

ISAS Brief

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The Perils of Counting Caste

While the unpublished findings of the ‘Caste Census’ in India might not receive serious attention if ever made public, some of the socio-economic data, made available by the same Census, can set the marketing managers and policy makers thinking.

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Ever since some of the findings of the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) in India, undertaken in 2011, were announced in July 2015, controversy has dogged it. The census was to have been the first to try to enumerate “castes” since 1931. The reasons for its apparent failure are not hard to find.

Perhaps the most important flaw was that the SECC was not conducted by the Census Commissioner of India, which handles the decennial census, but by multiple agencies. The Union Rural Development Ministry was in charge of collecting the socio-economic data in rural areas while the Union Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation Ministry was in charge of urban areas.² The caste census was under the administrative control of the Home Ministry, to

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² See <http://www.secc.gov.in/staticReport>.

which the Census Commissioner reports, but the data were collected by the different state governments.

All this, according to a former Census Commissioner, made the “entire exercise casual and perfunctory with an extremely high rate of coverage omission”.³ Though the United Progressive Alliance government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh initially decided that the Census Commissioner would conduct the caste census in 2011, it later went back on its decision.

Not surprisingly the caste data are yet to be released. With thousands of castes and sub-castes prevalent in India, collecting data on caste is notoriously difficult. The issue is intensely political, because various benefits, based on principles of “positive discrimination”, are associated with lower-caste status. And observers of census procedures around the world know that attempts to enumerate people’s “identities” can have explosive results.

The withholding of the census data has become an election issue in Bihar, which is now in the midst of multi-phase state-wide polls and where caste plays a huge role. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and his ally for these elections, former Chief Minister Laloo Yadav, have both demanded that the caste census be made public. On 13 July 2015, Mr Yadav led a march to Patna’s Raj Bhavan to press their demand.⁴ Incidentally, both Mr Laloo Yadav and Mr Nitish Kumar themselves belong to the ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OBC), a vast, hard-to-define category that gets quota benefits but has never been counted. A recent agitation in Gujarat by the Patel community showed how contested the OBC classification is.

Put on the back foot by the opposition demands, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Union Government has appointed an expert committee, headed by Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya, to collate and classify the caste census data. Even without the doubts about the quality of data collection, the complexity of the task is daunting. According to Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, the caste census had collected an astronomical 4.6 million different names of

³ M.Vijayanunni, “Where is the caste data?” *The Hindu*, July 15, 2015. See <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/povertycumcaste-survey-where-is-the-caste-data/article7422082.ece>.

⁴ <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/lalu-nitish-dare-pm-modi-to-release-caste-census-data/>

castes, sub-castes, clans and tribes. State governments have been given the seemingly impossible task of consolidating these data.⁵

While the release of the caste data may never happen, the socio-economic data provide interesting insights. The survey identified 244 million households across the country, 179 million of which are rural households. This means an average of about five people per household.

Fast Moving Consumer Goods manufacturers in India have been trying to gauge purchasing power and customer preferences for decades. Indeed, it was a truism in the 1980s that the marketing arm of Hindustan Lever had a better understanding of rural conditions than the Government of India.

The current survey provides fascinating and sobering data about the extent of purchasing power, prosperity and household choices. For example, the long-standing discussion about the size of the Indian middle class is illuminated by questions about household possessions. According to the census, only 11 per cent of India's 244 million households⁶ own a refrigerator. However, given the irregularity of electricity in much of India, many families may have gauged that a refrigerator is almost useless unless one has a backup generator. The survey did not ask households whether backup electricity was available to them.

In regional terms, Goa has the largest percentage of households with refrigerators – nearly 70 per cent. It is followed by Punjab and Haryana, both at about 66 per cent. Strangely, Tamil Nadu, now India's most urbanised major state and a leader on a number of social indicators, has only 32 per cent of households with refrigerators. Less surprisingly, Bihar has the smallest percentage of households with refrigerators – 2.6 per cent. Nevertheless, that amounts to 460,000 refrigerators and a vast potential market for white-goods marketers and for suppliers of cheap, backup electrical power units.

The survey found that in 2011 more than 70 per cent of households owned a phone. For 68 per cent, this meant only a mobile; a further 2 per cent had a mobile and a landline. Puzzlingly, the

⁵ http://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/amid-criticism-govt-sets-up-expert-group-to-collate-caste-count-115071601423_1.html

⁶ <http://www.secc.gov.in/statewiseTypeOfHouseholdsReport?reportType=Type%20of%20Households>

survey did not ask about ownership of a television set, though it quizzed households about two-wheeled vehicles and four-wheeled vehicles. Only 17 per cent owned a two-wheeler and only 2.5 per cent owned a four-wheeler (presumably a car or tractor).

