

India needs a caste census - and Southasia does too

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Demands for a caste census are shaking up politics and prompting a fresh reckoning with historical injustices in India. Everywhere that caste is endemic, overdue caste counts have the power to do the same.

The first time anyone wrote about the need for caste groups to be represented in government in proportion to their populations was 150 years ago. The anti-caste reformer Jotirao Phule described in *Gulamgiri* the exploitation of the Shudra and Atishudra masses – in today’s terms, approximately, the Backward Classes and the Scheduled Castes – by the *bhats*, or Brahmins, who “infested” the colonial government. “I really do not mean to suggest that the government should not appoint bhats in their offices at all,” Phule wrote in his 1873 treatise, “but then it should be proportionate with their population.”

Eight years later, in 1881, the British government in India conducted its first census, which recorded the numbers and living conditions of individual castes. Five such censuses would be carried out decennially, the 1931 census being the last. Even castes among Muslims were identified and counted – shredding the pretence, still common today, that caste has no place in the Islam of the Subcontinent. The 1941 census could not be completed because of the Second World War, and censuses resumed post Independence, but now without comprehensive counting of castes.

The misgovernance and corruption that Phule persuasively linked to the caste system, which prevented the masses from being represented in government, continues to this day. But this cause of one of India’s most persistent and pervasive problems, and the very issue of the underrepresentation of the oppressed castes, has largely been swept under the carpet. In independent India, any effort to lift up the carpet and deal with the muck has been strongly opposed by the castes at or near the top of the traditional varna pyramid – mostly the “twice-born” Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas – which continue to benefit from overrepresentation in public employment (and private employment too), and to command much official policy and practice.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes – official categories for the Dalits and Adivasis at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy – formed some 16.5 percent and 8.5 percent of the national population in the 2011 census. Going by data presented in 2022 before the upper house of the Indian parliament, these groups are significantly underrepresented in the top tiers of the country’s central bureaucracy, with respective proportions of roughly 4 percent and 5 percent. For ‘Group A’ posts, which cover some of the most coveted civil services, these respective shares are around 13 percent and 6 percent. But even that seems generous when compared to the Other Backward Classes – the “intermediate” castes, many traditionally seen as Shudras, that stand just above the SCs and STs in Brahminical belief – who form some 18 percent of the ‘Group A’ bureaucracy but approximately 52 percent of the population as last counted, way back in 1931. The composition of the remaining 63 percent or so of the ‘Group A’ cohort has not been revealed, but by any reasonable guess it must overwhelmingly comprise the Hindu upper castes (the proportion of Muslims and Christians in the

bureaucracy would be minute). By an educated estimate – based on school enrolment data maintained by the ministry of education – the upper Hindu castes form perhaps 10 percent of the population.

The overrepresentation of the upper castes could be even more extreme than these numbers suggest. Many expect that a comprehensive caste census now would show their share of India's population to be shrinking, and that other census data, looking at such things as land ownership, would expose the sheer degree of their continued advantage in socioeconomic life.

At the start of 2023, the state government of Bihar launched a “caste-based survey”, thumbing its nose at the Bharatiya Janata Party-led central government in New Delhi, which had repulsed demands by numerous parties in the state to enumerate castes as part of India's long-delayed 2021 census. Within days, a petitioner moved the Supreme Court of India to stop the exercise, arguing among other things that the survey amounted to a census, which only the central government was empowered to carry out. Others joined the chorus against the survey in the Supreme Court, including the national president of the right-wing Hindu Sena – ideologically, if not organisationally, a fellow traveller of the Hindu-nationalist BJP. Here the contention was that the caste survey could create social disharmony, pitting one caste against another and adversely affecting national unity and integrity. It went without saying that the presumed harmony of the status quo required leaving the entrenched privileges of the upper castes unchallenged.

The Supreme Court declined to intervene but left the petitioners free to approach the Patna High Court. The group Youth for Equality, best known for its part in mass protests in 2006 against expanded reservations for the OBCs in higher education, also filed a petition in the High Court against the caste survey. A stay was granted after much legal wrangling, but in August the High Court ruled that the survey was legally permissible and could proceed, validating the Bihar administration's argument that state governments are empowered to conduct statistical surveys on a variety of factors, including caste composition. After the aggrieved petitioners went back to the Supreme Court to appeal, the central government itself reiterated before the court that it alone had the right to carry out such an exercise, only to then hurriedly retract this argument.

