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EXPLORING ASIA:

POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Politics and the 2011 Census of India

By Sunila S. Kale, Assistant Professor, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington

How does the government of India, the world's largest democracy, make decisions about who gets the support of affirmative action and other measures to enhance social mobility? One tool it uses to decide these and many other issues is a census.

India has 1.2 billion people, making it the second-most populous nation in the world after China. How do we know that? In 2011 India carried out its decennial census, an epic exercise in counting, tabulating and now analyzing data that takes the better part of a year to complete.

Debates, political protests and then careful negotiations are all part of the long process leading up to the census. And after the results are released, information from the census is used by political parties, social movements, nongovernmental organizations and ordinary Indian citizens to build political claims, adopt new tactics and make sense of the polity and society in which they live. In that way, we can think of the census as a political exercise, both a product and a component of the Indian political landscape.

Just as the U.S. census has changed over the years in the questions that it asks and the range of answers it allows, the Indian census too has changed over time. In India, one of the most heavily negotiated aspects of the 2011 census concerns the question of caste. Caste in India remains a dominant feature of the social landscape. It is an amalgam of ethnic affiliation (*jati*) and position in a social hierarchy (*varna*).

Some of India's founding fathers, most importantly B. R. Ambedkar, wanted to craft political institutions to alleviate the oppression experienced by those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Their system of affirmative action, known in India as "reservations" and sometimes referred to as "compensatory discrimination," provides jobs in education, public

employment and elected political office to benefit members of ex-untouchable ("scheduled caste," or *dalit*) and indigenous ("scheduled tribe," or *adivasi*) communities. The hope was that these oppressed individuals and groups could achieve social mobility and political power through employment and could thereby permanently disrupt the entrenched hierarchy of caste.

The constitution guaranteed reservations to only these two communities — *dalit* and *adivasi* — who were arguably the most socially, politically and economically marginalized in India. Over time, members of other groups in Indian society also demanded that the state help them achieve greater social mobility. In 1993, the Indian government expanded the central government's affirmative-action policies to include other rural communities, known as OBCs, or "other backward classes." The challenge for the government's policy was to determine a fair program of compensation.

The earlier reservations, for *dalit* and *adivasi* groups, were allocated according to the population shares determined by the Indian census, which continued to enumerate *dalit* and *adivasi* communities after independence. Assigning a fair level of reservations for OBCs, however, was a more difficult task because the last census to perform a comprehensive survey of caste identities was carried out in 1931. In the absence of census data, social scientists and governmental agencies have used the data from 1931 to project estimates of OBC population that range from a high of 52 percent to a low of 27 percent of the total population.

Because of the lack of more updated data, there were vociferous calls to include an expanded caste census as a part of the 2011 Indian census. On the one hand, opponents of the "caste census" argued, first, that the exercise of counting castes would push India further away from the goal of eliminating caste from social life, and, second, that India should move toward means-tested, or economic, criteria to administer affirmative-action programs instead of caste or social identity-based reservations.



Women in discussion, photo by Keith Snodgrass, UW South Asia Center Associate Director

On the other hand, advocates of the caste census reasoned, first, that providing effective affirmative action was impossible without more accurate data about the relationship between caste identities and socioeconomic welfare. They also said that India could not afford to ignore the persistent reality of caste since it structures and determines one's life chances and one's treatment by other groups in society.

Ultimately, India opted to carry out a separate "Socioeconomic and Caste Census," which began in the latter half of 2011 and continues today. This new census will give the government a clearer sense of the caste composition of Indian society. This census will allow the government to calibrate benefits to reach the poorest and those most discriminated against in Indian society. However, because the census is foremost a political tool, it remains open to question how and by whom the data will be used in the future.



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