Among the major states, Punjab households led the way for two-wheeler ownership – 41 per cent. The small state of Goa and Union Territory of Puducherry at 46 per cent and 42 per cent did slightly better. A remarkable runner-up was the distant eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh on the Chinese border, with 39 per cent of households owning a two-wheeler.

Of the major states, Punjab and Kerala led the way among households owning four-wheelers, each at more than 9 per cent. But again, Goa led at 19 per cent, a product presumably of its front rank in the tourist industry.

In collecting data on Scheduled Castes (SCs), the census revealed a remarkable penetration of mobile phones – 67 per cent of SC families nationwide were estimated to own a mobile phone. Fewer than 7 per cent owned a refrigerator, and 11 per cent owned a motorcycle or scooter.

On the basis of these figures, Scheduled Caste households of Punjab appeared better off than those in the other major states. Forty-six per cent of Punjab SC households owned a refrigerator, 75 percent a mobile phone and 28 per cent a two-wheeled vehicle. In contrast, less than 2 per cent of SC households in Bihar owned a refrigerator and less than 5 per cent a two-wheeler. But the mobile phone was widespread: 77 per cent of Bihar SC households were recorded as owning a mobile phone, a slightly higher proportion than in Punjab.

The quality of the “caste” data in this “caste census” is open to question and is unlikely to be taken seriously if it is ever published. However, the survey questions about ownership of consumer goods will intrigue marketing managers in consumer-goods industries and suggest vast areas for expansion. One hypothesis for the paucity of refrigerators in rural areas is the unreliability of electricity supplies. However, Gujarat, which claims the most reliable rural electric supply in the country, shows only 8 per cent of households owning a refrigerator against 15 per cent in Haryana and 14 per cent in Kerala and Punjab’s notable 46 per cent.

Table 1: Scheduled Caste Ownership of Selected Possessions (Rural Households)

State Code	State Name	Households Own a refrigerator	%	Households Own mobile only	%	Households having 2 wheeler	%
ALL INDIA		2144495	6.5%	22034234	66.64%	3727035	11.27%
1	JAMMU & KASHMIR	50350	32.2%	110548	70.69%	19838	12.69%
2	HIMACHAL PRADESH	88523	29.3%	241557	79.86%	28848	9.54%
3	PUNJAB	548714	45.7%	903687	75.26%	333546	27.78%
4	CHANDIGARH	1180	40.5%	2598	89.13%	735	25.21%
5	UTTARAKHAND	29895	10.8%	229327	82.49%	35047	12.61%
6	HARYANA	102589	15.1%	518121	76.23%	83072	12.22%
7	NCT OF DELHI	88740	64.1%	127782	92.28%	41926	30.28%
8	RAJASTHAN	75955	4.0%	1224100	64.73%	185364	9.80%
9	UTTAR PRADESH	259108	4.2%	5160447	83.20%	832348	13.42%
10	BIHAR	45510	1.5%	2308104	76.99%	143210	4.78%
11	SIKKIM	387	7.9%	3892	79.69%	67	1.37%
12	ARUNACHAL PRADESH	2	5.3%	6	15.79%	6	15.79%
13	NAGALAND	0	0.0%	86	81.90%	4	3.81%
14	MANIPUR	872	7.8%	9533	85.38%	1353	12.12%
15	MIZORAM	51	10.7%	261	54.60%	15	3.14%
16	TRIPURA	6167	4.9%	76199	60.61%	7035	5.60%
17	MEGHALAYA	375	7.4%	3365	66.54%	262	5.18%
18	ASSAM	22445	4.5%	326171	65.28%	37394	7.48%
19	WEST BENGAL	149372	3.3%	2206535	49.22%	190511	4.25%
20	JHARKHAND	26913	4.1%	404831	61.73%	75047	11.44%
21	ODISHA	33797	2.2%	451655	29.03%	67901	4.36%
22	CHHATTISGARH	15268	2.4%	171973	27.49%	46158	7.38%
23	MADHYA PRADESH	38137	2.2%	776741	45.25%	148082	8.63%
24	GUJARAT	36194	8.4%	314189	72.55%	78438	18.11%
25	DAMAN AND DIU	360	42.4%	767	90.24%	312	36.71%
26	DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI	202	27.6%	600	81.97%	245	33.47%
27	MAHARASHTRA	100945	6.2%	833559	50.92%	172170	10.52%
28	TELANGANA	69056	6.7%	837592	81.60%	199792	19.46%
29	ANDHRA PRADESH	59815	3.5%	1246272	72.16%	203176	11.76%
30	KARNATAKA	35656	2.5%	1077712	74.15%	176982	12.18%
31	GOA	1627	46.5%	2671	76.36%	1328	37.96%
32	KERALA	92386	14.2%	499593	76.89%	70113	10.79%
33	TAMILNADU	159983	6.2%	1944565	75.61%	538232	20.93%
34	PUDUCHERRY	3921	14.3%	19195	69.92%	8478	30.88%

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