

# **Political Impact Of Caste Survey And Obc Sub-Categorisation In The Context Of Mandal-Kamandal Politics**

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## **Introduction**

Caste is a fundamental social institution by which the Indian social structure is identified. Several scholars have attempted to define the caste system in India, outlining its major features and characteristics and highlighting how it shapes the social order and influences the power structure in society. However, despite being subjected to myriad interpretations and definitions, the complexity of this phenomenon has made the study of caste one of the most controversial fields of Indian studies, giving rise to disputes and conflictual perceptions regarding the changing nature and significance of caste in the last 75 years. The caste system, whether considered antithetical to democracy or a crucial factor in the advancement of democracy, undeniably remains a salient feature of Indian society, and the interface between caste and politics is imperative to have a comprehensive understanding of the changing contours of Indian politics.

Caste has been viewed as a divisive force in society, which arranges hereditary groups in a hierarchy, making those at the bottom of the hierarchical structure vulnerable to exploitation and oppression by those at the top. To address this issue, the Indian State, after independence, provided 15% reservation to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), who were formerly known as untouchables. This act of positive discrimination was followed by demands for reservation raised by the leaders of the Shudras, and reservation for the people belonging to the Other Backward Classes recommended by the Kaka Kalelkar Commission in 1953 was reiterated by the Mandal Commission in 1978. It provided a new dimension to caste politics, with caste-based political parties gaining ground and emerging as a significant force in Indian politics, especially at the regional or state level. The implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission under the government led by V.P. Singh in 1990 marked the beginning of Mandal Politics centered around caste-based reservation.

The purpose behind caste-based reservation was to correct the historical injustice faced by the backward castes in the country by ensuring their advancement and adequate representation, thereby weakening the influence of the caste system in Indian society. However, the reality today is that caste identities have not vanished; they have hardened, and Indian politics has become more casteist in the past few decades. Caste-based appeals made by political parties are particularly evident during the elections, whether at the state or the national level. With the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections approaching, the political parties that comprise the Opposition have again resorted to Mandal Politics to forge an ideological unity among the political parties, consolidate their vote banks, as evident in their demands for a caste-based consensus, and defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party, countering its politics of Hindutva or what is termed as the Kamandal Politics.

## **Caste Survey**

A census is an official survey of a country's population carried out at regular intervals for acquiring, recording, and calculating information about the population. The Indian Census is one of the most extensive administrative exercises in the world and provides statistical information on different characteristics of people in India. Conducted every ten years, the census is considered an effective tool for proper administration, planning, and policy-making, which are crucial for good governance and understanding and studying India. However, India is a complex society, with caste being an essential factor in determining the identities of people living across the country, and any study of Indian society without taking the caste factor into account will be deeply flawed. However, no credible or comprehensive caste data about the Indian population is available. This has given rise to the demand for a caste-based census that provides a caste-wise tabulation of the Indian population, classifying them according to their caste, which has garnered both support and resistance from within society.

## **Background**

The history of the census in India dates back to 1881 when the British Colonial Administration conducted it; however, the first caste-based census was conducted in 1931. Unlike the earlier census survey conducted by the colonial administration, the 1931 census took the caste factor into account and provided a caste-wise tabulation of India's population. According to this Census survey, the Brahmins represented 6.4% of the entire population, the Rajputs (the principal caste of warriors) 3.7%, and the Banyas (mainly merchants composing the third order) 2.7%. Shudras, forming the rest of society, were bound to represent the majority in society. The data collected before independence became the basis for the reservation quota for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) as recommended by the Mandal Commission and for the welfare programs that targeted the upliftment of these sections of society. The demand for a caste survey has been raised in every decennial census conducted by the government of India since 1951. This demand for a caste survey has been one of the recurring demands in the political discourse; however, it was only in 2011 that, under the Congress-led UPA government, the first Socio-economic Caste Census (SECC) was conducted after long debates and political battles. The primary argument supporting the caste census was that it would allow the government to re-evaluate which caste groups are economically worse off and better off, thereby framing policies accordingly and replacing the 90-year-old data set. However, the reports from the SECC have been published, except for the caste data, and the demand is being raised, especially by the opposition parties, to make the caste data public. Uncertainty surrounds whether the release of the caste census data will help achieve the goal of a caste-free society. However, the political battle over it will undoubtedly dominate Indian political

discourse and hugely impact the strategies of the various political parties in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha Elections.

