



# Caste Census Data for a Just Republic

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# INDIA'S CASTE CENSUS:

## DATA FOR A JUST REPUBLIC

How can a democracy claim  
to deliver justice without  
knowing who its people truly are?

*A half-century of affirmative action has operated on  
data that's nearly a century old-*

**Authors-Yasha Singh and Nitin Ranjan**

India's first caste census in 94 years marks a turning point in the quest for social justice. This report uncovers how reliance on century-old data kept millions of OBCs, Denotified Tribes, and Dalit sub-castes invisible to policy, fueling upper-caste overrepresentation and elite capture within reservations. It highlights the "triple marginalization" of Dalit women and transgender people and shows how data gaps have hamstrung Supreme Court decisions. With state-survey evidence, raw data tables, and a plan for granular sub-categorization, this work provides the empirical foundation and policy blueprint needed to dismantle caste inequities and renew India's social contract.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### • **Blinded by Invisibility:**

India's 94-year hiatus in caste enumeration has rendered the vast majority of its citizens—OBCs, Denotified & Nomadic Tribes (DNTs), and Dalit sub-castes—statistically invisible. Policies built on 1931 colonial data perpetuate mis-targeted quotas and entrench exclusion rather than alleviate it.

### • **Elite Monopoly:**

State-level probes (e.g., Bihar 2023) expose brutal overrepresentation: Forward castes constitute just 15.5% of the population yet occupy a disproportionate 75% of government jobs. Kayasthas (0.6% of population) hold 6.7% of posts—an 11:1 overrepresentation ratio.

### • **Reservation in Name Only:**

The Rohini Commission reveals that 97% of OBC reservation benefits flow to just 25% of castes, leaving 983 backward-caste groups with zero representation. Blanket quotas without sub-categorization have become a shell—symbolic but ineffective.

### • **Erasure of the Stateless:**

An estimated 10.7 crore Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes remain off every official list—denied voter IDs, ration cards, educational access, and legal recognition. Their exclusion is not an oversight but a continuation of colonial-era criminalization.

### • **Intersectional Exclusion:**

Dalit women and Dalit transgender individuals endure “triple marginalization” of caste, gender, and identity. NCRB data records 10 Dalit women raped daily, yet no policy framework quantifies or addresses these compounded injustices.

