

The Indian census and caste

Caste in doubt

The perilous arithmetic of positive discrimination

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Asking some uncomfortable questions

SIXTY years after India's constitution banned caste discrimination, Hinduism's millennia-old hierarchy retains a tight grip. Lonely-hearts ads in the newspapers are classified by caste and sub-caste. Brahmins, at the top, dominate many professions. There are still hundreds of "honour killings" by which families avenge inter-caste marriages and liaisons. Caste discrimination is still dreadfully evident in the wretched lives of *dalits*, formerly "untouchables", who remain India's poorest and least educated people. It is not surprising, then, that India is considering the inclusion of caste in its ten-yearly census, the next of which is due in 2011.

The proposal has caused a storm of controversy. India has not counted caste in its census since 1931. Many argue that its inclusion would buttress a system that independent India's first leaders railed against. The Congress party, which led the independence struggle, struck caste from government forms and has resisted calls for a nationwide caste count.

However, now heading a coalition government, Congress needs the support of smaller parties, including a number of caste-based groups that have sprung up in recent years, to push through important legislation. A system of affirmative action has given caste greater potency. In 1990 "reservations" in government jobs and university places for *dalits* were extended to a group of castes slightly higher-up the pecking order, the "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs). Reservations are based on data from the 1931 census. Caste politicians are not alone in arguing that this makes a nonsense of the system.

Counting caste in the census, however, would be difficult, or even impossible. Besides the four main *varna*, or castes, India has uncounted thousands of sub-castes, few of which census officials will recognise. More worryingly, the count would surely lead to a flood of demands for more reservations; already, the government is battling quota demands from non-OBC castes, Muslims and Christian converts from Hinduism—and a call for reservations to be extended to India's private sector.

Six decades of reservations have done little to better the lot of low-caste Indians. But recent economic growth has been more transformative. As millions have moved to urban areas in search of work, they have left the rigid social groupings of their villages for the relative anonymity of cities, and swapped hereditary trades for jobs in which family background is largely immaterial. Many Indians are becoming caste-blind, and marrying across caste lines. Anidhrudda, a 30-year-old software engineer in Kolkata (Calcutta), says his inter-caste marriage was no big deal. But even he concedes there are limits. If he had married a *dalit*, he says, "my family would not have been able to face society."

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