
CASTE CENSUS AND ITS IMPACT ON RESERVATION POLICY DEBATES: LESSONS FROM GUJARAT

Mishra Chandanben Virendrakumar, Research Scholar, University School of Law, Gujarat
University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

The demand for a caste-based census has been reignited across India, particularly in states like Bihar, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. The absence of accurate caste data in the post-independence period has led to policy formulations based on colonial or outdated estimates.

I. Introduction

Caste has remained a fundamental determinant of socio-economic status and political representation in India. The Indian Constitution enables affirmative action to redress historical injustices through reservation policies for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) under Articles 15(4) and 16(4). However, the absence of an updated and comprehensive caste census after 1931, barring SC/ST enumeration has led to increased opacity in identifying the real beneficiaries and assessing the actual backwardness of communities.

In Gujarat growing demands for reservation among dominant castes and internal differentiation among OBCs have given rise to a strong call for data-backed policy. This paper discusses how the absence of a caste census affects the legitimacy, scope, and structure of reservation debates in the state.

II. Background: Caste and the State's Data Deficit

India's reservation system is predicated on the principle of social and educational backwardness, yet the state has long operated without robust, updated, and disaggregated data on caste demographics. The last full caste census—apart from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)—was conducted in 1931 under British rule. Since then, policymakers have continued to rely on outdated colonial data or fragmentary institutional studies to inform decisions that affect millions of citizens. This longstanding data vacuum has earned criticism from scholars, civil society actors, and even policymakers, particularly in states where the socio-political landscape is driven by caste identity.

The **Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011**, which was expected to fill this gap, collected caste-related information across more than 25 crore households. However, the caste component of the SECC was never released officially due to inconsistencies and concerns over data reliability. The central government cited data classification challenges—over 46 lakh caste names were returned, many of them duplicates, region-specific variations, or improperly categorized—rendering aggregation nearly impossible without major post-enumeration corrections. As a result, despite the mammoth effort, India remains without verified, government-backed caste population data for the majority of its communities.

This data deficit is particularly significant in the context of **Other Backward Classes (OBCs)**, who have been granted 27% reservation based on the *Mandal Commission*'s estimation in 1980 that they comprise roughly 52% of the population. However, this estimate has never been updated, verified, or disaggregated by region or economic indicators. In Gujarat, more than 140 castes are listed as OBCs, yet no reliable state-level caste-wise breakup exists to determine the distribution of reservation benefits among them.

Moreover, in the absence of caste census data, **State Backward Classes Commissions (SBCCs)** rely on anecdotal evidence, field surveys with limited scope, or political lobbying to determine backwardness. This often leads to the inclusion of relatively advanced communities and the exclusion of less mobilized but genuinely disadvantaged castes. For instance, dominant OBC castes with political clout may exert pressure to retain or expand their benefits, while smaller castes remain invisible in the state's welfare net due to lack of data-based visibility.

The lack of empirical clarity also weakens **judicial scrutiny**. In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court explicitly emphasized the need for objective socio-economic indicators to determine backwardness and capped total reservations at 50%, subject to quantifiable data justifying exception. Yet, with no caste-wise statistics, courts often rely on government affidavits that are not empirically tested. This undermines constitutional scrutiny and allows for arbitrary policy expansion under populist pressures.

States like **Bihar**, which conducted their own caste-based survey in 2023, have challenged the status quo and provided a new template for data-backed governance. The report revealed that OBCs and EBCs together constituted over 63% of the state's population, thereby strengthening the legal and political justification for more nuanced sub-categorization and equitable benefit

distribution. In contrast, Gujarat has so far resisted any move toward caste enumeration, citing concerns over administrative feasibility and potential social discord.

In essence, the **data deficit perpetuates both injustice and inefficiency**. It leaves vulnerable groups without access to remedies and fuels resentment among castes that perceive themselves as left out. For a federal democracy premised on equity and representation, this institutional blindness to caste demography is neither sustainable nor justifiable.

IV. Legal and Policy Challenges

The Supreme Court in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* recognized the need to identify backwardness based on social and educational indicators rather than purely caste. However, in the absence of granular caste data, governments continue to rely on ambiguous criteria.

The recent Bihar caste-based survey has reignited debates nationwide, prompting other states—including Gujarat—to reconsider their data infrastructure. Gujarat's resistance to caste enumeration, however, stems from fears that it may empower caste-based mobilization and demand for equitable redistribution.

V. Lessons from Gujarat: Data, Democracy, and Justice

Gujarat presents a microcosm of India's larger caste dynamics: a powerful forward caste demanding reservation, internal OBC frictions, and marginalized SC/STs struggling for proportional representation. Without reliable data, reservation policies risk becoming either tools of appeasement or institutionalized inequality.

A caste census, if carried out transparently and scientifically, could:

- Enable data-driven sub-categorization within OBCs.
- Prevent elite capture of reservation benefits.
- Validate or challenge inclusion/exclusion from backward lists.
- Enhance legal scrutiny and reduce litigation around reservation.

Moreover, the Gujarat experience underlines the importance of democratic accountability in

policy decisions that affect historically oppressed communities.

The debate on caste census is not merely a statistical concern but a constitutional necessity. For states like Gujarat, where caste realities are complex and politicized, the absence of data exacerbates injustice. A well-conducted caste census can provide the empirical basis to recalibrate reservation policies in a way that ensures both equity and social harmony. As India aspires toward inclusive development, confronting the caste data vacuum is indispensable to realizing the constitutional vision of substantive equality.

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