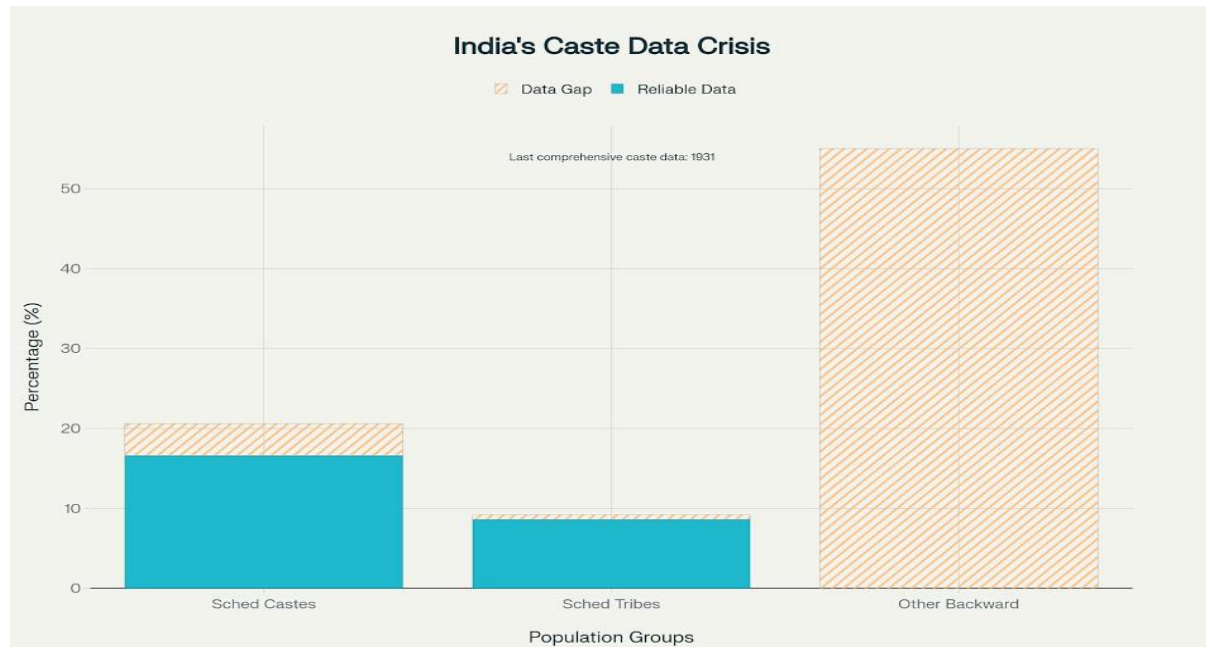
### **What This Report Delivers:**

- **Raw Data Tables** from state-level caste surveys and the SECC's hidden archives.
- **Comparative Legal Analyses** of landmark Supreme Court judgments that hinge on data absence.
- **A Granular Sub-Categorization Blueprint** to recalibrate OBC quotas and include DNTs, Dalit women, and trans persons.

This is the empirical foundation—and the policy roadmap—to dismantle caste-based privilege, reclaim truth, and forge a truly just republic.

## 1. The Visibility Crisis: India's Democratic Blind Spot

*How can a democracy claim to deliver justice without knowing who its people truly are?*



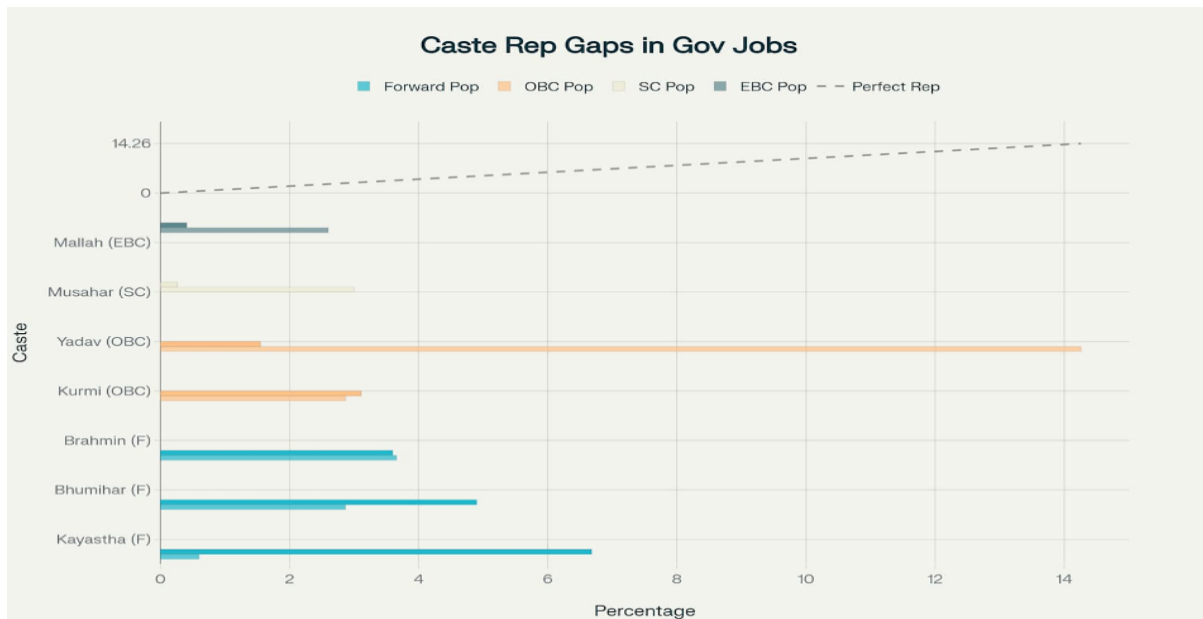
India's decision in 2025 to include caste enumeration in the national census—after a gap of 94 years—is not merely a statistical exercise.<sup>i</sup> It is a reckoning. For decades, the Indian state has operated without accurate data on the very communities it claims to uplift. This deliberate invisibilization of caste—particularly of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Denotified Tribes, and sub-castes within Scheduled Castes—represents one of the gravest policy failures in the history of Indian democracy.

