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Caste question on census angers Indians

By **Sara Sidner**, CNN

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Question on caste not been part of census since 1931 under British rule
- Government move to add it to census is generating strong opposition
- Some critics say the caste question can be used to divide India
- Government uses caste as part of a quota system to determine some benefits

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New Delhi, India (CNN) -- The national census in India is striking a raw nerve in the country with a proposal to add a question it has not asked since British colonial times: What is your caste?

Fifteen-year-old Chanda sits outside her handmade hut in a Delhi slum playing a game with the only toys she has, small dusty rocks from the road. She is spunky and street smart but has never been to school. She said the national census workers came to her home and asked her a lot of questions, including: "What is your caste?"

That question has not been a part of the census since 1931 under British rule. The government's move to make it a part of the 2010 census is generating strong opposition.

Groups of protesters opposed to it say the caste question can be used to divide India. Some scholars say the British used caste to play one group of Indians against another.

"This is going to harm, this is going to divide; this is going to finally create anarchy. This is going to take further all the bad wrong things that have slowly spread like poison, and there is no end to it," said Sonal Mansingh, one of India's most renowned dancers and a member of a campaign opposing the caste question.

Caste is a complicated, hot-button issue in the South Asian country. For centuries, caste could determine where you live, your job, even who you could marry and where you were buried, among other things. It has been used to brutally discriminate against people, especially those in lower castes, but in current times is also being used in a quota system to try to uplift those who have typically been discriminated against.

In the Hindu tradition, four main castes are broken down into hundreds of subcastes that can dictate your status in Indian society. Then there is one level of society deemed to be unworthy of a caste -- so reviled that they were called "untouchables." Now they are often referred to as Dalits.

Even now, particularly in villages, caste can dictate one's life. But slowly the strict lines of the caste culture are dissolving, especially in the cities.

Still, Chanda, who lives in a New Delhi slum, said caste was important in her neighborhood.

"If I do inter-caste marriage my parents will kill me," she said, noting she doesn't see a problem with a caste question on the census because it is a part of life. Some from her community think it may bring them more government benefits.

The government still uses a person's caste as a part of a quota system to determine certain government benefits. The system sets aside a percentage of government jobs or seats in schools for those from what are referred to as scheduled castes -- those with traditionally little education and opportunity.

The government is still deciding on whether caste should be included in the census.

"It has been submitted to the group of ministers who are discussing it," said R.C. Sethi the Additional Registrar General in charge of the census.

But the caste question is already being asked, according to some who have participated in the census.

"They asked, but no one here is opposing the caste question," Delhi resident Rajesh Kumar Ahiwal said of his neighborhood. "Besides they can tell my caste through my surname."

The debate over the issue is not over by a long shot as India tries to count more than one billion people this year.

Jagdish C. Sharma, former secretary of India's Ministry of External Affairs who helped start one of the anti-caste question groups, said that as India secures its position on the world stage, there is no place for such divisive measures.

"It is not in accordance with the spirit of the India constitution, which talked about a casteless and classless society. Now, our attempts should be to achieve that dream, to make that dream a reality rather than take such retrograde steps when slowly these boundaries are erasing," Sharma said.

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