

# Caste in the Census

## Introduction

A momentous decision was taken recently by the Government of India. For the first time since independence, there will be questions about caste in the Census of India for 2011. This appeared in a sense to be sudden. All indications were that the Government would, as it had done before, avoid the issue. However, when the "Yadavs" - Sharad Yadav, Lalu Prasad and Mulayam Singh - raised the issue vociferously, and when all the opposition parties and many of the Congress ministers speaking up in the cabinet meeting that followed the Lok Sabha session supported the proposal for gathering Census information about caste began to appear inevitable. The main justification has been the need for information, as Law Minister Verappa Moily had put it, to carry out pro-OBC policies.

In fact, a general groundswell of opinion supporting the move had been building up, with increasing aspirations of the subaltern castes supporting this. Quite likely the way the Women's Reservation Bill was taken up, with no indication of support for the issues raised by OBC groups, provoked further resentment of the government further and helped to fuel the fire (the most widespread comment pointed out that those who supported reservation for women were the opponents of reservation for OBCs - and asked why this was so!).

However, the decision has been greeted by a good deal of concern and even resentment among the elite groups. The press, by and large, has not been favorable. *India Today* headlined its cover story, "The curse of caste", and saw the government as simply giving in to populism. *Frontline* published an article that, admitting that there was a need for accurate information regarding caste, tried to argue the Census was not the right instrument to get this. Asha Krishnakumar cited "social scientists" (primarily writing in

the early years of independence) who argued that "even assuming that caste data are relevant, enumeration of the population on the basis of caste is bound to be vitiated by vote-bank and reservation politics," Independent surveys would be better, argued the journal, citing many of the scholarly participants at a recent seminar at the Madras Institute of Development Studies.

Bal Thackeray, opposing the proposal, showed the communal nature of the avoidance of caste. He mocked the idea arguing that mixed marriages made it impossible: "How will you record the caste of a couple if the husband is a Brahmin and the wife is either an OBC or from another caste? Will you record the caste of the husband, or the wife? Enough is enough. Do not divide the country further," and then went on to say, "If you wish, you can record the number of Hindus, Muslims and Christians so that the country will know how many Bangladeshi or Pakistani nationals have infiltrated into our country," It is also striking in this connection that while the BJP has supported the idea, the RSS has opposed it.

Finally, Jug Saraiya in his facetious way mocked, in the *Times of India*, the idea of "competitive casteism" (I should have more quota than you), rejected the problems of "backward Muslims" and Dalit Christians, and argued, in the age-old fashion of the elite, that it would be better to count "economic backwardness" (Saraiya, 2010).

A reply to many of these objections was given in an article in the *Economic Times* by sociologist Satish Deshpande, who has been one of the most insightful writers on issues of caste, particularly the OBCs (in several articles, and a recent book, *Contemporary India: Sociological Issues*, Penguin 2003). Deshpande pointed out, "on the other side is the vast majority of the so-called 'lower' castes, which, having been massively shortchanged by six decades of supposedly caste-blind development, now insists that caste is all-important and all talk of abolishing caste is mere humbug. He noted that the paucity of data on caste is not accidental, but results from a policy of "willful if well-intentioned neglect." Deshpande argued that the practical difficulties are exaggerated and added, in reply to all of those

loudly proclaiming that caste was irrelevant and they didn't want to be counted; "Certainly those who do not want their caste enumerated can just claim "no caste", adding that The number and class composition of those who can afford this luxury will itself be educative. " *Economic Times*, June 3, 2010).

With these differing opinions in mind, let us look in more detail at some of the issues regarding caste in the Census.