Despite constitutional commitments to equality, affirmative action, and social justice, India has relied on 1931 colonial-era caste estimates to allocate reservations and frame welfare policy. This failure to generate and act upon contemporary caste data has led to deep misalignments between need and policy, eroding the promise of an egalitarian republic.

While India's Constitution formally abolished caste-based discrimination in 1950, caste continues to dictate who gets access to education, employment, and public power. Without data, these inequalities are easier to ignore. As political scientist Yogendra Yadav warns, “[The] refusal to count caste has helped preserve upper-caste dominance under the cloak of castelessness”.<sup>ii</sup>

The consequences of this blindness are everywhere: university faculty remain 85% upper-caste even in public institutions with OBC quotas; in Bihar, Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs) form 36% of the population but hold less than 1% of government jobs; and over 10 crore Denotified and Nomadic Tribes remain excluded from most welfare schemes due to classification gaps.<sup>iii</sup>, <sup>iv</sup> To pretend caste is no longer relevant is to close one's eyes to its daily manifestations—and to deny data is to deny justice.

## 2. The Data Desert: How Policy Operated Blindfolded



India’s caste census crisis is not just a bureaucratic lapse—it is a foundational flaw in the way policy has been crafted for over seven decades. Since independence, the Indian state has maintained detailed demographic data on Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), but has completely neglected reliable enumeration of Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—a group estimated to make up over 50% of the population. The last time comprehensive caste data was collected was in the **1931 British census**—nearly a century ago.

The consequences have been profound. Policies meant to uplift the socially and educationally backward have been based on approximations, not evidence. In landmark cases such as *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992), the Supreme Court upheld OBC reservations but imposed a **50% cap** on total reservations due to the lack of reliable data.<sup>v</sup> More recently, in *Jaishri Laxmanrao Patil v. Chief Minister, Maharashtra* (2021), the Court struck down the Maratha reservation law, again citing the **absence of updated empirical caste data** as a key reason.

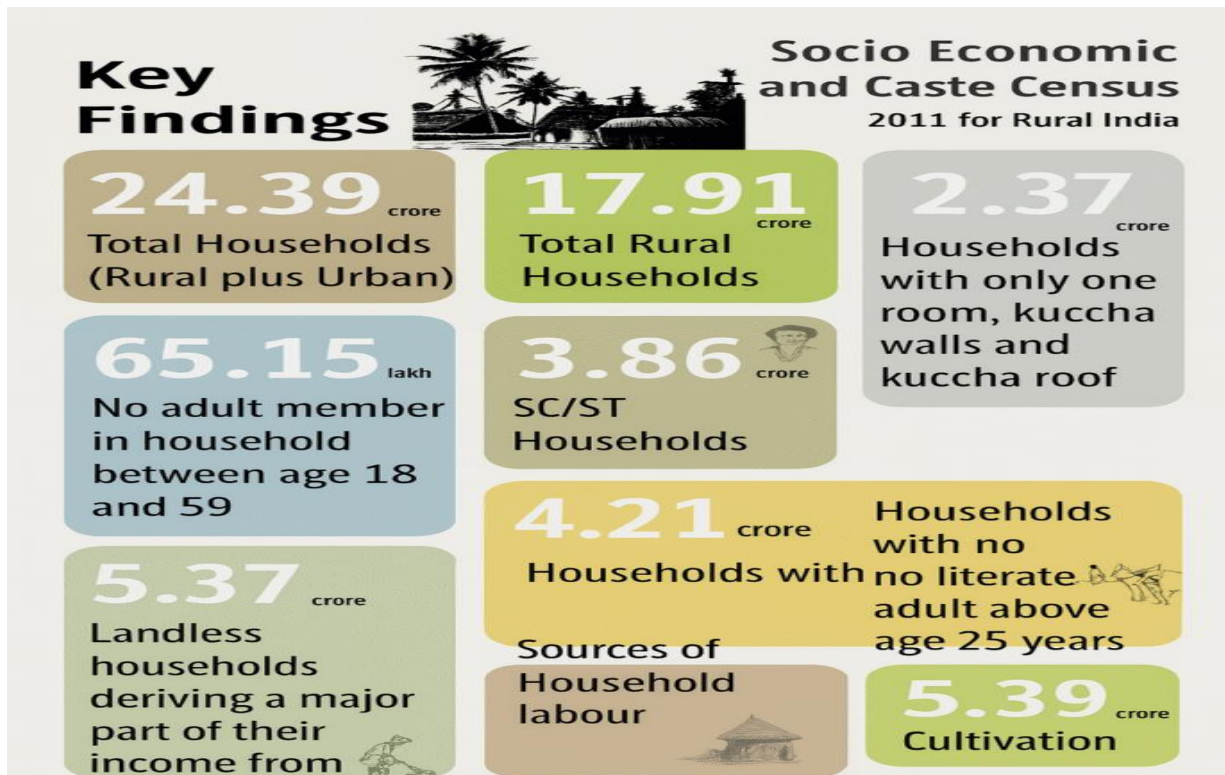
An attempt to bridge this data vacuum through the **2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC)** ended in failure. The open-ended caste identification process produced **over 46 lakh distinct caste names** and **8 crore data errors**, which rendered the dataset unusable. Despite government claims of near-total coverage, the **Supreme Court refused to admit the SECC findings as reliable**, calling the dataset “flawed and bound to mislead”.<sup>vi, vii</sup>

