



Cover Page



CASTE CENSUS AND ITS IMPACT ON RESERVATION POLICY IN INDIA

Dr. B. Santhosh Kumar

Associate Professor, Government Degree College, Parkal, Hanumakonda District, Telangana State

Abstract

The debate over a caste-based census in India lies at the core of contemporary social justice discourse. Accurate demographic data is crucial for refining affirmative action policies. Several states have conducted localized surveys, revealing significant intra-group disparities. This article explores the intersection of caste enumeration and constitutional reservation policy. It evaluates key judicial developments — particularly the contrasting positions in *E.V. Chinnaiah v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (2005) and *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024) — and analyzes state-level initiatives for the internal sub-categorization of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Ultimately, this paper argues that granular, empirical data is a constitutional imperative to prevent elite capture, better identify backwardness, and modernize India’s distributive justice framework.

Keywords: Caste Census, Reservation Policy, Sub-Categorization, Davinder Singh, Affirmative Action.

Introduction

The Indian reservation framework is a vital constitutional mechanism to address historical inequalities. Anchored in Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the Constitution, reservations aim to ensure equitable representation in education and public employment for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Despite this commitment, the lack of updated, comprehensive caste data remains a major gap. The last nationwide caste census occurred in 1931 under British rule. While SCs and STs continue to be enumerated, detailed OBC data has largely been absent or extrapolated. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 attempted to address this but faced methodological issues, and its full caste data was not publicly released.

This data deficit has contributed to "elite capture," where dominant sub-groups within reserved categories monopolize benefits. The legal landscape shifted significantly with the Supreme Court’s 2024 judgment in *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh*, which overruled *E.V. Chinnaiah* (2005) and permitted sub-categorization within SCs based on quantifiable data.

This article examines the relationship between a nationwide caste census and reservation policy, including historical context, state initiatives, judicial shifts, and policy implications.

Background: Post-Independence Caste Enumeration

In India, the modern population census began in 1881 under British rule and has been conducted every ten years. Caste details were recorded until the 1931 Census. After Independence, from the 1951 Census onward, full caste enumeration (except for SCs and STs) was discontinued.

The 2021 Census was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent elections. Opposition parties, particularly Congress, demanded a nationwide caste census. On April 30, 2025, the Central Government announced that caste enumeration would be included in the upcoming decennial Census. Population census being a Union subject, the Centre leads this exercise.

A comprehensive caste census will provide updated data on population shares across 28 states and 8 Union Territories, along with socio-economic indicators. This will help identify backward castes more accurately and improve the targeting of welfare schemes.



Cover Page



Impact on Reservations

Reservations aim to promote social justice and equal opportunities. As per the 2011 Census, SCs (16.6% population) have 15% reservation, STs (8.6%) have 7.5%, and OBCs have 27%. The OBC population varies widely across states.

In 2019, the 103rd Constitutional Amendment introduced 10% Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reservation for general category citizens under Articles 15(6) and 16(6), without affecting existing quotas.

The Supreme Court in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992) upheld OBC reservations but imposed a 50% ceiling (subject to exceptional cases) and mandated exclusion of the "creamy layer."

State-level demands have grown significantly. In Telangana, the Congress government conducted a caste survey (2024) covering approximately 3.55 crore people and revealed BCs at around 56%. It had earlier promised enhanced BC reservations. Similar exercises in Karnataka, Bihar, and Odisha have shown wide intra-caste disparities.

Tamil Nadu's 69% reservation model (protected via the Ninth Schedule) is often referenced, though the Supreme Court in *I.R. Coelho* (2007) clarified that Ninth Schedule laws remain subject to basic structure review.

A nationwide caste census is expected to trigger multiple changes:

- It may provide justification for states to seek higher reservations through constitutional amendments.
- It will strengthen demands for revising the 50% ceiling in exceptional cases.
- Data on economic status alongside caste will help fine-tune the creamy layer exclusion criteria.
- It will enable more precise identification of castes that have achieved adequate representation, allowing for dynamic inclusion and exclusion.

Any nationwide increase beyond the 50% limit would require a constitutional amendment by Parliament.

