

Original Article

Caste, Social Justice, and Enumeration Debates: Caste Survey, Reservation, and Representation

Syed Riyaz Pasha

Assistant Professor, HOD Sociology

Government First Grade College, Tiptur, Tumkur District, Karnataka, India

Abstract

Caste continues to shape social relations, access to resources, educational opportunities, political participation, and representation in contemporary India. The debate over caste enumeration has therefore become closely connected with wider questions of social justice, reservation, equality and democratic representation. For decades after Independence, the decennial Census enumerated Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes but did not undertake a comprehensive enumeration of all caste groups. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 attempted to collect broader caste information, while several States subsequently undertook their own caste surveys. In 2025, the Union Government decided to include caste enumeration in Census 2027, making the issue especially significant for current public policy. This paper examines the sociological relationship between caste enumeration and social justice, with particular attention to reservation policy and representation. It argues that reliable caste data can improve the empirical basis for identifying inequalities, assessing representation and designing targeted welfare measures, but enumeration by itself cannot eliminate caste-based disadvantage. The study is descriptive and analytical, based on secondary sources including constitutional provisions, government publications, census documents, academic literature and scholarly studies. The paper discusses the opportunities and challenges associated with caste surveys, including classification, data quality, privacy, political interpretation and the need for transparent methodology. It concludes that caste data should be treated as a public-policy instrument for understanding inequality rather than as an end in itself. Effective social justice requires credible enumeration combined with educational opportunity, economic mobility, anti-discrimination measures, accountable reservation policy and equitable political representation.

Keywords: Caste, Social Justice, Caste Enumeration, Census, Reservation, Representation, Equality, India

Address for correspondence: Syed Riyaz Pasha, Assistant Professor, HOD Sociology, Government First Grade College, Tiptur, Tumkur District, Karnataka, India

Submitted: 25 June 2024 **Revised:** 03 July 2024 **Accepted:** 15 July 2024 **Published:** 31 Aug 2024

Introduction

Caste is one of the most enduring forms of social stratification in India. Although the Constitution establishes equality before law and prohibits discrimination on specified grounds, caste continues to influence social status, occupation, marriage, access to education, economic opportunities and political participation. The sociological significance of caste is therefore not limited to traditional hierarchy; it also concerns contemporary patterns of exclusion, mobility and representation. The question of how caste should be measured has consequently become an important issue in debates over social justice.

Caste enumeration has a long and complicated history in India. Colonial censuses classified populations through categories that were shaped by administrative and social assumptions. After Independence, the Census continued to enumerate Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes because these categories have constitutional and

administrative significance, while a comprehensive enumeration of all castes was discontinued. The 2011 Census collected detailed data for SCs and STs, but not a publicly released comprehensive caste count for all communities. The SECC 2011 separately attempted to collect caste information alongside socio-economic information, demonstrating both the demand for and the practical difficulties of large-scale caste data collection. The contemporary debate has acquired renewed importance. On 30 April 2025, the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs decided that caste enumeration would be included in the forthcoming Census. The Government subsequently stated that Census 2027 will include caste enumeration in its second phase, with the detailed questions to be finalized and notified through the prescribed process. This decision has brought questions of data quality, classification, reservation, representation and policy targeting into renewed public discussion.

Quick Response
Code:



Access this article online

Website: <https://rlgjaar.com>

Website: <https://www.doi.org>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23074860

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](#). The Creative Commons Attribution license allows re-distribution and re-use of a licensed work on the condition that the creator is appropriately credited

How to cite this article:

Syed, R. P. (2024). Caste, Social Justice, and Enumeration Debates: Caste Survey, Reservation, and Representation. Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research, 1(2), 53–57. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23074860>

The relationship between enumeration and reservation is especially important. Reservation in education, public employment and political institutions was designed as a constitutional mechanism to address historical disadvantage and improve substantive equality. Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution provide the framework for special provisions and equality of opportunity, while constitutional provisions relating to SCs and STs establish specific institutional safeguards. In practice, however, reservation policy operates within a changing social structure in which educational attainment, occupational mobility, regional inequality and internal differences within broad social categories matter.

Representation is another major dimension. Political representation is not simply a numerical question; it also concerns participation, voice, access to decision-making institutions and the extent to which historically disadvantaged groups are visible in public institutions. Caste enumeration can contribute evidence about demographic composition, but representation must be understood in relation to education, income, geography, occupation, gender and institutional access. Thus, the debate is not merely about counting castes; it is about how social knowledge is converted into equitable public policy.