## **Counting Caste under Colonialism**

Because caste censuses originated during colonialism, they have acquired something of the negative connotation associated with the colonial governing need to classify, categorize and through this dominate populations. Important documents were produced; the various "caste and tribes" volumes for many provinces; the gazetteers, the Censuses themselves. But they were vitiated by a good deal of racism. The British adopted fairly wholehearted the "Aryan theory" of caste (that much of the Indian elite, and in an upside-down version, subaltern theories like Phule and many others used it as well is a different matter), seeing the three upper varnas as of Aryan-European descent, the shudra castes as nonAryan, and those they called "primitive tribes" as aborigines. This was seen as a descending level of race and of civilization. The last half of the nineteenth century, when this approach flourished, saw intensified racism, with - among other things - the theory of "martial races" being proclaimed in regard to the Indian army and dalits, who had previously provided many fine soldiers, being largely expelled from military service. Many of the more enthusiastic racial theorists used clippers and other instruments to measure facial features: the size of noses, length of foreheads, and so forth.

It was in this context that H. H. Risley, the British ethnographer and colonial administrator, famous for his earlier work on castes and tribes of Bengal, became Census

Commissioner in 1901. He not only was concerned to "count caste" in the Census, but also to order them in terms of existing hierarchy; he believed that they could be categorized in terms of the varna theory, and that this established also order of precedence. Risley was also a proponent of the racial theory of caste. The furor this produced and its complications, including a flood of petitions about names and order, led to the approach being dropped in the 1911 Census, but the thrust remained.

Caste also began to provoke a good deal of organizing. Especially as the subaltern castes began to assert themselves, they sought new identities. There were a great number of caste tracts published (see for instance the study by Sumit Sarkar, which focuses on Bengal (Sarkar, 2002) by people at all levels of the caste hierarchy, taking varying positions, ranging from rejection of traditional caste positions and nomenclature to justification of the existing order. For the subalterns, the effort was either to claim a traditional "high" status - Brahman descent, turned into untouchables by some fluke or trickery - or, very often, an entirely new identity. The old caste names were most often rejected; even relatively modern, elite-assigned terms such as "Panchama" began to go out of favour in a new wave of radical organizing that began to take place from the 1920s. Groups began to call themselves "Adi-Dravidian," "Adi-Andhra" and so forth, and insist that the Census use these terms rather than traditional caste identities. Thus the Census became "politicized," used by all sides as a legitimator of identities.

In recent years it has become a practice to write as if caste was actually created by such processes during the colonial period. Ronald Inden's *Imagining India* is an important framing work, but in terms of caste Nicholas Dirks has recently become most well known. His *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, has been decisive. In his introductory chapter, tellingly titled "the invention of caste," Dirks writes,

"I will argue that caste (again as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and western colonial rule. By this I do not mean to imply that it was simply invented by the too clever British.... But I *am* suggesting that it was under the British that 'caste' became a single term capable of expressing, organizing and above all 'systematizing' India's diverse forms of social identity, community and organization...In short, colonialism made caste what it is today....making caste the central symbol of Indian society" (5)

Dirks has two points to make: first, that in the precolonial period caste was only one among many forms of identity, and second, that with the overcoming of the indigenous political rulers, the political thrust of caste was replaced by religious ritual as seemingly the primary source of caste identities and legitimation. These, according to Dirks, were momentous changes, and the very documentation and categorization processes, symbolized by the Census, were the primary movers in this process. These were not simply sources of data, but part of the "technologies of rule."s

This position has been critiqued by such historians as Sumit Sarkar. Caste was of course not simply "constructed"; it had its pre-colonial forms that very definitely important. Furthermore, the process of redefining and updating caste during colonialism was not simply a project of the British rulers; Indian elites were active collaborators in the process. All of the caste-tribe volumes, gazetteers and the Censuses themselves relied on high-caste Indian bureaucratic assistants, and sometimes those who were seen as traditional pundits for providing "information." Colonialism indeed did bring changes into the functioning of caste; the Censuses not only documented this but were active participants in the process - but the process was a complex one.

## **Independent India: The Three Monkeys Policy**

It was perhaps, then, understandable that the newly independent Indian elite would reject the idea of caste censuses altogether. There was a strong feeling that a new beginning was needed, that the old colonial methods had to be rejected. Indeed, the idea was being put forward that caste was irrelevant: rapid economic development and social welfare programmes would obviate the need for even the existing concessions. This gained its justification in part from a diffuse Marxian economism that saw industrial development as the primary factor, caste as a backward remnant that was slowly vanishing. Jawaharlal Nehru was a good example of all of this; his *Discovery of India* and other writings showed how he both saw caste as ultimately irrelevant and economically based, and at the same time romanticized it to some extent (along with the two other "traditional" social structures, family and village) for being based on collective/communitarian values. Similarly, trends in the social sciences that focused the critique on colonial domination and external oppression, or on simply capitalist exploitation, allowed for a neglect of internal mechanisms of exploitation. In many ways, the rise of "post-modernism" aided this.