Communal politics works to their advantage, preserving their dominance over oppressed-caste Hindus or Muslims, while a caste census can potentially put an end to this brand of politics and threaten their dominance.

Perhaps by then it was too late. The Bihar government, under Nitish Kumar – earlier an ally of the BJP, until he broke ranks with it in 2022 – had convinced many in the state and beyond that the caste survey was an essential step towards greater social justice, promising a firm numerical basis for more equitable distribution of educational opportunities and public employment going forward. The BJP-led central government ran the risk of angering and alienating vast groups of oppressed-caste voters if it came out too strongly against Bihar's caste count.

There was good reason to believe that the caste survey would push the envelope on representation: the lack of updated numbers on caste representation has long been cited as a reason to limit further expansion of caste-based reservations in public education and employment, including by the Supreme Court of India – itself an institution with vast overrepresentation of upper-caste groups.

When the Bihar numbers were released, in early October, they confirmed a distribution that many had long suspected to apply to the state – and, by reasonable extrapolation, to much of the rest of the country. The upper castes today account for just around 15 percent of the population, while an

overwhelming 85 percent is made up of the Backward Classes, Extremely Backward Classes, Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes – collectively often called the Bahujan, or “the masses”. Of course the Bahujan do not enjoy anything close to a proportional share of opportunities and resources, even as the relative privileges of the many communities clubbed under this group vary widely. The Hindu upper castes were shown to form around 10 percent of the population, just as expected. The caste survey also counted the elite Muslim castes, meaning the combined upper-caste population came to roughly 15 percent of the total.

Several other states have also undertaken exercises similar to Bihar’s – Telangana took stock of its caste composition in 2014 and Karnataka in 2015, while Odisha and Uttarakhand have surveyed their OBCs – but with Bihar’s caste survey notched up as a victory for the anti-BJP opposition the battle over a caste census has gone truly national. In Maharashtra, where the powerful Maratha caste has demanded OBC status and the reservation benefits that it brings, OBC groups looking to counter the demand are calling for a caste census. This is putting pressure on the state’s ruling coalition, which includes the BJP, particularly since the OBCs are a crucial plank of support for the coalition partners. The INDIA alliance, a wide grouping of opposition parties preparing to stand against the BJP in India’s 2024 general election, had already raised a demand for a country-wide caste census, sensing an opportunity to take the fight to the ruling party over its conservative caste politics. Seeing the Bihar numbers out and stirring fresh debate, the alliance, which includes the Indian National Congress, has doubled down on the demand. With India’s 2021 census having been delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the census is now due on the heels of the 2024 election. The question of a caste census is set to be a major issue in the looming electoral campaign.

In October 2023, the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi spoke to the media to make clear his party’s stance: first a comprehensive caste census, and then representation as per population. A century and a half after Phule’s prescription, here it was being wholeheartedly endorsed by an upper-caste national leader. But as significant as this was, Phule’s dream is still far from reach. The INDIA alliance has a huge fight ahead against the entrenched BJP, and even if it wins the 2024 election there is no guarantee that the promises made while in the opposition will convert into action once in power. The challenge is already clear in the state of Karnataka, where the Congress took over power from the BJP in May 2023. Siddaramaiah, the state’s chief minister, had ordered a full count of castes when he earlier ruled Karnataka and saw a survey completed in 2018. But Siddaramaiah and the Congress failed to formally release the results before the end of his first term, and are still stalling on a release today. The fear is that the state’s economically and politically strong Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities will not take kindly to the new numbers, which apparently show the Scheduled Castes to form a significantly larger part of the population than either of them. All across India, powerful groups and interests will be ready to put up similar resistance.

But no matter the hurdles, no matter the stop-start progress, it is clear that a fresh caste census is an essential progressive step for India, and sooner or later it must come. In the long run, it opens the way to new waves of mobilisation for caste justice, and greater solidarity among the oppressed castes as they continue to awaken to their collective subjugation. In the short run, even if a country-wide caste census fails to happen anytime soon, just the demand for one has the emotive appeal to galvanise oppressed-caste voters against the BJP’s conservative caste politics, and against Brahminical politics of all hues. It’s no wonder that the opposition has latched on to the demand so firmly, seeming to sense an Achilles’ heel of the communal “Hindu” politics that keeps Hindutva forces in power. (It has to be said, however, that the opposition parties are hardly all innocent of Brahminical politics themselves.) A caste census has the potential to upend and reconfigure all of Indian politics and society, just as the seismic events set off by the Mandal Commission did in past decades.

