

Caste Census in India: Colonial Roots and Contemporary Debates

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ABSTRACT

One of the primary challenges for the post-independence political and administrative community in India has been the demand for a comprehensive and detailed caste census. While no caste list has appeared in the National Census since 1931, this list remains highly contentious in discussions of social equity and the efficacy of affirmative action. To gain insight into the overall picture of national politics today, one must view it through the evolution of caste enumeration from the flexible caste system existing before the British colonised India to the rigidly defined categories imposed by the British to the subsequent use of caste for political gain in today's India. The discussions today are not just about who gets counted, but whether the reservation policy currently in place is genuinely beneficial to the most vulnerable members of the Other Backward Classes (OBC), or whether it simply entrenches the authority of the "creamy layer" at the top of the OBCs. The paper examines the historical trajectory of census practices in India, tracing their colonial foundations and analysing contemporary debates surrounding caste enumeration and representation. It engages with both archival sources and recent policy discussions to highlight how the census remains a site of political negotiation and identity formation in postcolonial India.

Keywords: *Census, Colonialism, social equity, identity politics, Divide & Rule, Creamy Layer.*

INTRODUCTION

India is often termed as “the epitome of diversity in the world.” It's diverse in terms of ethnicity, regions, religion, class, caste, etc. However, the integral unity within these diverse cultures and traditions cemented the bond among Indians to live together. Syncretism among religions plays a significant role in shaping social norms, cultural values, and the belief systems of Indians. Therefore, syncretic elements and rationality within Dharma have typically been used to legitimise socio-religious reforms in Indian society in the 18th-19th century.

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Wanderers from different corners of the world have usually come to India as travellers, who later became traders and, in the last days of the Mughal era, finally conquerors. The foreign visitors found India's diversity exceptional and noted its syncretic character in their travelogues. Some of them settled in India and assimilated into its ever-blooming diversity. It is an excellent mission to create laws and policies that reflect the diverse aspirations of people with varied characteristics and culturally distinct backgrounds. Those laws and regulations were made instruments for overall development, keeping diversity in mind, which was the primary purpose of the census, conducted once every ten years since 1872.

FOUNDATION OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Before colonial rule, caste, or *Jāti*, was a locally contextual, flexible, and dynamic system of social stratification, rather than a single, monolithic, all-India hierarchy. Scholarly analysis, such as Nicholas Dirks's *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (2001), challenges the notion of caste as an unchanging, purely religious, or "spiritual essence" of India (Dirks, 2001). Dirks argues that in pre-colonial kingdoms, particularly in South India, the power of local kings (Kshatriyas) and the political economy of land and tribute were often more significant than the ritual supremacy of Brahmins (priests). Caste identity was fluid; groups could, and did, change their status over time through military success, land acquisition, or by employing Brahmins to fabricate suitable genealogies. Pre-colonial records, such as *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Rajatarangini*, contain lists of communities, but their nature is descriptive rather than a rigid, all-India hierarchy (Dirks, 2001).

Unlike earlier conquerors, the British did not intend to settle in India as natives and assimilate into the local populace. They came as traders, primarily to exploit and plunder India's vast resources. The East India Company (EIC) was established in the subcontinent in 1600 AD, but the British were not the only one's eyeing India's rich reserves. The British arrived in India after the Portuguese and French had already been there. Since many other European countries, apart from Britain, were also in India for trade, they sought the same privilege to exploit the country's resources. Therefore, given the aspirations of other European colonial powers, such as the French, Dutch, and Portuguese, the East India Company began consolidating its control over India. The other European powers, other than the Portuguese, were France and the Netherlands. Since all of them wanted a level playing field for trade

in India and economic exploitation, it became essential for the East India Company to assume control of India to establish a strong foothold. By the mid-18th century, India was almost under British colonial rule. Although the Mughals were a dominant and most significant power in India until the 17th century, many small kingdoms exerted local influence.

