

# Without Jati Data, Social Justice is Guesswork in the Dark: Prof K Kalyani

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**India will enumerate caste during the next official census in 2027. Considering this is a long-standing demand, how invested do you think the government is in such a census?**

The caste census remains an important concern, since delays in conducting it would risk sidelining the caste question in the political imagination. We've seen parties raise the issue when they want to woo caste groups for political mileage, but the caste census, in actual terms, never materialises. It requires a strong political will and social commitment, particularly from the Union Cabinet, given that the Home Ministry is responsible for conducting the census and caste census. Delays will only hinder society's ability to understand caste-based marginalisation. The sooner it is done, the better.

**Many argue that a caste census will freeze identities or draw hard lines around it. Do you foresee that difficulty?**

The caste reality of India is ancient. It goes back at least two thousand years—it's not a modern process, nor is it a consequence of contemporary political formations, though contemporary polity has influenced it. The caste census will provide a systematic, scientific understanding of how caste is operating today. So, instead of debunking it, or saying it will perpetuate caste, we must understand that caste structures are fundamental to understanding the Indian social system. The more nuanced our understanding gets, the more data we have on it, the better we will get at eradicating it or shaping welfare policies with a targeted approach.



**There's much discussion around the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category, arising from the understanding that it consists of many caste groups and, therefore, a large share of the population. But what does the OBC category represent today?**

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Terms like Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and [Other Backward Class \(OBC\)](#) are administrative categories that also feature in the Constitution. But often, they don't reveal the full dynamism of caste as a social reality. Caste keeps changing its form, its alignment with other caste groups and the claims it makes about itself and others. The social, political and educational mobility of members of each caste also keeps changing. That's why we must break down the monoliths that operate through these terminologies. Many a time, broad categories can be misnomers that miss the acute understanding of caste. Hence, it is important to evaluate how caste categories actually float in society in terms of socio-political status, land relationships and educational status.

**The caste census will be jati-wise, and not capture the OBCs as a group. What are the implications?**

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Jati is a working category to understand how caste functions in India (or South Asia). Jati operates through graded inequality, seen in occupation and marriage relationships, and so it covers the entirety of social life. To delve deeper into the nature of each given jati, we must not get stuck within the confines of administrative categories.

Besides, the OBC category is so broad that it can only be used generically, and it is often oversimplified. Certain OBC caste groups have gained sociopolitical dynamism and, as a result, the category itself has fractured. For instance, the dominant OBC groups like Yadav, Koeris or Kurmi communities in North India, and Kapu (Andhra Pradesh), Reddy (Karnataka), Vokkalinga, and others, in South India, have moved up the social ladder due to their access to land and political representation. Of course, this is not to say that they have become socially inclusive. Even within these upwardly mobile OBC groups, there is a lack of educational mobility, as we see in the almost negligible representation of OBC professors in the top central universities.

The OBC category includes the Most [Backward Castes](#) (MBC) and Extremely Backward Castes (EBC), with very small or no land holdings. Unfortunately, there's no nationwide official data to substantiate this. But surveys in Bihar and Telangana have shown a stark difference in land ownership between the upwardly mobile OBCs and the MBCs and EBCs. To understand who are relatively well-off, and who are not, within OBCs, jati-wise enumeration is essential.

### **Are there demands to address the disparity between the upwardly mobile OBCs and those left behind?**

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In Uttar Pradesh, many MBC groups—including the Kashyap, Kewat, Nishad, Bind, Prajapati, Rajbhar, Mallah and Kumhar communities—recently demanded inclusion in the Scheduled Caste category as they feel they have not gained adequate representation as OBCs. Inclusion in the Scheduled Caste list would give them visibility. Such political discussions make it even more critical to have a caste census that explores the nature of jati—if jatis exist, how do they operate, are they exclusive to Hindu communities, or are there jatis in other religious communities? A caste census enumerating each jati will enable policies to address each caste specifically, helping the most marginal within marginalised groups.

### **OBC reservation is based on social and economic backwardness, so, if jatis are enumerated, will new criteria be required to assess their relative status?**

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Some states, including Bihar, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have already sub-categorised reservations for OBCs, typically as [EBCs](#). Jharkhand has divided OBCs into OBC 1 and 2, based on relative access to land and resources.