B R Ambedkar, the iconic Dalit leader and intellectual, secured representation and reservation for Dalits and Adivasis under special provisions in the Constitution of India, drafted under his watch and brought into force in 1950. (Christian and Muslim Dalits, however, remain excluded through a constitutional order issued the same year.) Ambedkar also made sure the constitution had a provision for the setting up of a commission to investigate the conditions of the socially and educationally backward classes and make recommendations to the central and state governments to ameliorate them. However, it was only with the rise of the OBCs in the national political arena in the 1970s that the process of securing their representation in the bureaucracy and public higher education began. At the level of the individual states, Tamil Nadu was an early starter, with E V Ramasamy, better known as Periyar, championing the cause of reservations for non-Brahmins and securing it in the 1920s in what was then the Madras Presidency. After Independence, Tamil Nadu's reservation provisions remained in place despite being challenged in court, although the size of the non-Brahmin quota varied over the years.

Caste is endemic in the Subcontinent – it far predates the region's modern borders and survives across these borders today in myriad ways, shape-shifting as always to adapt itself to numerous cultural and social contexts.

Reservations became a truly national issue with developments in the 1970s in Bihar. In 1979, the state's chief minister, Karpoori Thakur, implemented reservations in government employment for groups classified as Backward Castes and Extremely Backward Castes. In doing this, he was following the recommendations of a commission set up in 1970 by another chief minister, Daroga Prasad Rai, whose Congress party had come under pressure politically to look into the situation of these groups in Bihar, and also elsewhere. Predictably, there was severe backlash from the upper castes, who worked to bring Thakur down and weakened the reservation provisions for Backward groups.

This was followed by a non-Congress central government in Delhi setting up the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission in 1979, under the chairmanship of the OBC parliamentarian Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal. (In 1953, in the wake of Tamil Nadu's efforts to enshrine and protect reservations, a Congress government had appointed the country's First Backward Classes Commission under the chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar, a Brahmin, but its report proved to be inconsequential and was rejected by the government a few years later.) The Mandal Commission submitted its report the following year, recommending reservations for OBC castes, but with the Congress returning to national power it was only a decade later that a non-Congress coalition government declared its intent to implement the Mandal recommendations. That led to massive reactionary protests and violence, but the government pushed ahead and implemented reservations for the OBCs in public employment in 1993. It took until 2006, again with massive protests, for OBC reservations to also be enforced in higher educational institutes as recommended by the Mandal Commission. Galvanised to defend the hard-won reservations, the OBCs became more conscious and assertive than ever before about their right to representation. This became a launchpad for demands for a caste census, with OBCs – by far the largest caste block and with plenty to gain – often at the forefront.

Reservations have since faced frequent legal challenges, and the courts have on many occasions asked for hard data showing a lack of fair representation to justify reservations for particular communities. This response was typified by the Supreme Court's 1992 judgement in what has become known as the Indra Sawhney case. This judgement upheld OBC reservations, but also

established a rule that no more than 50 percent of equivalent seats or positions in any institution could be set aside for reserved candidates under any criteria. That is when more groups fighting for social justice felt the need for a caste census, because only a census could provide official data on various communities' relative populations and plight, forming a basis for demands of a fair share.

One of the first politicians to demand a caste census was Ali Anwar, who represented Bihar in the Rajya Sabha – the upper house of the Indian parliament – from 2006 to 2017. At the time, Anwar was a member of the Janata Dal (United), the party headed by Nitish Kumar. The country's 2011 census was only around a year away when he raised the issue in the Rajya Sabha, but no one – not even OBC representatives or his own party fellows – seconded him.

Almost a decade earlier, Anwar had travelled through Bihar digging up colonial-era anthropological and census reports from the archives to understand the composition of castes in the Muslim fold and the conditions of the oppressed castes among them. These castes had mostly converted to Islam from the lower rungs of the Brahmanical caste system, at least in part as a step towards emancipation under Muslim rule, but their oppression had not ceased. One result of his field trips and his study was the book *Masawat ki Jung*, published in Hindi in 2001. Anwar also founded the Pasmanda movement of oppressed-caste Muslims (the term means “those left behind”). This work was informed by his own experiences as a Pasmanda Muslim growing up in Bihar and then as a student activist and journalist before he entered politics.