British colonialism can be divided into two phases since its arrival in India: the 1st phase spans from the Battle of Plassey to the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, and the 2nd phase spans from the aftermath of the Sepoy Mutiny to India's Independence in 1947. The British East India Company took control of India's administration to consolidate its rule. However, they avoided intervention in the country's social and cultural spheres and concentrated on maximising their profits in trade and commerce. The colonial rulers continued the existing customs, traditions, and rituals of contemporary India to win the confidence of India's dominant class and consolidate British rule (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the reputation of the East India Company came down significantly. Therefore, the British Crown took direct control over India. Observing the unity among different sections of Indians against the British Raj. Thus, they now tried to divide the people on issues such as caste, class, and religion to break the growing nationalist sentiment among Indians.

THE STRUCTURE AND VALUES OF INDIAN SOCIETY AND THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

The British were well aware that they couldn't rule India unless they became familiar with indigenous rule and won the native's trust. Therefore, the rulers must have a critical understanding of people's culture, traditions, customs, and other aspects of society that mainly influence people's lives. The British tried to legitimise their control over India as a civilising mission, claiming they were more civilised and modern than the Indians. As Edward Said defines 'Orient' as "Europe's greatest, richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisations and languages, its cultural contestants and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other" (Said, 1978).

With the arrival of modernity in the 19th century, there was an increasing interest in studying the eastern societies (Orientalism), including their culture, traditions, and languages, which were previously known only to the elite, learned men of society, such as Brahmins and Maulvis.

Orientalism, according to Said, was a vested knowledge imposed from above by Europeans; moreover, it was shaped as per colonial needs and endorsed by all, as the colonial powers themselves legitimised it. Subsequently, the orient concept became invaluable to the British because it empowered them to conform to the society they governed, facilitating efficient administration.

In accordance with their profit interest through unrestricted commerce and revenue gathering, the EIC attempted to eliminate the debris of the Mughal Empire. The initial stage begins at the village level, establishing their dictatorship by seizing the powers of local rajas and zamindars (who used to dominate there). They justified this on the basis that natives were not aware of freedom, and that's why their crooked nobility class easily exploited them. Here, the story doesn't end unilaterally; the Fort William College attempted to counter the ideas of emancipation promoted by the French Revolution. They believed that concepts such as liberty, property, and the rule of law would make individuals more conscious of their freedom and further modernise the framework of Indian society, thereby ensuring the liberation of their members. So, Lord Cornwallis and Thomas Munro introduced the Permanent Settlement (Bengal) and the Ryotwari Settlement (Madras and Bombay presidencies), respectively, giving the idea that it would preserve India's village communities. Still, if seen closely, both systems closely followed the tenets of supreme governance and the inviolability of personal property to be safeguarded by colonial rule. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay observed that the British wanted the company's government in India to be vindicatory rather than regulatory; thus, they sought to adopt Indian traditions of native governance (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

CASTE SYSTEM AND THE RELIGIOUS LAWS

Indian society has been divided based on caste since ancient times. According to Hindu scriptures, society was divided into a four-fold classification into the hierarchical order (also called the Chaturvarnya system): Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. This division initially was based on occupation, but gradually it gave way to a caste system based on birth. For example, a Brahmin's child would be born a Brahmin, and a Shudras descendants would be Shudras.

To establish a strong foothold in the country's administration, the British needed to comprehend the societal structure and adapt it accordingly to bolster

the British Raj. Warren Hastings designed his policies based on the principles of Orientalism, and the vanquished populations were to be governed by these rules and regulations, thus laying the groundwork for the codes of Hindu and Muslim law. The ancient Hindu Dharma Shashtra served as the basis for Hindu law, while Muslim law was based on interpretations of the Quran by Maulvis and Maulanas. Hastings introduced the new judicial system. Every district was to have courts on two levels: one for criminal justice and the other for adjudicating personal matters, based on Muslim law for Muslims and Hindu law for Hindus. The division of legal topics followed the English system of classification. The civil courts were presided over by panchayat officials and were assisted by Brahmin pundits and Maulvis for interpreting indigenous laws (Ketkar, 2021). It caused a lot of confusion as they were based on various Dharmashastras and varied from case to case; therefore, Hasting formed a committee of eleven pundits and codified the Hindu laws in 1775 and the Muslim laws by 1778. Thus, standardisation of laws centralised the judicial authority, and the administration was reduced to the system.

