

Counting Caste: A Step towards Radical Anticasteism

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Abstract: *The demand for a caste census has stirred a debate again with many vehemently opposing it and calling it antithetical to anticasteism. On the other hand, proponents of the caste census argue that it is a necessary step towards addressing caste. This paper argues that the discomfort with counting caste has its roots in the invisibilisation and erasure of caste in mainstream discourses in the colonial and postcolonial period. While the Gandhian discourse opposed the separate claims of the Depressed Class, arguing that they cannot be considered distinct from the Hindu order, the Nehruvian discourse used the language of liberal individualism in the constituent assembly to deny any articulation of group rights based on caste. The women's movement and the feminist discourse also did not take caste as an important category, focusing on the singular axis of gender. The Hindutva discourse invokes the figure of 'Muslim other' as the external enemy to consolidate a 'Hindu unity' to prevent articulation and assertion of 'lower' castes. Only the Ambedkarite discourse acknowledges the central role of caste and seeks to address it through remedies without a naïve erasure of caste. In the current context, it is vital to draw from the radical anticasteism of the Ambedkarite discourse and seek the counting of caste in the census. Using this lens, this paper critically analyses the mainstream discourses and finds the naïve erasure of caste and the hollow rhetoric of anticasteism helps perpetuate caste-based inequalities. The final section of the paper argues that a caste census is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to address the question of caste. The caste census would provide the premise upon which a new modern public sphere can be built where the vocabulary of caste is given due importance. It would also aid the development of a 'socially embedded' understanding of the economy and, thereby, socially informed policies. The caste census would also provide the anticaste Ambedkarite discourse with the much-needed data to bring out the effect of caste in the material sphere and include the aspects of both representation and redistribution.*

Keywords: Caste Census, Anticasteism, Ambedkarism, Caste Enumeration, Affirmative Action.



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Introduction

The Census of India, started by the British in 1872, was the first systematic attempt undertaken to collect information about Indian society. The British census commissioners recognized that caste is an important social category and any reality of India would not be complete without also collecting information of caste and its influence on occupation, residence, literacy, education etc. It is important to note that the caste of all the people was enumerated in this decade-wise exercise. This practice continued till the census of 1931 and the data collected remains one of the most important sources of understanding the impact of caste in Indian society. Due to the constricted financial conditions during the Second World War, the census of 1941 was not as extensive and did not count caste.

In 1949, a committee headed by R R Diwakar recommended that there should be no listing of subcastes in the census “unless the person concerned claims to be a member of any of the Backward Classes or a Scheduled Tribe” (The Times of India, 1949, p 7). In the post-independence period, without any debate, the government abruptly shifted the policy from enumerating information about all castes to only collecting information about the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, a practice that continues to date. To justify their position, they state that since India’s independence, the union government had chosen “*the policy of official discouragement of caste...in general, no race/caste/tribe enquiries should be made and such enquiries should be restricted to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes*” (Union of India, 2021, p. 7, emphasis added). This essentially meant that the question of caste was reduced to a concern of Dalits and tribal communities instead of attempting to uncover the ramifications of caste across different sections of society.

Due to the growing demand for the caste census, caste information was collected in the Socio Economic and Caste Census (2011), the complete data for which has not been released to the public to date, citing technical errors. Recently, the union government filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court taking a stand against the caste census. The government has stated that it is “not feasible” to include caste in the upcoming decadal census due to the complexity of the data involved and the lack of training of its enumerators. Moreover, not counting caste is a “conscious policy decision” (Union of India, 2021, p. 27) over which the judiciary cannot dictate its terms. On the one hand, the government talks of the *practical infeasibility* of counting caste; on the other, it questions the very *desirability* of conducting a caste census. What is the implicit assumption behind this reluctance to count caste? Where does this reluctance emerge?