In Bihar, uniquely, the EBC category spans across religious groups, ensuring representation of the more marginalised minority communities. Meanwhile, the quota for women also keeps space for EBCs and OBCs.

So, the more we sub-divide the OBC category along access to resources, the better we can target reservation policies. The Rohini Commission, set up in October 2017, which submitted its report in 2023, discussed ways to identify the most marginalised amongst the OBCs. Unfortunately, its report was not made public

### **At present, the census includes the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes. Did that help develop our understanding of these categories?**

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It did in the past, especially regarding access to resource by Dalit/Adivasi communities and land holdings within the community. However, we can't say much, since the latest data, from 2011, has not been made public yet. But much of the discussion around the OBC category has been through independent research or through data gathered by the backward class commissions, which didn't address the question of jatis.

Within OBCs, the most upwardly mobile jatis maintain a certain distance—political, social and in terms of marital relationships—from the lowermost sections. This is why the EBC and MBC identities are always in flux, in the form of movements or mobilisations to forge new alliances—especially political ones, but also social ones—in which different castes come together. The MBCs in [Uttar Pradesh](#) demanded Scheduled Caste status as a group after they felt excluded. Similarly, the leadership among Rajbhar, Prajapati and other similar communities have mobilised to shift towards the BJP, where they feel they would gain political visibility.

In this way, the distance between castes within the OBC category also makes it more politically vulnerable. The census must work to open it up to understanding caste-based problems within the category.

### **In northern states, the BJP has woven alliances with numerically small MBC or EBC communities, but their interests are often swept away by relatively dominant social groups.**

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Actually, the exact numbers of MBC and EBC groups is highly variable from state to state. It's not true that dominant caste groups are always numerically dominant. In many states, the EBC communities are large in numbers. Also, we have to consider the impact of political alliances on the status of dominant castes: for example, the BJP is trying to carve out a dominant caste Kurmi alliance in Bihar, whereas the M-Y [Muslim-Yadav] alliance exists and is supported by the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). The BJP has explored caste alliances that it can work with and which have worked to its advantage, particularly in terms of voting numbers. It is also true that a divided OBC category is easy to woo for votes without addressing where the shoe pinches its members.

It is also important to discuss how select leadership from both dominant-caste OBC and EBC communities has extended its support to the BJP. Amidst this, the social consciousness or mobilisation towards enumeration—to ensure political representation—has taken a back seat. Caste identity is reduced to political equations rather than ensuring social inclusion and equitable representation.

If opposition parties give space to OBC groups in terms of representation and ensuring their inclusion in institutional spaces, this shift of a large chunk of the population towards one end of the political spectrum can be avoided. The Congress party, under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, has shown enthusiasm in pushing it forward and initiating conversations on it. It needs to be carried out in letter and spirit.

### **With respect to the Dalits, how will the caste census affect them, as they are already counted?**

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Even if they were counted, we don't have the 2011 caste census data yet, which implies that there is something seriously wrong with the data sharing, or there is a political unwillingness to talk about questions of caste and caste-based statistics with pinpoint accuracy. The caste census will enable all marginalised castes, including the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs, by revealing not just their exact numbers but allowing a further analysis that will bring out caste realities on the ground.

The census is not just a 'governmentality' or an administrative data map, but about how the data can help us achieve social equity. Data that reveals the nuances of jati—its place in the social hierarchy, which jati claims what Varna status, which jatis have gained social, political, economic or educational mobility—will help us to understand our social reality.

A caste census in India, where caste has been the basis of social systems, will not fragment society. People say caste pride has weakened and the jajmani system has been replaced by globalisation and the market today. But globalisation has only complicated caste, not done away with it. Whether it is determining who marries whom, or who networks whom, who befriends whom, or what labour and land relationships exist between social groups, caste has already defined all of these for millennia.