Manusmriti compiled by the Brahmins, deals with range of topics concerning social and religious life that includes: sacraments (samskaras); initiation (upanayana) and study of the Vedas (the sacred texts of Hinduism); marriage, hospitality, obsequies, dietary restrictions, pollution, and means of purification; the conduct of women and wives; and Raj dharma, the Karma theory, the soul, and life after death (heaven or hell). According to the Manusmriti, the Hindu society was divided into four varnas. It further states that Brahmins emerged from the mouth of Brahma, symbolising that they are intellectuals born to gain and spread knowledge. Kshatriyas emerged from the hands of Brahma, which symbolises strength, and they are meant to fight wars and protect people; therefore, kings and rulers were considered Kshatriyas. Vaishyas emerged from the thighs of Brahma and were bound to be merchants and traders. Shudras emerged from the feet of Brahma; therefore, they were the lowest caste and bound to be slaves and servants to the upper castes. Since this hierarchy in society was decided by God, as described in the Manusmriti, this could not be changed (Shah, 2004).

CASTE SYSTEM AND THE BRITISH RULE IN INDIA

The British Colonial administration, especially after the 1857 Rebellion, drew their attention to the unity among the people, which might have had adverse consequences for British rule; therefore, it was vital for them to

devise policies to curb this unity by exploiting the caste, class, and religious differences ingrained in society thus began to systematically collect and classify information on Indian society in disguise to facilitate governance, revenue collection, and military recruitment. This deliberate "knowledge project" was driven by ill will, a divide-and-rule policy, or at the very least, a powerful administrative imperative, which led to the codification and essentialization of caste.

To strengthen its position in India, the colonial rulers heavily relied on Indian scriptures. They believed that the scriptures contained essential facts that could be used to create deep divisions in society. They were used very tactfully by the Britishers to divide the people based on caste and religion and thus weaken any mobilisation against the Colonial Rule. An important fact to note here is that all the British officials were great scholars, for example, Thomas Munro in Madras, John Malcolm in Central India, and Elphinstone in Maharashtra, who contributed significantly to various historical and geographical arenas, in addition to their contributions to political and military issues. The legitimacy granted by the British government to customs and traditions found to be favourable to the growth of the British Empire and its smooth functioning, along with the existence of various caste conflicts in society, transformed Indian society into a traditional and backward one (Carroll, 1978).

The British can't be put at fault for the resurgence of the social stratification (varna system) in society, but, according to Bryce, since the Brahmins were unwilling to compromise their dominant position, they supported the British government's will. As Ludden stated, the term 'Hindu' initially referred to the people living east of the Indus. However, the British used the term in their official census and elections to describe those who were not Muslims, Christians, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists, or Sikhs. Though British India had Hindus as a majority, this community was not homogeneous like Islam and Christianity, which followed one Quran and Bible, respectively. Instead, the Hindus followed different religious leaders or worshipped other Gods and Goddesses. For example, some Hindus worshipped Vishnu and called themselves Vaishnavas, while those who worshipped Shiva were known as Shaivites. The Hindus recognised themselves as Vaishnavas, Shaivites, etc., rather than as Hindus (Ludden, 2006).

As we can see, the Brahmins drew closer to the British to maintain their social and economic superiority. The Brahmins were learned and held a

superior position in society; they enthusiastically participated in the country's financial machinery and collected taxes from the people for the government under the Zamindari system. This cemented good relations between Brahmins and the British.

In the 19th century, Thomas Munro introduced the Ryotwari system, which directly collected taxes from farmers. Munro believed, as Burton Stein argues, that he stood firm that the customary Indian forms of governance would administer efficiently if “directed by men like him, knowledgeable and sympathetic, with tremendous and concentrated authority. Such a despotic attitude makes Indians step out of direct political participation. Another example of the Brahmins' benefits was their role in administrative services under the British government, where they were represented in large numbers compared to the other castes (Arnold, 2011).

