

General Studies-1; Topic – Salient features of Indian society

Caste Census in India

1) Introduction

- Caste is a social reality which determines one's social status and the limits of the social relations and also opportunities for advancement in the life of an individual.
- Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 was the first-ever caste-based census since 1931 Census of India.
- There are demands for collection of caste data in 2021 Census.
- It is important to understand the implications that caste data would have in the country.

2) Need for Caste Census

- Hasty inclusion of the caste question in the SECC has resulted in largely unusable data.
- If we want information regarding the size and characteristics of various castes in India, we must look to the Census of 1931.
- This does not address the change and requirement of present time.
- Caste data will help to identify various backward and downtrodden classes.
- It will give authentic information regarding the socio economic condition and education status of various castes.
- It would help government identify beneficiaries for various socio-economic welfare schemes.
- It would help in understanding the changes in society and exclude or include well of or deprived caste.
- Without accurate data of thousands of jatis (castes) and upjatis (subcastes), it is difficult to infer the accuracy of the caste based political decisions.
- Some jatis may have managed to pull themselves out poverty and marginalisation, while others may have sunk into it.
- Data on caste can be used to rationalise reservation policies.
- This data will strengthen the democratic system and will help to uplift a particular caste and in future there will hopefully be a casteless society.
- Therefore it is time to collect data that reflects the current situation.

3) Caste Census in Colonial Time

- First Census in 1871, included questions about caste.
- This data was then used to divide and conquer India.
- It first privileged Brahmins as interpreters of Indian culture and then targeted them as the root of caste-based oppression and inequality.
- This classification was also a source of anti-Brahmin movements of 20th century.
- It generated a conception of community as a homogeneous and classifiable community and thereby influenced the processes of political representation.
- Post-Independence Censuses have shied away from including questions about caste.

4) Present Status

- We are facing many challenges despite not giving credence to the caste census.
- Patels, Gujjars, Jats and Marathas are demanding reservations.
- Karnataka elections centres around Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities.

- Similar situation exists in several states.
- Land ownership that strengthened the power of upper castes has lost its hold now.
- Land fragmentation and decades of agricultural stagnation have turned many upper caste landowners into marginal farmers.
- Rising rural wages, particularly construction wages and social security schemes have now placed the Dalits and OBCs in a better position.
- National Sample Survey (NSS) data shows that poverty persists among forward castes.
- India Human Development Survey shows that 56% of Dalit children ages 8-11 cannot read but neither can 32% of forward caste and 47% of OBC children.

5) **Impact of Caste data on Society**

- Creates Caste-based political mobilisation
- Promote strong sentiments for or against reservations.
- Caste does play a role in elections in terms of vote banks.

6) **Concerns / Challenges**

- Caste-based census will give rise to caste division.
- Collection of caste data is not easy.
- Difficulty in ascertaining the correctness of the caste claimed by a person.
- Sometimes the same caste is spelt in different ways.
- Some individuals report their jati and others upjati making it difficult to create mutually exclusive categories.

7) **Way Forward**

- We have nearly three years before the Census of 2021. We have data from the SECC and technologies like Artificial Intelligence and machine learning.
- We have other data sources such as matrimonial advertisements and State-specific Scheduled Castes/OBC lists.
- We can condense them into meaningful categories via machine learning tools.
- These categories could then be validated by domain experts from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) institutions in various States.
- This gives us district specific list of castes.
- Respondents can then be allowed to self-identify from the precoded list.
- However, the government must go beyond caste and work for the upliftment of illiterate, marginalised and poor section of population.
- The government should give more importance to economic division, education, health etc