In the absence of credible data, India's largest social justice interventions are flying blind. Welfare schemes are misdirected. Political debates on reservation are reduced to speculation. And most importantly, millions of communities are made statistically invisible—excluded not just from opportunity, but from recognition.

As policy expert Poonam Muttreja aptly puts it: *"We are designing policies in the dark while claiming to pursue social justice."*<sup>viii</sup>

### 3. Numbers Don't Lie: What State-Level Surveys Reveal

In the absence of a national caste census, a few Indian states have taken it upon themselves to collect their own data—and the results have shattered long-held assumptions.



Take **Bihar's 2023 caste survey**, which offers one of the most detailed pictures of caste demographics and representation in independent India. The survey revealed that **OBCs and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs)** together comprise **63%** of Bihar's population, while **Scheduled Castes** account for another **19.65%**. In stark contrast, **Forward Castes**—Brahmins, Kayasthas, Bhumihars, and Rajputs—constitute just **15.52%** of the population.

Yet despite being a numerical minority, these upper castes enjoy a **grossly disproportionate share of government jobs and economic power**:

- **Kayasthas**, who make up just **0.6%** of Bihar's population, occupy **6.68%** of government jobs—a staggering overrepresentation ratio of **11:1**.
- **Bhumihars**, at **2.87%** of the population, hold **4.9%** of public jobs.

- In contrast, **EBCs**, who make up **36%**, are represented in only **0.98%** of government employment.
- **Scheduled Castes** like **Musahars**, one of the most marginalized Dalit subgroups, constitute **3%** of the population but hold just **0.26%** of jobs.<sup>ix, x</sup>

These numbers lay bare a brutal truth: **India's power structures remain deeply skewed along caste lines**, even 75 years after independence. The most marginalized groups—despite their demographic size—remain locked out of the state apparatus, while a small upper-caste elite monopolizes access to employment, education, and assets.<sup>xi</sup>

This overrepresentation is not limited to Bihar. A 2019 report revealed that **85% of faculty positions** in India's 45 central universities were held by upper-caste individuals, despite constitutional reservations for OBCs, SCs, and STs.<sup>xii</sup> Without robust national data, these patterns remain hidden, unchallenged, and unaddressed.