The idea of liberalism emerged in the West during the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, which also gave rise to various social and religious reforms. The western-educated elite, in the march of post-enlightenment rationalism, attempted to reform Hinduism internally. The Hindu customs, traditions, cultural practices, and caste system were being criticised, and an intellectual challenge was posed against the religious and social orthodoxy of Hinduism. Western-educated liberal intellectuals also shared similar views about Indian society and its people, such as Raja Ram Mohun Roy, who initiated various reform movements against practices like Sati and Devdasis. They attempted to promote widow remarriage, inter-caste marriages, and other reforms. With the contribution and endeavour of Raja Ram Mohun Roy, the British government under Lord William Bentinck legally banned the practice of Sati in 1829. These social reformers undertook to reform their societies and their religious practices, and to abolish evil practices (Jones, 1989).

Through the introduction and dissemination of modern scientific education, Lord Macaulay sought to promote rational thinking and liberate Indians from the constraints of religious and social orthodoxy. The intention behind the spread of English education was not only that, but according to Macaulay, it was also meant to create “a class of persons between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect.”

THE REVOLT OF 1857 AND COLONIAL RESPONSES

After the Revolt of 1857, the East India Company faced a backlash and lost its autonomy over India, which was subsequently transferred to the British Crown by the Government of India Act, 1858. The Governor-General's official rank was revoked, and thereafter the Viceroy acted as the representative of the British Crown in India. Although there were many reasons for the fall of the Company Rule, the primary one was the Company's interference in the people's religious affairs. By late January 1857, rumours spread that the cartridges of the new Enfield Rifles were greased by cow and pig fat deeply offended the sentiments of both the Hindus and the Muslims as the cartridges had to be bitten off from mouth before loading, it made the sepoy's old suspicion about the plot of Britisher to destroy their religion and caste and convert them to Christianity. The Revolt of 1857 made the British realise the fact that unity among the people might have had adverse consequences for British rule; therefore, it was vital for them to devise policies to curb this unity by exploiting the caste, class, and religious differences ingrained in society. This deliberate Divide-and-Rule master plan proved fatal for the country. It later led to the partition of the country into India and Pakistan on a communal basis. (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

The process of rebuilding the army raised questions about the proportion of Hindus and Muslims in government service. Apart from this, it was also a matter of concern for the government to determine its policies towards the classes that had been fortunate enough to have access to education. The revolt prompted Queen Victoria to announce that British officials would not interfere in their subjects' religious matters and would respect the people's spiritual and social sentiments. Queen Victoria also led Indians to believe that there would be no discrimination based on caste, class, religion, or race, and that education opportunities would be available to all equally. However, in reality, this wasn't the case, as the lower classes were still deprived of these facilities while the upper classes maintained their domination. After the Revolt of 1857, the British government assumed control of India's administration and adopted a policy of non-interference in the country's religious sentiments. Indian society was so engrossed in itself that it did not realise that the specific guidelines of colonial rule were intended to divide society to prevent revolts similar to the 1857 uprising. Therefore, it followed the following policies to fulfil its interests.

Therefore, the colonial census operations between 1881 and 1931 systematically institutionalised caste divisions for administrative purposes. H.H. Risley, the 1901 Census Commissioner, regarded caste as "the cement that holds together the myriad units of Indian society. Risley's anthropological approach, grounded in refuted anthropometric science and racial hierarchy theories, significantly influenced how caste categories were imposed within Western paradigms. Colonial administrators instituted hierarchical communities that hadn't previously existed. In the Bengal region, "Chandala," a broad descriptor for low-caste people, was erroneously treated as a specific caste name by authorities, sparking significant resentment (Risley, 1904). Similarly, sub-castes such as Yadav and Vishwakarma came up as official categories for geographically disparate communities that shared traditional occupations.