The discomfort with counting caste extends to sections of the civil society as well, which fear “social upheaval” and political turmoil if the data is released (Jain, 2015). There are also criticisms of the caste census in academic circles (Burman, 1998; Malik, 2010; Misra, 2007; Natraj, 2010;

Shah, 1998; Sudarshan, 2010; Teltumbde, 2010). There are three types of arguments made against the caste census. The first argument is that it is impossible to count caste reliably due to the lack of training of enumerators and the expertise of census superintendents, the complexity of the caste system, and challenges in situating caste in cases of inter-caste marriages and non-conforming forms of family. While this is a concern worth debating over, it is a rather extreme step to reject the caste census instead of collectively finding ways to address it. The second argument is that caste is a colonial construct (Samarendra, 2011), which was used by the British to divide Indian society, and the caste census solidified fuzzy caste distinctions into rigid categories (Bhagat, 2006). In his recent article, Pritam Singh (2022) countered this argument by showing that the census was an empowering tool for the lower castes to make assertions by demonstrating the “upper caste hegemony in the public sphere” (p. 67). The third argument is that counting caste is antithetical to anticaste politics. This opposition to counting caste in the census is not new. It is interesting to note that even in the 1931 Census of India Report, there is a mention of similar criticism against the counting of caste, the Census Commissioner writes that:

It has been alleged that the mere act of labeling persons as belonging to a caste tends to perpetuate the system, and on this excuse a campaign against any record of caste was attempted in 1931 by those who objected to any such returns being made. It is, however, difficult to see why the record of a fact that actually exists should tend to stabilise that existence . . . Indeed the treatment of caste at the 1931 census may claim to make a definite, if minute, contribution to Indian unity (Census Commissioner of India 1933, p. 420).

According to this perspective, any mention of caste in the public discourse keeps caste alive and should therefore be avoided. Demands for the caste census and representation measures like reservation or separate electorates create a social rift. In his recent editorial, Gopal Guru (2022) questions the claim that caste-based census perpetuates “regressive social consciousness” (p. 9). The primary concern of this paper is to take the discussion on the third argument forward: is counting caste against the project of anticasteism?

Invisiblising without Annihilating: Critical Review of the Mainstream Discourses

This section critically evaluates the mainstream discourses regarding their attitude towards questions of caste and representation. It is claimed that the Gandhian, Nehruvian, Women’s movement, and Hindutva perspectives have all attempted to invisiblise the question of caste without attempting to annihilate it.

The nationalist elite distinguished between the domain of political freedom and social reforms during the colonial period. The mainstream discourse considered political freedom more urgent. On the question of social reform, while conservatives were opposed to any interference in the cultural domain, even those with a reformist outlook sought to postpone these questions to a time

when India had gained independence from British rule. Anticaste leaders like B R Ambedkar questioned the postponement of social reforms by exposing the cracks of caste in Indian society. caste. Others accused them of supporting the foreign rule and dividing Indian society. Different discourses used different types of languages to invisibilise the articulation of the question of caste.

Let us first consider Gandhi's opinion on the issue of counting caste in the census. In his speech at Minorities Committee meeting in London on November 13, 1931, Gandhi states that

Let this Committee and let the whole world know that today there is a body of Hindu reformers who are pledged to remove this blot of untouchability. *We do not want on our register and on our census untouchables classified as a seprate (sic) class.* Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity, so may Mohammedans, so may Europeans. Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity?... *It will create a division in Hindusim* which I cannot possibly look forward to with any satisfaction whatsoever (Gandhi, 1999a, p. 159).

Classification on the basis of religion was acceptable to Gandhi, while classification based on caste was not. Gandhi invokes the unity of the Hindu identity to argue against the use of caste as a field in the enumeration of census data. This invocation also ensured that the enumeration of upper castes was avoided and the very existence of caste was invisibilised without addressing it in any effective manner. He also states that “*The untouchables are made and unmade by census enumerators and commissioners*” (Gandhi, 1999b, p. 359), holding the census process responsible for the perpetuation of untouchability. The Gandhian discourse reduced the question of caste to the removal of untouchability by reforming orthodox sections of Hindu society. In this process, it portrayed the exercise of counting caste, and thereby any articulation based on caste, as divisive.