This paper examines these issues from a sociological perspective. It focuses on four connected themes: the rationale for caste enumeration, the relationship between caste data and reservation, the significance of representation, and the methodological and ethical challenges involved in collecting and using caste information.

Objectives

1 To examine the relationship between caste enumeration and social justice

The study seeks to understand how systematic information about caste composition and socio-economic conditions can contribute to identifying inequalities and improving evidence-based public policy.

2 To analyse the role of caste data in reservation policy

The paper examines how demographic and socio-economic information may assist in reviewing access to education, employment and other opportunities, while recognizing that reservation is governed by constitutional and legal principles rather than population figures alone.

3 To study caste and political representation

The objective is to analyse how caste composition intersects with representation in educational institutions, public employment and political institutions, particularly for historically disadvantaged communities.

4 To identify methodological and ethical issues in caste surveys

The study considers problems of classification, self-identification, multiple caste names, data validation, privacy, comparability across regions and the public interpretation of statistical findings.

5 To suggest measures for responsible use of caste data

The paper proposes principles for transparent enumeration, publication, data protection, independent review and evidence-based use of findings in social policy.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based entirely on secondary sources. The principal sources include the Constitution of India,

official Census publications, Government of India releases concerning Census 2027, reports and publications on the Socio-Economic and Caste Census, and books and journal literature on caste, social stratification, reservation and affirmative action. Official sources are used to establish current institutional and policy facts, while sociological literature is used to interpret the wider significance of caste and social justice.

1 Nature and Sources of Data

The research uses documentary data. Primary official sources include publications of the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India and the Press Information Bureau. The official Census catalogue provides detailed SC population tables from the 2011 Census, illustrating the continued institutional importance of caste-linked demographic data. Recent Government communications indicate that Census 2027 will be conducted in two phases and that caste enumeration will take place during the population-enumeration phase.

2 Method of Analysis

The material is analysed thematically under four broad dimensions: social justice, reservation, representation, and enumeration methodology. The study does not attempt to estimate the population of individual caste groups or construct new statistical rankings. Instead, it interprets the policy significance and limitations of caste data.

3 Scope and Limitations

The study is India-focused and primarily addresses the contemporary policy debate. Since the comprehensive caste questions for the second phase of Census 2027 were still to be finalized and notified as of the Government's February 2026 communication, the paper does not assume a final questionnaire or a predetermined classification system. The paper is also limited by the availability and comparability of secondary data. State-level surveys may differ in methodology, categories and validation procedures, making direct comparisons difficult.

Features of the Study

1 Caste Enumeration as a Tool of Social Knowledge

Enumeration is fundamentally a process of producing systematic social knowledge. In a society marked by multiple and overlapping identities, policy makers require reliable information about the distribution of population groups and their socio-economic conditions. Caste data can potentially reveal patterns that broad aggregate indicators conceal. For example, two communities with similar population size may have very different levels of literacy, occupational concentration, land ownership, household assets or access to higher education. A carefully designed caste survey can make such differences more visible.

At the same time, caste categories are not simple demographic labels. Caste identities may have multiple local names, sub-caste distinctions, regional variations and changing forms of self-identification. Therefore, enumeration must combine respondent self-identification with a transparent coding and validation framework. The Government has stated that Census questions relating to caste will be finalized before the second phase. The methodological choices made at this stage will strongly influence the usefulness of the resulting data.

2 Caste Survey and Census: Similarities and Differences

A census is a statutory, nationwide enumeration conducted under the Census Act and associated rules, whereas a caste survey may be organized by a State or another institution for a more specific policy purpose. The distinction matters because differences in geographical coverage, questionnaire design, classification and validation can produce results that are not directly comparable. The Government has explained that Census 2027 will integrate caste enumeration into the main census rather than conduct it as a separate exercise.⁵

The SECC 2011 is an important reference point in this debate. It attempted to combine socio-economic information with caste information, but the caste component involved substantial challenges in processing and classification. The experience demonstrates that collecting names or labels is only the first step; transforming self-reported categories into consistent and analytically useful datasets requires extensive coding, validation and documentation.

3 Caste Enumeration and Reservation

Reservation is a constitutional mechanism associated with substantive equality and affirmative action. It seeks to address structural disadvantage by creating opportunities for groups that have experienced historical and institutional exclusion. The constitutional framework contains specific provisions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and permits special provisions in education and public employment under specified conditions.