REBUILDING OF THE ARMY BASED ON CASTE

During the Revolt of 1857, soldiers refused to fire on rebels from their region or of the same caste. Consequently, the British decided to build an army loyal to their masters and to refrain from resisting military operations anywhere in the country. As a result, the British government appointed the Peel Commission to investigate the military affairs. The commission observed that the "native army should be composed of different nationalities and castes, and as a general rule, mixed promiscuously through each regiment." Consequently, over time, significant changes were made, including disbanding the regiments responsible for the 1857 mutiny. The army was reformed to avoid domination by a particular caste, and regiments were constituted by evenly mixing all castes. The recruitment of the military remained concentrated in Punjab, which had maintained loyalty during the Mutiny, and regional elements were strictly segregated to minimise cross-cultural cohesion. The British colonial authorities utilised their perceived knowledge of Indian culture and rituals of racial-ethnic groups to develop the basic understanding of "martial races". Apart from this, the British also attempted to foster discontent between the Aryans and the Dravidians. Therefore, it not only tried to divide the people by caste but also by region and language. Aryans resided in Northern India, and Dravidians were a South Indian race speaking Dravidian languages (Said, 1993).

Another policy adopted by the colonial rulers to maintain a stronghold on Indian soil was the proposal for a census and enumeration. In the 19th

century, censuses were primarily introduced in many countries. The purpose of conducting these censuses was to assess poverty levels in these countries and, if necessary, provide state aid in their benefit. Examining census data from European countries, they appeared to be secular institutions, but were a stark contrast to the situation in India. The census process introduced in India was aimed at gathering information on the caste structure of society, rather than providing economic benefits to people. After the 1857 Mutiny, the study of languages, race, religion, caste, and other aspects in India became important for British Rule, and the Regional Gazetteer was appointed to collect data for this purpose. There were several deliberate reasons for the British starting the caste census in India. The British sought a critical understanding of Indian society and norms to administer it effectively, enabling them to exploit its resources and revenues. According to Ramachandra Guha, “census enumeration was not a novel practice adopted by the British, but was equally practised in earlier times, particularly in the Mughal period. However, the fact remains that the earlier enumerations were very much confined to land revenue and taxation, and were also geographically limited. In contrast to this, the colonial census was interested in anthropological knowledge and was carried out, covering most parts of the country” (Guha, 2003).

Initially, the census included questions on family, religion, education, caste, health, and other related topics. The information thus collected would have been used for administrative purposes; instead, the census data was used to develop knowledge about India and to apply it. The enumeration of castes led to a better understanding of the structure and the existing cleavages in the society. Therefore, the British government succeeded in creating a culture in which caste identity became synonymous with national pride. Similarly, the question of religion became fundamental to the census, and the data was used in different ways. For instance, the history of India was no longer divided into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern periods, but instead into Hindu and Muslim periods. Therefore, we can say that the purpose of the census in India was to create tension among various societal groups and thus curb the sense of nationalism that might emerge against British rule. The diversity in the Indian scenario was not new, but it did not have the prominence it has today; it was only after the census that these cleavages widened and deepened.

The Census was introduced in 1872 and was based on caste and class, as the colonial rulers believed these two factors were the most prominent in Indian society and required deep study. According to this, within Hinduism, there were various caste classifications, and within Muslims, castes were

classified as Syed, Sheikh, Pathans and Moghuls. Again, in the year 1881, a census was conducted throughout British India, with priority given to questions on race and caste, followed by those on religion. Thus, this became the basis for subsequent censuses, conducted every 10 years. The 1891 census was based on caste categories defined by occupation. The 1901 census, under the chairmanship of H.R. Risley, emphasized caste categories based on social superiority and, for the first time, incorporated the category of tribals (Risley, 1904).

The colonial government conducted a census as early as 1856, but it was postponed due to the 1857 mutiny and finally held in 1861. Taking lessons from the 1857 revolt, the Home Government, in consultation with the Indian government, agreed to the general population census in 1871. However, the years between 1867 and 72 were spent on conducting the census. This series of censuses is known as the 1872 Census, which was neither the first census conducted after 1872, nor conducted across the subcontinent, nor did it cover the entire territory under British control.

