



## A new framework around caste and the census

*Issues: Census its significance, drawbacks, Caste Census (GS II)*

The synchronous decennial Census going back to the colonial exercise of 1881 has evolved over time and has been used by the government, policymakers, academics, and others to capture the Indian population, its access to resources, exclusions it faces and to map social change.

### Problems with Census:

1. However, the census is a large, immensely powerful, but blunt instrument unsuited for specialised enquiry. It not quite useful enough for a detailed and comprehensive understanding of a complex society.
2. In this context, the discussion around caste and its enumeration has been controversial.
3. With demands to conduct a full-scale caste census gaining traction over time, some have seen the inclusion of broader caste information as a necessity to capture contemporary Indian society and to understand and remedy inequalities.
4. Following decades of debate, the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) was conducted in 2011 and took a few years to complete; this was a distinct exercise from the Census of 2011.
5. The SECC, which collected the first figures on caste in Census operations since 1931, is the largest exercise of the enumeration of caste. It has the potential to allow for a mapping of inequalities at a broader level.

### Others Issues in Census

1. The first relates to the time lag between each Census, and the second to the delay in the release of data. Nearly a decade after the SECC for instance, a sizeable amount of data remains unreleased.
2. While the Census authorities present documents on methodology as part of a policy of transparency, there needs to be a closer and continuous engagement between functionaries of the Census and SECC, along with academics and other stakeholders concerned, since the Census and the SECC are projects of governance as well as of academic interest.



## The main concerns with Caste Census

1. It would be disingenuous to ignore the emotive element of caste and the political and social repercussions of a caste census.
2. There have been concerns that counting caste may help solidify or harden identities, or that caste may be context-specific, and thus difficult to measure.
3. Questions remain on whether the SECC is able to cover the effects of caste as an aspect of Indian social structure in everyday life, or at least to illuminate our understanding of its impact at varying scales — from the local to the regional and to the national scale.

## Census and SECC

1. The Census provides a portrait of the Indian population, while the SECC is a tool to identify beneficiaries of state support.
2. This difference is significant since it influences not only the methods of a collection but also the use and potential for misuse of data.

## A road map

1. What is needed then is a discussion on the caste data that already exists, how it has been used and understood by the government and its various departments to grant or withdraw benefits, and also its utility for the important academic exercise of mapping social inequalities and social change.
2. Linking and syncing aggregated Census data to other large datasets such as the National Sample Surveys or the National Family Health Surveys that cover issues that the Census exercises do not, such as maternal health, would be significant for a more comprehensive analysis, enabling the utilisation of the large body of data that already exists.
3. Census operations across the world are going through significant changes, employing methods that are precise, faster and cost-effective, involving coordination between different data sources.
4. Care must however be taken to ensure that digital alternatives and linking of data sources involving Census operations are inclusive and non-discriminatory, especially given the sensitive nature of the data being collected.