



# Caste Census and Democracy in India: Legal Challenges and Constitutional Perspectives

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
<b>Research Paper</b>	
<b>Keywords :</b> <i>Caste Census, Democracy, Legal Challenges, Constitution, Social Justice, Affirmative Action, Indian Judiciary</i>	<i>Caste has been a defining feature of Indian society, shaping social, economic, and political structures for centuries. The debate over caste census has intensified in recent years, as it is seen as a tool for ensuring social justice and equitable distribution of resources. While proponents argue that a caste-based census is necessary for evidence-based policymaking, opponents highlight concerns over potential social divisions and legal complexities. This paper examines the role of caste census in India's democratic framework, its constitutional and legal challenges, and judicial perspectives on the issue. It also explores global practices in social classification and affirmative action to provide a comparative analysis.</i>

## 1. Introduction

Caste has been an intrinsic part of India's socio-political landscape, influencing access to resources, education, and political representation. While the Constitution of India aims to establish a casteless society, caste-based reservations and affirmative action policies acknowledge the deep-rooted inequalities that persist. The demand for a caste census has grown over the years, with political parties and social groups arguing that accurate caste data is essential for targeted welfare measures. However, the legal and constitutional aspects of conducting such a census remain contentious. The word "caste" originates from the Portuguese term "casta," which means lineage, race, or breed. Portuguese travelers and colonizers used this term in the 16th century to describe the rigid social divisions they observed in India.

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The Latin root of the word is "castus," meaning pure or chaste, indicating a notion of social exclusivity and hierarchy. Over time, the term was adopted into English and other European languages to refer specifically to India's structured social stratification system. Caste is a social stratification system based on heredity, traditionally associated with Hindu society but also influencing other religious communities in India. It determines a person's social status, occupation, and marriage prospects. The term originates from the Portuguese word "casta," meaning lineage or breed. Caste-like systems exist worldwide, manifesting in different forms across cultures and societies. In India and South Asia, the caste system is deeply rooted in social and religious traditions, dividing communities into hierarchical groups based on birth and occupation. Similar structures are seen in Japan with the Burakumin, in Korea with the Baekjeong, and in Nigeria with the Osu, where marginalized groups face discrimination despite legal reforms. In medieval Europe, feudal hierarchies functioned like caste systems, with nobility at the top and serfs at the bottom. The United States historically had a racial caste system, particularly under slavery and segregation, which scholars argue still influences social dynamics today. Latin America's colonial caste system ranked people based on their ancestry, favoring Europeans over Indigenous and African populations. In the Middle East, groups like the Al-Akhdam in Yemen remain socially ostracized. Though many caste systems have been legally abolished, their effects persist through social discrimination, economic disparities, and restricted access to opportunities in various parts of the world.

Legally, caste is recognized in India for affirmative action purposes, particularly for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The Constitution of India prohibits caste-based discrimination under Article 15 and Article 17. Sociologists like M.N. Srinivas define caste as a hierarchical system with endogamy, hereditary occupation, and strict social norms.

This paper explores the historical background, democratic implications, legal challenges, and judicial interpretations of the caste census in India.

## **2. Historical Context of Caste Census in India**

The colonial British administration conducted caste-based censuses until 1931, after which the practice was discontinued post-independence. The 1951 Census of India chose not to record caste data, except for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), which were explicitly recognized for affirmative action.

In 2011, the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) was conducted, but its caste data was never officially released, citing issues of accuracy and political sensitivity. The demand for a caste census has

resurfaced in the context of expanding reservation policies, social justice movements, and political mobilization.

The caste census was discontinued after 1931 primarily due to political, administrative, and social reasons.

The key factors were:

### **2.1. Administrative Challenges and World War II (1939-1945)**

- The 1941 Census of India was conducted under the shadow of World War II. Due to financial and logistical constraints, detailed caste-based data collection was largely abandoned. The war diverted administrative focus to security and resource management.
- The census operations were simplified, and caste enumeration was seen as an additional burden.

### **2.2. Nationalist Movement and Opposition to Caste-Based Identity**

- The Indian independence movement, led by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, aimed to create a unified national identity rather than reinforcing caste divisions.
- Many nationalists believed that caste enumeration would further institutionalize caste-based identities, contradicting the vision of a casteless society.

### **2.3. Post-Independence Policy of Social Integration**

- After independence in 1947, the Indian government under Prime Minister Nehru sought to move away from colonial-era caste classifications to promote equality.
- The Constitution of India (1950) emphasized affirmative action for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) but did not extend this to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) at the time.
- The government believed that continuing caste enumeration could reinforce caste divisions rather than diminishing them.

### **2.4. Mandal Commission and Backward Class Reservations**

- In the absence of updated caste data, the Mandal Commission (1980) relied on the 1931 Census to estimate the OBC population (at 52%) and recommend 27% reservations.
- The absence of a caste census has led to frequent debates about whether reservation policies are based on accurate and updated demographic data.

### **2.5. Political Sensitivities and Fear of Social Conflict**

- Successive governments feared that caste-based census data could fuel demands for increased reservations and disrupt the existing social and political order.

- Political parties have often taken cautious stances on the issue, balancing between demands for social justice and fears of caste-based polarization.

## **2.6. Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011**

- The SECC 2011 was conducted to collect caste data, but the government never officially released its caste-related findings, citing concerns over data accuracy and the potential for social unrest.

The discontinuation of caste census after 1931 was driven by colonial-era administrative challenges, nationalist aspirations for social unity, post-independence policies, and political sensitivities. However, the demand for updated caste data remains strong, particularly in the context of affirmative action and social justice policies.

