Caste Census in India – Benefits and Challenges

Mains: *GS II – Social Justice*

Why in News?

After decades of political debate and administrative hesitation, the Government of India has decided that caste will be counted as part of the Population Census 2027 for the first time since Independence.

What is the background of the caste census in India?

- **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.
- 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 existing caste categories?

- **OBCs** – Around *2,650 communities* are included in the Central List of Other Backward Classes (OBCs).
- **SCs** – Approximately *1,170 communities* are recognised under the Scheduled Caste (SC) category.
- **STs** – Nearly *890 communities* are included in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list.
- In addition to the Central List, individual State governments maintain their own OBC lists, making harmonisation of caste data an important administrative challenge.

What are the features of the 2027 Census?

- **Components included** – The population enumeration phase of the 2011 census consisted of 29 questions covering, demographic characteristics, marital status, cultural details, literacy, economic activity, migration, travel to place of work and fertility.
- The Census is designed to count every individual residing in India.
- Participation & penalty – Under the Census Act, 1948, participation in the Census is mandatory.
- Failure to comply can attract a penalty of ₹1,000 and imprisonment for up to six months.
- **New starters** – The 2027 Census will introduce several significant firsts:
- It will be India's first fully digital Census.
- It will be the first Population Census to enumerate caste comprehensively after Independence.
- It will be the first Census offering self-enumeration to respondents.
- **Enumeration blocks** – Around 24 lakh Enumeration Blocks (EBs) have been identified.
- Each Enumeration Block generally covers 150–180 households or 650–800 individuals.
- **Enumerators appointed** – Approximately 30 lakh government officials, primarily schoolteachers, have been appointed as enumerators.

What are the benefits of caste census?

- **Targeted Welfare –** A caste census provides detailed information on the educational, economic, and health conditions of different caste groups, enabling the government to design and implement welfare schemes more precisely.
- This ensures that benefits such as subsidies, scholarships, and housing assistance reach the communities that require them the most.
- **Policy Evaluation –** Reliable caste-wise data allows policymakers to assess the outcomes of existing affirmative action and welfare measures.
- By tracking changes over time, governments can evaluate policy effectiveness and make necessary modifications to address emerging gaps.
- **Accurate Representation –** Reservation and affirmative action policies have long depended on outdated demographic estimates, as the last comprehensive caste data was collected in 1931.
- A contemporary caste census would provide an updated empirical foundation for aligning representation and policy with present-day social realities.

- **Sub-categorization –** Disaggregated caste data can expose inequalities within larger reserved categories.
- This facilitates the sub-categorization of quotas, ensuring that relatively advanced sub-castes do not disproportionately benefit while more disadvantaged communities receive equitable access to reservation benefits.
- **Fair Delimitation –** Updated population figures for different caste groups are important for the rational delimitation of electoral constituencies.
- Such data helps ensure fair political representation by reflecting the current demographic composition of backward communities.
- **Democratic Inclusion –** A caste census can identify communities that remain socially, economically, and politically underrepresented.
- Recognizing these groups enables the formulation of policies aimed at promoting their inclusion in democratic institutions and governance processes.
- **Mapping Privilege –** Comprehensive caste enumeration offers a clearer understanding of the distribution of social privilege and disadvantage across society.
- It replaces assumptions with evidence-based data, creating a robust sociological foundation for informed policymaking.

What are the challenges?

- **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.
- **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.

Conclusion

- The 2027 Population Census represents a landmark moment in India's governance architecture.
- By bringing caste enumeration within the statutory framework of the Census, the government seeks to generate comprehensive demographic information that has remained unavailable since 1931.
- However, the credibility of this exercise will depend not merely on collecting data but on adopting a scientifically robust methodology capable of addressing the anomalies witnessed during the 2011 SECC.

- The ongoing pre-test is therefore crucial, as its findings will shape one of the most significant data collection exercises in Independent India's history.
- A transparent, accurate, and inclusive caste census can provide a stronger empirical foundation for social justice policies, welfare planning, and evidence-based governance.

Reference

The Hindu| Caste Census 2027