in the rapidly changing digital landscape. The ongoing legal and technological transformation highlights the complex journey of establishing and protecting privacy rights in India, as it balances individual freedoms with the demands of a digital society.





III. CENSUS, CASTE CENSUS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CASTE CENSUS

A census is a systematic and comprehensive process of collecting, recording, and analysing data about a specific population. It comes from the Latin word 'censere', meaning 'to assess', and represents the most complete form of population enumeration. The key characteristics that define a census are its enumeration (counting each person), universal coverage within a defined territory (counting everyone in the designated area), simultaneity (conducted at approximately the same time), and defined periodicity (regular intervals, typically every ten years as recommended by the UN).

While most are associated with national population and housing counts, census methodology extends beyond just counting people. It can be applied to various domains, including agriculture, business, culture, and traffic, making it a versatile tool for gathering systematic data about any defined population or subject matter. The United Nations provides guidelines and recommendations for conducting censuses to ensure international consistency and comparability of data collected across different countries and periods.

The Caste Census is an introductory demographic survey conducted under the administrative control of the Ministry of Home Affairs, specifically by the Registrar General of India (RGI) and the Census Commissioner of India. It focuses specifically on collecting caste-related demographic information about citizens.

The Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) is a more comprehensive study that examines both caste and socio-economic factors of households. Started in June 2011, the census was conducted through door-to-door enumeration and involved three separate authorities: the Department of Rural Development (for rural areas), the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (for urban areas), and the Ministry of Home Affairs (for caste data). Unlike a simple caste census, SECC ranks households based on predefined parameters and uses multiple criteria, including automatic exclusion, automatic inclusion, and deprivation indicators.

The key difference between the two lies in their purpose and confidentiality: While regular census data (including caste census) must remain confidential under the Census Act 1948, SECC data is deliberately kept open for government departments to use for granting or restricting benefits to households. Additionally, SECC allows for public scrutiny and objections through Gram Sabhas and Panchayats, making it more transparent and participatory than a traditional caste census. Both serve as tools for understanding population demographics, but SECC provides a more actionable framework for policy implementation.

IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CENSUS AND CASTE CENSUS

The history of population counting in India dates to ancient times, with evidence from the Rig Veda (c. 800-600 BC) and Kautilya's Arthashastra (c. 321-296 BC). The modern systematic census began during British rule, with the first complete city census conducted in 1830 by Henry Walter in Dacca. The first comprehensive nationwide census was conducted in 1872, although it did not encompass all British-controlled territories. Since 1881, under W.C. Plowden as

Census Commissioner, India has undertaken uninterrupted decennial censuses.

Following independence, the Census Act of 1948 formalised the process, with the first census of independent India conducted in 1951. The census has evolved significantly from 14 questions in 1951 to 29 questions in 2011, reflecting the changing needs of planning and governance. Notable developments include the introduction of the National Population Register in 2011, technological advancements such as Intelligent Character Recognition (ICR) in 2001, and the expansion of data collection to encompass various socio-economic parameters, making it the largest administrative exercise in peacetime India.

The most significant turning point in caste enumeration occurred in 1990, when the Mandal Commission's recommendations led to the proposal of 27% OBC reservations in government jobs, underscoring the critical need for accurate caste data. This was followed by the 2011 census, which marked two important attempts at caste enumeration: the main census that systematically counted SC/ST categories (reporting 17% SC and 9% ST), and a separate specialized caste census specifically designed to count OBCs and other caste groups. This dual approach in 2011 represented the first major systematic attempt at comprehensive caste enumeration in independent India.

Current Status: The present situation of the caste census in India remains complex and unresolved. The data from the 2011 specialized caste census has never been released due to concerns about data quality. There is no consensus on the methodology for measuring caste, as different surveys employ varying approaches, ranging from who should be asked about caste (all religions vs. specific groups) to how responses should be verified. Despite the crucial importance of caste data for policy-making and social programs, including reservation policies, India still lacks a standardised, widely accepted method for conducting a caste census, making it a continuing challenge in demographic studies and policy implementation.

V. IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS: THE IMPERATIVE OF A CASTE CENSUS

The necessity of a caste census is rooted in multiple imperatives—social, legal, administrative, and moral. Socially, caste remains a profound structuring principle in Indian society, evident in low inter-caste marriage rates (only about 5% as of 2011-12), residential segregation, and continued caste-based electoral considerations [12]. Legally, the Constitution and subsequent Supreme Court rulings have recognised caste as a significant criterion for defining backwards classes and supporting reservation policies.