In 1935, Ambedkar (1935) declared that “he would not die a Hindu” at the Yeola Conference. This invoked an anxious reaction from the caste Hindus and they argued that the Depressed Classes must remain Hindus in order to enjoy the benefits of the Poona Pact (The Times of India, 1936). On the other hand, orthodox sections of the caste Hindus made statements against the attempts at temple entry and other rights claimed by the untouchables (The Times of India 1929; 1930; 1932b). Untouchables could, therefore, *neither enter the temple nor leave it.*

The Hindu Mahasabha strongly opposed separate electorates and demanded the scrapping of the Poona Pact (The Times of India, 1933a). Invoking the idea that “All Indians are Hindus” (The Times of India, 1933a) and “Dominion Status will cure their all” (The Times of India, 1933b), they opposed the demands of separate electorates and also reservations for the Depressed Classes (The Times of India, 1932a) claiming that it would separate them from the Hindus forever. The Hindutva discourse focused on articulating the interest of the Hindus vis-à-vis the Muslim “other” and suppressed the demand for rights made by the lower castes. Dilip Menon (2010) shows that “in the period from 1850–1947, communal violence has always followed periods of lower caste

mobility and assertion” (p. 126). Corbridge and Harriss (2000) similarly argue that the revival of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s was an “elite revolt” against the increased lower caste assertion. The current Hindutva regime continues to emphasise the idea of a threat to the Hindus from the Muslim “other”. “cow vigilantism,” which has resulted in several lynchings in the past few years, and the Ayodhya Ram Mandir controversy have been repeatedly used to develop a common homogenous interest among the Hindus, thus attempting to eradicate the question of caste within Hindu society. The recent decision of the Bihar government, which includes members from the National Democratic Alliance, to conduct a caste count in Bihar at odds with the union government’s position is a reflection of the tension of the Hindutva discourse with caste (Singh, 2022).

Even after India got independence from British rule, the mainstream discourses did not give importance to the question of social reform. During the Constituent Assembly debates, any articulation from the perspective of any particular group was discouraged. To quote Nehru:

We came to the conclusion some time back that we must get rid of separate electorates. That was the major evil. *Reluctantly* we agreed to carry on with some measure of reservation . . . There is some point in having a safeguard of this type *where there is autocratic rule or foreign rule*. Therefore, I think that doing away with this reservation business. . . shows that we are really sincere about this business of having a *secular democracy* (Constituent Assembly Debates Volume VIII, 1949, 26th May 1949, emphasis added).

The discourse of Nehruvian liberal secularism dominated the Constituent Assembly, which delegitimised the articulation of the interests of lower castes. Vallabhbhai Patel asked the Scheduled Castes, “*forget what you did...* to forget that they are untouchables” (quoted in Bhargava, 2014, p. 252). The modern secular discourse used the language of liberal individualism and citizenship to emphasise that identities like caste no longer matter. The invocation of such terms criminalised any articulation based on caste, masked historical injustices, and merely declared equality among all individuals.

The women members in the Constituent Assembly, all except one of whom were upper castes¹, took pride in not asking for special privileges. Renuka Ray stated that “since the start of the Womens’ Movement in this country, women have been *fundamentally opposed to special privileges and reservations*” (Rajya Sabha Secretariat, 2012, p. 93, emphasis added). Hansa Mehta proudly claimed that “The women’s organisation [All India Women’s Conference] to which I have

¹ There were only fifteen women members in the Constituent Assembly, of whom only one, Dakshayani Velayudhan, belonged to a Scheduled Caste.

the honour to belong has *never asked for reserved seats, for quotas, or for separate electorates*” (Rajya Sabha Secretariat 2012, p. 67, emphasis added). The “Towards Equality” report, considered a vital text in the women’s movement, acknowledges the role of caste at some places; however, it chooses to categorise women on economic grounds. The report rejected the proposal of reservations for women in legislatures², stating that there is a “*fallacy in the argument for separate representations*” as it would “threaten *national integration*” and women must continue competing with men as equals (Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1974, p. 304, emphasis added). The emphasis on the singular axis of gender and the language of formal equality between men and women led to an invisibilisation of the role of caste.

