

The politics of a caste census, its impact on secularism

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Context:

By consistently championing the issue of having a caste census, various Opposition party leaders of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) have set the agenda on this one issue at least — which they have otherwise failed ever since Narendra Modi emerged on India's national political scene.

Poverty as agenda:

1. From demonetisation to the idea of simultaneous elections, it is Prime Minister Narendra Modi who has established a monopoly over agenda setting in India's political discourse. In response to the INDIA coalition's persistent demand for a caste census, Mr. Modi has argued that he only believes in poverty as being the only caste and that serving the poor is his sole priority.
2. According to scholars who work on Indian poverty, there are two kinds of poverty, i.e., economic and institutional. Caste plays a pivotal role in the perpetuation of institutional poverty because, historically, it determines occupation and skills.
3. In the modern Indian economy, most occupations are network driven in which caste plays decisive roles in driving those networks, which is why a caste census is vital. This is also why Rahul Gandhi's observation that such a census 'is like the X-ray of India' makes some sense. By not recognising that caste has bred poverty, Mr. Modi is turning a blind eye to a deeply painful reality of Indian society.
4. It is not just Mr. Modi, but even the trickle down approach of the Nehru- Mahalanobis model of development did not recognise either. Therefore, nonrecognition of the organic relationship of caste and poverty has been a long neglected fact of Indian policy thinking.

Explaining the right's reluctance:

1. However, the reason why Hindutva seems reluctant to have a caste census is because it believes it might open a Pandora's box of claims and counter-claims relating to positions and power — about who got what, when and how. Such a census would serve as the enduring source for divisive politics and trigger a never ending process of social engineering that would upset Hindutva's apple cart of Hindu majoritarian unity, which it has stitched together after decades of hard work through intense grassroots campaigns.
2. Utilising the politics of religious polarisation, Hindutva forces are within striking distance of fulfilling their political dream of Hindu majoritarian unity, which appeared almost Utopian in the mid-1970s.
3. On the other hand, secular political groups are also aware of the divisive potential of a caste census. For them, it is the most potent weapon among others to contain the growing electoral

influence of Hindu majoritarian forces.

4. The prospect for the revival of secular politics owing to a caste census is rather limited. It is a gamble from the point of view of a resurrection of secularism in India. It might contain the pace of Hindutva politics but is not the ultimate outcome that may lead to the establishment of a Hindu majoritarian political culture or a similar variant of state.
5. The last time that a caste census was carried out was in 1931, a time when organised right groups were marginal players during India's freedom movement. After Independence, there was a possibility for a caste census to be resumed in 1951. It is plausible that in the non resumption of caste census in 1951, the right might have played a crucial role.
6. It will not be far-fetched to argue that there might be some overlap in the reasons behind why the word "secular" despite some effort was not included in the Indian Constitution, and the reason why a caste census was not resumed in 1951.

Conclusion:

Embedded right groups might have played their part at the time in their concerted resistance to India's secular project. The present day resistance only echoes the same old reasoning but is much louder in volume, and more organised.



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