## Significance

Caste is an inevitable reality of Indian society, and its salience has increased over the years. Though the rigidity of the caste system regarding the ritual hierarchy and the laws of commensality or marriage has witnessed a decline, the role of caste in politics has surged in the past few decades. The recommendations of the Mandal Commission for the reservation of OBCs and demands made by leaders such as Shri Kanshi Ram, evident in the slogans raised by him, "Jiski Jitni Sankhya Bhari Uski Utni Hissedari," provided a new shape to Indian politics. The demands for a caste census thus have a long history. It has been supported on the grounds that the regular conduct of caste censuses is crucial for understanding the complex societal structure. **Firstly**, it is argued that a caste census will provide the necessary information for understanding the distribution and demographic profile of the different caste groups by enumerating the number of people who are deprived or marginalized or the kinds of occupations they are engaged in. This data will allow policymakers to develop, plan, and implement development schemes and welfare programmes targeted toward disadvantaged groups that need state assistance and affirmative action. It will also prove instrumental in assessing the effectiveness of reservation policies by revealing the gap between economic and social capital acquisition within and between the general category and the reserved. **Secondly**, the caste census would also ensure that the privileged sections of the upper caste lose the advantage of anonymity, acknowledging the presence and impact of the systemic deprivation that the caste structure has inflicted upon the citizens, particularly evident in wealth distribution in India. The share of Upper Caste groups has shown an increase from 39% to 41% in their share of total wealth from 2002 to 2012. Relative to their population share, this group improved the gap from +14% to +18% in the said 10 years, while for the OBCs, the gap relative to their population share has worsened due to their considerable increase in population<sup>1</sup>. **Thirdly**, caste-based census data can help address the issue of social justice and inequality by identifying groups that have historically faced discrimination and exclusion. It is also in conformity with Article 340 of the Indian Constitution, which mandates the appointment of a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes and make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by governments. **Fourthly**, the caste-based census will also be instrumental in debunking the myths about caste elitism by providing accurate data about which castes are numerous in particular regions. **Finally**, it would also provide researchers with the

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<sup>1</sup> Caste Census: A Bid To Ensure Social Justice To The Other Backward Communities

<https://www.outlookindia.com/national/caste-census-a-bid-to-ensure-social-justice-to-the-other-backward-communities-news-284460>

opportunity to gather information and study the social, political, and economic aspects of India that are influenced heavily by the caste system.

The caste-based census would ensure that everybody's caste is counted. Several political parties have strongly backed the caste survey with the justifications given above. While the above arguments have some substance, the objective behind the caste census is certainly not devoid of political connotations. The recent clamour around the caste census will generate its political implications, with political battles and debates around issues of quota and reservation coming to the fore and occupying center stage in the upcoming 2024 General Elections.

## Debates

The demands for a caste census are not something new; as the records of questions and debates raised in Parliament reveal, this demand has come up almost before every census. The demand usually comes from among those belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBC) and other deprived sections, while sections from the upper castes oppose the idea. The primary argument of those who oppose the caste survey is that it is **against the idea of a casteless society** as envisaged by leaders like Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Constitution and will weaken efforts to create social harmony. The criticism of the caste census is based on the idea that it has the potential to turn one caste against the other, resulting in polarization and conflict between different caste groups. The debate around the caste census also revolves around concerns regarding the **privacy of individuals** and their right not to disclose their caste identity. Besides, the **misuse or manipulation of caste data** by the political parties for their political gains is highly likely, and this could ultimately lead to further entrenchment of caste divisions in society. Finally, there are **methodological issues** concerning the conduct of the caste census, giving rise to specific vexed questions such as those related to the status of the migrant from one State to another and the children of inter-caste marriage in terms of caste classification, etc. These questions and concerns pertinent to the caste census have sparked debates, which is why the task of the caste-based census has remained unfinished to date.

Amidst the debates around the caste-based census, the Congress-led UPA Government decided to go for a full-fledged Socio-Economic Caste Census. With an approved cost of Rs 4,893.60 crores, the SECC was conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development in rural areas and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation in urban areas under the administrative control of the Ministry of Home Affairs: Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India. The SECC data, excluding caste data, was finalized and published by the two ministries in 2016<sup>2</sup>, but the only

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<sup>2</sup> Explained the Caste Census debate and Government stand over the years  
<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-the-caste-census-debate-7422053/>

information provided about the caste census was that there were around 46,00,000 castes, sub-castes, and gotras. Since then, the demand for publishing caste data has become a point of contention, and this debate took an intense form when the Central Government, in 2021, declared that it was a matter of policy not to enumerate caste-wise populations other than SCs and STs in Census 2021, which has been postponed to 2024 because of COVID-19. The Government has cited numerous administrative, operational, and logistical reasons to argue that collecting caste data during the 2021 census would be unfeasible. This decision by the government caught heavy flak from OBC leaders who supported SECC, such as Shri Lalu Prasad, Shri Mulayam Singh Yadav, and Shri Nitish Kumar. The Maharashtra Assembly also passed a resolution urging the Centre to hold a caste-based Census in 2021 and asked the SC to direct the Central government to release the SECC data. The petition was rejected on the grounds that the data was "inaccurate and unreliable." Even the National Commission for Backward Classes asked the government to conduct a caste census to enumerate the OBCs along with the 2021 census exercise. However, the government, which previously agreed to conduct a caste census in 2018, has refused to do the same in 2021. This demand for a caste census received a further push when the Shri Nitish Kumar Government launched a caste census in Bihar in January 2023, and the Congress also raised the demand for the same. With Shri Rahul Gandhi demanding the government make the 2011 SECC data public and remove the 50% cap on reservations in his campaigns during the Karnataka Assembly Elections and the party president Shri Mallikarjun Kharge writing a letter to the Prime Minister demanding the caste census be done immediately, the caste debate has acquired a new impetus.

The journey of the caste census in India has been a complicated one, and to date, it remains an unfinished task with several issues and questions regarding the caste census remaining unresolved and unanswered. While the Opposition parties are on the same page regarding the caste census, the central government, in its submission to the Supreme Court in the same year, opposed it in clear terms. With the issue of the caste survey emerging as the poll platform of the opposition parties, it is certain that the caste survey in Bihar will no longer be a Bihar-centric issue but will have profound national implications.