From an administrative perspective, detailed caste data serves multiple crucial functions. It helps correct wrongful caste inclusions and exclusions, prevents dominant castes within reserved categories from monopolising benefits, aids in sub-categorising castes, and helps determine economic criteria for defining the 'creamy layer' of beneficiaries. Morally, the census addresses the historical lack of data that has allowed upper caste and dominant OBC elites to control national assets, income, and power disproportionately.

The data reveal critical disparities: studies found that



OBC labour force participation rates dropped from 46% to 38% between 2016 and 2022-23, compared to a minimal decline for upper castes [13]. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index shows that approximately 33.3% of India's SC population lives in poverty [14]. Moreover, funds intended for disadvantaged communities are often misallocated, as evidenced by reports from the National Commission for Scheduled Castes.

By providing a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to understanding caste dynamics, the census offers a pathway to more targeted, effective social welfare policies. It transforms the narrative from arbitrary reservation policies to data-driven, nuanced interventions that can genuinely address the complex socio-economic challenges faced by different caste groups.

VI. CASTE CENSUS: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of the caste census is to create a comprehensive demographic and socio-economic mapping of India's diverse caste groups. By collecting detailed data, the government aims to comprehend the complex social landscape and address historical inequalities. The census serves as a critical tool for policymaking, enabling targeted interventions that can uplift marginalised communities. It provides empirical evidence to support affirmative action policies, tracks the effectiveness of reservations, and ensures equitable allocation of resources across different caste groups.

The objectives are multifaceted, including identifying socio-economic disparities, monitoring educational and employment representation, and creating a data-driven approach to social justice. For instance, recent studies have revealed stark inequalities: only 14% of Scheduled Tribe agricultural households and 16% of Scheduled Caste households own land. The National Sample Survey showed that SCs constitute 32% of the informal labour population, despite representing only 16% of the total population, highlighting the critical need for comprehensive data collection.

VII. CASTE CENSUS AND THE PATH TO ELIMINATING CASTE

Paradoxically, the caste census is viewed as a potential mechanism for ultimately annihilating the caste system. By bringing caste data into the open, the census aims to challenge and expose the deep-rooted social stratification that has persisted for millennia. The approach follows Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of directly confronting caste dynamics, to create a more equitable society. The late Kanshi Ram's slogan, "Jiski Jitni Sankhya Bhari, Uski Utni Hissedari" (Proportional share based on population strength), encapsulates this philosophy of representation and social equality.

The census seeks to transform caste from a tool of oppression to a means of understanding and addressing social inequalities. By providing transparent data, it challenges stereotypes, exposes systemic discrimination, and creates opportunities for meaningful dialogue. The aim is not to perpetuate caste divisions but to make them visible and dismantle them systematically. The goal is to "acknowledge caste to annihilate it," using data as a weapon against social hierarchies and discrimination.

VIII. DEBATES AROUND THE CASTE CENSUS: MORAL DILEMMAS AND POLITICAL REALITIES

The question of conducting a comprehensive caste census in India has ignited intense debates that reveal deep philosophical divisions about India's social future. These debates centre on several key points of contention that warrant careful examination.

A. Moral Legitimacy vs. Practical Necessity

At the heart of the debate lies a fundamental question: Is counting caste morally legitimate in a society attempting to move beyond caste divisions? Critics argue that a caste census would only "deepen divisions" and grant more legitimacy to a system that should be abolished [15]. According to this perspective, forcing individuals to identify with a caste runs counter to the constitutional vision of a casteless society. It may impede social progress by reinforcing caste consciousness.

Conversely, sociologists argue that it is "foolish not to collect information on a social institution that is of such importance in the distribution of life chances today" [16]. This perspective contends that effective policy-making requires accurate data and that measurement is a crucial step toward achieving this goal. The things you wish to abolish must be monitored and measured. Otherwise, you risk equating censorship with abolishing.

B. Evidence of Persistence vs. Claims of Fading Relevance

Another point of contention revolves around the current relevance of the caste system in Indian society. Some observers claim that caste distinctions are naturally fading in modern, urban India, particularly among educated youth who are increasingly unaware of caste identities [17]. Proponents of this view cite increasing rates of inter-caste marriages and urbanization as evidence that caste is losing its grip on Indian society.

