Caste Census

Mains syllabus: GS II – Governance, Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

Why in the News?

The Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) has approved the enumeration of castes in the upcoming Census.

What is the historical context of caste census?

- **British India (1881–1931)** - The British administration included caste in decadal censuses to categorise the population by caste, religion, and occupation.

  The most recent caste data available is from the Census of 1931 and It put the numbers of Other Backward Classes (OBC) at 52% of the then total 271 million population of the country.

  This figure became the basis of the Mandal Commission's recommendation in 1980 to grant 27% reservations to OBCs in education and government jobs, which was implemented only in 1990.

- **Post-independence (1951)** - The newly independent Indian government, led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, stopped caste enumeration to avoid reinforcing social divisions.
- The data collected in Censuses since 1951 include the numbers of individuals belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and of various religious denominations.
- But the members of caste groups other than SCs and STs have not been counted.
- **1961 directive** - The central government allowed states to compile OBC lists based on their own surveys, but no national caste census was conducted.
- **Mandal commission (1980)** - The recommendation for 27% OBC reservation brought caste data into sharp political focus.
- The absence of updated caste figures made implementation difficult and contentious.
- **SECC 2011** - Though this UPA-era effort collected caste data, the findings were never fully released or utilised, prompting criticism.

- **State-level surveys** - In recent years, states like Bihar, Telangana, and Karnataka conducted their own caste surveys to guide welfare schemes and reservations.
- Bihar's 2023 survey found that OBCs and Extremely Backward Classes made up more than 63% of its population.

What are the significances of Caste census?

- The data could help redesign affirmative action policies, improve representation, and address entrenched inequalities.
- **Evidence-based policy making** - Accurate data on the socio-economic status of various castes enables the government to craft more targeted and effective welfare schemes.
- **Resource allocation** - A better understanding of caste-based economic disparities can lead to more equitable distribution of government funds, welfare programs, and development efforts.
- **Redesign affirmative action policies** - Much of access to essential services in India—education, healthcare, nutrition, and social protection—is shaped by structural inequalities of caste, region, religion, and economic status.
- A caste census is critical to uncover these intersectional disparities and to design policies and programs that are truly equitable and inclusive.
- Improving effectiveness and efficiency of Social Welfare Schemes - It helps identify and target beneficiaries accurately, ensuring that welfare programs reach those who need them most.
- **Rationalizing reservation policies** - Caste census data can provide a factual basis for affirmative action, helping evaluate whether current reservation policies are adequately serving marginalized groups or need to be revised .
- **Facilitate sub-categorisation** – The caste census data will also be helpful in sub-categorization of caste particularly among the OBCs for reservation in government jobs and education.
- **Social justice and inclusion** – The data will empower marginalized communities by bringing visibility to their socio-economic challenges.
- **Implementing women reservation** - The reservation for women in legislatures announced by the government is also dependent on the Census and delimitation.

What are the implementation challenges in Caste census?

- **Deciding the OBC list** - A central OBC list maintained by the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) is used for reservations in central government jobs and educational institutions.
- Separately, each state maintains its own OBC list, which often differs from the central list — and in many cases, includes many more communities.
- This difference between Center and State list will be a political challenge.

In the last Census, for SCs and STs, the proforma relied on the official lists notified under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, and the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950.

These lists — currently comprising 1,170 castes under SC and 890 communities under ST — are periodically updated through amendments passed by Parliament.

- **Logistic difficulties** - The original 2021 Census was set to be the first to use digital enumeration, with enumerators collecting data via an electronic form rather than pen and paper.
- With the inclusion of caste data, the software will now need to be updated to include a new field for OBCs, along with a drop-down menu of sub-categories.
- **Training the enumerators** - Enumerators will also need to be retrained, especially since many of those identified for the postponed 2020 exercise may have moved on or retired.
- **Complex data handling** - Managing accurate data from thousands of caste categories (many with regional variations) is a huge logistical task.

What challenges may arise after the caste census?

- **Social tension** – While the census aims at social justice, it could also reinforce caste identities, potentially deepening social divides.
- Public access to detailed caste data may lead to resentment or rivalry among groups, especially in the competition for limited resources or reservation benefits
- **Shift in power dynamics** - Detailed caste data can shift the balance of political influence by revealing the true population sizes of caste groups, potentially changing how political parties allocate tickets and build coalitions.
- **Political exploitation** - Caste census data can significantly reshape political discourse, especially in states where caste identity is a primary factor in elections and can be exploited for vote bank politics.
- **Privacy concerns** - Improper handling of caste-related data can breach privacy or expose individuals to discrimination.

What lies ahead?

- The move is expected to significantly influence governance, electoral politics, and India's broader battle against inequality.
- The adoption of technology will significantly reduce the manual effort required to tabulate data, which earlier took months—sometimes years.
- State and Union OBC list could be consolidated and this exercise could then be used as an opportunity to remove the differences between the them.
- Difficulties going to be faced by enumerators can be addressed through proper training and rigorous piloting.
- A pilot exercise could be conducted to understand the challenges and ground realities.
- Then it can be extended national level , based on the learnings from the pilot exercise.
- While the caste census can promote equity, inclusion, and transparency, it must be handled with sensitivity, neutrality, and robust safeguards to avoid worsening social divisions.

References

The Indian Express | Caste census

Times of India | Caste census