Some young social-justice activists noted Ali Anwar's demand for a caste census, and the disinterest of the government and his peers. They approached the JD(U) leader Sharad Yadav, then a member of the lower house of parliament, who tried to rally support for the idea. This brought together a cross-party, cross-state group of opposition MPs – the heavyweights Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav, and also Gopinath Munde of the BJP – who threw their weight behind it. The Congress, then at the head of the ruling coalition, gave in, and agreed in principle to conduct a caste census in 2011. But the government stopped short of making caste a part of the main census, and instead carried out an additional Socio-Economic and Caste Census without the provisions mandated by the Census Act. The findings of this exercise – which amounted to a survey rather than a census – were deemed to be flawed and never published.

In campaigning for the 2014 election that brought the BJP to power, Narendra Modi made it a point to loudly claim OBC identity. Over his tenure as prime minister, though, reservations have been in the news for all the wrong reasons. Reservations for promotions in public employment and local elected bodies have been challenged in court, and attempts have been made to cut down on the number of reserved teaching positions in institutions of higher education. Meanwhile, even as such efforts to erode reservations for oppressed-caste groups continue, the Modi government has successfully pushed to set aside 10 percent of seats in academic admissions and government employment for the Economically Weaker Sections, meaning the relatively less prosperous among the “unreserved” categories outside the SCs, STs and OBCs – in effect, the upper castes.

If Tamil Nadu is anything to go by, ushering in more representative governance and giving the oppressed castes a fair chance in political and economic life can be a huge step towards eroding the centuries-old caste hierarchy that undermines equality and socioeconomic progress across India.

In 2017, the Modi government set up a commission to chop up the existing 27-percent quota for OBCs in public service and higher education into smaller pieces for various sub-sections of the OBCs. After a much-prolonged process – including no less than 14 extensions – the commission

finally submitted its report to the government in July 2023. The report has not been made public. The commission was presented as an effort to break the domination of reserved positions in employment and education by a segment of relatively well-off elite OBC groups, and so to ensure greater representation for marginalised sections of the OBCs. But the Supreme Court had already taken care to guard against this in the Indra Sawhney judgement, which put in place criteria to sift out the “creamy layer” – economically and educationally advanced OBCs who are made ineligible for reservations.

Furthermore, there have always been disproportionately few positions and seats reserved for the OBCs, and the implementation of even the existing reservations has by and large been half-hearted. The present quotas for all caste-oppressed groups, both in their numbers and in their implementation, are woefully inadequate to correct the inequalities imprinted on society over at least a millennium by the caste system – which, it should be emphasised, itself functions as a system of reservations, though in favour of the upper castes. Yet instead of improving and expanding inadequate reservation policies, the Modi government has turned attention to the contentious subdivision of existing reservation quotas and the groups meant to benefit from them.

In reality, the government seems to be chasing a divide-and-rule policy aimed at fracturing the massive OBC support base of parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh. These parties emerged after the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations began, and have consistently stood for reservations as part of their OBC-centred politics.

All of this is very much in keeping with the mission of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the parent body of the BJP and the main force behind Hindu nationalism. A traditional bastion of the upper castes, especially after the implementation of the Mandal Commission’s recommendations it has been striving to reinforce the intellectual, social, political and economic supremacy of the upper-caste minority, in keeping with its idealisation of Hinduism and the Brahminical social order at the core of the religion. The threat it perceives is not just ideological, but electoral too. The BJP, the RSS’s vehicle to state power, relies on the notion of a united “Hindu” community cutting across castes voting for a “Hindu” party to protect its interests. Independent political consciousness and mobilisation among the oppressed castes means fragmentation of the “Hindu” block and a weakening of the BJP’s voter base. Even more daunting is the idea of the Bahujan majority coming together against their oppression by the upper castes, ending Brahminical political hegemony. Modi’s decision to project himself as OBC is a tactic to preempt this by drawing the numerically dominant OBCs towards the BJP, just as the attempt to subdivide OBC reservations is a tactic to erode any unified OBC political programme.

