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Socio-Economic and Caste Census

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This article is based on **“A new framework around caste and the census”** which was published in The Hindu on 23/01/2021. It talks about the comparison between Census and Socio-Economic and Caste Census and their associated concerns.

Enumerating, describing, and understanding the population of society and what people have access to, and what they are excluded from is important not only for social scientists but also for policy practitioners and the government.

In this regard, the **Census of India**, one of the largest exercises of its kind, enumerates and collects demographic and socio-economic information on the Indian population.

However, the critiques of the exercise of the census consider it as both a data collection effort and a technique of governance, but not quite useful enough for a detailed and comprehensive understanding of a complex society.

In this context, the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) was conducted in 2011, but it has its own issues.

Census, SECC & Difference

Census

- The origin of the Census in India goes back to the colonial exercise of 1881.
- Census has evolved and been used by the government, policymakers, academics, and others to capture the Indian population, access resources, map social change, delimitation exercise, etc.
- However, as early as the 1940s, W.W.M. Yeatts, Census Commissioner for India for the 1941 Census, had pointed out that “the census is a large, immensely powerful, but blunt instrument unsuited for specialized inquiry.”

SECC

- SECC was conducted for the first time since 1931.

- SECC is meant to canvass every Indian family, both in rural and urban India, and ask about their:
 - Economic status, so as to allow Central and State authorities to come up with a range of indicators of deprivation, permutations, and combinations of which could be used by each authority to define a poor or deprived person.
 - It is also meant to ask every person their specific caste name to allow the government to re-evaluate which caste groups were economically worst off and which were better off.
- SECC has the potential to allow for a mapping of inequalities at a broader level.

Difference Between Census & SECC

- The Census provides a portrait of the Indian population, while the SECC is a tool to identify beneficiaries of state support.
- Since the Census falls under the Census Act of 1948, all data are considered confidential, whereas according to the SECC website, “all the personal information given in the SECC is open for use by Government departments to grant and/or restrict benefits to households.”

Associated Concerns With SECC

- **Repercussions of a Caste Census: Caste has an** emotive element and thus there exist the political and social repercussions of a caste census.
 - There have been concerns that counting caste may help solidify or harden identities.
 - Due to these repercussions, nearly a decade after the SECC, a sizeable amount of its data remains unreleased or released only in parts.
- **Caste Is Context-specific:** Caste has never been a proxy for class or deprivation in India; it constitutes a distinct kind of embedded discrimination that often transcends class. For example:
 - People with Dalit last names are less likely to be called for job interviews even when their qualifications are better than that of an upper-caste candidate.
 - They are also less likely to be accepted as tenants by landlords. Thus difficult to measure.
 - Marriage to a well- educated, well-off Dalit man still sparks violent reprisals among the families of upper-caste women every day across the country.

Way Forward

- **Utilizing Existing Data:** As SECC has its own concerns, linking and syncing aggregated Census data to other large datasets such as the National Sample Surveys may help the governments realize the intended benefits of SECC.

National Sample Surveys cover issues that the Census exercises do not, such as maternal health, information of land and asset ownership, consumption expenditure, nature of employment, which would be significant for a more comprehensive analysis.

- **Digital Alternatives:** Statisticians such as Atanu Biswas point out that Census operations across the world are going through significant changes, employing digital methods that are precise, faster, and cost-effective.

However, care must be taken to ensure that digital alternatives and linking of data sources involving Census operations are inclusive and non-discriminatory, especially given the sensitive nature of the data being collected.

Conclusion

While the Census authorities present documents on methodology as part of a policy of transparency, there needs to be a closer and continuous engagement between functionaries of the Census and SECC, along with academics and other stakeholders concerned, since the Census and the SECC are projects of governance as well as of academic interest.

Drishti Mains Question

Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) is a better exercise than Census to capture the population's data. However, it has its own issues. Discuss.



Watch Video At:

<https://youtu.be/A1f9fNHCBgU>

This editorial is based on **“Farmers Besotted By Protestations”** published in The Economic Times on January 22nd, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.