Hegemonic Modernity and *Hollow Anticasteism*

With its ideals of egalitarianism, the modern sphere offered more hope to the untouchables than the traditional sphere. However, we find that the invocation of abstract identities like citizen and individual by the upper castes in the modern sphere delegitimised any articulation of caste. Partha Chatterjee argues that during the nationalist movement, the nationalist elite divided society into two domains, “material” (outer) and “spiritual” (inner). The material domain consisted “of the economy, of statecraft and of science and technology”, while the spiritual domain consisted “essential’ marks of cultural identity” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 6). He argues that the nationalist elite tried its best to imitate the west in the outer sphere while preserving the sacredness of the inner sphere. This hegemony over the modern sphere served two purposes: *to restrict the benefits of modernity and the modern public sphere to already privileged communities and to keep the traditional sphere untouched*. Any articulation in the language of caste was delegitimised and tagged as “casteist” and divisive. This is the central tension in Dalits’ relation to modernity: while modernity is more emancipatory than tradition, it also imposes abstract and universal categories like citizenship, nation, and the working class, thus erasing the role of caste.

It is interesting to note that Ambedkar used the term “Caste Hindus” for communities which had a place in the varna hierarchy. In the post-independence period, we find a shift in the terminology, with upper castes perceiving themselves as the “general” category, unmarked by any caste identity (Deshpande, 2013). Due to the “official policy of discouragement of caste” by the state, only the caste of “lower” castes would be named and enumerated. The lifeworld of the upper castes constituted the modern public sphere, and thus, they could claim to be modern, secular, and casteless.

² Lotika Sarkar and Vina Mazumdar were the only exceptions who wrote a dissent note (Committee On the Status of Women in India, 1974, p. 355).

The language in the modern sphere delegitimised and stigmatised the “reserved” category of people who were blamed for bringing up the supposedly long-dead concern of caste. One can find an example of this reluctance to bring in the caste question in the Kaka Kalelkar Report as well. In identifying the backward classes, they tried *to avoid caste* but found it difficult to ignore caste” (quoted in Singh and Donald, 2019, p. 38). The strong opposition by the upper castes in opposing the reservations for the Other Backward Classes is another example (Balagopal, 1990). Whenever the “lower” castes raised concerns about caste, “upper” castes would display what could be termed as “upper caste fragility”³, thus denying and erasing the role of caste in the modern world. Therefore, there was no space for articulation possible in their hollow anticasteism which only served the purpose of perpetuating caste. The current opposition to a caste census is part of this hollow rhetoric.

Ambedkarite Discourse: Towards a Radical Anticasteism

Ambedkar recognised that the mainstream discourse deployed different strategies to deny the space for articulating the interests of the depressed classes. Hindus tried to deny the existence of the untouchables so that they don’t have to give them a share of political representation (Ambedkar, 2014d, p. 77). Since the representational share would depend on population, the primary way of denying untouchables’ separate representation was to oppose the caste census. Ambedkar bluntly questioned the logic behind not counting caste:

The Census which is the only source of information on these points fails to help me. The last Census omits altogether the caste tables which had been the feature of the Indian Census ever since its birth. The Home Minister who is responsible for this omission was of the opinion that if a word does not exist in a dictionary, it can be proved that the fact for which the word stands does not exist. One can only pity the petty intelligence of the author. (Ambedkar, 2014a, p. 167, emphasis added)

The naïve erasure of caste in the hegemonic discourses of the upper caste does not challenge the fundamental divisions created by caste and instead perpetuates inequalities. Ambedkar was aware of the danger of caste Hindus dominating the modern sphere. He negotiated with modernity by constantly bringing up the perspective of the ex-untouchables to challenge the language of the modern sphere. His discourse was neither derivative (from the west) nor “desi” (drawing from Indian tradition), but went “beyond” both (Guru, 2011, p. 36). He was responding to both the

³ The term ‘upper caste fragility’ is borrowed and derived from Robin DiAngelo’s (2011, p. 54) conception of “white fragility”, which she states “is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.”.

colonial power and the Hindu social order based on caste and attempted to reimagine modernity as a space committed to actively achieving substantive equality rather than merely declaring formal equality⁴. To enable the depressed classes to exercise equal rights - social boycott or threatening with social boycott must be declared as an offence, and there must be “protection against discrimination” and provisions for adequate representation. In *States and Minorities*, Ambedkar argues that apart from fundamental rights, there must be provisions for protecting minorities and safeguards for the Scheduled Castes (SC) in the constitution. These safeguards included the right of representation in the legislature (in the form of separate electorates), executive services and responsibility on the state to pay for the education of SCs and giving them land, among other things.