Gradually, Indian society came to be divided along communal lines. Since the census revealed that Hindus were in the majority, the minority communities were convinced that they were politically and economically vulnerable compared to the majority. The government attempted to create hostility among different religious groups over social, political, and spiritual issues, thereby aiming to weaken the nationalist wave emerging with the advent of the Congress party under A. O. Hume in 1885. Unfortunately, the colonial government achieved success in its policy of 'Divide and Rule' when the Muslim League was formed in 1906-07, demanding a separate electorate. The government's long wait to break the unity of the people was thus fulfilled, and it acted promptly, first by partitioning the Bengal province in 1905 and then by granting reserved seats for Muslims in the imperial and provincial legislatures through the Morley-Minto Act of 1909. Later, the 1921 census focused on recognizing the backwards and deprived classes, but this was dropped in the 1931 census because it was found to be detrimental to colonial rule.

POLITICS OF CASTE AND RECOGNITION IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA: REVISITING COLONIAL CATEGORIES

All sections of Indian society had enormous hope and aspirations for the newly independent country. Although colonial rulers suppressed every

section of the population, weaker sections of society, like the scheduled castes, tribes and other suppressed castes, were mainly victims of colonial suppression. Therefore, these sections were expecting more provisions & protections for their welfare from the newly democratic government. So, when the constituent assembly was formed, the matter of scheduled castes, tribes, and other backward castes frequently came up in its debates.

CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY DEBATE OVER 'BACKWARD CLASSES'

In his maiden speech in the constituent assembly debate, dated December 13, 1946, Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru used the term 'other backward classes' for the first time for those who were socially suppressed, other than the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. Pt Nehru emphasised the need for special measures in favour of the scheduled castes, tribes, minorities, depressed and other backwards classes to complete the process of national integration after independence (Ramagoud, 2022).

Although the term 'other backward classes' was used by then Prime Minister Pt. Nehru, however, no special provision for the welfare of this section could be included in the Constitution. Dr Ambedkar suggested an amendment in the draft of the sub-committee on fundamental rights by adding a new section, Article 16(4), which states that 'the proposal would not "prevent the Government from prescribing a certain proportion of posts of public service for the minorities, whoever they may be. This provision was an extension of the existing Article 16 clause of the Indian Constitution. Against the inclusion of the word 'backward' via Article 16(4) in the constitution, many members of the constituent assembly raised their concerns on the interpretation and definition of the word 'backward' and sought its deletion or modifications. Loknath Mishra feared that the word 'backward' is presumed to be the symbol of insufficiency, while another member, Damodar Swarup, argued that although the word 'backward' may be just or reasonable, it is wrong in principle; therefore, it should be deleted. Shri Swarup further stated that the word "backwards" is not easy to define. He found this word not suitable for a secular country like India, as it gives rise to the tendency of casteism and favouritism. Some members, like Ari Bahadur Gurung and T T Krishnamachari, wanted that word defined by the House; it would lead to frequent court cases and be a lawyer's heaven. Some members, such as V I Muniswami, Chandrika Ram, and T Channiah, argued

in favour of this term and called for affirmative action to promote the welfare of backward classes.

Dr Ambedkar responded to all arguments against the inclusion of the backward classes in the Constitution. He said that *“Unless you use some such qualifying phrase as “backward” the exception made in favour of reservation will ultimately eat up the rule altogether ... that I think ... is the justification why the Drafting Committee undertook on its own shoulders the responsibility of introducing the word “backward” which, I admit, did not initially find a place in the fundamental right in the way in which this assembly passed it”*.

Dr Ambedkar redressed two prominent questions raised during the debate: firstly, the definition of the word, and secondly, the justiciability of the clause. The definition of the word, he left it to the local government to determine from time to time, considering the local socio-economic conditions. According to him, the backward community is the one the local government considers backward. Dr Ambedkar emphasised the justiciability of the word ‘backward’ (Ramagoud, 2022).

CENSUS IN INDEPENDENT INDIA AND OBCs

Following the colonial period, the Census Act of 1948, piloted by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, established the legal framework for independent India's census operations. India's first independent census, conducted in 1951, marked a significant departure from colonial-era practices. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's government decided to discontinue comprehensive caste enumeration, recording data only for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) to facilitate constitutional reservations under Articles 15(4) and 16(4) for the most historically oppressed groups.