Judicial Shifts and Sub-Categorization

For decades, sub-categorization within reserved groups was contentious. In *E.V. Chinnaiah v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (2005), the Supreme Court held that SCs form a homogeneous class and could not be sub-divided by states.

This position was overruled on August 1, 2024, in *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh*. A seven-judge bench ruled that sub-categorization within SCs (and by extension STs) is permissible if supported by empirical data showing relative backwardness.

This judgment makes a detailed caste census constitutionally significant, as accurate data is now essential for any valid sub-categorization to withstand judicial scrutiny and prevent elite capture within reserved categories. The ruling has opened the door for states to create sub-quotas (for example, giving more reservation to the most backward sub-castes like Madiga in SCs or Extremely Backward Classes in OBCs).

State Initiatives and Federal Developments

Several states have conducted their own surveys due to the absence of central data:

- Bihar Caste Survey (2023): Showed OBCs + EBCs at 63%, leading to increased state reservations.
- Justice Rohini Commission (2017 onward): Highlighted that a few dominant OBC castes cornered most benefits.
- Telangana, Karnataka, and others: Conducted similar exercises to design internal quotas.

The Central Government's 2025 decision to integrate caste enumeration into the national census provides a uniform, nationwide dataset, reducing legal challenges arising from varying state surveys.



Cover Page



The Indian Reservation Matrix

As the next comprehensive census concludes, the collected data will directly impact a highly structured reservation system:

Reservation Category	Central Allocation Quota (%)	Key Constitutional Provisions	Governing	Current Policy Directives & Upcoming Adjustments
Scheduled Castes (SC)	15.0%	Articles 15(4), 341	16(4)	Open to sub-categorization under <i>Davinder Singh</i> (2024) based on upcoming data.
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	7.5%	Articles 15(4), 342	16(4)	Allocations guided by regional demographic density.
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	27.0%	Articles 15(4), 16(4)		Subject to "Creamy Layer" exclusion; sub-categorization pending official data release.
Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)	10.0%	Articles 15(6), 16(6)		Formulated via the 103rd Constitutional Amendment (2019) for the general category.
Women's Reservation	33.0% (Legislative)	Articles 239AA, 330A, 332A		Pending Implementation: To be enacted post-delimitation following the upcoming census.

Challenges and Criticisms

While the caste census is widely welcomed by proponents of social justice, it also faces criticism. Detractors argue that it may deepen caste divisions in society, encourage vote-bank politics, and lead to further demands for reservation hikes that could compromise merit and administrative efficiency. There are also concerns about data accuracy, potential manipulation, and the risk of inflating backward class numbers for political gain.

Moreover, some experts fear that excessive focus on caste identity might overshadow economic criteria for affirmative action. Integrating caste data with economic indicators (similar to EWS) could offer a more balanced approach.

Future Implications and Policy Roadmap

The upcoming caste census is likely to reshape India's reservation landscape fundamentally. It will provide empirical backing for sub-categorization, help implement women's reservation more effectively (by factoring in caste and gender intersections), and guide post-delimitation seat allocation in Parliament and State Assemblies.



Cover Page



Key Recommendations:

1. Use standardized, robust methodology in the census to avoid past errors (e.g., SECC 2011).
2. Establish periodic review mechanisms (every 10 years) to assess backwardness and exclude advanced groups.
3. Implement data-driven sub-categorization within SCs, STs, and OBCs.
4. Link census findings with delimitation and women's reservation for balanced representation.
5. Create an independent expert body to continuously monitor and recommend adjustments in reservation policy based on fresh data.

Conclusion

A nationwide caste census is essential for evidence-based reservation policy. It will help move from broad quotas to more targeted interventions, reducing elite capture and ensuring benefits reach the most marginalized. By updating outdated assumptions with current realities, India can better realize the constitutional goal of substantive equality while maintaining national unity.

Bibliography

1. Government of Bihar. (2023). Caste-Based Survey Report 2023.
2. Government of India. (1980). Report of the Second Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission).
3. Government of India. (2011). Socio-Economic and Caste Census.
4. Supreme Court of India. Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992).
5. Supreme Court of India. E.V. Chinnaiiah v. State of Andhra Pradesh (2005).
6. Supreme Court of India. State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh (2024).