

## We need to move from a caste census with a capital C to one with a small c



When the Narendra Modi government surprised everyone by announcing the caste census, there was a mood of triumph in the social justice camp. Whatever the government's political calculations, the much-awaited and long-postponed caste census was finally happening. We were at the cusp of the next big step in India's unsteady march towards eliminating caste inequalities. Or so we thought.

Two new books invite us to be cautious. Unlike the earlier media polemics, all heat and little light, Trina Vithayathil's *Counting Caste* and Anand Teltumbde's *The Caste Con Census* are products of serious scholarship and reflection. Both authors share a commitment to social justice and to the annihilation of caste. Yet they offer strikingly different takes on the subject. This rare coincidence, the arrival of two fine books on a semi-technical subject like caste enumeration, promises to open up a fruitful discussion on the coming caste census exercise and deepen conversations on social justice.

Teltumbde is a well-known and highly respected voice, never afraid of swimming against the tide, among the scholars and activists who take the Ambedkarite perspective on the annihilation of caste seriously. While supporting affirmative action, he has insisted on supplementing reservation with universal education and health and connecting affirmative action to the transformative project of radical equality.

Usually, the debate on the caste census follows a predictable line: Advocates of social justice endorse the caste census, while its opponents are overt or covert defenders of caste privilege. Teltumbde breaks this mould. For him, the Modi government's declaration of caste enumeration in the next Census is a ploy to divide and rule and the recent liberal consensus around the caste census is a con. A mere head count of various jatis would only underline caste identity, encourage the demand for sub-classification of reservation quotas, prevent a larger coalition of those at the receiving end of the unequal social order and pave the way for undermining caste-sensitive affirmative action.

Teltumbde succeeds in provoking, but not in convincing. While he offers a strong counter to a simple-minded idea that the caste census is just a head count of all the jatis and the naive belief that it is the panacea for social inequality, he does not take on the more nuanced version of the caste census. The real point, as per scholars like Satish Deshpande, is that the caste census goes beyond just a head-count of "lower" castes. Enumeration of caste in the census is the beginning of the unmasking of privileges of the "upper" castes, as it would offer data on the educational, occupational and economic profile of each caste group. A caste census is not sufficient by itself, but it is a necessary step towards understanding the structure of inequality and designing policies and politics to dismantle it.

The real question, therefore, is not whether but how — how exactly should caste enumeration be carried out so it does not remain a token gesture or become a tool to perpetuate caste privileges? Teltumbde alerts us to questions about the nature of data, framework of analysis, mechanism for policy translation and the underlying political agenda of the caste census.

This is where Vithayathil's monograph comes in. The first book by this young scholar, *Counting Caste* is undoubtedly the first authoritative book on caste enumeration in the census. The product of a decade of meticulous scholarly research, the book traces the history of counting caste, from the time census operations began in British India in 1871, to the many failed attempts at counting caste in post-Independence India. The most valuable part of the book is the exhaustive story of how a parliamentary cross-party consensus in favour of the caste census in 2011 was first diverted into a Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) under the UPA government and then firmly buried by the NDA. Her painstaking research demonstrates that the devil lies in the details. She dives deep into the designing and execution of the SECC to outline the strategy of sabotage by "bureaucratic deflection".

The moral of her story, written before the announcement of the caste census, is that we must not be complacent. We need to keep an eye on every step and every technical detail as the census of 2027 unfolds. First of all, it should be a full enumeration of all castes, including of "General" castes, not just an extension of the existing enumeration of SC and ST castes to include OBCs. Second, it must be extended to all religious communities, not just Hindus. The SECC of 2011 was deficient in this respect; the protocols of that survey discouraged recording of castes for Muslims and Christians. Third, the question about caste should first be filtered through the broad categories of SC/ST/OBC/General and then accompanied by pre-set caste lists for all these categories. An open-ended question, simply asking everyone to name their caste, would be an invitation to chaos and confusion, leading to perfect sabotage like the SECC. Fourth, the data must be made available at the disaggregate level, for each jati, for each tehsil or below.

Finally, the debate points to the need to cast our net wider. We need to move from a census with a capital C (that is, the decennial Census of India) to a census with a small c (any survey of 100 per cent population of a designated group). We have many such censuses that must be tweaked to include the caste question. These include the Economic Census, Agriculture Census, Livestock Census, All India Survey of Higher Education, List of Directors of Registered Companies. Large-scale surveys like the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey and Periodic Labour Force Survey must include a question on caste. This must be supplemented by a census of all public-sector employees, all elected representatives at all levels and all holders of constitutional offices.

This is how we can have a full inventory of how assets and opportunities are distributed in contemporary India. A “caste census” in this wider sense is the necessary step towards understanding, exposing and dismantling the structure of social inequalities in today’s India.

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