Despite the discontinuation, with the issuance of the 1961 directive, the federal government authorised the states to conduct their own surveys and formulate state-specific lists of Other Backwards Classes (OBCs). The direction enabled adequate unlocking of local dialects on caste sub-categorisation, on the one hand, and, on the other, managing the union government's disinclination to conduct an in-depth national caste census. This could be seen as an impressive strategic move in domestic politics, with political leaders diverting the appeal of caste census demands to state governments rather than tackling them at the central level.

MANDAL COMMISSION AND THE DEMAND FOR CASTE CENSUS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Coming to another noteworthy event in the context of the caste census initiative, which, no doubt, has a history of being the most controversial: the Mandal Commission, also known as the 2nd OBC Commission (1979-80).

- The Mandal Commission Report (1980): The foundational basis for the 27% reservation for Other Backwards Classes is reflected through this report. The report lacks contemporary caste data, which is why the Commission was forced to infer from the 1931 Census.
 - ◆ **Methodology:** To identify OBCs, the Commission categorically applied eleven criteria (social, educational, and economic) to form the basis of segregation. Crucially, it estimates the OBC population by subtracting the population of SCs, STs, and Forward Castes from the total Hindu population based on 1931 figures, and then applying that proportion to the non-Hindu population.
 - ◆ **Key Finding:** With the big takeaways from empirically conducting the survey, the Commission came up with the data that OBCs comprised approximately **52%** of the total population, justifying the recommended **27%** reservation in union government jobs and educational institutions (bringing total reservations to just under the Supreme Court's 50% ceiling in the *Indra Sawhney* case).

POLITICISATION BY RULING AND OPPOSITION PARTIES

How does caste in India structure the political realm? On this, Rajni Kothari (1970) suggested in "Caste in Indian Politics" that the disclosure of caste into the political realm enabled the mobilising and unification of a diverse social group into the democratic engagement process (Kothari, 1970). Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph (1967), *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, unravel how traditional institutions, like caste, could be adapted for modern political roles by initiating the concepts of the "modernity of tradition" and the "traditionalization of modernity," arguing that Indian democracy evolved by refashioning inherited social forms rather than erasing them (Rudolph, 1984). With the implementation of long-awaited recommendations of the Mandal Commission under the V.P. Singh, marking the beginning of the Politicisation of caste. This led to the transformation of the whole political playground, with the shift of power from the traditional

upper-caste elite to regional parties that portray the aspirations of OBC and Dalit communities. The party in power (the implementers) framed the verdict as a measure of welfare or social justice. At the same time, the opposition portrayed it as 'casteism' and a threat to national solidarity and effective administrative governance. Decades long, the political calculus has functioned in an involving manner, both ruling and opposition parties either openly called for a caste census (to show underrepresentation of OBC and take their vote base into confidence) or defying it (to keep the already prevailing power dynamics and steer clear of losing support from upper castes). This varied political stance suggests that the census is seen as less inclined towards being a purely administrative tool and more inclined to be a political weapon for the electoral assembly.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CASTE CENSUS (SECC), 2011

The very first all-inclusive attempt at caste enumeration was well represented in the SECC report 2011 since 1931. The Manmohan Singh government ratified this after a parliamentary debate in 2010; the census collects socio-economic data on rural and urban households, as well as caste data. Initially, exercise was launched from Sankhola village in West Tripura district, covering 24.49 crore households across India.

The 2011 census differed in many respects from a typical census operation. It made information disclosure voluntary rather than mandatory (as it did not operate under the Census Act of 1948), and assigned oversight of surveys in rural areas to the concerned Ministry of the government of India. Further, the Department of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation conducted surveys to take appropriate action regarding the issue. The Registrar General of India oversees the administration of the caste census.

DATA PUBLICATION AND SUPPRESSION

Although the socio-economic findings of SECC 2011 were published in 2016, the population of the caste remained unpublished. The collected data on caste was sent to the concerned Ministry (MSJE) of the Government of India. Then an expert committee under the chairmanship of Mr Arvind Panagariya was constituted for further classification. But the classification report was never made public, hence the caste enumeration exercise is considered incomplete.

