

WHY THE CASTE SURVEY IN BIHAR WORRIES THE BJP

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Enumerators collect information from residents during the first phase of the caste-based census in Bihar. | Photo Credit: PTI

Ever since [Bihar began its caste count](#) in January, questions have been raised on whether the exercise is being conducted only for political gains, given that the Lok Sabha elections are just 16 months away, or whether it will prove useful for the social and economic development of the Other Backward Classes (OBC). Some people have asked why this exercise is even needed in Bihar. Let us examine these questions.

Whatever the motive of the Nitish Kumar government, is an undeniable fact that we need data. Without numbers, neither can political parties put forth their arguments for the need of certain policies or quotas convincingly, nor can the government effectively provide support through policies and programmes for specific communities. This is why a census is essential. It is the best way to count the number of people belonging to a community and determine their socioeconomic status (though this particular survey may not be officially called a census as the census can only be conducted by the Central government every 10 years).

Some people also wonder whether there is any logic in conducting this exercise when the Central government is averse to it. There is no harm — if nothing else, it will at least put to rest all the speculation about the share of OBCs in Bihar's total population. It is numbers that give concrete meaning to vague expressions or speculations. When someone says 'young' or 'old', they are not being specific. 'Young' could mean below 10 years or below 18 years and 'old' could mean above 60 years or above 80 years. Similarly, when the OBC population is described as 'very large', it leads to disputes about figures. The census is the only way of arriving at a reliable estimate.

The charge that the timing of the exercise indicates that it is politically motivated may not be true as Mr. Kumar has always supported a caste-based census. When this issue was being debated within the National Democratic Alliance, of which he was then a part, Mr. Kumar was the dissenting voice. He even urged the Central government to "reconsider" its position against the exercise.

While the first phase of the survey was completed in January and we will have to wait until May

for the entire exercise to be completed, it cannot be denied that this survey will have political implications. By conducting this survey, the Janata Dal (United)-Rashtriya Janata Dal government has sent out a clear message that it is interested in addressing the social and economic backwardness of the OBCs. The two parties are sure to reap some electoral dividends from this, especially since both have sizeable support among OBC voters. Through this exercise, the RJD and the JD(U) have provided some hope to the OBCs that their plight can be improved. It would not be surprising if parties such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Biju Janata Dal, which are also splinter parties of the Janata Dal, initiate this process in their States if they are in power, or put pressure on their State government to conduct the census.

The expected gains could have been minimised if the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had not vehemently opposed the caste census when the issue was debated. The BJP's opposition to this exercise has only led to doubts in the minds of a large section of OBCs. They do not understand why the BJP is so staunchly opposed to this exercise. This has led to speculation of whether the Central government wants to hide certain facts and numbers.

It is unclear why the BJP is opposed to the exercise given that it has made huge inroads into the OBC community, especially the lower OBC voter base, across the country. Evidence from surveys by Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies shows that the BJP got 44% of the OBC votes in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections compared to just 22% in 2009. The caste census initiated by the Central government would have only given positive signals to the OBC community.

Perhaps there are other compulsions. The BJP's central leaders feel that the demand for a caste census in the State is an attempt to revive Mandal politics. Mandal politics gained centrality in the mid-1990s, especially in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and brought about a fundamental change in OBC politics. There was a dramatic mobilisation of OBCs. The BJP then was struggling to build its own narrative until senior leader L.K. Advani launched his famous Rath Yatra to counter OBC mobilisation.

However, the BJP leadership needs to realise that the BJP of today is very different from the BJP of the 1990s. Today, even nine years after assuming power at the Centre, it has a much broader support base among all the communities, including the OBCs, compared to the past. Many OBCs have deserted parties like the SP and RJD and supported the BJP. A caste census by the Central government would not damage the nature of the BJP's support base significantly.

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