## **Politics Around Caste Census**

While several political parties have been pushing for the caste census, the rationale given behind the caste census is that it will facilitate better policy framing and implementation and ensure social justice by uplifting the social and economic conditions of the backward classes in Indian society. But the politics of social justice and the political undertones to this demand for the caste census are

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becoming increasingly apparent. Social justice in India is closely related to the ideas of caste and reservation, and the politics of social justice mainly revolve around these two issues. Reservation has always been a contentious issue, and this was evident in the Karnataka Assembly Elections, where the leaders of the Congress party staunchly advocated the removal of the 50% cap on reservation for backward classes, promising to increase the reservation to 75% in their manifesto. On the other hand, the BJP leaders, claiming reservation on the sole basis of religion for Muslims as unconstitutional, scrapped the 4% quota for Muslims in the 2B category of the 'Other Backward Castes' and granted benefits of increased quota to the politically dominant communities, i.e., Vokkaligas and Lingayats, in admissions and appointments to government jobs. This decision, which was taken on March 27, a few months before the State Assembly Elections, was remarked upon by the Supreme Court as being based on fallacious assumptions and having a shaky foundation. The hike in the reservation was a major poll plank for the BJP and crucial for the party to retain its vote share among Lingayats and increase it in the case of the Vokkaligas. It was also hoping to consolidate the votes of Panchamasalis, a major sub-caste among the Lingayats that was demanding 15% reservation. Panchamasalis called off their 32-month struggle for reservation under the 2A category after the Basavaraj Bommai cabinet accorded the community a 7% quota under the new 2D category. Before this, Lingayats had a 5% quota in education and jobs. The judgment of the Supreme Court was a huge setback for the BJP, as reflected in the results of the Karnataka elections. This particular instance in Karnataka reveals how crucial reservation is for the political parties to secure their vote bank and consolidate their support base. If a caste census is conducted, then the data collected from such an exercise would be used by the political parties to provide benefits in the form of freebies and reservations for one section of the backward communities and also lead to a spurt in the demand for reservations, thereby creating conflicts among these communities and disrupting social harmony.

The caste census is being supported because it will provide much-needed data for implementing just and rational policies (especially reservation) for the welfare and development of the backward classes, while the opponents argue that it will harden caste identities, creating further social divisions. While the arguments on both sides have some merit, the efficiency of the caste census, if it is undertaken, would depend on how the political parties use the information gathered.

## **OBC Sub-Categorisation**

Sub-categorizing OBCs, as the name suggests, refers to the creation of sub-categories within the larger group of OBCs for reservation. The OBCs receive 27% reservations in central government jobs and educational institutions, as recommended in the report prepared by the Mandal Commission. However, the debates around the OBC reservation are mainly centered around the perception that only a few well-off communities or the dominant caste groups among them benefit

from the quota. The demand for OBC sub-categorization based on their numerical strength within the larger caste grouping has been cropping up during elections since 2002, only to subside post-polls. With Lok Sabha elections around the corner, this debate has again sprung up in conjunction with the issue of the caste census. Several scholars and leaders of political parties have argued in favour of OBC sub-categorization based on data collected from the caste census.

OBC reservation has always been a sensitive issue in the history of Indian politics and has been a matter of contentious debate. It was in the context of reservation for the OBCs that the term "**creamy layer**" was used for the first time by the Supreme Court in the judgement of **Indira Sawhney v. Union of India** (AIR 1993 SC 477), also known as the Mandal Commission case. This term refers to "some members of a backward class who are socially, economically, and educationally advanced as compared to the rest of the members of that community. They constitute the forward section of that particular backward class and eat up all the benefits of reservations meant for that class without allowing benefits to reach the truly backward members". The Apex Court also asked the central government to fix the criteria for the identification of the creamy layer. In 1993, the government set the ceiling limit for the creamy layer at 1 lakh. It subsequently increased to 2.5 lakhs in 2004, 4.5 lakhs in 2008, 6 lakhs in 2013, and 8 lakhs in 2017. In simple terms, the concept of the creamy layer emphasized the fact that reservation must ensure that its benefit reaches the most disadvantaged sections, excluding advanced sections among the OBCs. These developments further affirmed the perception that few affluent groups within the OBCs have cornered the benefits of reservation; therefore, raising the argument that "quotas within the 27% quota" are imperative for ensuring equitable distribution of the benefits of reservation. While certain states like Bihar have experimented with OBC sub-categorization and provided reservation for extremely backward classes (EBCs) within the OBC reservation, to examine this question of the inequitable distribution of benefits of reservation, the government constituted the Rohini Commission on October 2, 2017.

## **Justice Rohini Commission**

The Justice Rohini Commission was appointed under Article 340 of the Indian Constitution, which states that "The President may by order appoint a Commission comprising of such persons that he thinks fit to investigate the conditions and background of socially and educationally backward classes that lie within the territory of India." This 5-member commission headed by the former Chief Justice of Delhi, Justice G. Rohini, was constituted in 2017 to examine the issue of sub-categorizing the 2633 caste groups enlisted in the Central List of OBCs. The terms of reference of the Rohini Commission when it was originally set up, were the following:

- To examine the extent of the inequitable distribution of benefits of reservation among the castes or communities included in the broad category of OBCs with reference to such classes included in the Central List.
- To work out the mechanisms, criteria, norms, and parameters in a scientific approach for sub-categorization within such OBCs.
- To take up the exercise of identifying the respective castes or communities or sub-castes or synonyms in the Central List of OBCs and classifying them into their respective sub-categories.

