

Caste census: Will Bihar storm take a giant leap?



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There is a natural connection between Bihar and reservation for the oppressed. B. P. Mandal, who had made recommendations on reservation for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) at the national level, belonged to Bihar and was the seventh Chief Minister of that state (1968).

Earlier, when Daroga Prasad Rai was Bihar's CM, he set up the Mungerilal Commission in 1971 to introduce reservation for the backward classes. The Commission's recommendations, however, were implemented only in 1977 during the tenure of the Janata Party CM Karpoori Thakur. The Mungerilal Commission's report paved the way for setting up the Mandal Commission in 1979. The implementation of the Mandal Commission report by the VP Singh

government at the Centre in 1990 and the support and opposition that the move triggered then were all important milestones in the Indian socio-political history.

Today the OBC politics has begun from Bihar. The report of the caste survey undertaken by the Nitish Kumar-led government in Bihar has fuelled a great storm across the national politics.

The path trodden

The intention of those insisting on the caste census is to ensure that all sections of the society get representation in jobs and education in proportion to their population. Since 1951, only the datasets on the Scheduled Castes/Tribes have been collected as part of the general census. The datasets on the other backward communities have not figured in the count.

In 2011, castewise statistics were collated in the socio-economic caste census (SECC) undertaken by the Union Department of Urban Development. But the survey report, mired in various obstacles, got a final shape only in 2013. But complete caste data and details were not released. The BJP government, which took office later, had not bothered to complete the task. The Modi-led BJP government has announced it as a policy decision not to conduct a survey on the other backward communities. But ironically it was the same BJP, which made a vociferous demand when it was in the opposition camp to conduct a caste-wise survey.

The 2021 population census was put on hold for various reasons including the corona pandemic. Meanwhile, Nitish Kumar met Modi and requested him to conduct a caste census. Consequently, an announcement was made in Bihar on June 6, 2022 that a caste-

wise survey would be conducted. However, a case was filed in the Supreme Court, which demanded that only the union government should conduct the census. Therefore, Bihar's attempt at caste survey was stalled. All the same, overcoming the legal wrangling, the Bihar government has completed the exercise and come up with a report.

Political ploy

According to the report, in Bihar the MBCs constitute 36 per cent, the OBCs 27.13 per cent, the SCs 19.65 per cent, STs 1.68 per cent and the forward communities 15.52 per cent.

The opposition front I.N.D.I.A has started using these data as its major political ploy ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections and the five state Assembly elections. "After we form our government in 2024, a nationwide caste census will be conducted," said the leaders including Lalu Prasad Yadav. Rahul Gandhi has been insisting that rights and privileges be granted according to the population.

There has long been a criticism around that the Congress has never bothered about the oppressed sections of the society. Back in 1980 the Congress did not show any inclination nor any interest to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations. It did take the Mandal report 10 years to be implemented, that too, only by the V. P. Singh government in the wake of serious efforts made by IAS officer P.S. Krishnan and political leader Ram Vilas Paswan. When V. P. Singh, the then Prime Minister, announced in Parliament to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations, the then Congress leader Rajiv Gandhi opposed the move. Now his son Rahul Gandhi has seriously been carrying on the OBC politics, reflecting a great change of times and values.

Shifting scenarios

After the Mandal Commission recommendations were implemented, parties such as the Janata Dal United , Rashtriya Janata Dal and so on, led by the OBC leaders got a shot in the arm and became a force to reckon with. And then the Congress' influence started sliding. Thereafter, the BJP, which has a major vote bank only in the forward communities, started implementing its own strategies through Ram Temple issue and rath yatras. The slogans – 'Mandal vs Kamandal' and 'Mandal vs Mandir (temple) – reverberated as popular cries at that time. In the subsequent years, the OBCs' support to the saffron party has recorded an uptick.

Now it is quite obvious that after the Bihar government's caste survey report was out, the BJP has been caught off balance, reacting to the development in various ways. The party claims that it was very much part of the Bihar government in an alliance when the census was launched. In the same breath, it poses a question why the datasets related economic status have not been released. Modi is accusing the Congress of dividing the people on the caste lines. In fact, the Prime Minister who has the tag of the OBC PM is a great asset to the BJP. The party takes pride in the fact that it has a majority of the oppressed sections as its MPs, MLAs and Members of Upper House.

Challenges for BJP

The Congress-led Karnataka government conducted a similar census way back in 2015. Yet the results have yet to be released till date. That is why the BJP asks if Karnataka is one thing and Bihar another to the Congress.

However, there is a great challenge for the BJP. Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, who usually takes a pro-BJP stance, has now taken an anti-BJP stand on the issue of caste census. The report of the caste census conducted by the Odisha government is set to come out soon. Mayawati has demanded a caste survey in Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, some parties in the BJP alliance such as Apna Dal (Soneylal) have started echoing the same demand.

The BJP has, in fact, succeeded in mobilising all castes under the banner of Hindus. It has well been using its strategies, projecting development and welfare along with its Hindutva ideology. Yet in a major challenge to the BJP's prospects, the I.N.D.I.A front has taken up a potent and powerful weapon in the form of caste census. What will be the outcomes? To know the answer, we have to wait. But the wait need not last till the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Translated by V. Mariappan