The Importance of Caste Data

Why in news?

With respect to reservations, the faith of our citizens cannot be restored until credible exercises of data collection are undertaken regarding caste.

What sparked the need for caste data now?

> *Article 15 provides scope for the State for making any special provision for women and children, for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.*

- Recently, the Supreme Court upheld the 27% quota for OBCs in the All-India Quota seats for the NEET and reiterated that reservations for backward classes were not an exception but an extension of the principle of equality under **Article 15(1)** of the Constitution.
- The judgment highlighted how open competitive exams give the illusion of providing equal opportunity while ignoring the widespread inequalities in educational facilities, the freedom to pursue such education, and societal prejudices.
- The Court pointed out to the psychological and social effects of inherited cultural capital (communication skills, books, accent, academic accomplishments, social networks, etc.), which ensures the unconscious training of upper-caste children for high-grade performance.
- The Constituent Assembly held a similar philosophy while introducing constitutional provisions which enable the government to make special provisions for the uplift of the lower castes.

What are the oppositions against caste based reservations?

- **Casteless society**- Many believe that such provisions only perpetuate caste differences and they call for a casteless society.
- Justice D.Y. Chandrachud pointed out that castelessness is a privilege only the upper caste can afford because their caste privilege has already translated into social, political and economic capital.
- On the other hand, individuals who belong to the lower castes must retain their caste identity in order to claim the benefits of reservation.
- **Caste and class politics**- Political parties often promise reservation for communities on being brought to power without any credible data collection exercises to justify the decision.
- For instance, the Supreme Court struck down the reservation for the Maratha community in Maharashtra in excess of 50%, which was the limit set in the *Indra Sawhney* case.
- It also observed that when more people aspire for backwardness instead of forwardness, the country itself stagnates which situation is not in accord with constitutional objectives.

To know more about caste-based census, click here

What is the need for a credible exercise of caste data?

- **Faith in reservation**- A credible exercise of data collection is needed to restore the faith of the citizens towards reservation.
- **Lacunae in Census**- The Census includes data concerning the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes but there is no similar data on OBCs.
- **Unreliability of existing datas** - The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) conducted in 2011 has been called faulty and unreliable.
- **Data backed reservation**- Even the Mandal Commission's recommendations were criticised as being based merely on the personal knowledge of the members of the commission and sample surveys.
- **Targeting the deserved**- Caste data will enable independent research not only into the question of who does and does not need affirmative action but also into the effectiveness of this measure.
- **Informed decision making**- Impartial data and subsequent research might save the attempts of the uplift of the most backward classes from the shadow of caste and class politics and be informative to people on both sides of the spectrum for and against reservation.
- **Supreme Court judgements**- In the *Indra Sawhney* case, the Supreme Court held that the States must conclude the backwardness of a particular class of people only after proper assessment and objective evaluation.
- It held that such a conclusion must be subject to periodic review by a permanent body of experts.

The National Commission for Backward Classes Act, 1993, provides under Section 11 that the Central government may every 10 years revise lists with a view to exclude those classes which have ceased to be backward and include new backward classes. But this exercise has not been done to date.

References

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