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Caste in Census: Hypocrites all!

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We can tell a person's caste from his name. Upper caste Hindus mostly use the caste as their surname. As long as this practice continues, people will be known by their caste name and not their first name. This writer, for example, is known as Mr Nair among friends and colleagues, though my first name is Viswanathan. Years ago when I was with the Indian Express, someone from my village came to Bombay and called up the office asking for Viswanathan. The telephone operator told him that there was no one in the office by that name. This applies to most Indians, they go by the surname Reddy, Rao, Iyer, Iyengar, Mehta, Shah, Desai, Sardesai, Chakravarty, Choudhary, Chaturvedi, Goswami, Nair, Menon, Pillai and so on. It gives them an identity and they are proud of their caste, too. When it comes to a debate on the abolition of caste, all are hypocrites. Most columnists and news channel Editors vehemently argue against reintroducing caste in Census. But those who abhor the caste system do not want to drop their caste-based surname first to prove their genuine concern. Even Gandhiji did not do it though he had championed the cause of the Harijans and the downtrodden. Caste makes a person inferior or superior, caste determines an individual's place in society, the work he or she may carry out, and who he or she may marry and meet. A person is enabled or disabled at birth and one cannot change his low birth though he can change his destinies through education and hard work. But the fact remains, a Nair's son becomes a Nair and a Dalit's son inherits his father's caste.

A controversy has erupted over the inclusion of caste in the 2011 Census, after a long gap of 60 years. The colonial practice of caste-based headcount was discontinued after independence. All government records, registers and application forms also deleted the column of caste. One of the major objectives of Independent India was to remove the disabilities arising out of this social malady. But then, did the caste system disappear? On the contrary there are violent agitations for more reservations based on caste. More and more communities are fighting for their inclusion under lower castes and backward classes in order to enjoy the benefits of reservation. With the result, some states like Tamil Nadu has 70 per cent reservation though the Supreme Court has limited this to 50 per cent.

The Census, first conducted in 1881 by the British, collected caste-wise data until 1931. While the Census continues to count scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, OBCs have not been enumerated for 80 years. Parties with strong OBC constituencies argue that this leads to wrong data on their numbers and consequently affects their entitlement. The Census over the years provides vital information on population and its relative characteristics in terms of sex, age groups, economic activity, occupation, literacy, language, religion, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and a host of demographic features.

Though India's Constitution has sought to abolish caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability, the caste system is still widespread and remains deeply rooted in the society, especially in rural India. A Dalit's shadow was believed to pollute the upper classes. They may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by upper classes, drink water from public wells, or visit the same temples visited by the higher castes. Dalit children were often made to sit in the back rows in classrooms! Things are changing, but the lower castes are not treated on par with the upper class even now. In my village there is a Bhagwati temple. Even today, only people belonging to the Nair community worship in the temple. There is no bar on others, but their inferior complex dissuades them from entering the temple. This applies to most of the temples in Kerala.

The caste system is not restricted to Hinduism alone. It is prevalent among Christians and Muslims as well. Christians in Kerala are divided into several sects, the main sects being Syrian Christians, Latin Christians, Protestants, Jacobites, Marthomites, CSI (Church of South India), etc. Syrian Christians consider themselves superior to others. They were believed to be converted from Brahmins, other upper castes and Jews by St Thomas, while Latin Christians were converted mainly from lower castes where fishing was the traditional occupation. Latin converts were poor and deprived. So the Government of India gave them the social benefit of OBC status. Anthropologists have noted that the caste hierarchy among Christians in Kerala was much more polarised than the Hindu practices. They would not enter into marriage alliances without the permission of their respective church authorities. In Goa, mass conversions were carried out by Portuguese Latin missionaries. The Hindu converts retained their caste practices, thus the original Hindu Brahmins in Goa now became Christian Bamons and the Kshatriyas became Christian noblemen called Chardos. The Dalits or untouchables who converted to Christianity became Mahars and Chamars. Though Jesus Christ took everybody by his stride without differences, Christian Dalits suffer discrimination from the higher castes.

Among Muslims, there are Sunnis, Shias, Boris, Iranis and so on. The rivalry between the Sunnis and Shias is known throughout the Muslim world. Those who are referred to as Ashrafs are presumed to have a superior status derived from their foreign ancestry, while the Ajlafs are assumed to be converts from Hinduism, and have a lower status. There is also the Arzal caste regarded as the equivalent of untouchables. There is a demand to accommodate the Muslim Dalits in the quota given to the SCs. The Sachar Committee on the plight of Muslims too has recognised that there are Dalits in the Muslim community.

Under the Constitution, caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability are prohibited. According to K Kanakasabapathy, Director, EPW Research Foundation, though Caste in census was discontinued, the report of the first Backward Classes Commission in 1955, in fact, recommended caste-wise enumeration of the population in the Census of 1961 and treatment of "caste

as the criteria" to determine backwardness. It had prepared a list of 2,399 backward castes, of which 837 had been classified as the "most backward." This report was not accepted, as it was feared that the really needy would be swamped by the multitude and would not receive special attention. The Second Backward Classes Commission, using the 1931 Census data of the British, estimated that 54 per cent of the total population (excluding SCs and STs) belonging to 3,743 different castes and communities were backward.

The objection to Caste Census is that it will push back the country to the dark ages. The electoral politics has blinded the three Yadav leaders – Mulayam, Lalu and Sharad – who argue that their flock, the OBCs, would be entitled to more reservations in employment and educational institutions after the Census. Critics believe that the government has succumbed to pressure from the Yadav trio for its survival. Poverty is not confined to the OBCs. In a country where 40 per cent people earn less than a dollar, the concerted effort of the political parties should be how to salvage people from the deplorable economic conditions in which they are stuck. It is time to change the basis of reservation from caste to poverty. The criterion should not be caste but how much a person earns.

On the positive side, the question is why do we have to omit the OBCs alone in the Census. The Census covers all the religions, the SCs and STs, and the vast number of OBCs are deliberately left out unidentified for whatever reasons. By doing so, we were, of course, open to manipulation, corruption and dishonest representation. The new data collected from the Census may never be perfect; people tend to misrepresent the caste and their income. Actual caste data could shed light on how backward some of the OBC classes are. The data might reflect that inter-caste gaps in education, occupation and access to infrastructure are far greater than we think. By avoiding caste details in the Census, we are not eliminating it.