After the Commission wrote to the government in July 2019 that it had noted several ambiguities in the list and is of the opinion that these have to be clarified/ rectified before the sub-categorized central list is prepared, a fourth term of reference was added on January 22, 2020.

- To study the various entries in the Central List of OBCs and recommend correction of any repetitions, ambiguities, inconsistencies, and errors of spelling or transcription.

In 2018, the Commission analyzed the data on 1.3 lakh central jobs and admission to higher educational institutions under the OBC quota over the preceding five years and three years, respectively, revealing that 97% of the benefits of reservation went to 25% of OBC castes. 24.95% of these jobs and seats went to just 10 OBC communities. It also said that 983 OBC communities, one-third of the total, had almost zero representation in jobs and admissions in educational institutions, and 994 OBC sub-castes had a total representation of only 2.68% in recruitment and admissions.

Then in February 2021, the commission proposed to divide the 27% reservation for the castes on the central list into four sub-categories. The first category included around 1674 castes who have not benefited from the reservation and will have a 2% share; the second category, which included 534 castes, will have a 6% share; the third category, which has 329 castes, will have a 9% share; and the fourth category, which comprises 97 castes that are considered dominant and have a large population, will have a 10% share. According to the commission, splitting up the OBC quota reservation would allow equity in the quota regime, ensuring that other groups would also be guaranteed a share.

The Rohini Commission initially asked to submit the report in 12 weeks, submitted its report on July 31, 2023, to the President of India, Smt. Droupadi Murmu, after having received 14 extensions in the last six years. Though the recommendations of the Commission have not been revealed, its report concluded that a small number of caste groups among all OBC groups were dominating reservation and other government benefits. Undoubtedly, the findings of the Rohini

Commission will have significant political and social ramifications. This data would reveal the changes, if there are any, in the socio-economic status of the OBCs who have availed themselves of the benefits of reservation since its inception. Besides, this report would aggravate the demand for a caste census. Several experts have already stated that OBC sub-categorization can be meaningful only when a new caste census is conducted, providing updated population data. Lastly, the Commission's report will definitely impact the electoral arithmetic of the political parties, especially in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and other states that have their own sub-categorization and where the castes that have been enjoying the maximum benefits of reservation are also politically dominant. The Report of the Commission has been submitted at a time when the General Elections are just a few months away, and the opposition parties have been emphasizing the caste census to project themselves as a united strong opposition against the BJP. This indicates that the politics around social justice in India will face new challenges, and the events that will follow will impact the political discourse of India immensely.

### **Mandal- Kamandal Politics**

The late 1980s and the decade of the 1990s were of extreme significance for India. It was a period of remarkable economic and political change. On the one hand, resentment against the Congress Party was increasing, as evident in the National Front government assuming power at the center under the leadership of Shri V. P. Singh, and, on the other hand, several regional parties were gaining a strong foothold in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar by focusing on caste-based mobilization. This decade witnessed not only huge economic reforms being undertaken but also caste polarization, where the antagonism against the upper castes was used as a vehicle of political mobilization. This politics of caste mobilization, which followed the implementation of 27 percent reservation for OBCs in government jobs as recommended by the Mandal Commission, is known as Mandal politics (named after B. P. Mandal). Mandal politics emerged at a time when Hindu nationalism was also gaining prominence. The Ayodhya Ram Mandir issue and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 proved beneficial for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to consolidate its support base and expand its influence. The term Kamandal, a water pot often used by spiritual leaders and saints, was used as a metaphor for Hindutva politics, which acted as an opposing force, manoeuvring against Mandal politics, which aimed at mobilizing the socially and economically backward classes. In simple terms, Mandal-Kamandal politics refers to the political tussle between those who supported reservation for backward classes and those who opposed it by focusing on the issue of the Ram Temple. It brought a significant change in the contours of electoral politics in India, and is crucial for understanding contemporary political transformations and dynamics.

## **Background**

The beginning of Mandal Politics can be traced back to the 1980s, when the backward classes emerged as a potent force in electoral politics, aiming to secure a greater share of political and economic power through reservation in the public sector. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar became the epicenter of such movements, with leaders like Kanshi Ram, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Karpuri Thakur, and Lalu Prasad becoming the prominent faces and voices of the backward classes. Mandal politics was successful in achieving its objectives, as 27% reservation was provided to the OBCs in government jobs. However, this decision of the V.P. Singh's government triggered massive protests from the upper castes of Hindus. Incidents of protesters immolating themselves in demand for a rollback of the reservation policies were also recorded, and it seemed that these incidents created discord between the upper castes and the lower castes, creating a deep division between them. Capitalizing on the resentment among the upper caste Hindus, the BJP, under the leadership of Shri Lal Krishna Advani, started a Rath Yatra to build a Ram Temple in Ayodhya. This strategy of the BJP for countering Mandal politics, known as Kamanadal politics, contributed to its rise to political eminence. Mandal-Kamandal politics resulted in regional caste-based parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Janata Dal (JD) in Bihar consolidating power. While these political parties surged, Congress was faring poorly in these states, both electorally and organizationally. The fate of national parties often plays out in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and Mandal-Kamandal politics gained centrality in these two states, which led to the decline of the Congress not only in these states but also weakened its position at the national level. The weakening position of Congress and the ascendancy of the BJP ultimately reflected in the Lok Sabha Elections, where the BJP was able to form a government at the center, with Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee becoming the first non-Congress Prime Minister to complete a full five-year term. However, the BJP was defeated in the 2004 Lok Sabha Elections when the political parties that emerged from Mandal politics came together, entering into an alliance with Congress under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The 2004 elections revealed the strength and persistence of Mandal politics both at the state and national levels. After assuming power, the UPA-led government also implemented the second recommendation of the Mandal Commission, i.e., providing OBCs with 27% reservation in educational institutions. With this, the UPA succeeded in keeping the BJP out of power in the 2009 general elections.