The result, however, was destructive for the effort to deal in policy forms with caste itself. The simple belief that caste was fading away allowed for new ideological forms of justification of the existing social structure. "Equality" began to be seen, not in terms so much of attempting to redress existing injustices, but in terms of refusing to differentiate on any grounds between sections of the population. So it was that when the casteist opposition to the Mandal Commission came forward, it was "upper" caste youth who identified themselves as "Youth for Equality" - implying that the very effort to redress caste discrimination was itself a sign of casteism.

Reservations have been, if justified at all, seen as "recompense" for past discrimination, not an attempt to correct the current and ongoing. Because they were not looked at as a forward-looking policy of removing the existing vicious systems of discrimination, and because of the rigidity of the system, the notion grew that there were

two types of positions, "reserved" and "merit." Reservation was seen as recompense for the opposite of merit.

The first commission appointed to deal with the non-Dalit, ex-shudra "backward classes", the Kalelkar Commission, refused to admit that there was a crucial issue. It was only after Karpoori Thakur had introduced reservations for OBCs in Bihar, and the former shudra castes were beginning to assert themselves politically, that the then in power Janata Party rediscovered the tradition of Jayaprakash Narayan and appointed a new Commission, headed by B.P. Mandal, also of Bihar. Now the issue of "OBCs" had to be taken seriously. Even then, the "Mandal Commission" was forced to use the term "backward classes", and the rather awkward process of proving "social and economic backwardness" in the absence of really adequate data had to be gone through. (The term "classes" indicates economic criteria; but during the colonial period it had been generally used as a category term and also used to refer to castes; for instances Dalits were referred to as the "Depressed Classes.")

All of this can be called the "three monkeys" policy: see no caste, hear no caste, speak no caste. To a large extent it has been the abiding method by which the Indian elite has tried to ignore the issue and thus justify their own, unexamined, position within the system. It is thus only gradually, and more recently, with the relentless - and democratic - assertion by subaltern groups that caste (and in particular efforts to overcome it) has come to be admitted into legitimate political discourse.

## **Subaltern Assertion after Independence**

The existence of the Census can hardly be blamed for identity-oriented caste assertion. Demand for recognition on a caste basis and use of identities has continued after the Censuses stopped using caste as a category. The issue has not been simply

"identity" politics but the very material benefits that people presumed could be gained from the concessions given to OBCs and to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

A process of vigorous organizing has gone on, with Meenas and Gujars in Rajasthan being at odds, with many groups classified as OBCs demanding inclusion in the "Scheduled" caste category because this was presumed to have more facilities.

The signs of caste are clear. Ongoing atrocities against Dalits, continued vicious discrimination in schools (where children of bhangis have been forced to clean up toilets, where continual denial of equal educational rights has gone on), use of special cups in tea stalls, forbidding dalits to walk through certain caste areas of the village - all of this has been a factor. Within non-Hindu religious groups as well, discrimination against dalit converts has continued, among Christians, Sikhs, even Muslims. "Backward" Muslims have been organizing for some time, and the Sachar Committee report demonstrated the causes behind this.

Political organizing has been taking place, of course, in terms of caste. "Vote bank" politics gets blamed, but after all the democratic arena has been open to such assertion. What was new towards the end of the twentieth century was the rise of caste-based parties. Some political parties were fairly openly for OBCs or Dalits - the "Liberation Tigers" in Tamilnadu, the Republican Party factions in Maharashtra. In Tamilnadu the PMK, led by Ramdoss, has been clearly a Vanniyar party, though its name gave a "class" focus. In UP and Bihar, the Samajwadi party has been identified with Yadavas. The Bahujan Samaj Party originated as an attempt to unite many of the OBC and Dalit castes under one large "bahujan" banner, but has remained stamped as a Dalit and mainly Chamar party. Indeed, UP Chamars have formed its loyal vote base, though Mayawati has recently played this in many different ways with an alliance with Brahmans that temporarily won great success, then returning to an OBC focus when this failed in the last parliamentary election.