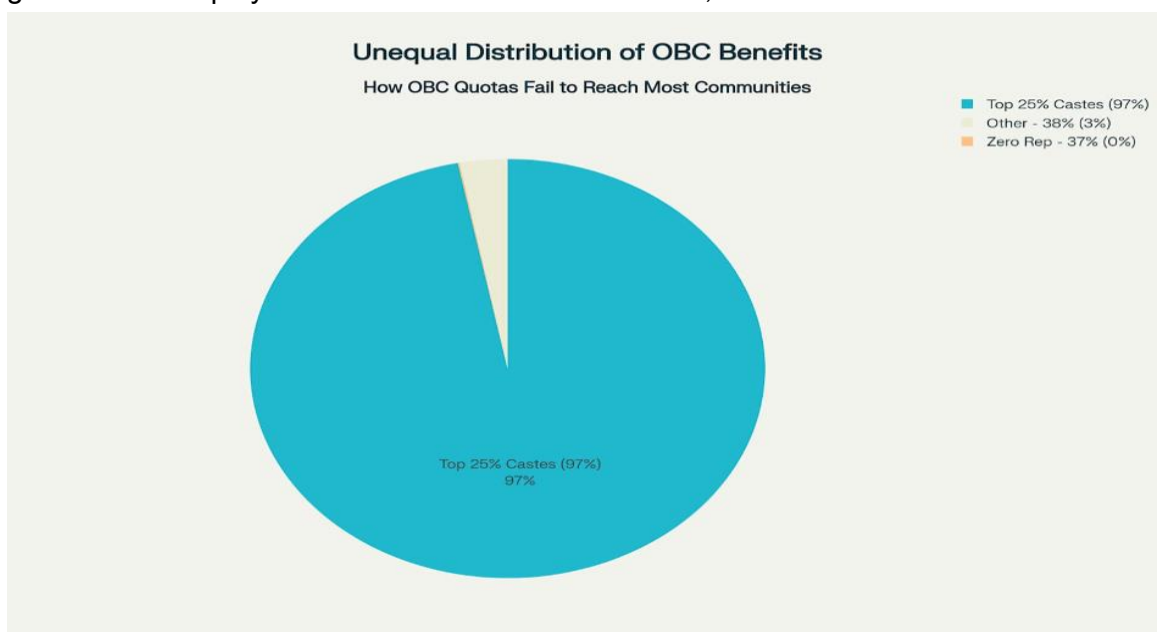
The caste survey data demolishes the argument that caste-based discrimination is a thing of the past. It is not. It is just no longer counted.

#### 4. The Hollow Core of OBC Reservations

At the heart of India’s affirmative action framework lies a disturbing paradox: even where reservations exist, they often **fail to benefit those most in need**. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of **Other Backward Classes (OBCs)**, where a small elite subset has captured nearly the entire pool of benefits—leaving hundreds of communities behind.

The **Rohini Commission**, tasked with examining the sub-categorization of OBCs, analyzed over **1.3 lakh central government jobs** and educational admissions. Its findings were stark: **97% of OBC reservation benefits** go to just **25% of OBC castes**.

Meanwhile, **983 communities—37% of all OBC groups—**have received **zero representation** in government employment or educational institutions. <sup>xiii, xiv</sup>



This isn’t just a case of imperfect implementation. It reflects a **structural failure**, where dominant backward castes such as **Yadavs, Kurmis, and Koeris**—with stronger political and social capital—monopolize access to opportunities. In contrast, smaller and more socioeconomically disadvantaged OBC communities, especially from rural or remote regions, remain locked out.

The **Bihar caste survey** corroborates this elite capture even within dominant groups. While **Yadavs** make up **14.26%** of the population, they account for only **1.55%** of government jobs—suggesting that benefits may flow largely to upper segments within the caste, rather than the broader community. <sup>xv</sup>

This internal colonization within the OBC category undermines the moral foundation of India’s reservation system. It also exposes why any meaningful reform must begin with **sub-**

**categorization**—differentiating between dominant and marginalized OBCs, and ensuring **equitable intra-group distribution** of affirmative action benefits.<sup>xvi</sup>

**Without disaggregated data, such reforms are impossible. And without reform, India's promise of social justice remains a shell—well-intentioned, but hollow.**

## 5. The Forgotten Millions: Denotified & Nomadic Tribes

Among India's most excluded citizens are those who barely appear in any government record, reservation list, or welfare program: the **Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs)**. These communities—comprising an estimated **10.74 crore people**—represent perhaps the largest stateless population within a democratic nation.<sup>xvii, xviii</sup> Their story is one of **historic criminalization, modern neglect, and statistical erasure**.

