

Q: "Caste must be counted because it counts". Discuss the statement in light of the recent debates over caste-based census.

Approach:

- Define Caste and caste-based census.
- Give reasons why it must be counted.
- Also provide the reason why it should not be counted.
- Provide a balanced conclusion.

Caste refers to a unique system of social stratification, peculiar to Indian society, which is characterized by particularistic-ascribed pattern of behavior. **Caste-based census** refers to a population enumeration that collects socio-economic data on the various caste groups within a society.

Significance of Counting the Caste:

- **Reliable Data:** The representation in political and administrative institutions of various communities can be ensured with availability of reliable data.
- **Determinant of Economic Development:** Caste determines the economic prospects of a person, especially in rural areas. According to **Satish Deshpande**, it is arguably most important regulator of life-chances today.
- **Understanding Inequalities:** **M. Vijayanunni** portrayed it as a move to challenge the status quo by highlighting inequality and eventually eliminating caste.
- **Political Representation:** According to **Christophe Jaffrelot**, a caste census would assist in mapping political representation and allowing for the better inclusion of underrepresented groups.
- **Better Targeting:** The supporters argue that it will be useful in better intersectional planning and targeting of social schemes.

While there are various potential benefits of the Caste-based census, there are also certain apprehensions regarding the use of the exercise.

Issues with Caste-based Census:

- **Hardening of the Caste identities:** As argued by **M N Srinivas**, A fresh enumeration on caste would lead to fresh mobilization and a further hardening of caste identities.
- **Complexity of Caste System:** **A.M. Shah** points out the difficulty in collection of data given the multiplicity of names and the contextual manner in which the terms are used.
- **Demographic Changes:** **Ghanshyam Shah** talks about the difficulty being exacerbated due to migration, inter-caste marriage, modern employment practices etc.
- **Available Alternatives:** **Y. Singh** points out on already available data from various committees and commissions.
- **Privacy concerns:** Data and privacy concerns have persisted due to which there had been partial release of SECC data.
- **Suhas Palshikar** argues that, "It is true that Bihar's caste census opens up door for more informed public policy on social justice. However, mere conducting a caste census is no guarantee of such a policy shift- particularly in view of the populist pressures parties have themselves built and under which they operate".

As **Nandini Sundar** (*Caste as Census Category: Implications for Sociology*) puts, a caste census by itself may put little to our understanding but may complement the sociological understanding along with historic and ethnographic contextualization.