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Recasting 2011 census: Too little, too late
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There must be something about being counted that produces a visceral reaction in all societies. The US seems to routinely go through last-minute debates about counting immigrants and adjustment of undercount. The storm around the inclusion of caste in the 2011 Indian census is another example. However, it offers a unique opportunity for a public debate around what we are counting and why.

If this were simply a debate about how many Indians consider themselves belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBC) and enumeration of their basic characteristics, there is little reason for this storm in the teacup. Judging by the Press reports, all the census is going to do is collect self-reports of whether the respondents belong to OBCs and along with education, marital status and housing characteristics normally enumerated in the census, so one may be able to compare characteristics of OBCs with those of the general population.

Are any of the results likely to be surprising? Most studies based on large surveys document two things: socio-economic conditions of OBCs are worse than those of forward castes, although significantly better than those of Dalits and adivasis; and their incomes as well as human development indicators are on par with all India averages.

This is not surprising since OBCs comprise a vast proportion of India's population and their conditions determine all-India averages. For example, NSS documents average monthly per-capita expenditure as Rs 557 for OBCs in rural areas compared to Rs 558 for the general population. A recently-published study by researchers from NCAER and University of Maryland documents that 46% of India's 8-11 year-old children cannot read a simple paragraph; among the OBCs, 44% cannot read.

If OBCs are expected to look more or less like the average Indian, it does not really matter whether their head count is large or small, particularly given the measurement error due to self-reporting. At the same time, the criticism of how incorporation of this one question is going to ruin the whole census exercise also seems overblown.

It is inconvenient to have to add one more column at this late date but I have great faith in the ingenuity of the office of the registrar general. What we lose by this careless inclusion of caste in Census 2011 is an opportunity to debate the underlying nature of social inequality in the country, and that is a grievous loss.

However, we do not help the most deprived by focusing on the average. Sadly, this is precisely what successive commissions on OBCs have done with the help of outdated data from the census of 1931 conducted by a colonial administration.

How many people in the country today even know how any jati comes to be termed OBC? The first OBC Commission of 1953, led by Kaka Kalelkar, set the trend of using regionally-specific caste groupings to define 'depressed classes'. This was further refined by the Mandal Commission to come up with a set of criteria of social, educational and economic backwardness that were used to classify various castes as being backward or not.

If we truly want to identify the deprived groups, two aspects of this exercise deserve re-examination: are the criteria consistent with the Indian reality in the 21st century? And should these criteria be applied consistently across the country or be different for different states, as was the case with the Mandal Commission report?

The criteria used by the Mandal Commission overwhelmingly rely on social characteristics since social backwardness receives three points, compared to two points for educational backwardness and one point for economic backwardness in its classification. Definition of social backwardness includes high work participation by women and low age at marriage, among others. This may well have been reasonable in 1980, but in a modern economy, women with college degrees are more likely to be employed than women with primary education.

So, paradoxically, this criterion would place castes with higher college education for women below those where women only complete primary school. Similarly, the age at marriage criterion probably accounts at least partially for the fact that about 32% of Haryana's population is classified as OBC compared to 19% of Punjab's. The second aspect of the Mandal Commission decision is even more problematic. The commission quickly realised that given the geographic diversity of the country and its overwhelming reliance on social indicators, some states are likely to have many more OBCs than others.

In order to avoid this political quagmire, instead of using the same cutoff for each state, they used different cutoffs so that the stigma (and benefits) of backwardness were evenly distributed across the country. However, although OBC counts may appear to be similar for Bihar and Kerala, it is hard to argue today that these two states are similar on other aspects of deprivation.

These examples suggest a need for serious and thoughtful evaluation of backwardness with data that are consistent with 21st century realities. If census is to carry out a serious caste enumeration to update the 1931 data, it would take years

of thought and planning to figure out how to condense a list of thousands of jatis into some manageable number and then to use it to elicit responses from the population instead of merely checking the OBC box. This is simply not feasible in 2010 when the population enumeration in February 2011 is barely seven months away.

If the goal of public policy is to ensure that the vulnerable and marginalised citizens of India receive special consideration, reliance on OBC classification is like using an ax to remove a brain tumour . However, if the current storm has generated a real political will to fashion a scalpel for the tumour, then we should be looking at setting up expert groups for a complete enumeration of jatis in 2021 and their reclassification to identify the truly marginalised backward classes. Is our polity brave enough to attempt this?

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