Originally branded as criminals under the **Criminal Tribes Act of 1871**, many DNT communities were forcibly categorized as born offenders by British colonial authorities. Although the Act was repealed in 1952, its social consequences persist: stigma, police surveillance, and deep economic exclusion remain routine for these groups.<sup>xix</sup>

Today, India recognizes **1,262 DNT communities**, but only a fraction are officially classified under SC, ST, or OBC categories. A 2022 **Anthropological Survey of India** study found that only **179** could be recommended for classification; **63 communities were deemed "not traceable"**, highlighting the ongoing erasure and fragmentation of these groups through migration, forced assimilation, or mislabelling.<sup>xx</sup>

Their invisibility is not just bureaucratic—it's existential. Most DNTs lack caste certificates, ration cards, voter IDs, or land titles, cutting them off from public schooling, healthcare, and basic employment schemes. Their geographic mobility—once a cultural asset—now leaves them penalized in a welfare system built for the sedentary.

This is not merely an administrative failure. It is **institutional abandonment**.

If India's caste census fails to account for these communities—and if reforms do not explicitly integrate DNTs into reservation and welfare categories—it will continue to condemn millions to a life beyond the margins. As the **Renke Commission** and subsequent expert groups have warned, only a targeted legal and policy recognition of DNTs can end their cycle of exclusion.<sup>xxi</sup>

**Justice, for them, begins with being counted.**

## 6. Triple Invisibility: Dalit Women, Trans Persons, and Intersectionality

Caste in India does not exist in isolation. It intersects with gender, class, and identity to create **compound layers of discrimination**. At the sharpest edge of this intersection stand **Dalit women and Dalit transgender individuals**, who endure what scholars describe as “triple marginalization”: **caste-based, gender-based, and economic exclusion**—simultaneously and systemically.<sup>xxii</sup>

Despite constitutional protections and affirmative action policies, **Dalit women remain among the most vulnerable populations** in India. According to the **National Crime Records Bureau**, **10 Dalit women and girls are raped every day**—a figure that likely underestimates the true scale of violence due to underreporting and caste-biased law enforcement. Surveys like the **National Family Health Survey (NFHS)** also show that Dalit and Adivasi women report **higher levels of sexual violence and lower access to healthcare and education** compared to other social groups.<sup>xxiii, xxiv, xxv</sup>

This violence is not incidental—it is structural. It functions as a tool of control and intimidation, reinforcing caste hierarchies by policing the bodies and mobility of Dalit women. As Dr. B. R. Ambedkar once warned, **the caste system is sustained through control over women’s sexuality and labor**. Today, that control persists, both culturally and institutionally.

Beyond cisgender identities, **Dalit transgender persons** face marginalization from both upper-caste queer communities and within their own Dalit communities. Activists like **Grace Banu** have described this as the force of “**cis-Brahmanical patriarchy**” operating at the intersection of gender, caste, and sexuality. Most reservation frameworks and welfare schemes remain silent on these intersectional identities, rendering them statistically and legally invisible.

Even within the Scheduled Castes, disparities abound. Communities like the **Musahars**, traditionally engaged in rat-catching and considered one of the most oppressed Dalit groups, remain excluded from real representation. In Bihar, they make up **3% of the population** but occupy only **0.26% of government jobs**—lower than even the least represented forward caste groups.<sup>xxvi</sup>

An effective caste census must do more than count categories. It must **recognize intersections**, sub-categorize within large groupings, and lay the groundwork for policy frameworks that acknowledge the complex identities people live with. Without this, the most marginalized will remain buried even in the data meant to liberate them.

## 7. The Political Economy of Silence

Why has India, the world's largest democracy, systematically avoided collecting caste data for nearly a century? The answer is not a technical one—it is political. The refusal to count caste is rooted in a **deeply entrenched political economy that benefits from invisibility**, silence, and the status quo.

