

Divide and Rue

Counting on Caste in Census

By M N SRINIVAS

THE enumeration of castes and tribes in the decennial census is not a mere numerical exercise for it affects the nature and functioning of the enumerated groups.

British administrators learnt this truth the hard way after conducting the first three or four censuses. They also learnt to use the census, along with other measures, to keep Indians divided. For instance, the Scheduled Castes were listed separately from the other Hindu castes, while the existence of caste distinctions among Muslims and Christians did not find mention. As the nationalist movement gained strength, its leaders opposed the census enumeration of castes on the ground that it was divisive.

First Census

In the first census conducted in independent India, Sardar Patel took a policy decision to drop the enumeration of castes except for the SCs and STs as data regarding their numbers was essential for ensuring their representation in legislatures and Parliament.

But caste had also been omitted in the wartime census of 1941 for reasons of economy, and because the British census commissioner was confronted with innumerable petitions requesting changes in caste name and rank.

As far back as 1867-1871, when the first census operations were conducted in India, two peasant castes of Madras Presidency wanted to be classified as high castes, one as Kshatriya and the other as Vaishya. The tendency to claim Kshatriya or Vaishya status by low status groups increased significantly in 1881 and 1891 censuses. Sir Herbert Risley, author of the well known book, *The People of India* and commissioner of the 1901 census, took a decision to determine, through the census operations, the precise rank of each *jati* in the local hierarchy, and its correct *varna* affiliation. His idea was the result of a colossal misunderstanding of the nature of caste, of confusing *varna* with *jati*, and ignorance of the dynamism inherent in the *jati* system. *Jati* ranking, unlike *varna*, is a fuzzy affair, especially in the middle ranges where disputation regarding mutual rank is the rule and not the exception. Such ambiguity is the essence of the system, for it favours mobility. And historically speaking, the ranks of Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and more rarely, even Brahmins, have been occupied by upwardly

mobile low status groups. It was British rule and the imposition of Pax Britannica that froze that kind of ability.

One gets an idea of the widespread discontent which Risley's efforts caused in the following extract from the report of LSS O'Malley, census commissioner of Bengal and Orissa in 1911: "... Hundreds of petitions were received from different castes requesting that they ought to be known by a new name, be placed higher up in the order of precedence, be registered as Kshatriya and Vaishya, etc. Many castes were aggrieved at the positions assigned to them, and complained that it lowered them in public estimation." Risley's efforts also encouraged, over a period of time, the formation of caste *sabhas* which, in turn, became extremely active in petitioning census authorities for assigning their castes a higher status, than that conceived by local opinion. Caste *sabhas* also became agencies for reform, of caste custom and ritual which occasionally led to clashes with higher and dominant castes. The point which I wish to stress is that Risley's efforts to determine the rank of each *jati* had exactly the opposite effect, and led to considerable unrest among the people.

Strident Demands

Since the reservation of seats in educational institutions and jobs in the government started in the 1920s in parts of South India, cognate sub-castes found it advantageous to form alliances if not mergers, in order to increase their political clout, and secure a greater share of such scarce resources as education and employment. The size and scope of "reservation" has risen substantially since 1901. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, constituting 18 and five per cent respectively of the population, are entitled to not only reservation in education and employment, but reservation in all legislatures, state assemblies and Parliament. Reservation for the backward classes is restricted to education and employment, though it is as high as 70 per cent in Karnataka and 69 per cent in Tamil Nadu.

Since August 1990, the OBCs are entitled to reservation of 27 per cent jobs in the central and state governments, following the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations. The Commission listed 3,743 *jatis* as backward among Hindus, and referred to the existence of backward castes

among Muslims. And as everyone knows, in recent years, Dalits Christians have been demanding that they be treated on par with SCs among Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. Once the census commission starts its activities in earnest, all demands for classification as OBC, SC and ST are going to become strident.

Other Complication

Groups which are today an integral part of a single backward caste may claim to be distinct in the hope that its claims might get better attention. For there is a widespread feeling among backward classes that the more influential and powerful sections and families are siphoning off the benefits at the cost of the poorer and weaker groups. Not many people are aware that there exists a division of castes into right-hand and left-hand — a division that runs through the hierarchy — in large parts of South India and many groups belonging to the left-hand division think that they are not getting their share of the benefits. A fresh census enumeration might result in their demanding a separate listing which will have political repercussions.

Another complication is that there are many groups all over the country which think that they have been unjustly denied OBC, SC or ST status. They will seize the census as an opportunity for redressal and will exert tremendous pressure on political parties to push their demands through. Counting heads in each caste will also pose problems to the hapless enumerators. There are likely to be complaints that the census figures have underestimated the numerical strength of the caste or other groups, a situation which may lead to litigation. Last but not the least are the middle classes. Not only have their numbers increased significantly during the last two decades, but they are also far more vocal and demanding. They will have visceral objections to the enumeration of castes in the census.

Even more important, educated youth all over the country, hailing largely from the middle classes, will stage protests, burn effigies and even immolate themselves. What happened in the months following August 1990, might seem utterly insignificant compared to the scale of the disturbances which are likely to materialise.