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Who's afraid of caste census?

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Ever since the Centre announced that it would collect data on various castes during the ongoing Census, the media has created a hue and cry saying that this would harm the nation and open a Pandora's Box of caste conflicts. On the other hand, those who seek caste enumeration are of the view that this would clear the cobwebs and deliver proper data on other backward classes (OBCs) that will help implement reservation policies and welfare schemes better.

The collection of caste data was not a decision taken by the government on its own. The OBC leadership across the country has demanded it and the Supreme Court advised the Centre to go for such a Census to ensure that an accurate population database was made available.

Let us not forget the fact that even at the time of the 2001 Census there was a strong demand for caste census. The then deputy Prime Minister L.K Advani, in fact, went on record to say that caste data would be collected. But Right-wing academic forces — particularly a group of sociologists and anthropologists — advised the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government not to go for such an enumeration as it would go against the interests of the ruling upper castes and communities.

It should be noted that the opposition to caste data has been coming from upper castes that still control the levers of power. The lower castes have never opposed such a proposal.

It is fallacious to argue that society would get further divided if the population of each caste is known to the policymakers and to the public.

Caste culture is all around us. In the dalit-bahujan discourse, the upper castes are being shown as constituting less than 15 per cent. This could be totally wrong. Even within the lower castes there are several false claims about numbers. Every caste claims that it is numerically the strongest and keeps asking for its "rightful" share.

How to tell them that their claims are wrong? When caste has become such an important category of day-to-day reckoning it is important to have proper data at hand to tell communities that they constitute this much and cannot ask for more than their share.

It is true that we cannot distribute everything based on caste. But caste census is the right basis for statistics such as literacy rate and issues like the proportion of representation. Once we cite the Census data there cannot be any authentic opposition to that evidence.

The upper caste intelligentsia is afraid that once detailed data on number of people in lower castes is available it would become a major ground for asking for accurate proportional representation in certain sectors, such as education and employment.

For example, once the caste data is available, the 50 per cent limit on reservations imposed by the Supreme Court could be questioned on the basis of numbers. This would in turn help in sustaining the overall system of liberal democracy. The system of democracy would only get deeper with the discourse of numbers.

Democracy is in effect a system of numbers unlike communism, which does not deal with numbers while institutionalising a government. In a democracy, the governing system is institutionalised through an electoral process and in such a system the people must be counted from all angles — sex, race, religion, caste and so on. In a democracy based on numbers, any section of society can come to power.

Based on the counting on the basis of religion, Hindus have realised that they are the majority. And because of that understanding they have claimed power. When Mahatma Gandhi suggested that Muhammed Ali Jinnah should be made the first Prime Minister in order to avoid Partition, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel put forth the argument that India was a Hindu-majority nation and would not accept a Muslim as its first Prime Minister. Where did the notion of Hindu majoritarianism come from? It came from numbers.

With the same logic what is wrong if women, cutting across religious divides, count themselves, and organise themselves to come to power? They constitute about 50 per cent of the population and if they want to fight for gender democracy, they too can come to power. So should there be a demand for abolition of gender enumeration, too?

If caste census is done, the India democracy would thrive on the firm support of the lower castes who keep hoping of getting their share based on their numbers. The upper castes may feel desolate with the system of democracy itself, if this shift begins to take place. They might call such a shift “castocracy”. But would they call a state or a nation being ruled by women “womenocracy”?

Cognitive social psychology says all such theories are constructed on a convenience known as “comfort zone”. If brown upper castes live in white societies they see brown bashing but black bashing remains hidden in their blind spots. In white societies the browns are not in their comfort zone but in India they are and do not want to see the other's “discomfort zone”.

Many upper caste intellectuals say that caste was a construction of the colonial census system. They talk as if caste never existed before the British started an enumerative process. By their logic we should come to the conclusion that before the British enumerated people based on religion, there were no religions in India. There are many such blind spots in India and that is why we still remain backward in theories of knowledge.

Let all castes — not just OBCs — be counted for strengthening our democratic system. I know that even mine is a blind-spot theory but it may have the effect of an antidote.

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