The period from the late 1980s to the 2000s demonstrated how Mandal politics has shifted the political discourse towards a universal acceptance of OBC reservations. Realizing the need to expand its social base, the BJP decided to counter the caste-oriented social justice narrative of the opposition parties by bringing together the disparate social groups under the umbrella of Hindu

nationalism and uniting the voters across caste lines by emphasizing the Hindu identity of the backward castes. This ultimately benefited the BJP in emerging victorious in Uttar Pradesh in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the 2017 and 2022 State Assembly Elections. The BJP has not only incorporated leaders from backward communities at the state level but today, even the BJP Prime Minister is openly projected as an OBC leader. While the last few years have witnessed Mandal or caste-based identity politics being superseded by religious nationalism, the caste factor remains. It has certainly highlighted the problems of a single-minded focus on caste-based empowerment and representation, but with the current events taking place and the issue of the Bihar caste survey gaining nationwide attention as well as the support of the opposition parties, it seems that Mandal politics is gaining salience in the political discourse and will be used by the alliance of the opposition parties as a countermeasure to the BJP's Hindutva politics.

## **Revival of the Mandal Politics**

The comeback of the BJP in 2014, which followed its attainment of an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha and its victory in the Uttar Pradesh State Assembly Elections, was repeated in the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections as well as in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh State Assembly Elections. With the BJP becoming the first political party to achieve an absolute majority and forming government in Uttar Pradesh twice in a row, several experts were of the opinion that the political project centered around Mandir or Hindutva ideology has prevailed over Mandal politics. Kamandal politics and Hindu nationalism seemed to be on the path to achieving their objective of forging a national community that cuts across the divisions of caste, class, and region, while Mandal politics and the political parties associated with it appeared to be fragmented and struggling to regain their political clout, especially in Uttar Pradesh. The victory of the BJP in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh State Assembly Elections was followed by the Janata Dal (United) ending its alliance with the BJP in Bihar and entering into a Grand Alliance with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)-led bloc, which also comprises Congress and Left parties. The simmering tensions between the BJP and JD (U) ultimately resulted in Mahagathbandhan forming the government in Bihar with Nitish Kumar as the Chief Minister. The coming together of the RJD and the JD(U) is being perceived as a revival of the Mandal Politics against the BJP; however, another group of experts believes that the fate of the RJD-JD(U) alliance will be the same as that of the SP-BSP alliance in the 2022 State Assembly elections. Moreover, it was also believed that because of the Bihar-centric image of Nitish Kumar and the BJP's expanding support base among the backward classes over the past few years, it would be difficult for him to project himself as a leader of the OBCs and the Dalits in other states.

The launch of the caste census in Bihar was seen as an attempt to revive Mandal politics. The argument was that a caste census would facilitate better policy decisions for the upliftment of the

disadvantaged groups; however, this issue was used by the opposition parties to target the BJP, especially after it implemented reservation for the economically weaker classes (EWS). The EWS reservation quota was based on the criteria of poverty, and the opposition parties claimed it was a move to deny marginalized castes and communities their rights. This demand received a further push, when the Congress party, while campaigning for the Karnataka Assembly Elections, demanded the Socio-economic Census 2011 report to be revealed. Rahul Gandhi raised the slogan 'Jitni Abaadi, Utna Haq' (proportionate reservation/right). The slogan and the demands of the Congress party were rooted in India's caste politics, and they proved instrumental for Congress in achieving a landslide victory in the Karnataka Assembly Elections. There was a period when Congress struggled to find its position in Mandal-Kamandal politics; however, the strategy adopted by the party in Karnataka reveals that it is trying to mobilize the backward classes and Dalits, intensifying caste-based identity politics to defeat the BJP and its Hindutva Project.

The past few months have witnessed the opposition parties coming together, forming an alliance called Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (I.N.D.I.A), and they have been demanding implementation of the caste census while asserting that they have come together to defeat the "hatred and violence being manufactured against minorities" as well as "rising crimes against women, Dalits, tribals and Kashmiri Pandits." The issue of caste census has provided these 26 political parties an ideological anchor that unites them as an opposition front against the BJP. The support provided to caste census by all the opposition parties while BJP-led NDA opposing it has made the revival of Mandal politics at the national level likely. With the inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya scheduled to be inaugurated in January 2024 and the opposition parties emphasising caste census, it seems that the Mandal-Kamandal politics is going to become electorally salient and play out in a big way in the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections.

