

The case for and against counting castes in India

Soutik Biswas, bbc.com, 13 November 2025

Counting castes in India has always been about more than numbers—it is about who gets a share of government benefits and who doesn't.

The country's next national census, scheduled for 2027, will—for the first time in nearly a century—count every caste, a social hierarchy that has long outlived¹ kingdoms, empires and ideologies.

5 The move² ends decades of political hesitation and follows pressure from opposition parties and at least three states that have already gone ahead with their own surveys. A 2011 survey—neither run nor verified by census authorities or released by the government—recorded an astonishing 4.6 million caste names.

10 A full count of castes promises a sharper picture of who truly benefits from affirmative action and who is left behind. Advocates say it could make welfare spending more targeted and help recalibrate quotas in jobs and education with hard evidence.

Yet in a provocative new book, *The Caste Con Census*, scholar-activist Anand Teltumbde warns that the exercise may harden the deeply discriminatory caste system, when the need is to dismantle it.

15 The argument cuts against the prevailing view that better data will produce fairer policy. [...]

Mr Teltumbde sees the modern caste census as a colonial echo.

British administrators began counting castes in 1871 as a “deliberate response to the post-1857 unity of Indians across caste and religion,” turning it into an “effective tool of imperial control.” They held six caste censuses between 1871 and 1931—the last full caste enumeration in India.

20 Each count, Mr Teltumbde argues, “did not merely record caste, but reified and hardened it.”

Independent India, in Mr Teltumbde's reading, preserved the system under the moral banner of social justice, “while effectively evading its core obligation of building the capacities of all people, which is a prerequisite for the success of any genuine social justice policy.”

25 The obsession with counting, he says, bureaucratises inequality. By turning caste into a ledger³ of entitlements and grievances, the census reduces politics to arithmetic—who gets how much—rather than addressing what Mr Teltumbde calls the “architecture of social injustice.”

He sees the demand for a caste census as a push for more reservations—a cause driven by an “upwardly mobile minority,” while the majority slips into deprivation and dependence on state aid. Nearly 800 million Indians, he notes, now rely on free rations.

30 Affirmative action quotas were first reserved for Dalits—formerly known as untouchables—and Adivasis (tribespeople), India's most oppressed groups. But soon, the less disadvantaged “other backward classes” (OBCs) began clamouring for a share of the pie. Politics quickly coalesced around demands for new or bigger caste-based quotas.

Mr Teltumbde's deeper worry is that enumeration legitimises what it measures. [...]

35 Many scholars don't quite agree, seeing the census as a necessary tool for achieving social justice.

Sociologist Satish Deshpande and economist Mary E John call the decision not to count castes “one of independent India's biggest mistakes.” [...]

40 What's needed, they write, is “a fuller, more inclusive picture where everyone must answer the question of their caste.” This isn't an “endorsement of an unequal system,” they stress, but a recognition that “there is no caste disprivilege without a corresponding privilege accruing to some other caste.” [...]

Sociologist and demographer Sonalde Desai told me that without a fresh caste census, India's affirmative action policies operate “blindly,” relying on outdated colonial data. [...]

1 outlive: survive, live longer than

2 The move: This decision

3 a ledger: *un registre de comptabilité*