## **3. Caste Census and Its Democratic Implications**

A caste census has significant implications for Indian democracy:

### **3.1. Representation and Social Justice**

- The Mandal Commission (1980) recommended 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) based on data from the 1931 Census. Critics argue that without updated caste data, reservation policies may be based on outdated assumptions.
- A caste census can help assess the socio-economic status of various communities and ensure equitable distribution of government resources.

### **3.2. Electoral Politics and Vote Bank Consolidation**

- Caste remains a dominant factor in Indian electoral politics. Political parties rely on caste-based voter mobilization, making caste census data a potentially powerful tool for election strategies.
- Critics fear that caste enumeration may deepen caste-based divisions and further communalize politics.

### **3.3. Policy Formulation and Affirmative Action**

- Government policies on education, employment, and welfare rely on demographic data. A caste census could provide empirical backing for extending or modifying reservation policies.
- The absence of comprehensive caste data leads to underrepresentation and misallocation of resources for marginalized groups.

## **4. Legal and Constitutional Challenges of Caste Census**

### **4.1. Constitutional Provisions**

The Constitution of India does not explicitly mandate a caste census but provides for:

- **Article 15(4) and 15(5):** Special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes.



- **Article 16(4):** Reservation in public employment for backward classes.
- **Article 340:** Appointment of commissions to investigate the conditions of backward classes.

While these provisions enable affirmative action, the absence of caste census data complicates their implementation.

#### 4.2. Right to Equality vs. Affirmative Action

- **Article 14:** Guarantees equality before the law. A caste census may be challenged on the grounds that it institutionalizes caste identity, contradicting the goal of a casteless society.
- **Article 21:** Right to privacy, as reaffirmed in *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017)*, could be invoked to challenge the collection of caste-based data without individual consent.

#### 4.3. Judicial Interpretations

The judiciary has played a key role in shaping affirmative action policies:

- In *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992)*, the Supreme Court upheld the 27% OBC reservation but called for periodic review based on updated data.
- The *Mandal Commission* judgment emphasized the need for empirical data on caste representation.
- More recently, in *Jaishri Laxmanrao Patil v. Chief Minister, Maharashtra (2021)*, the Supreme Court struck down the Maratha reservation, highlighting the lack of reliable caste data.

### 5. Global Perspectives on Social Classification and Affirmative Action

Countries like the U.S., South Africa, and Brazil have policies for racial and ethnic categorization to implement affirmative action. However, their approaches differ:

- The U.S. collects racial and ethnic data through census surveys but does not use it for reservations.
- South Africa's post-apartheid policies include Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), which relies on racial data.
- Brazil implements quotas based on racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

Comparing these models, India's approach to caste-based reservations is unique but requires periodic data updates for effective policy implementation.

### 6. Recent Developments and Political Debates

- The Bihar government conducted its own caste survey in 2023, igniting national debate on caste enumeration.
- The Supreme Court is yet to rule on the legality of state-led caste surveys.



- The Union Government has not committed to a full-fledged caste census but continues to enumerate SCs and STs.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The caste census remains a contentious issue in Indian democracy, balancing between the need for social justice and potential legal and political challenges. Based on the analysis, the following recommendations emerge:

1. **Periodic Review of Caste Data** – Conducting a caste census every decade, similar to SECC, with safeguards for data accuracy.
2. **Legislative Clarity** – Amending census laws to provide a legal framework for caste enumeration.
3. **Data Privacy Safeguards** – Ensuring caste data is used solely for policy formulation, not for political manipulation.
4. **Judicial Oversight** – A constitutional bench may be needed to settle the legal debates surrounding caste enumeration.
5. **Public Awareness and Consensus** – Engaging civil society in discussions on caste data collection to prevent social fragmentation.

## Final Thoughts

A caste census, if conducted with transparency and legal safeguards, can serve as a critical tool for ensuring equitable development in a democratic India. However, it requires a delicate balance to prevent political misuse and uphold constitutional values. The question of whether a caste census is necessary for reservations or whether it might increase social conflict is highly complex and deeply political. On one hand, advocates argue that a caste census is essential for ensuring a fair and evidence-based reservation system. Since the last caste-based census was conducted in 1931, India has been relying on outdated data to determine the socio-economic status of different caste groups. The Mandal Commission (1980) used 1931 data to estimate the OBC population at 52%, but without updated figures, it is unclear whether reservations are proportionate to the actual backward population. A caste census would provide accurate demographic data, allowing for the identification of socially and educationally backward communities that need affirmative action. Additionally, it could help rationalize reservations by ensuring that well-off groups do not disproportionately benefit while truly disadvantaged communities remain deprived. It could also help identify new backward groups that are currently unrecognized and thus excluded from social justice measures.



However, critics warn that a caste census might exacerbate social divisions and increase conflicts. Publicizing caste-based numbers could reinforce caste identities rather than help dissolve them, leading to greater caste-based mobilization and possibly strengthening vote-bank politics. Political parties may manipulate caste data for electoral gains, deepening caste-based polarization instead of promoting social cohesion. Furthermore, the revelation of new caste data could fuel demands for increased reservations, leading to agitation and inter-community tensions. For example, recent Maratha, Jat, and Patidar movements for OBC status have already demonstrated how caste-based demands can trigger large-scale protests and social unrest. Additionally, there is concern that a caste census might not lead to equitable solutions but instead create new divisions between different communities competing for limited resources and opportunities.

Given these complexities, the necessity of a caste census must be carefully weighed against its potential to intensify caste-based conflicts. If conducted, the government must ensure that the data is used transparently and for policy formulation rather than political manipulation. Strict legal safeguards should be in place to prevent misuse of the data while ensuring that the findings contribute to equitable reservations and not to social unrest. Ultimately, a caste census should aim to promote social justice and inclusivity, but it must be handled with great caution to prevent it from deepening caste-based divisions and conflicts.

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