**Upper-caste elites**, who dominate positions of power in bureaucracy, academia, media, and the private sector, have long opposed caste enumeration. Their resistance is cloaked in familiar arguments: that caste data will “divide society,” “undermine meritocracy,” or “reignite casteism.” But the reality is more self-serving. **By refusing to measure caste, the Indian state protects existing hierarchies** under the guise of neutrality.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Consider the backlash to caste enumeration from sections of India's economic elite. The **lateral entry scheme**—introduced under the pretext of improving bureaucratic efficiency—allowed professionals to enter senior government roles **without reservation requirements**, effectively bypassing affirmative action altogether. This created a pipeline of unchecked upper-caste dominance in decision-making spaces, replicating old hierarchies in new forms.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Sociologist **Faisal Devji** calls this the “**new division of power**”: a structural arrangement where **Brahmins and Banias dominate the private sector**, while **OBCs and SCs compete for the increasingly constrained public sector pie**. Without data to expose this imbalance, policies remain skewed in favor of those already at the top.

This mirrors trends in the United States and other unequal democracies, where dominant racial or social groups resist data collection as a way to avoid redistribution. As **Erika Lee** writes in *America for Americans*, data has always been a threat to the powerful because it reveals inconvenient truths—about exclusion, about inequality, about privilege.<sup>xxix</sup>

In India, caste-blindness is not a virtue. It is a political strategy. It enables what Dr. Suraj Yengde calls the “invisibilization of caste”—a practice that keeps marginalized groups off the agenda by keeping them **off the record**.<sup>xxx</sup> The call for a caste census is not just about counting communities. It is about **redistributing power, remaking institutions**, and holding up a mirror to those who benefit from silence.

## 8. Why Data is Power: Lessons from Global Racial Justice Movements

Around the world, **data has become a frontline tool in the fight for justice**. Whether it's racial disparities in U.S. policing or gender gaps in European corporate boards, **numbers tell the story that rhetoric cannot erase**. India's refusal to gather caste data has prevented similar progress—leaving one of the world's deepest systems of inequality unmeasured, and therefore unchallenged.

The **United States** offers a powerful comparative lens. Despite its own painful history of racism, America collects extensive racial data across domains—employment, housing, health, education, and criminal justice. This data has been instrumental in exposing discrimination, shaping civil rights legislation, and enforcing affirmative action programs.<sup>xxxix</sup> As **Isabel Wilkerson** explains in her book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, the American racial hierarchy operates in ways strikingly similar to India's caste order, with one crucial difference: **America counts**.<sup>xxxix</sup>

This difference matters. In the U.S., agencies can track disparities, courts can demand redress, and activists can press for change—all because there is evidence. In India, by contrast, policymakers are forced to **rely on outdated, colonial-era data from 1931**, while pretending to craft modern policies. The result is social justice built on guesswork.

Resistance to caste data in India closely mirrors white backlash to racial data in the U.S. In both cases, **dominant groups claim such data divides society** or threatens meritocracy. But as **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** argued in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, the backlash often comes **not from the oppressed demanding justice, but from the privileged fearful of losing power**.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The Indian state must learn from this global playbook. If it is serious about equality, it must do what every modern democracy does: **measure the inequality it wants to fix**. Without a caste census, India is attempting to solve a problem it refuses to see.

**The choice is clear: embrace transparency, or continue manufacturing justice in the dark.**

## 9. Conclusion: A New Social Contract

India's caste census is not merely a data collection exercise—it is a referendum on the nation's moral and constitutional foundations. **Can a democracy committed to justice afford to govern in ignorance?** Can a republic that claims to empower the marginalized refuse to even **count them?**<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The upcoming caste census, if implemented with integrity and transparency, offers a once-in-a-century opportunity to remake the social contract. It can replace outdated assumptions with hard evidence. It can expose structural inequalities that have long been papered over. And most importantly, it can guide **targeted, accountable, and just policies** that deliver not just symbolic recognition but material redress.

But data alone is not enough. The test lies in what India chooses to do with it. Will it acknowledge that **reservation without sub-categorization** has failed? Will it finally recognize the **Denotified Tribes, Dalit trans persons, and intersectional minorities** that have been left off the map? Will it summon the **political courage** to expand protections, redistribute opportunities, and challenge the upper-caste dominance that data will inevitably reveal?<sup>xxxv</sup>

This is a moment of reckoning. As public policy expert Poonam Muttreja warned, **"We are flying blind while claiming to pursue social justice."** The caste census is our chance to fly with vision. In the words of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: *"You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You have to demolish it."*<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The first blow to that edifice must come from truth. And **truth begins with data.**

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