

Contemporary Issue (Caste Census)

Overview of the Issue

A caste census is a systematic process of collecting data on the caste identities of individuals during a national population count. The Indian government has approved the inclusion of caste enumeration in the next nationwide Census, scheduled for completion by March 2027, marking the first time this data (beyond Scheduled Castes and Tribes) will be officially collected since 1931.

Timeline of Caste Census

Historical Timeline of Caste Enumeration

- **1881-1931:** Caste was a regular and comprehensive feature of the decennial censuses conducted by the British administration.
- **1941:** Caste data was collected in a limited form, but the full results were not published due to World War II.
- **1951:** The newly independent government decided to discontinue caste enumeration to avoid reinforcing social divisions. Since then, only data for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) has been collected in the main census.
- **1961:** The central government allowed states to conduct their own surveys to compile state-specific lists of Other Backward Classes (OBCs).
- **1979-1980:** The Mandal Commission was appointed and later relied on the 1931 census data to estimate the OBC population at 52%, forming the basis for the 27% reservation policy implemented in 1990.
- **2011:** The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) was conducted by the UPA government, collecting detailed caste information along with economic data. However, the specific caste data was never officially released publicly due to concerns over accuracy and classification issues.

Recent Developments

- **2021:** The decadal Census of India, which was scheduled for this year, was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **2023:** Bihar conducted and released the results of its own statewide caste survey, which found that OBCs and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) comprised over 63% of the state's population.
- **2024-2025:**
 - **Telangana** released its own caste survey report in February 2024.
 - **Karnataka** approved and submitted its long-awaited caste survey report (commissioned in 2015) in early 2025.
- **April 30, 2025:** The Union Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, officially approved the inclusion of caste enumeration in the upcoming nationwide census, marking a significant policy shift.

Note Points to understand the Issue

➤ Difference between caste census and caste survey?

The main difference lies in the legal authority and scope, with a census being a definitive, nationwide statutory process, and a survey being a state-specific, non-statutory data collection.

Feature	Caste Census	Caste Survey
Legal Status	A statutory process mandated by the Constitution and conducted under the Census Act.	A state-level exercise that lacks the legal and constitutional backing of a census.
Authority	Conducted by the central government through the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner.	Conducted by individual state governments, using their own administrative systems.
Scope	Nationwide, covering the entire country.	Limited to a specific state or region.

Methodology	Standardized across the country to ensure consistency.	Varies significantly from one state to another, depending on resources and priorities.
Data Comparability	Results are comparable across all states and will provide a standardized national dataset.	Results lack standardization and cannot be directly compared between different states.
Primary Purpose	To serve as an official basis for national policymaking at the central level.	To aid in the formulation of regional policies within that particular state.
Examples	The upcoming inclusion of caste enumeration in the next national census.	Caste surveys previously conducted by states like Bihar and Karnataka.

Is there any constitutional mandate for caste census?

There is no explicit constitutional mandate for a caste census in India. The Constitution does, however, contain provisions that are often cited as favouring or necessitating the collection of caste data for the purpose of social justice and welfare policies.

Key Constitutional Provisions and Legal Context

- **Union Subject:** The Constitution, under Article 246 and Entry 69 of the Union List in the Seventh Schedule, makes the decennial census a federal (Union) subject, meaning only the central government has the authority to conduct an official census. The Census Act, 1948 provides the legal framework for this exercise.
- **Identification of Backward Classes:** Article 340 of the Constitution mandates the President to appoint a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes and make recommendations for their advancement. Proponents of a caste census argue that accurate, up-to-date data is essential to fulfill this mandate and inform evidence-based policymaking.

- **Affirmative Action:** Articles 15(4) and 16(4) permit the state to make special provisions and reservations for backward classes. The Supreme Court has, in various judgments (such as the Indra Sawhney case), emphasized the need for quantifiable data to justify reservations and the implementation of sub-categorization within backward classes, reinforcing the need for caste data.
- **Scheduled Castes and Tribes:** The Constitution does specifically mandate the enumeration of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and their populations have been counted in every census since 1951. This is not the case for other caste groups, such as Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Which Act provides the legal framework for conducting the census in India?

The Census Act, 1948 provides the legal framework for conducting the population census in India. This act establishes the legal basis for the systematic collection of demographic and socio-economic data across the country.

Key aspects of the Census Act, 1948 include:

- **Authority:** The Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, operating under the Ministry of Home Affairs, is the authority responsible for planning and implementing the census under the provisions of this Act.
- **Mandatory Participation:** The Act places a legal obligation on the public to cooperate and provide accurate information to census officers. Refusal to answer questions or intentionally giving false answers can result in penalties.
- **Confidentiality:** A crucial provision in the Act guarantees the confidentiality of the individual information collected. These personal records are not open to inspection and are not admissible as evidence in any court of law, ensuring public trust and the use of data for statistical purposes only.
- **Appointment of Staff:** It empowers the central government to appoint a Census Commissioner and state governments to appoint census officers to supervise and conduct the census operations.
- **Scope and Timing:** The Act provides the framework for determining the general scope and timing of the census, which is a Union subject under Article 246 of the Indian Constitution.