However, this optimistic assessment is challenged by evidence showing persistent caste-based discrimination and violence [18]. Government data indicate that caste-based atrocities have been rising in recent years. Research continues to document how individuals with Dalit surnames face housing discrimination, social ostracism, and even targeted violence. These contradictory narratives about the current influence of caste fundamentally shape perspectives on whether a caste census is necessary or counterproductive.

C. Political Opportunism vs. Evidence-Based Policy

Accusations of political motivations further complicate the debate around the caste census. Critics characterize calls for a caste census as "nothing but a political ploy [by opposition parties] to garner votes in the name of caste." This perspective views the push for caste enumeration as opportunistic identity politics rather than a genuine concern for social welfare.

Proponents counter that comprehensive data is essential for improving India's affirmative action policies, which have not been substantively updated in over three decades. The current reservation system relies on population estimates from 1931 and the findings of the Mandal Commission from



1980. Without current data, it remains impossible to determine whether quotas accurately reflect population proportions or whether certain groups that have advanced economically still require reservations.

IX. THE POLITICAL FOOTBALL PHENOMENON

Perhaps most revealing is what scholars describe as the "political football" phenomenon. Parties often advocate for a caste census while in opposition, but actively work to prevent or undermine such efforts once in power. This pattern was evident in 2011 when the Congress-led government conducted a "socioeconomic and caste census" but never published the results, citing data quality issues that some scholars suspect were "planned failures" designed to sabotage the effort.

This consistent pattern suggests that political leadership across the spectrum recognizes the potential volatility of comprehensive caste data. Accurate counts could fuel demands from numerically strong but underrepresented groups for larger quotas in jobs and education, creating uncomfortable political pressures for ruling parties.

X. REGIONAL APPROACHES AND NEW DEVELOPMENTS

While the national debate continues, several states have moved forward with their caste censuses, creating natural experiments in caste enumeration. The southern state of Telangana, under the leadership of the Congress party, has recently launched a local caste census [19], joining Bihar [20], Andhra Pradesh, and other states in collecting state-level caste data. These regional initiatives may provide valuable insights into methodologies and impacts of caste enumeration.

At the national level, Rahul Gandhi, representing the opposition Congress party, has emerged as one of the most vocal advocates for a nationwide caste census, illustrating how the issue continues to divide political opinion along party lines.

The ongoing delay of India's next general census—now 14 years since the last one—has only intensified this debate. As experts from both sides continue to argue over the moral and practical implications of counting caste, the underlying questions about India's social identity and future remain unresolved.

A. Contemporary Developments: The Telangana Case Study

The recent caste survey conducted by the Telangana government provides a timely case study that illustrates many of the debates surrounding caste enumeration discussed throughout this article. This state-level exercise offers valuable insights into both the potential benefits and challenges of conducting caste censuses in contemporary India.

B. Methodological Challenges and Data Credibility

The Telangana survey highlights the significant methodological challenges involved in caste enumeration. Despite deploying over 94,000 enumerators and achieving 96.9% coverage of households, the survey has faced serious questions about its accuracy and reliability. Critics point to

discrepancies between the current findings and previous estimates, particularly the reported decline in Backwards Classes (BC) population from 52% in earlier surveys to 46.25% in the current census, despite overall population growth.

This case illustrates how the technical aspects of data collection—such as questionnaire design, enumeration procedures, and data processing—can significantly impact outcomes and potentially influence policy decisions. The allegations of undercounting specific communities reinforce concerns about whether census methodologies can accurately capture India's complex social reality.

C. Data Transparency vs. Privacy Concerns

The Telangana government's decision to withhold detailed individual-level data, citing privacy considerations, exemplifies the tension between transparency and data protection [21]. Contemporary caste enumeration must navigate complex privacy requirements while still providing sufficient transparency for public scrutiny.

The government's justification mirrors broader debates about how sensitive demographic data should be handled, stored, and shared. This highlights the need for clear protocols on data management that strike a balance between the imperative for evidence-based policymaking and the right to privacy. This issue would be magnified in any national-level caste census.

D. Political Contestation of Data

Perhaps most significantly, the Telangana case illustrates how caste data becomes intensely politicized once collected. Opposition parties' allegations that the data was manipulated to deliberately undercount specific communities while inflating others demonstrate the inherently political nature of caste enumeration. These controversies reflect the "political football phenomenon" discussed earlier, where caste data becomes a battleground for competing political interests.

The sharp divisions over interpretation of the data—with some parties claiming deliberate manipulation to reduce BC political influence and others defending the methodology—show how statistical exercises become entangled in broader power struggles. This reinforces the argument that caste census initiatives are never merely technical demographic exercises but are fundamentally shaped by political considerations.