Caste enumeration can provide relevant empirical evidence for evaluating the social context in which reservation operates, but population share should not be treated as an automatic formula for reservation. Reservation policy also involves constitutional interpretation, legal limits, identification of backwardness, representation, administrative feasibility and the design of beneficiary categories. Data can inform these questions; it cannot by itself answer them.

The reservation debate also requires attention to internal inequalities. Broad categories may contain communities with substantially different levels of educational attainment, occupational status and institutional representation. Therefore, where policy permits, disaggregated data can help identify whether benefits are reaching intended groups and whether particular sections remain underrepresented. Such analysis should be carried out through transparent criteria rather than political assumptions.

4 Representation in Education and Employment

Representation is a multidimensional concept. In education, it can refer to enrolment, completion, access to professional and higher education, and presence in research and academic institutions. In employment, it can refer to recruitment, promotion and presence across occupational levels. Caste data can help identify disparities in these dimensions when combined with socio-economic variables.

The usefulness of representation data increases when caste is analysed alongside gender, rural-urban residence, income, education, disability, region and occupation. A single caste percentage cannot capture the full structure of social inequality. For example, an increase in enrolment does not necessarily mean equal educational

outcomes if dropout rates, quality of schooling and transition to higher education remain unequal.

5 Political Representation and Democratic Participation

Political representation has historically been an important field of affirmative action. Constitutional arrangements provide reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in legislatures and local institutions. The sociological importance of such representation lies in enabling participation by groups that were historically excluded from formal decision-making structures.

Caste enumeration can provide demographic context for understanding representation, but demographic proportion and political representation are not identical concepts. Electoral systems, territorial concentration, political organization, party selection, social networks and local leadership all affect representation. Consequently, caste data should be used as one component of democratic analysis rather than as a mechanical determinant of political entitlement.

6 Data Quality, Privacy and Ethical Concerns

Caste is a socially sensitive identity. Errors in enumeration may arise from spelling differences, local terminology, multiple identities, interviewer interpretation or inconsistent coding. If such data are released without adequate methodological documentation, the public may draw conclusions that are not supported by the underlying evidence.

Privacy and confidentiality are equally important. The Government has stated that individual Census data are kept confidential and that only aggregated data are published at administrative levels.⁹ Digital enumeration may improve processing speed and validation, but it also increases the importance of cybersecurity, controlled access, audit trails and public trust.

7 Digital Enumeration and Census 2027

Census 2027 is planned as India's first digital census, with mobile-based data collection, a central monitoring system and an option for self-enumeration. Government sources state that the exercise will involve a large field workforce and digital systems for monitoring and data management. These features can potentially reduce transcription errors and accelerate data processing, although digital systems do not automatically resolve conceptual or classification problems.

8 Social Justice Beyond Counting

The central sociological lesson is that enumeration is a means rather than an end. Accurate data can identify disparities, but social justice requires institutional action. Educational quality, scholarships, skill development, access to land and housing, social security, anti-discrimination enforcement, public employment and political participation are all relevant. Caste data can help governments determine where inequalities persist and whether programmes are reaching disadvantaged populations.

9 Public Interpretation and Responsible Use

The interpretation of caste data requires caution. Population estimates should not be converted into claims about social worth or hierarchy. Data should be presented with definitions, margins of uncertainty where relevant, methodology and explanatory notes. Public institutions and researchers should distinguish descriptive statistics from normative policy choices. This is especially important because caste data may influence public debate over reservation and representation.

Findings and Suggestions

1 Major Findings

First, caste remains a significant dimension of social inequality and representation, making reliable data relevant to social policy. Second, the inclusion of caste enumeration in Census 2027 creates an opportunity to develop a nationwide, standardized evidence base; the Government has confirmed that caste will be enumerated in the second phase.^{1,2} Third, caste enumeration is methodologically complex because caste identities vary across regions and may contain multiple names and sub-categories. Fourth, caste data can strengthen the empirical basis for evaluating representation and targeting social programmes, but demographic proportions cannot by themselves determine reservation policy. Fifth, privacy, confidentiality and transparent data governance are essential because caste information is socially sensitive. Sixth, representation must be studied beyond simple headcounts by examining education, employment, political participation and access to institutions. Finally, enumeration should be connected with measurable social outcomes so that data collection results in evidence-based action rather than merely producing statistics.