### **OBC Politics since 2014**

The electoral success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 General Elections, where it achieved a clear majority in the Lok Sabha, marked the beginning of a shift in OBC politics, where the BJP, known for its urban base and middle-class, upper-caste Hindu orientation, was able to muster considerable votes from the backward caste Hindus and Dalits. While the support of the upper castes for the BJP has remained intact, it has significantly expanded its support base among the OBCs, which is the primary reason that opposition parties, including the Congress Party, are focusing on the revival of Mandal politics to consolidate their support base for the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

A major factor behind the rise of the BJP in 2014 was the popularity of Shri Narendra Modi and his image as a leader, which has been gaining credibility over the years. The projection of Shri Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate before the 2014 elections was a masterstroke that helped the BJP expand its support base among the OBCs. By emphasizing his humble origins and lower caste background, the BJP was able to project Shri Narendra Modi as a leader of the OBCs while at the same time retaining the votes of the upper castes. Thus, the BJP's victory was a result of a shift of voters towards the party, cutting across caste, class, regional, gender, and age lines. This shift was more pronounced among the backward-caste voters, especially the lower OBCs. The same trend was visible in the 2019 general elections, where despite speculation that the BJP would not be able to maintain its cross-caste Hindu coalition, it was able to increase its support among most social groups. The 2019 elections witnessed a huge increase in support for the BJP among the Dalits, with more than one-third (34%) of Dalits voting for the BJP as compared to one-fourth (24%) in 2014. This data reveals that with the BJP coming to power in 2014 and Shri Narendra Modi becoming the Prime Minister, it has been successful in bridging the caste divide in its support.

While the success of the BJP in the general elections is often attributed to the popularity and charisma of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, the "Modi Factor" has also been effective in BJP's victory in state assembly elections. In the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections, the BJP won 73 Lok Sabha seats in UP, securing over 40% of the votes for the first time in the state. This stellar performance was repeated by the BJP in the State Assembly Elections 2017, where it successfully won 312 seats. Even the alliance of the SP and Congress failed to counter the BJP's dominance in the state. In the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, the SP and BSP allied to fight against the BJP, yet the BJP managed to cross the 50% vote share mark and win 62 seats. Finally, in the 2022 State Assembly Elections, the BJP made history by winning a consecutive election in Uttar Pradesh at the end of a five-year term, with Shri Yogi Adityanath becoming the first-ever leader to win a consecutive election since 1957.

The comeback and stellar performance of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh in the last decade need to be understood in the light of caste politics. Uttar Pradesh is the center of Mandal politics, where caste plays a decisive role in shaping the strategies and the trajectory of the political parties and their leaders. According to the post-poll data by CSDS-Lokniti, published by The Hindu, the BJP has not only managed to consolidate its traditionally staunch upper caste base even further, netting over four-fifths support from the Brahmins, Thakur, and Vaishyas, but it has also managed to hold on to its recently cultivated support of non-Yadav OBCs, a segment that constitutes around 40 percent of the state's electoral population. Thus, the caste arithmetic of the BJP, focusing on mustering the support of the non-dominant OBCs and bringing them under the broad umbrella of Hindu nationalism, has paid off in the last decade. Its strategy to consolidate its support base both among the OBCs and the upper castes could be understood by juxtaposing the 27-percent

reservation in NEET for OBCs with a 10-percent quota for the economically weaker sections, which appealed to both sections of society.

In **Gujarat** the same trend of the BJP's dominance is visible. In both the Assembly elections of 2017 and 2022, the BJP has been successful in establishing itself as the dominant party, especially after winning 156 out of 182 seats in the 2022 State Assembly Elections, creating electoral history in the state by becoming the only party to win the most seats in the state ever. The comparison of the 2017 and 2022 Assembly Elections reveals that support for the BJP has increased among all sections except the Muslims. It has been able to forge a broad social coalition behind it, becoming a catch-all party that has widened its social base and stands for 'Samagra Hindutva' which seeks to integrate OBCs and scheduled castes within the Hindutva fold.

In **Bihar**, too, the BJP has been successful in mustering the support of the non-Yadavs. In the 2014 elections, it won 22 seats alone and bagged 31 seats in all with its allies. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, it won all 17 seats it contested, winning 39 seats in alliance with the JD (U) and LJP (Lok Janshakti Party), leaving only 1 seat for its rival, the Congress party. The BJP has also improved its performance in the state assembly elections, increasing its tally of seats from 53 in 2015 to 71 in 2020. BJP's performance in both the general and state elections in Bihar revealed that the BJP and its allies enjoyed support across the upper castes, the Kurmis among other non-Yadav OBCs, and the Dalits. With the JD(U) breaking off its alliance with the BJP and raising the demands for a caste census, the latter has found itself in a tight corner to secure its vote bank among the OBCs. Striving to retain and expand its social support base, the BJP, in its newly constituted state executive has appointed an OBC from the Koeri community as its president. This 38-member state executive is dominated by the upper castes (17 members), followed by the OBCs, EBCs, and Dalits. Allying with the smaller regional parties in Bihar to fight against the opposition alliance, the BJP is banking on its caste arithmetic to counter Mandal politics and secure its support base, which will be crucial for the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha Elections.

The performance of the BJP in these states in North India, especially in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which are the centres of Mandal-Kamandal politics, reveals that the BJP has transformed its strategy. While the image of Shri Narendra Modi as a strong leader coming from the backward (Teli) community has been instrumental in expanding its support base among the OBCs, the BJP's victory needs to be understood in the context of its social coalitions and the political mobilization of less dominant castes and subcastes. It would not be wrong to say that the BJP, by focusing on the less dominant intermediary castes and the subcastes, has found itself a new political space and sort of invented a new vote bank for itself, which has paid rich dividends in the last decade, but whether this strategy will prove effective for the BJP in the 2024 elections is highly uncertain amidst the rising clamour around the caste census.