Like with Modi’s sudden claim of his OBC status – before the 2014 campaign, in over a decade as the chief minister of Gujarat, he had never proclaimed it – the BJP continues to make instrumental appeals to OBC sentiment. In 2018, with an eye on the 2019 general election, the home minister and BJP leader Rajnath Singh declared that OBCs would be identified and enumerated as part of the 2021 census. This announcement could have contributed to BJP’s return to power in May 2019, but it didn’t do much else. It is 2024, with the next election already close, and the country still hasn’t had its census, let alone an OBC census.

Meanwhile, a Ram temple built on the site of the demolished Babri Masjid in Ayodhya is to be inaugurated in the run-up to the 2024 election. The incumbent BJP-led government will be hoping that the assertion of the historically oppressed masses is subsumed by celebration of a reinvigorated Hindu identity centred on Ram – considered an incarnation of the god Vishnu who, according to the *Ramcharitmanas*, took birth as a man “for the sake of Brahmins, cows, gods and saints.” The temple inauguration will be the culmination of an anti-Muslim campaign by the BJP and RSS that

began in the 1980s to fight off the increasing assertion of Backward Classes and Dalits under the leadership of the likes of Kanshi Ram, Charan Singh, Sharad Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Lalu Prasad Yadav.

It is not just the RSS or the BJP or upper-caste Hindus that are uncomfortable with what a caste census might bring. Back before Independence, the dominant political force claiming to speak for Hindus was the Hindu Mahasabha, with a Muslim counterpart in the Muslim League. “Because a caste census had been held in 1931, before the next census was going to be held in 1941, the Hindu Mahasabha urged the Hindus to only tell enumerators that they were Hindus and not reveal their castes,” Ali Anwar told us. “At the same time, the Muslim League also urged the Muslims to identify themselves as simply Muslim. They said, ‘We are already a minority and we will be broken up into smaller fragments.’ Hindu Mahasabha was also saying that if we present ourselves as a divided lot, we’ll be a minority, not a majority.” Even as they disagreed bitterly on much else, on this the Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League were on the same wavelength. “The same attitude prevails today,” Anwar explained. “All upper castes, be it Hindus or Muslims, do not like in their heart of hearts an idea like the caste census.” Communal politics works to their advantage, preserving their dominance over oppressed-caste Hindus or Muslims, while a caste census can potentially put an end to this brand of politics and threaten their dominance.

In early 2021, Ali Anwar, now no longer in parliament and having broken away from the JD(U), released a booklet titled *‘Sampradayik dhruvikaran ka yehi ilaj, jati jangana ke liye hojao tayar’* – The antidote to communal polarisation is a caste census, get ready for it. The reasoning is that, with a caste census to reinvigorate the fight for caste justice, the oppressed in the “Hindu” community will unite against their real oppressors rather than an imagined Muslim threat, and oppressed-caste Hindus will forge solidarities with oppressed-caste Muslims instead of being set against them. Anwar called press conferences to publicise the booklet and had separate versions custom-made for Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, each with the target area’s own lists of Pasmanda castes. He also wrote letters to the prime minister, all opposition parties and the chief ministers of all the Indian states urging them to back a caste census. In Bihar, five parties together urged the chief minister, Nitish Kumar, to lead a delegation to the prime minister about holding a caste census.

At the time, Kumar headed a governing coalition in the state with the BJP as the numerically dominant partner. Beholden to the BJP to stay in power, and with the larger party calling the shots, Kumar was increasingly at risk of being rendered irrelevant. For him, the issue of a caste census was a godsend. He led the delegation to ask Modi for a caste census, then, citing the Modi-led central government’s refusal to include a full caste count in the 2021 census, parted ways with the BJP. (Besides Bihar, the states of Maharashtra and Odisha also asked the central government to include information on caste in the census.) Instead, Kumar joined with the erstwhile opposition to form a new governing coalition, and pushed ahead with the state-wide caste “survey”.

In *The Dravidian Model*, the scholars A Kalaiyarasan and M Vijayabaskar analyse economic data to show how caste-based representation in public institutions has been central to the all-round development of the state of Tamil Nadu. Apart from being the most industrialised state in India in terms of its number of factories, Tamil Nadu performs remarkably well in terms of health and educational indicators and other measures of overall societal well-being, outstripping almost all other Indian states of comparable or larger size. Even more remarkable is how Tamil Nadu’s historically “backward” castes have been participants and beneficiaries in this development, with earlier inequalities being greatly reduced. For comparison, the state of Gujarat, championed as a

model for the rest of the country by Modi and the BJP, has achieved impressive financial and economic figures but lags behind on indices of equality and human development. Consider the figures cited by Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar on the ownership of enterprises that employ a hundred or more workers in India's three most industrialised states: Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra. In Tamil Nadu, OBCs, SCs and STs own 73 percent of these enterprises, compared to 23 percent in Gujarat and 14 percent in Maharashtra.