The renewal of life for "khap panchayats" in much of the Jat areas of north India has been striking in the last decade. Dozens of young people have been slaughtered and otherwise disciplined for committing the "crime" of marrying within the same gotra; the conservative elders of the community have been asserting themselves.

All of this has gone on without any caste-based census. Indeed, the rejection has left the country without much data to cope with the problems.

Finally, it has to be admitted that marriages are overwhelmingly still arranged and take place within the caste. All we have for main data are impressionistic; but aside from a few very visible examples of inter-caste marriage, a look at the matrimonial columns of any newspaper will show the situation. Since marriage and inheritance are the primary carriers of caste, this shows the degree to which it remains.

## **The need for Data**

In recent years, with renewed pressure for OBC reservations, with sample surveys (such as NSS) showing data that contradicted the Mandal Commission estimates,<sup>1</sup> there has been again a felt need for the Census to take up the issue. Now, over the teeth of much opposition from elite sources, this is apparently going to take place.

In fact, without admitting social problems, analyzing them and collecting data, it is impossible to have a basis for policy and action to redress the problems. Caste is not simply a thing of the past, it clearly exists today. It exists in changed forms; for example, in most cases the traditional forms of jajmani service are no longer the basic productive

---

<sup>1</sup> As the Sachar Committee Report has pointed out, the NSS survey relies on self-identification; and the reluctance of some to identify themselves as "backward" may have biased the data. In fact, the two NSS surveys, the xx round and the aa round, show a growing proportion of OBCs, as awareness of some of the benefits of being called such increases. i

system of the villages. Yet there are some very "feudal" forms of caste that continue - for instance, the fact that manual excrement is removed in wide parts of India by people, mostly women, of a particular ex-untouchable caste. And the "modern" forms of caste remain.

In this respect, a study financed by the University of Pennsylvania and carried out by D. Shyam Babu, , Devesh Kapur and Chandrabhan Prasad in an eastern UP village of changes since 1991 provides some interesting data. The study found that many of the traditional forms of subordination had vanished: dalits now wore almost the same clothes, ate the same food as caste Hindus and built their houses past the "traditional" one story limit. Most significantly at the economic level, Dalit men no longer worked as ploughmen for the upper caste landlords. Instead, the landlords ploughed their own land with tractors, and even the land of the dalits - who had some significant share of its possession - was ploughed by them. A social revolution? Yes, but the fact remained that the greatest capital ownership - in the case of this village - were with the landlords: they possessed all the tractors.

Again, the question remains: how much is economic position correlated with caste? How much of capital ownership is still in the hands of banias and Brahmins? A great deal, it would seem, but we simply don't have the data. Undoubtedly caste has changed in the era of globalization and capitalist development, but we need to know its specific forms.

This is also true for intercaste marriages. These do exist, some very prominent ones, but what is their percentage? In the U.S. there is accurate data on inter-racial marriages, and interestingly enough, this shows a growing percentage in the last couple of decades. Such information allows us one way to map the lessening incidence of racism in the society. In India, again, we simply don't know.

## **Studying Social Stratification**

In sociology, in the United States and Europe, the subject of "social stratification" is a common area. This looks in detail at the various forms of inequality and their interaction in a society. In Indian universities, for the most part, there are no such courses. There have been, instead, traditionally courses on the "weaker sections" or the "marginalized" groups - Dalits, Adivasis and others. Graduate students were discouraged from writing PhDs on caste (unless to show how it was "constructed" during colonialism), except for students from "lower" castes, who were often encouraged to write on their own particular caste or tribal group.

However, the issue is not simply the position and situation of particular groups, it is how the system as a whole works.