### **Is it your argument that state governments and the centre will be free to draw up categories of individual caste groups even after their enumeration as jatis?**

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Yes, the sub-categorisation of caste groups has been discussed in many states, most notably in Bihar, where [Karpooori Thakur](#) implemented the suggestions of the Mungeri Lal Commission report, which identified the problems of the most deprived among the OBCs. Thakur is rightfully given the sobriquet of 'Jannayak' in Bihar because he involved himself with social movements and addressed the under-representation or absence of social groups within OBCs.

In 2024, the BJP government awarded Karpooori Thakur with the Bharat Ratna, but the real question of providing representation to historically excluded communities, or even enumerating them remains distant. More than tokenism or awards, it's important to work on the ideological premises of Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, Karpooori Thakur and others like them.

## **We notice many OBC communities now declare themselves as belonging to the Kshatriya Varna. Will that not complicate or confuse the census officials?**

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The claim for Kshatriya status is not new—it predates colonial times when different jatis mobilised to claim a higher caste/Varna status. The aim must be to understand such claims and their jati relationships. For example, some upwardly mobile OBC groups have sought higher Varna status. In regions of North India, the Ahir claim Kshatriya status. In

many songs and popular performances, we notice claims of their belonging to warrior groups. Similarly, the Meena community is in the OBC category in some states, but it claims Scheduled Tribe status, backed by its community mythology and the desire for representation.

Do Kshatriya caste-communities intermarry with communities that claim the same status as them? The answer is a blatant no, which implies that the mobility within Varna groups still remains rigid. Only after the caste census is published, and when the analysis on it proceeds, will we know whether the claims to relative status are borne out by everyday experiences today.

Knowing the social, political, economic and educational status of each jati will reveal caste realities that we have missed so far, particularly pertaining to the OBCs, who have largely been bracketed as a single large group. It's a fractured group with internal dynamics that must be understood—be it MBCs claiming Scheduled Caste status or EBCs aligning with the politically powerful to gain visibility

## **Do you think we will also discover certain socially exclusionary practices within the OBC category?**

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Yes. Many EBC groups claim they have been subjected to caste-based violence, but such cases go unreported, or the police view them as merely law and order problems, and not as a caste issue.

## **Are you referring to caste-based discrimination against groups not identified as Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe?**

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Yes, because different caste groups face different forms of discrimination. While for Scheduled Castes, the discrimination is due to [untouchability](#) practices, for OBC groups it is of the nature of social exclusion. The fragmentation or internal division within OBCs does not imply—and I underline this—that the backward classes, even the most dominant among them, are not socially marginalised. It is also not to say that the dominant communities among the backward classes would not face caste-based discrimination by the Savarna castes. However, more jati-wise analysis will help us flesh out how the extremely backward are differentially treated within the OBCs.

Secondly, we have the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, but no similar law for OBCs, though the National Commission on Backward Classes does talk about the violence they face. In that sense, the caste census can reveal the vulnerability of jatis: who faces violence and who perpetrates it? Many say that the OBCs perpetrate violence against the Scheduled Castes, for instance, in Maharashtra, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. But when we say OBC in this context, do we mean the dominant among them? And is it the EBCs who bear the brunt of the violence? Indeed, we need laws to protect the vulnerable, but first we must have granular caste data—no law can be made out of thin air. The SC/ST Atrocities Prevention Act was passed because we had data that told us about the occurrence of anti-Dalit violence.

**Sometimes, we can forget that caste and violence related to it flow from the top down. For instance, often, the economic rise of OBCs is seen as an affront by the members of elite castes.**

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Yes, during the farmer protests, we saw how farmers, who belonged to peasant castes, were not allowed to enter Delhi. The paradox lies in what you mention—if there is a wealthy peasantry, why was it denied entry into the national capital?

Prof Sukhdev Thorat has detailed the biases that impact job-seekers from the Scheduled Castes during interview-based appointments. So, there must be more substantive engagement with new forms of biases in the post-liberalisation, post-globalisation world. Until the nineties, in the pre-Mandal era, the OBCs were part of the jajmani system, performing unpaid, exploitative labour. Liberalisation opened the economy and created new spaces but we are yet to understand where caste questions arise in this system. Has the caste relationship changed, or has the older order manifested in a newer form? These conversations will flow from analysis of caste census data, without which we're groping in the dark.

*(The views expressed are personal.)*