

Counting people, lesson from Bihar

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By Khalid Anis Ansari

Debate on caste census needs to be relaunched as a dialogue among citizens on the very nature of nationhood and democracy

While caste informs every aspect of the South Asian experience — knowledge, stratification, power, intimacy, theology — the Indian governing classes have been so far averse to its inclusion as a category in the decennial Census. The last time caste was recorded was in the decennial Census of 1931 conducted by the colonial regime. Ironically, while “caste” was dropped in the census exercises in Independent India with the understanding that it promotes competitive casteism and social divisions, the category “religion” that was chiefly instrumental in the country’s Partition was retained. The reluctance to hold a caste census comes primarily from the pan-religion caste elites that hold deep anxieties about getting their privilege and dominance within the system examined. BR Ambedkar sarcastically remarked on the pathological elite strategy of transcending caste by dropping it as “if a word does not exist in a dictionary it can be proved that the fact for which the word stands does not exist”. The anti-caste scholar Gail Omvedt called it the “three monkeys” policy – see no caste, hear no caste, speak no caste.



PREMIUM

JD (U) workers and supporters celebrate after the declaration of Bihar's caste-based survey report in Patna on Wednesday (PTI)

The persistent caste blindness has been breached by the Bihar government’s release of the first set of caste-based survey data on the symbolic occasion of Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday on October 2. Ambedkar envisaged the annihilation of caste as central to the

nation-building project. Castes were anti-national “because they bring about separation in social life” and “generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste”. The way out was not an ostrich syndrome but to name caste explicitly and empirically inform the politics of dignity and redistribution. Any meaningful population enumeration must be positioned as a cartographic exercise that dynamically mirrors India’s immense cultural diversity and socio-economic inequality, including caste. Bihar has historically opened the floodgates, which could catalyse a fresh spiral of social justice politics that learns from past mistakes and takes the questions of subaltern cultural-ideological diversity and internal inequalities seriously.

So far, the Bihar government has publicly released the numerical strength of various castes, religious groups, and broad statutory categories — Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, Economically Backward Classes, and General (unreserved). The data is along expected lines and remarkably does not see much departure from the colonial estimates in the Census of India 1931 for the states of Bihar and Orissa. Prima facie, the minimal departures can be explained by natural growth and outmigration factors. The most immediate impact would be a renewed demand for quota expansion of the BC, EBC, and SC categories by challenging the arbitrary Supreme Court ceiling of 50%. A 10% EWS quota for the 15.5% general category and a 30% (18% EBC and 12% BC) quota for the 63% backward classes is morally indefensible. There will be a push towards proportional representation and redistribution.

The second fallout will be the intensification of the Islam and caste debate. The survey returns the population share of the privileged caste Ashraf Muslims to 4.8% and the lower caste Pasmanda Muslims to 12.9%, leading to a total population share of Muslims at 17.70%. The population figures of the privileged Sheikh caste, at 3.8%, numerically the highest among Muslims, may be inflated due to some lowered caste groups and the Bangla-speaking Muslims of the Seemanchal region reporting themselves as Sheikhs due to Ashrafisation (analogical to Sanskritisation) or traditional usage. The reduction in the Julaha (Ansaris) numbers at 3.5%, which were reported to be around 25% of the Muslim population during the 1931 Census and in the present survey constitute about 20% of the Muslim population, can be explained away by the formation of Jharkhand, which has a substantive Julaha population. However, the higher proportion of upper castes among Muslims in Bihar (27%) vis-a-vis the Hindus (13%) and the probable lower proportion of converts from Dalit origins may call for a serious revisiting of the dominant “Islam as social liberation” thesis. Be that as it may, the data for over 38 Muslim castes (the separate data for a few other Muslim castes like the Kalals/Iraqis, Teli, Nai, Badhai, and Tamoli are not available as they have been counted along with the Hindu castes) busts the myth of a monolithic Muslim community.

However, one will have to wait for the release of the socio-economic details of each caste to make more meaningful interpretations of extant hegemonies and exclusion in Bihar. The numbers of various castes/communities are helpful but insufficient. The numerical strength of various jatis/biradaris must be read in the light of their control of material and cultural power — land, capital, employment, incomes, access to education, health, credit,

and so on. This data will be instrumental in deciding categorical revisions and inclusion/exclusion in affirmative action (reservations) and redistributive policies on a more scientific basis. The lack of precise caste data has been contentious, particularly in the sub-categorisation debate, fueling unwarranted divisive passions. Caste, South Asia's storehouse of social power, often constitutes the crucial site where "class" is lived out and contested. Certain sections of the landed privileged communities may have slid down the class ladder due to the deep-seated agrarian crisis and the uneven effects of the penetration of market logic in the countryside. Does the rupture between the memory of historical privilege and recent decline make them especially prone to hurt sentiments and violence? The feature of caste endogamy, particularly the transfer of wealth through inheritance to successive generations, may be a binding site for status reproduction and explains the violence meted out to sexual transgressions outside castes/communities. What is the state of inter-caste/community marriages? Many questions can be reasonably addressed only when the socio-economic data is released.

However, the debate on the caste census must be rescued from the immediacy of electoral pragmatics and relaunched as a dialogue among citizens on the very nature of nationhood and democracy. The staging of caste by the Bihar survey will have a contagion effect on other states and strengthen the demand for a caste census at the national level. It will interrogate the dominant grip of majority-minority, secular-communal, and Hindu-Muslim discourses that militate against social justice. If democracy does not expand incrementally, it manifests itself in the morbid pathologies of repression and violence that we witness today.

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