When will the census with caste enumeration take place?

The current government has decided to include caste enumeration in the upcoming national Census of India, marking a significant policy shift as it will be the first caste-based census since 1931. This decision, made by the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) in April 2025, aims to collect comprehensive data to inform social justice policies and targeted welfare schemes.

Key Details of the Upcoming Caste Census

- **Timeline:** The data collection will occur in two phases.
 - **Phase 1 (House Listing and Housing Census):** This phase is expected to begin around October 1, 2026, for snow-bound areas (like Ladakh, and parts of Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand) and March 1, 2027, for the rest of the country.
 - **Phase 2 (Population Enumeration):** The primary population count will follow, with a reference date of March 1, 2027, for most areas.
- **Methodology:** The census is a Union Subject under the Constitution of India, and the Central government has emphasized that conducting it as part of the official national census will ensure transparency and scientific validity, unlike "unscientific" state-level surveys. It will be a digital census using mobile apps.
- **Scope:** It will enumerate caste data for all categories, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and general castes. Since independence, only SC and ST populations have been counted in the decadal censuses.

Rationale and Objectives

The government and its supporters state the following objectives for the caste census:

- **Targeted Development:** Accurate data on the population and socio-economic status of various caste groups will help in the effective design and implementation of welfare programs and resource allocation.
- **Social Justice:** The data is expected to help identify marginalized communities, assess the efficacy of existing reservation policies, and ensure a more equitable distribution of benefits.
- **Transparency:** Including caste enumeration within the main census process is intended to provide a reliable, national-level database, avoiding inconsistencies found in various state-led surveys.

How does caste census help in governance?

A caste census provides the government with precise, data-driven insights into the socio-economic status of different communities, enabling the formulation and implementation of targeted policies for social justice and equitable resource allocation. The current policies often rely on outdated data from 1931, making updated information essential for effective governance.

Key Governance Benefits

- **Evidence-Based Policymaking:** A caste census moves governance away from outdated estimates (such as the 1931 Census data used by the Mandal Commission) to current, reliable data. This allows policymakers to design effective programs based on the actual socio-economic conditions of different groups, which is essential for inclusive development.
- **Targeted Welfare Schemes:** By identifying the most disadvantaged communities, governments can ensure that welfare schemes related to education, healthcare, and housing reach those who need them most, reducing errors of inclusion and exclusion.
- **Effective Affirmative Action:** The data is crucial for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of existing reservation policies for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). It helps monitor progress towards social justice goals and enables informed decisions regarding policy continuation or modification.
- **Addressing Intra-Group Disparities:** A caste census can reveal inequalities within large caste categories (like OBCs), allowing for "sub-categorization" to ensure that benefits are equitably distributed among the most backward sections, as highlighted by the Justice Rohini Commission's work.
- **Fair Political Representation:** The data can inform the redrawing of constituencies (delimitation) and help ensure fair political representation for underrepresented groups in legislatures and local bodies, aligning with constitutional goals of equality and inclusion.
- **Fulfilling a Constitutional Mandate:** Article 340 of the Indian Constitution mandates the appointment of a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes and recommend steps for their advancement. A caste census provides the empirical data necessary to fulfil this directive.
- **Debunking Myths:** Accurate enumeration can challenge popular myths about the numerical strength or economic status of various castes, leading to more rational public debates on sensitive issues.

What are the outcomes of Bihar caste survey?

The Bihar caste survey, released in October 2023, revealed the state's total population to be over 13.07 crore, with Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) making up a combined 63%. The results have had significant political and policy implications, leading to an attempt to increase reservation quotas.

Key Demographic Findings

The survey provided a detailed breakdown of the population by caste group:

- Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs): 36.01% (largest group)
- Other Backward Classes (OBCs): 27.12%
- Scheduled Castes (SCs): 19.65%
- Unreserved (General) Category: 15.52%
- Scheduled Tribes (STs): 1.68%
- Among specific castes, the Yadav community emerged as the single largest subgroup, representing 14.26% of the total population.

Socio-Economic Disparities

A subsequent release of the socio-economic data highlighted significant inequalities.

- **Poverty:** Over a third (34.13%) of families in the state have a monthly income of ₹6,000 or less. Poverty rates were highest among SCs (42.93%) and STs (42.7%).
- **Education:** Only about 7% of the population are graduates, and less than 1% hold a postgraduate degree, raising concerns about the education system.
- **Employment:** There were disparities in government job attainment, with Kayasths in the General Category holding the highest proportion of government jobs (6.68%), compared to lower rates among many OBC and EBC groups.

Major Outcomes and Implications

- **Policy Review:** The data provides a basis for reviewing and recalibrating existing reservation policies to ensure they accurately reflect the current demographics and address historical injustices.
- **Reservation Hike:** Following the survey, the Bihar government approved a proposal to increase the total reservation quota for SCs, STs, EBCs, and OBCs from the existing 50% to 65% (and to 75% including the 10% EWS quota), a move that was later struck down by the Patna High Court.