Tamil Nadu's two major Dravidian parties, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), have between them ruled the state since 1967. The Dravidian movement that birthed these parties goes back to Periyar, who was the movement's central ideologue and launched the Self-Respect Movement in 1925 as a direct challenge to Brahminical dominance. Tamil Nadu has taken huge strides in per-capita income since implementing caste-based reservations in earnest in the 1960s. The authors of *The Dravidian Model* write,

The Dravidian movement, through its appeal to the Dravidian-Tamil identity thus managed to build a Dravidian common-sense that spoke to these groups simultaneously even though some groups may have adversarial relations with others. The components of that common-sense may be identified as the necessity for caste-based reservation, recognition of the importance of a productivist ethos, broad basing of mobility into the modern economy, regional autonomy and an anti-Hindi stance because of its links with the scriptural sanction of caste and gender hierarchies and hence its association with a denial of substantive democracy.

Phule's *Gulamgiri* became a kind of manifesto for the Satyashodhak movement that he launched in his native Pune in 1873, soon after the book appeared, and this anti-Brahmanical movement had a wide-ranging, long-term impact in the area we know as Maharashtra today. Notably, it prepared the ground from which Ambedkar would rise one day to galvanise new generations in the battle against caste. But the penetration of Phule's anti-Brahmanical common sense never quite matched the Dravidian common sense that took root in Tamil Nadu a century later. Phule himself remained active for only another decade and a half before he took ill and died, in 1890, and the Shudra-Atishudra unity that he aimed to bring about did not see the light of day. The Self-Respect Movement and the Dravidian movement, on the other hand, managed to forge a unity at least among Tamil Nadu's vast backward-caste population, if not between its backward castes and Untouchable castes. Ambedkar secured proportional representation for Dalits and Adivasis through his pre-Independence struggle and the provisions he laid out in the Indian constitution, but it was the Dravidian movement that first fought for and achieved representation for the Shudras - now classed in Tamil Nadu as the Backward Classes.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, led by C N Annadurai, set up a Backward Classes Commission soon after first taking power in 1967. The commission recommended measures for the upliftment of the Shudra caste, and their representation in the state became a top priority for decades to come. When the Supreme Court's judgement in the Indra Sawhney case created the 50-percent cap on reservations, Tamil Nadu was already implementing reservations in 69 percent of applicable seats. To protect the state's quotas, the AIADMK, then in power in Tamil Nadu, proposed a new reservations bill that was duly voted into law. The AIADMK was also then an ally of the Congress, the head of the central government of the time, and it pushed for parliament to place Tamil Nadu's reservation act in the Ninth Schedule of the constitution, cementing the reservations in place by winning them protection from judicial review.

Just how many castes there are today across religious lines in Pakistan and Bangladesh, what proportions of the population they make up and what socioeconomic conditions they face, we simply do not know.

Tamil Nadu's figures show there is no denying the impact caste-based representation has had on the state. This representation has made government institutions more accountable and put them in closer sync with social realities. As Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar write in *The Dravidian Model*, "entry of lower castes in the bureaucracy brought in valuable insights into processes on the ground that ensured better design and implementation of key health policies." Tamil Nadu ranks second today in the health index rankings of the Niti Aayog, the Indian government's top policy think tank – behind only the neighbouring state of Kerala.

The representation of the Backward Classes has also promoted the spread and entrenchment of their productivist ethos, underlined by Periyar and now nurtured through government policies framed by the community's representatives. (Brahminical culture, by contrast, has traditionally shunned labour and production – an attitude baked into the varna hierarchy, with its denigration of the Shudra and other oppressed castes traditionally engaged in agriculture, woodwork, metalworking, leatherworking, sanitation work and other life-sustaining functions – just as it has shunned the scientific thinking that oppressed-caste producers have long applied in processes of manufacturing and innovation.) This has resulted in massive participation of Tamil Nadu's Backward Classes in the manufacturing sector, and more recently in the services sector. "While Tamil Nadu, along with Gujarat and Maharashtra, is among the most industrialized states in the country," Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar write, "what makes it distinct from the other two is the labour-intensive, spatially and socially inclusive nature of industrialization, which has drawn a greater share of population out of agriculture."