## **Political Implications of the recent developments in the Caste Politics**

### **Patna High Court Verdict**

In August 2022, the JD(U), breaking off its alliance with the BJP, allied with the RJD to form the Mahagathbandhan. The current coalition government ruling Bihar comprises mainly Other Backward Classes-led Mandal-era political parties, which indicates the political significance of this exercise of caste census in Bihar. The first phase of the caste census began on January 7, 2023, and ended on January 21. The second phase of the caste census started on April 15 and was about to continue until May 15, 2023, but petitions were filed in Patna High Court challenging the caste census. As a result, the Patna High Court, on May 4, 2023, ordered a temporary stay on the caste census being held in Bihar. The High Court observed that the state government was carrying out a census in the garb of a survey, which impinges upon the legislative power of the Union. It stated that the state government had no legislative competence to carry out a caste census in the garb of a survey. However, on August 1, the High Court dismissed all the petitions challenging it, upholding the validity of the caste census. This decision of the Patna High Court is definitely good news for the leaders and the workers of the ruling coalition government in Bihar, as the caste-based survey would provide electoral and political dividends to the political parties such as the JD(U) and RJD, which have relied on caste-based identity politics and mobilization to expand their support base.

Petitions were also filed in the Supreme Court challenging the decision of the Patna High Court to uphold the Bihar caste census. While hearing the petitions on August 18, the Supreme Court refused to put a stay on the Bihar Caste Census and dismissed the petitioners' argument that it violates a citizen's fundamental right to privacy. The apex court also dismissed the petition opposing the uploading of the survey data for the public and observed that it cannot restrain the Bihar government from publishing the cumulative data or findings of the Bihar caste survey unless there is a prima facie case to show the violation of any constitutional right or lack of competence on the part of the state government.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Can't restrain Bihar from releasing caste census data: Supreme Court  
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/supreme-court-refuses-to-restrict-publication-of-bihar-caste-survey-data-unless-constitutional-violation-is-proven-101692382862753.html>

## **Impact on the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections**

The Supreme Court judgement on the Bihar Caste Census, upholding its validity, has elicited a response in favour of conducting a nationwide caste census from several opposition parties with the Chief Minister of Bihar, Shri Nitish Kumar backing the Congress party's demand for the same. With Rahul Gandhi making an aggressive demand for a caste-based census and removal of the reservation cap during the Karnataka campaign followed by Congress's victory in the Karnataka Assembly Elections, the opposition parties who were seeking to forge an alliance for the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections found a common issue on which they all could target BJP.

In the last few years, BJP has been successful in changing its image as an "upper caste, upper class" party by incorporating a large section of OBCs within its fold by projecting leaders from backward communities at the state level and targeting the Mandal parties for working towards the empowerment of particular dominant OBC communities. By adopting this strategy, it has been successful in shaping the Mandal-Kamandal politics to its advantage which was reflected in Uttar Pradesh State Assembly Elections and in BJP's rise in Madhya Pradesh. While BJP, earlier focusing solely on the appeasement of the upper castes has shifted towards both Hindutva and OBC consolidation, most of the Mandal-based political parties have been struggling to expand their support base while few have shrunken to family rule. However, the issue of caste census and reservation has not only brought the opposition parties which lacked cohesiveness, on the same page but also provided them with a strategy that would allow them to retain their voter base among the backward classes who have been veering towards the BJP in the name of Hindu unity. The demand for a caste census has again put BJP in a tight spot and tests its own outreach to the backward classes.

The Mandal parties have tried to regain hold of their position by putting forward the demand for a caste-based census and polarising the Hindu community, and along with other opposition parties have formed an alliance to defeat the BJP. These 26 opposition parties have agreed unanimously on putting forward the demand for caste census, calling BJP a party for the rich and upper castes and claiming that BJP's commitment to OBCs is a hoax. This strategy of reviving Mandal politics has been a smart move on the part of the opposition to secure the vote bank of the backward classes and mould the situation in its favour, especially in the Hindu heartlands of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The impact of the ongoing political battle over the caste-based identity between the ruling party and the opposition may not be as it was during the 1980s and 90s but it is certainly going to play out in a big way in the 2024 elections whether this will actually result in the upliftment of the disadvantaged sections of the society or merely remain a campaign tagline.

## Response of the Political Parties

With the caste census occupying center stage in India's politics and the Supreme Court giving a green signal to the Bihar government to conduct the caste census, the different political parties have geared up to capitalize on this issue to secure political gains from it. While the Supreme Court's endorsement of the caste census in Bihar has brought relief to the Mahagathbandhan, political parties in different states have also been vociferously demanding the same, along with the Congress party. The BJP has also supported the decision to conduct a caste census in Bihar but has been reluctant to adhere to the demand for conducting a nationwide caste-based census.

### Bharatiya Janata Party

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been known for being a staunch advocate of Hindutva and Hindu nationalism. It represents the political face of Hindutva ideology, as clearly reflected in its support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the 1990s and its constant efforts at mass mobilization of Hindutva forces. This strategy has certainly paid dividends in terms of the rise of the BJP as the dominant national political party in India. While the BJP's Kamandal politics has been targeted for appeasement of the upper castes, the BJP, under the leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, has been working towards shunning its image as an "**urban party of upper castes**" by reaching out to the non-dominant sections of the OBCs, even the SCs, to build a powerful coalition of upper castes and non-dominant OBCs. This strategy was instrumental for the BJP in expanding its support base in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Thus, while the BJP has been able to maintain a strong hold over its ideological roots in Hindutva, it has also been able to combine its own version of Mandal with it.