This means it is not simply a matter of "counting OBCs" in the Census: all castes have to be counted. This, of course, includes Brahmans and others of the "twice-born" elite.

When I was a graduate student, in the 1960s, the wave of radicalism included organizing in the various academic fields: we had "radical political economists", "Marxist Social Scientists" and so on. During those years the sessions of the major academic bodies were often tumultuous affairs. Young radicals would come to the fancy hotels where they were held, sleep dozens to a room, sell literature, agitate for their issues. One year during the business session of the American Sociological Association, one of the organizers, Martin Nicolaus, captured the microphone and before the assembled sociologists gave an impassioned speech. Sociologists, he said, habituated had their eyes down to study the "masses" and their hands held out to grab the money given by the ruling elite. Instead they should do it the other way around: study the elite for the needs of the working class! After this, studying the "ruling class" became a major theme; young sociologists looked at genealogies and social relationships, where the elite met, how they managed their own interrelations; many books were produced.

In India, we have been largely in a pre-1060s phase: study the masses. This needs to be changed. In order to map the existing structures of discrimination and the inter-relationship of class, gender and caste, we need to know about all of the groups - including and perhaps especially what proportion of positions in the power and wealth structures of society continue to be held by Brahmins. This includes, of course, structures involving the production and reproduction of knowledge, which remains a crucial technique of social control. Among other institutions that have remained clearly in upper-caste hands are the universities - something that has affected the very processes of thinking about caste hierarchy and discrimination.

## **The mechanisms of a Caste Census**

Taking a caste-informed census need not be a complicated operation. How many and what types of caste exist in a particular area, the diversities of the structures in different regions of India, all of this is irrelevant.

Caste can simply be a matter of self-identification. Let each person name their own caste, by whatever term she wants to call it. Later, at the state level, a committee can put these various and numerous groups into broad categories. (Here again, determining "OBCs" can look at the overall relationship of the caste group to economic and educational criteria).

In this process, a person can be completely free to say that she or she has "no caste" or is "mixed" or is "Indian" or whatever. This is a matter of personal preference. As Satish Deshpande has noted, the proportion claiming "no caste" is likely to be small, if not infinitesimal. But it will be interesting to know this, and to monitor the growth of people disclaiming a caste identity.

There is no need in this process to "classify" or hierarchise within the Census itself. Imposing categories of any kind should not be the method. Such classification and analysis will come later, at a minimal level for purposes of publication of Census data - though the raw data should always be made available for researchers.

## **Conclusion**

Recording caste in the Census is no magic; it will not by itself either increase caste tensions or decrease them. It will not by itself lead to the "annihilation of caste": that requires a political will. However, gathering information is a crucial foundation for the process. A caste-based Census is thus a progressive step forward, one that will provide useful tools for understanding Indian society and taking policy steps to remedy the centuries-old and still-existing discrimination.

The rejection of a caste-inclusive Census after independence left policy makers and social activists, not to mention social scientists, disarmed in their efforts to analyze and act. Now the opportunity to change the system is here. We will have the ability to analyze the complex interactions of caste, class and gender in India. We also will be able to estimate the number of mixed marriages that are taking place. The hopefully growing incidence of these, and the gradually reducing correlations of caste and economic position should provide a good basis for really being able to know the degree to which caste and its inherent hierarchy is being overcome.

## **Bibliography**

Deshpande, Satish, "Count Caste in this census to annihilate it," *Economic Times*, June 3, 2010

Deshpande, Satish, *Contemporary India: Sociological Issues*, Penguin 2003

Dirks, Nicholas, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, , 2001

Inden, Ronald, *Imagining India*, Oxford, 1990

Krishnakumar, Asha, "Caste and the Census," *Frontline*, Sept 2-17, 2011; [www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1718/17180910.htm](http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1718/17180910.htm)).

Sarkar, Sumit, "Identities and Histories: Some Lower-caste Narratives from Early Twentieth-century Bengal," in *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002

Suraiya, Jug, "Getting the Maximum Mileage You're your Vote," in *Times of India*, (<http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/jugglebandhi/entry/get-maximum-mileage-from-vote>