If Tamil Nadu is anything to go by, ushering in more representative governance and giving the oppressed castes a fair chance in political and economic life can be a huge step towards eroding the centuries-old caste hierarchy that undermines equality and socioeconomic progress across India. The contentions around representation have so far been largely confined to public education and employment, and to certain parts of government, but really this applies to all spheres – the executive, legislature and judiciary, the government bureaucracy at every level, and education and employment in private as much as in public institutions. The caste census, and a reality check on the true populations and levels of representation for all castes, is an essential step towards a reckoning with the injustice and inequality that plagues all parts of Indian life.

This is true not just for India but for the vast majority of Southasia too. Caste is endemic in the Subcontinent – it far predates the region's modern borders and survives across these borders today in myriad ways, shape-shifting as always to adapt itself to numerous cultural and social contexts. In Pakistan, the majority of the country's persecuted Christian minority once belonged to oppressed Hindu castes, but the hope that conversion would bring liberation from stigma has failed. Thousands among them remain condemned to the "manual scavenging" traditionally reserved for "untouchable" castes, performing life-threatening sanitation work with, at best, the barest protective equipment or modern tools. The same is true of Christians in Bangladesh too. In India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and beyond, this work is still overwhelmingly done by the oppressed castes or oppressed-caste converts, with upper-caste bureaucrats and legislators largely indifferent to their fate.

As difficult as it has been to get India to face up to caste injustice, in Pakistan and Bangladesh the situation is far worse. Governments and the public in both Muslim-dominated countries subscribe to the notion that caste is not a problem there since Islam proclaims the equality of all its faithful and has no scriptural justification for caste. But that is just a convenient excuse – the lack of scriptural sanction alone has not stopped religious communities from continuing the legacies of caste, as evidenced by the persistence of caste-based discrimination within not just Islam but also Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism in the Subcontinent. Bangladesh has millions of Dalits, and over a million of them work as [street cleaners](#). Pakistan has millions of Dalit Muslims and large communities of Hindu Dalits too.

During Partition, at the very creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Pakistan government passed a law prohibiting Hindu sanitation workers from leaving for India, worried over who else would do the dirty work. It was this group's caste and caste-based profession, not their religion, that swayed the Pakistani state. A survey found a strong awareness of caste among Pakistani youth when entering into friendships and romantic relationships. Pakistan listed some 40 castes in its territory, including 32 scheduled castes, in a presidential ordinance from 1957, back when Bangladesh was still part of the country as East Pakistan. These were understood to be Hindu castes, keeping up the pretence that Islam is caste-free. Just how many castes there are today across religious lines in Pakistan and Bangladesh, what proportions of the population they make up and what socioeconomic conditions they face, we simply do not know.

In Sri Lanka, casteism remains a feature of the country's Tamil communities, which are anyway oppressed by the country's Sinhala Buddhist majority. The Vellalars, historically a farming community, retain a commanding position in the Tamil-dominated North and East of the country, with numerous service castes, artisan castes and traditionally untouchable castes stacked beneath them in the social hierarchy. Anti-caste struggles came up in the 1960s and 1970s, but soon died down. Within Sinhala society, the Govigama, a traditional farming caste, continue to enjoy both demographic dominance as well as disproportionate political power. Membership of Buddhist monastic orders is often defined along caste lines, flying in the face of the Buddha's own belief in a caste-free and radically equal sangha. The powerful Siyam Nikaya remains the preserve almost exclusively of the Govigama. Caste discrimination is also evident among the Moors, a minority Muslim community.

In *Caste in Sri Lanka: From Ancient Times to the Present Day*, the journalist Asiff Hussein notes that caste was not a recorded criteria in the decennial census started in 1871 by the British colonial government of the time. This continued after the end of British rule, when the government promoted a unified pan-Sinhalese identity that turned a blind eye to caste divisions. The political economist Ahilan Kadirgamar has written that in Jaffna, the Tamil heartland, "there has been no caste census and caste does not even exist in any contemporary official records." Sri Lanka's system of affirmative action in university admissions favours students from disadvantaged regions, but does not account for disparate caste positions.