E. Implications for Reservation Policies

The Telangana government's announcement of a 42% reservation for BCs in local body elections, based on survey findings, demonstrates how caste census data directly influences affirmative action policies. This connection between enumeration and resource allocation validates both the concerns of critics who fear the destabilisation of existing arrangements and the hopes of proponents who see data-driven policy adjustments as necessary for achieving social justice.

The controversies surrounding sub-categorization within SC reservations that emerged following the survey—with Madiga community leaders demanding proportional

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representation—further illustrate how detailed caste data can trigger new demands for recognition and resources among marginalized groups.

F. Legal Dimensions and Precedents: The Bihar High Court Judgment

The Bihar caste census and subsequent legal challenges offer a critical case study that illuminates the complex constitutional and legal dimensions of caste enumeration in India. This example provides essential context for understanding the broader implications of nationwide caste census initiatives.

G. The Bihar Census and Reservation Enhancement

In 2023, Bihar became one of the first states in recent times to conduct a comprehensive caste survey, revealing that Backwards Classes constitute 63.13% of the state's population—a significant increase from previous estimates [22]. Based on this data, the Bihar government passed legislation increasing reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backwards Classes from 50% to 65%, taking the total reservation in the state to 75% when combined with the 10% Economically Weaker Section quota.

This move directly challenged the Supreme Court's 1992 judgment in *Indra Sawhney vs. Union of India*, which had established a 50% ceiling on reservations. The Bihar government justified exceeding this limit by citing newly collected empirical data that demonstrates a significant proportion of historically disadvantaged communities in the state's population.

H. The Patna High Court Verdict and Constitutional Questions

The enhanced reservation policy was promptly challenged in the Patna High Court, which in June 2024 struck down the legislation as unconstitutional [23]. The court's judgment underscored several key legal principles that have profound implications for caste census initiatives nationwide:

The court reaffirmed the 50% ceiling on reservations as a constitutional principle that cannot be breached merely based on demographic proportions. This ruling reinforced the view that reservations are intended to address specific, demonstrated inadequacies in representation, rather than ensuring proportional representation based solely on population.

The judgment highlighted the need for "compelling circumstances" to exceed the 50% limit, emphasizing that raw demographic data alone does not constitute such circumstances without evidence of extreme backwardness or inadequate representation in specific domains.

The court questioned the constitutional validity of using caste census data primarily as a tool for expanding reservations beyond established limits, suggesting that demographic enumeration cannot by itself justify overriding constitutional principles established by the Supreme Court.

I. Implications for Caste Census Initiatives

The Bihar case reveals the complex relationship between caste enumeration and reservation policies, highlighting several critical tensions within India's constitutional framework:

Data vs. Constitutional Principles: The case illustrates that empirical data on caste demographics, although essential for policy formulation, do not automatically supersede established constitutional principles or judicial precedents. This creates a paradoxical situation in which states conduct caste censuses but may face significant constraints in implementing policies based on the resulting data.

Federalism and State Autonomy: The Bihar government's appeal to the Supreme Court following the Bihar High Court judgment raises important questions about state autonomy in conducting social surveys and formulating reservation policies based on local demographic realities. This tension between federal constitutional principles and state-level social justice initiatives is likely to shape future debates on caste enumeration. **Evidentiary Standards:** The court's insistence on evidence beyond mere population figures raises essential questions about what types of data caste censuses should collect. This suggests that future census initiatives may need to gather not just demographic information but also specific evidence of backwardness, discrimination, and inadequate representation across various domains.

J. Contemporary Significance

The Bihar case holds particular significance for the national caste census debate because it highlights the potential limitations of data-driven policy interventions within India's constitutional framework. While proponents argue that empirical data are essential for targeted social justice interventions, the case reveals that collecting such data does not automatically legitimize proportional representation policies that exceed established constitutional parameters.

This experience suggests that advocates for caste census must engage not only with arguments about data collection but also with broader questions of constitutional interpretation and the relationship between demographic facts and normative principles in Indian jurisprudence. The ongoing appeal before the Supreme Court may eventually provide more precise guidance on how caste census data can be legitimately utilized within India's constitutional framework. The Bihar experience thus serves as both a model and a cautionary tale for other states considering similar initiatives. It demonstrates both the potential of caste enumeration to reveal previously hidden demographic realities and the complex legal challenges that may arise when attempting to translate this data into concrete policy interventions within India's constitutional democracy.