According to Ambedkar, the caste system prevented communication and endosmosis between people of different castes. Responding to criticisms that representative measures would be divisive, he argued that “their chief effect will be to *bring together men from diverse castes...* (they) will be thrown into *an associated life*” (Ambedkar, 2014a, p. 266, emphasis added). By bringing several castes and groups into contact, communal representation would enable the re-socialisation of attitudes towards other groups and move towards a fair distribution of power and resources, which are necessary steps to practice radical anticasteism. Only such a re-socialisation would eventually lead to the vanishing of caste and actively move towards the goal of equality. Measures of representation and redistribution are, therefore, devices to remove divisions from society.

Ambedkarite discourse shows the path to a *radical anticasteism*. It is *radical* as it addresses the chief effects of casteism: the lack of communication and endosmosis and unequal and unfair distribution of power and resources among members of different castes. It seeks to annihilate the effect of caste and not simply erase it. The caste census is the first logical step towards this goal⁵.

Conclusions

The caste census is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for practicing anticasteism. Conducting the caste census will shift the gaze away from Dalits, and lead to the recognition of the problem of caste, a problem of the whole society. Only when we understand the effect of caste comprehensively across society, can we practice anticasteism. The data from the caste census will

⁴ The manifesto of Republican Party of India stated its first aim as: “It will treat all Indians not only as being equal before the law but as being entitled to equality and will accordingly *foster equality where it does not exist and uphold it where it is denied*” (Ambedkar, 2014e, p. 156, emphasis added).

⁵ In his book *Who Were the Shudras: How they came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society?* Ambedkar (2014c) laments the lack of caste-based data arguing that “if people have no idea of the magnitude of the problem (of the Shudras) it is because they have *not cared to know what the population of the Shudras is. Unfortunately, the Census does not show their population separately*” (p. 9, emphasis added).

serve several purposes. First, it will promote a data-backed debate on reservation policy. Lack of data leads to rhetorical and unverifiable claims and counterclaims⁶. It is crucial to mention some of the long-term demands— expansion of the enumeration to cover all castes, counting of Dalit Christians (Louis, 2007), Dalit Muslims (Ahmad, 2003; Roy, 2021), and atheist or agnostic Dalits as Scheduled Castes, and counting and releasing caste level data instead of monolithic categories of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes. Second, it will be a rich source of data to base a “socially embedded” understanding of the economy (Granovetter, 1985). Historically, “Indian Caste Feudalism” was a mode of production where the surplus was extracted from the *shudras*, *atishudras* and women to the *dwijs* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya) in the form of *dana*, *dakshina*, taxes, usury, control over goods and labour, and unpaid/underpaid productive, reproductive, and sexual labour (Patankar and Omvedt, 2017). Therefore, it is vital to recognise the continued role of caste in the economy, as it will enable us to understand the impact of caste in distributing resources like land and other means of production and in accessing nutrition, healthcare, education, and state support. The census of India 2021 has listed 31 items to collect information, which includes dimensions about housing condition and ownership, source of drinking water and lighting, access to latrines, Liquid Petroleum Gas connection, internet, radio, laptops/computers, the type of vehicle owned, type of food consumed, among other things (Office of Registrar General, 2020). Using programming languages like Structured Query Language, which helps in data management and Python, which facilitates analysis of large sets of data, we can produce a goldmine of useful information to measure the impact of caste in accessing these resources. Third, this information will help frame socially informed economic and public policy. Since the lens of poverty and class was used in formulating economic policies, caste discourse was limited only to the policy of reservation. It is essential to measure the impact of caste across different domains and thereby use the lens of caste while formulating socially informed economy and social policies. There must be provisions in the welfare schemes to address the specific concerns coming from caste. Apart from the universalisation of welfare schemes, there is a need to incorporate differential access to correct the disparity.

Counting caste is essential for accounting for the past. The census is a thing of different times; it assesses the past in the present to make way for the future. There is no way to practice anticasteism in the present without accounting for the past through an anticaste perspective.

⁶ Whether it is the proponents of reservation as it is functioning currently, or those claiming that a few castes have usurped reservation, those seeking a sub-categorisation, those claiming economic criteria should be used, or even those claiming that reservation should be removed altogether— from each of these perspectives, it is impossible to take a position against the caste census without being inconsistent. All of them must seek a caste census if they are committed to anticasteism.

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