Also, the suppression of the SECC 2011 caste data became a central political point of contention; opposition parties claimed the government's refusal to publish the results was proof of its bias against social justice policies. The fact that the data remained unpublished was a missed opportunity to make sense of contemporary caste demographics and their implications for affirmative action policies.

CASTE CENSUS AND POLITICAL CONTESTATION: CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS IN INDIA

The Bharatiya Janata Party has in the past been opposed to, or at least wary of, caste census initiatives, claiming that such exercises would further deepen social divisions rather than promote national unity. In their replies to parliament in 2021 and 2023, the Minister of State (MoS) for Home, Nityanand Rai, said there were no plans to enumerate caste as a variable in upcoming censuses, calling caste enumeration "administratively complex and cumbersome. Prime Minister Narendra Modi constantly attacked caste-based politics, saying in March 2023 that India has only four castes: "the poor, the youth, women, and farmers. By this, he was trying to downplay social divisions by treating them as class rather than caste issues, and at the same time borrowing from Marxist theory to argue against caste-based political mobilisation.

OPPOSITION DEMANDS

Caste census was a central campaign demand of the Indian National Congress in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, which Rahul Gandhi termed it as the "X-ray of Indian society". Jairam Ramesh, the head of communications for Congress, said the BJP had mocked Gandhi's statement earlier but is now following the policy, hence calling it a "decisive step towards ensuring social justice. Opposition parties have consistently argued that accurate demographic data is essential for evidence-based policymaking and the fair distribution of resources. Congress viewed the caste census as critical for understanding historical deprivation and for designing appropriate affirmative action policies. The party's demands included specific provisions: setting timelines, breaking the 50% reservation cap, implementing Article 15(5) for private education quotas, and reviving SC/ST sub-plans.

Regional parties decided to support the demand for a caste census for different reasons, guided by varied motivations. In Bihar, Chief Minister

Nitish Kumar's endorsement of a caste census strengthened his position within opposition alliances while meeting the needs of local political constituencies seeking greater OBC representation.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the caste census in India is a mirror that reflects and echoes the country's most profound struggles between the constitutional ideal of equality and the sociological reality of entrenched hierarchy. The caste census saga reveals the unyielding tension between the demands of the administration, political plays, and social justice requirements. It was from the very beginning that the colonial enumeration aimed to tighten imperial control, and now, as debates about democratic representation rage, the caste census has always been an arena, a reflection of the broader struggles over power, identity, and belonging in Indian society. The evolving perspectives on caste from the colonial period, when it was 'fixed' and 'weaponised' as a political tool, to till today, current fights over the extrapolation of the 1931 census data have subsequently shown that an enumeration has been a contested act of state power. SECC 2011 data and the analysis cited by the Justice Rohini Commission provide a pretty stark picture, thus illustrating that, for the vast majority, the moot concept of upliftment is failing and that a 'creamy layer' problem does exist. In the wake of such developments, including the BJP government's decision to reverse the caste census and Supreme Court rulings on sub-categorisation, an evolving approach to caste-based policies is being gradually reviewed and modified. However, these changes largely reflect electoral strategies and legal moves rather than a clear, cohesive social vision, thereby affirming ongoing debate over the role of caste in Indian democracy. As time progresses, we should expand the scope of our attention to include other deserving people, irrespective of their historically generalised classification under certain caste groups or affiliations. After 78 years of independence, it is now imperative to accommodate all individuals who is in dire need of state's support by focusing on their current economic conditions and at the same time putting in place some restrictions on generational reservation benefits—thus, not only paying homage to real spirit and origin of affirmative action negotiated by our forefathers while drafting the constitution but also making them come true. In a vast, multicultural and multiethnic country like India, the experience suggests that a caste census cannot be worked out in isolation, avoiding broader questions

of social justice, democratic participation, and national integration. In the end, it should be instrumental in promoting equity without further dividing society and thus be in line with India's constitutional ethos.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATION:

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