Nepal is a step ahead of the rest in that the country already gathers data on its various castes and other ethnic groups as part of its census. The latest census, in 2021, included a comprehensive caste count. But the availability of this data has yet to translate into truly proportional representation for the disadvantaged and oppressed. The country's "twice-born" Brahmins and Chhetris, who form its largest individual castes, continue to dominate the executive, legislature and judiciary, as well as other spheres of public life.

In Nepal, a caste census has given oppressed groups a clear basis for demanding fair representation and opportunity, just as proponents of a caste census in India argue it will do there.

"Caste has become part of the census," Bir Bahadur Mahto, a researcher and activist on caste inclusion in Nepal, told us. "The republican constitution has addressed this issue." Nepal's republican constitution came into force in 2015 and permanently replaced an earlier constitution that had granted vast powers to a conservative Hindu monarchy, which was brought down in 2008 after a civil war and mass uprising. During the post-war transition and the drafting of the new constitution, Mahto said, "there was demand for data on populations of each caste." This came from a swathe of groups representing OBCs, Dalits and *janajatis*, or indigenous communities, and "all

these organisations demanded a caste-based census. So the government easily accepted the demand.”

Mahto heads the Antarrashtriya OBC Anusandhan Sansthan, or International OBC Research Centre, and has assisted Nepal’s National Inclusion Commission in preparing a list of castes to be recognised as Backward Classes. “There are provisions for reservations in public employment and higher education in the new constitution, but the guidelines for implementing them have yet to be framed,” Mahto explained. “We had demanded the setting up of a Backward Classes Commission, but instead the government set up an Inclusion Commission, which has been tasked with ensuring representation of various groups, among which the Backward Classes are one.” Recently, he added, the commission had “recommended 44 castes and their associated surnames for recognition as Backward Classes. So, now that the 2021 census has given us proportions of the various castes in the population, our demand is for proportionate representation.”

There is room for improvement in Nepal’s caste census. Mahto pointed out that some see the government’s figures on caste populations as inaccurate, with distortions in the data-gathering “because of the guidelines issued by the government, the questions framed, failings on the part of the enumerators.” There can be many complexities in identification. “For example, different castes use the same surname and different surnames refer to the same caste.” Mahto is a Kushwaha surname, and “the Kushwaha caste uses different surnames: Mahto, Mehta, Kushwaha.” The Tharus, an indigenous ethnic group, also sometimes use the surname Mahto, as do members of the Nonia caste. “So it becomes difficult to tell which caste a Mahto belongs to.” Then there is “Thakur”, which appears in the names of some Brahmins, but also of Hajams, Lohars and Sonars, who stand at various places in the traditional caste scale. “If they reveal their caste – Thakur, Lohar, Sonar – then it works,” Mahto said, but “there are often mixups.”

Still, “to a great extent, the enumeration has been impartial,” Mahto said. “The first caste census, in 2011, identified 125 castes. After the second caste census, in 2021 – the first one since the new constitution was promulgated – the number has gone up to 142 due to people owning their caste identity and a more detailed and specific questionnaire.” The share of deprived groups in the population also increased somewhat in the 2021 census.

If Nepal is finding its way through this terrain, others can too. And its experience is an indication that a caste census in itself is not a danger to social harmony, as conservative groups like to claim. Instead, in Nepal, the caste census has given oppressed groups a clear basis for demanding fair representation and opportunity, just as proponents of a caste census in India argue it will do there. Everywhere that caste exists in Southasia, a true picture of the population, representation and socio-economic status of all castes can serve the same purpose. The real danger to harmony is not from a caste census, but from conservative groups unwilling to concede any step towards greater caste justice and ready to take drastic measures to prevent a caste census from happening.

If India as a whole is to set aside centuries of discrimination against a majority of its people and make the progress that Tamil Nadu has made in establishing more representative and just rule, proportional caste representation is imperative. And if proportional caste representation is to become a reality, only a caste census can pave the way. The way forward is certainly not a commission tasked with chopping up the already woefully inadequate OBC quota to meet the ruling party’s electoral needs – and the irony is that even this commission would need a caste census to justify its recommendations. In India, and across Southasia more broadly, a comprehensive reckoning with caste and caste exclusion is long overdue.

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