- **Political Impact:** The survey has spurred a national debate on the need for a nationwide caste census and may influence political alignments and electoral strategies in Bihar and beyond by providing concrete data for demands of proportional representation and "social justice".
- **Targeted Interventions:** The granular data can inform targeted development schemes and welfare programs for the most marginalized communities, such as the Musahars, to address acute deprivation in health, nutrition, and housing.

What are the outcome of Karnataka Caste Survey?

The Karnataka caste census report (officially the Socio-Economic and Educational Survey), submitted to the government in February 2024, found that Other Backward Classes (OBCs) make up nearly 70% of the state's population and recommended increasing the OBC reservation from 32% to 51%. The report has not been officially made public due to political controversy and backlash from politically dominant communities.

Key Findings and Outcomes

- **OBC Population is Higher than Estimated:** The survey estimated the OBC population at about 69.6% of the state's total population, a significantly higher figure than earlier assumptions.
- **Dominant Communities Numerically Lower:** The survey found that traditional dominant communities, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, were numerically weaker than their claimed populations.
- **Lingayats population** was pegged at around 11% (compared to claims of 17-22%).
- **Vokkaligas population** was pegged at around 10.29% (compared to claims of 13-15%).
- **Largest Social Groups:** After the combined SC/ST population, which forms the largest social bloc, Muslims are the next single largest group at about 12.58%.
- **SC/ST Population:** Scheduled Castes (SCs) constitute about 18.2% and Scheduled Tribes (STs) about 7.1%, bringing the combined total to over 24% of the population.

What are the outcome of Telangana Caste Survey?

The Telangana government's Socio-Economic, Educational, Employment, Political, and Caste (SEEEPC) survey found that Backward Classes (BCs) constitute 56.33% of the state's population, including BC Muslims. The primary objective was to gather data for evidence-based welfare policies and potential reservation enhancements.

Key Population Findings

The survey, which covered 96.9% of households (approximately 3.54 crore people), revealed the following demographic breakdown:

- Backward Classes (BCs): 56.33% (including 10.08% BC Muslims)
- Scheduled Castes (SCs): 17.43%
- Scheduled Tribes (STs): 10.45%
- Other Castes (OCs): 15.79% (including 2.48% OC Muslims)
- Total Muslim Population: 12.56%
- Notably, around 4% of the surveyed population declared they had no caste or no religion.

An 11-member expert panel, chaired by former **Supreme Court Justice B. Sudarshan Reddy**, was formed to analyse the data and recommend specific policies, including potential sub-classification within SC and ST categories for more targeted benefits.

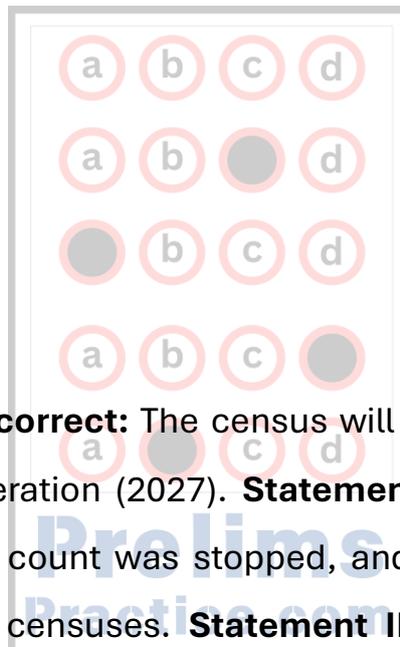
Practice Questions

1. With reference to the Census, consider the following statements:

- I. The upcoming census 2027 will be conducted in two phases: house-listing and population enumeration
- II. Post-independence census from 1951 to 2011 collected data only on Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)
- III. Caste census is a Union subject as per the Constitution
- IV. The Census Act of 1948 prevents the government from including caste in the census

How many of the above statements are correct?

- a) Only one
- b) Only two
- c) Only three
- d) All four



Answer: c

Explanation: Statement I is correct: The census will have two phases: house-listing (2026) and population enumeration (2027). **Statement II is correct:** After 1951, the practice of a complete caste count was stopped, and only data for SC and ST were collected in the subsequent censuses. **Statement III is correct:** According to the Constitution (Article 246), the census is a Union subject. **Statement IV is incorrect:** The Census Act of 1948 does not prevent the inclusion of caste data. Instead, the decision to include or exclude caste data in the census is a policy decision made by the government, which has faced debate and challenges.

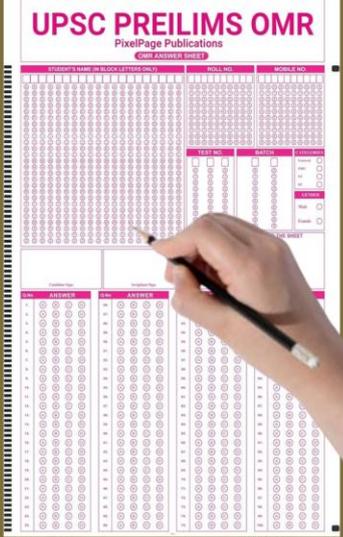
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