2 Suggestions

1. Develop a transparent national coding and classification protocol for caste responses, with publicly documented methodological principles.
2. Ensure extensive training of enumerators so that respondents can report caste identities without coercion or interviewer-imposed categories.
3. Publish clear methodological documentation explaining definitions, coding procedures, validation and limitations before releasing aggregate results.
4. Protect confidentiality through strong legal, technical and administrative safeguards, particularly in digital data systems.
5. Analyse caste data alongside education, occupation, income, housing, gender, rural-urban location and other socio-economic indicators.
6. Use the findings to evaluate the reach and effectiveness of existing welfare and affirmative-action programmes rather than relying solely on population proportions.
7. Establish independent expert review involving sociologists, demographers, statisticians, public administrators and constitutional scholars.
8. Improve periodic monitoring of representation in higher education, public employment and public institutions using comparable indicators.
9. Avoid presenting caste data as a measure of social status or worth; the purpose should be to understand inequality and improve equal opportunity.
10. Ensure that policy revisions based on enumeration are undertaken through constitutional, legal and transparent democratic procedures.

Conclusion

The debate over caste enumeration is ultimately a debate over how a democratic society understands inequality. Caste has historically influenced access to social, economic and political resources, and its contemporary effects cannot be assessed adequately through assumptions alone. A credible caste enumeration can provide valuable evidence about population composition, socio-economic disadvantage and institutional representation. The decision to include caste enumeration

in Census 2027 therefore represents an important development in India's system of social statistics.⁰⁴

However, counting must be accompanied by careful interpretation. Caste data should not be treated as an automatic formula for reservation or representation. Instead, it should form part of a broader evidence framework that examines historical disadvantage, current socio-economic conditions, educational opportunity and institutional access. The effectiveness of enumeration will ultimately depend on methodological quality, public trust, confidentiality, transparent classification and responsible policy use. Social justice is achieved not merely by identifying inequality, but by converting reliable knowledge into fair opportunities, effective institutions and meaningful participation.

Acknowledgement

The author expresses sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions whose valuable support, guidance, encouragement, and cooperation contributed to the successful completion of this research paper entitled "Caste, Social Justice, and Enumeration Debates: Caste Survey, Reservation, and Representation." The study examines the sociological relationship between caste enumeration, social justice, reservation, equality, and representation in contemporary India.

The author gratefully acknowledges the academic support and institutional encouragement received from Government First Grade College, Tiptur, Tumkur District, Karnataka, and sincerely appreciates the cooperation extended by colleagues, fellow academicians, and well-wishers throughout the preparation of this work.

The author is also thankful to the various government institutions, official publications, census documents, academic books, research articles, and scholarly studies that provided the essential secondary information and intellectual foundation for this descriptive and analytical study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of Caste*. Navayana Publishing.
2. Ambedkar, B. R. (1948). *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* Amrit Book Company.
3. Bayly, S. (1999). *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Deshpande, A. (2011). *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.
5. Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton University Press.
6. Government of India. (1950). *The Constitution of India*. Legislative Department, Ministry of Law and Justice.
7. Government of India. (2011). *Census of India 2011: Primary Census Abstract for Scheduled Castes*.

- Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.
8. Government of India. (2011). Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011: Guidelines and Reports. Ministry of Rural Development / Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation.
 9. Government of India. (2025). Cabinet approves caste enumeration in the upcoming Census. Press Information Bureau, 30 April 2025.
 10. Government of India. (2025). Population Census-2027 to be conducted in two phases along with enumeration of castes. Press Information Bureau, 4 June 2025.
 11. Government of India. (2025). Cabinet approves scheme of Conduct of Census of India 2027. Press Information Bureau, December 2025.
 12. Government of India. (2026). Caste Based Census. Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, 4 February 2026.
 13. Government of India. (2026). Census 2027 Safeguards. Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, 24 March 2026.
 14. Ghurye, G. S. (1969). Caste and Race in India (5th ed.). Popular Prakashan.
 15. Galanter, M. (1984). Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India. University of California Press.
 16. Jodhka, S. S. (2015). Caste in Contemporary India. Routledge.
 17. Jodhka, S. S. (2017). Caste in India: A Handbook. Routledge.
 18. Pai, S. (2002). Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh. Sage Publications.
 19. Sen, A. (2009). The Idea of Justice. Harvard University Press.
 20. Srinivas, M. N. (1962). Caste in Modern India and Other Essays. Asia Publishing House.
 21. Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2010). Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India. Oxford University Press.
 22. Thorat, S., & Attewell, P. (2007). The legacy of social exclusion: A correspondence study of job discrimination in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(41), 4141–4145.
 23. Zelliott, E. (1992). From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement. Manohar Publications.