XI. LESSONS FOR NATIONAL DISCOURSE

The Telangana experience offers valuable lessons for the national debate on caste census. It demonstrates that while caste enumeration can provide empirical grounds for policy interventions, it also inevitably becomes a contested terrain where questions of methodology, transparency, and political motivations predominate. The allegations of data manipulation and undercounting reflect more profound anxieties about how caste demographics might reshape political power structures.





XII. CONCLUSION: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX PATH FORWARD

The debate surrounding the caste census in India represents a complex intersection of historical legacies, contemporary politics, constitutional principles, and aspirations for social justice. After examining the various dimensions of this issue, several balanced conclusions emerge, pointing toward a nuanced approach.

A. The Dual Nature of Caste Enumeration

The caste census presents a fundamental paradox in India's journey toward social equality. On one hand, comprehensive data collection offers the potential for evidence-based policymaking that could address deeply entrenched inequalities with greater precision. On the other hand, as the Telangana and Bihar cases demonstrate, such data can become politically contentious, subject to manipulation, and potentially entrench the very identities that many hope to transcend in the long run.

This duality suggests that the way forward lies not in simply adopting or rejecting caste enumeration wholesale, but in developing methodologically sound, transparent, and constitutionally aligned approaches that balance competing concerns.

B. Reconciling Data Collection with Constitutional Values

The Bihar High Court judgment highlights a critical tension between demographic reality and constitutional principles. While empirical data revealing the numerical strength of historically marginalized communities is essential, such data alone cannot override established constitutional parameters such as the 50% ceiling on reservations. This suggests that future caste census initiatives should be designed not merely to count groups but to gather multidimensional evidence of continued social discrimination, educational disparities, and economic marginalization.

The objective should be to collect data that serves the constitutional vision of substantive equality rather than mechanical proportional representation. This requires designing census methodologies that go beyond simple enumeration to capture the complex realities of discrimination and disadvantage in contemporary India.

C. Transparency, Privacy, and Methodology

The experiences in Telangana, Bihar, and other states reveal persistent challenges regarding data transparency, privacy protection, and methodological rigour. A balanced approach would establish clear protocols for data management that protect individual privacy while ensuring sufficient transparency for public scrutiny and academic analysis.

Independent oversight of both data collection and analysis processes would help address legitimate concerns about political manipulation. Standardizing methodologies across states while allowing for regional variations in implementation could improve the consistency and comparability of data, enhancing its utility for policy formation.

D. Beyond Binary Debates

Moving beyond the simplistic binary of whether to count caste or not, India needs a thoughtful dialogue about how to collect socially relevant data in ways that serve the goal of

reducing social stratification rather than reinforcing it. This might include:

Adopting a multidimensional approach to social data collection that examines caste alongside other factors such as economic status, educational access, geographical location, and gender.

Developing time-bound frameworks that acknowledge caste as a current reality while setting clear objectives for policies that would eventually render caste-based interventions unnecessary.

Creating institutional mechanisms that can translate demographic data into targeted policy interventions without automatically equating numerical strength with proportional entitlements.

Establishing rigorous evaluation mechanisms to assess whether policies based on caste data are effectively reducing social disparities over time.

E. The Path Forward for Indian Society

For Indian society, the most constructive approach appears to acknowledge caste as a persistent social reality while working deliberately toward its eventual irrelevance. This requires:

Accepting the need for accurate data as a basis for addressing current inequalities, collected through methodologically sound processes with appropriate privacy safeguards.

Developing nuanced policies that respond to demonstrated disadvantages rather than implementing mechanical quotas based solely on population percentages

Focusing interventions on measurable outcomes that improve substantive equality of opportunity rather than simply redistributing positions based on demographic proportions.

Creating stronger interconnections between caste-based policies and broader social welfare initiatives, educational reforms, and economic development programs.

Engaging in honest public dialogue about both the persistence of caste-based discrimination and the vision of a future where social mobility is not constrained by the accident of birth.

The caste census debate ultimately reflects more profound questions about India's social identity and future direction. Rather than viewing it as merely a technical demographic exercise or a political battleground, it represents an opportunity to thoughtfully engage with fundamental questions about equality, representation, and social justice in a diverse and changing society. The most productive path forward lies in approaches that honor constitutional principles, recognize social realities, and maintain a clear focus on the goal of creating a society where caste no longer determines life opportunities.

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