However, the demands for a caste census and the removal of the 50% cap on the reservation have put the BJP in a delicate position where it has to balance the sentiments of OBCs with those of the upper castes. With the completion of the caste census in Bihar, the demand for a caste-based census will be raised even more vigorously in other states, especially where parties other than the BJP are in power. The political parties supporting the caste census have already targeted the BJP for 10% sub-categorization within the general category reservation for economically weak sections (EWS) among the upper castes. Moreover, the reluctance of the BJP to conduct a caste-based census and its stance over the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) has given them the opportunity to corner the party and project it as a party for the upper castes. Amidst such a clamour around caste census by the opposition, the BJP has also been facing demands for caste census from members within the party.

Recently, one of the BJP MPs, Sanghmitra Maurya from UP's Badaun, raised the demand for a caste-based census, stating that "even cattle have been counted in several states but not backward classes. While such demands have been there, it seems that the BJP is still holding steadfastly onto its strategy of Hindutva and OBC consolidation, as evident on the day of the death anniversary of Kalyan Singh, former CM of Uttar Pradesh, who belonged to Lodh (a prominent OBC community in UP). Observing the day as Hindu Gaurav Diwas," both Shri Yogi Adityanath and Shri Amit Shah addressed him as a true Ram Bhakt, hence sending a broad message of Hindutva and OBC consolidation.

It seems that while the opposition parties are keen to revive caste politics, polarizing Hindu voters, the central leadership of the BJP is still holding on to its Mandir Project to deal with the rise of Mandal politics before the 2024 Lok Sabha Election. With the inauguration of the Ram Temple (the issue that marked the ascendancy of the BJP in the 1990s) in January 2024 and its campaign in support of UCC, it will be interesting to see whether it will be able to mould the popular opinion of the electorate in its favour.

## **Indian National Congress**

With Mandal-Kamandal politics gaining centrality in the two electorally important states Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the 1990s, Indian National Congress (INC), the oldest political party of India which enjoyed a hegemonic position in Indian politics for decades, was struggling to find its lost status. While the Congress Party under Rajiv Gandhi staunchly opposed the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, it gradually changed its stance. The Congress-led UPA in 2006 also implemented the second recommendation of the Mandal Commission, that is, 27% reservation in educational institutions, and currently, the leaders of the Congress have joined the other political parties in their demands for a caste census. In the past few years, Congress has been moving closer toward the idea of a caste census, raising a demand for revealing the SECC 2011 data, removing the 50% cap on the reservation of OBCs, and conducting a caste census. These three demands were raised by Shri Rahul Gandhi during the Karnataka Election Campaign which confirms that it has moved ideologically closer to the Mandal-based political parties. Recently, the Congress President Shri Mallikarjun Kharge also promised to conduct a caste census in Madhya Pradesh if it wins the upcoming Assembly elections.

With the Lok Sabha Elections a few months away it is obvious that Congress will be betting on the issue of caste-census, reviving the Mandal-Kamandal politics to reclaim its lost political power.

## **Conclusion**

The caste system is a unique feature of Indian society. It is one of Hinduism's and India's most complicated and misconstrued notions that continues to intrigue thinkers and scholars from various fields of study but still has no universally accepted definition. Attempts to arrive at generalizations about caste have been fraught with misconceptions and false presumptions. The emergence of new jatis or subcastes, and even categories such as Dalit Christians have further complicated the nature of the caste system in India. While the nature of the caste system has changed over the years, its salience in Indian politics has increased over the years, and given the current scenario of Indian politics, it seems that the salience of the caste system has reached its peak. The demand for a caste survey, the Supreme Court's judgement in favour of the caste census in Bihar, and the alliance of the 26 opposition parties targeting the BJP for its reluctance to conduct a caste census, along with the inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya scheduled in the third week of January 2024, clearly indicate that the redux of Mandal-Kamandal politics is imminent in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha Elections.

This paper has highlighted the history of the caste survey and how the demand for a caste census has taken shape over the years. It mentions the Justice Rohini Commission and its report on OBC-sub categorization, submitted in July 2023, reveals that the beneficiaries of reservation and affirmative actions of the government belong to a few dominant OBC communities. It proceeds to talk about Mandal-Kamandal politics, its history, and how it is resurfacing again, emerging as a major variable in the upcoming elections and evoking varied responses from different political parties. It has attempted to assess the impact of these events on the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections and how they are going to influence the campaign strategies of the different political parties.

While caste had already become an indispensable aspect of regional politics, the revival of Mandal Politics at the national level, especially when the BJP has transformed its strategy and has been successful in mustering the support of the OBCs in the last decade by mobilizing and binding them under the umbrella of Hindu Nationalism, is going to be challenging for the opposition. Experts are also divided over the viability of the caste census. However, it is evident that both the Mandal parties and the Congress are now betting on the caste census to regain their lost status and consolidate their support base among the backward classes, while the BJP is holding steadfastly to its strategy of mobilising the same groups under the Hindutva umbrella, pushing the agenda of Hindu Rashtra and Uniform Civil Code in a bid to polarise the Hindu vote bank ahead of 2024 polls. Enumeration of the caste-wise population in the census may allow the government to direct policies more effectively towards those who most need state assistance and affirmative action policies but, at the same time, it has the potential to generate conflicts, degenerating into a political tinderbox.

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