

## **Castes Count: On T.N. Caste-Wise Survey**

### **Why in news?**

The Tamil Nadu government has decided to constitute Commission to conduct a survey for collecting caste-wise data in the state.

### **Why now?**

- The move may have been born out of political expediency.
- It came in response to the pre-election agitation organised by the Pattali Makkal Katchi, a party in Tamil Nadu.
  - It demands 20% exclusive reservation in education and government jobs for the Vanniyar community, its main electoral base.
- With this, the idea of a caste census is back in the realm of public debate.

### **What is the long-felt need?**

- There is a social and legal necessity for compiling caste-wise data.
- The Supreme Court has also been asking States to produce quantifiable data to justify their levels of reservation.
- The exercise would particularly help Tamil Nadu to retain its 69% total reservation.
- At the same time, some castes that have either electoral or numerical importance across India have some concerns.
- They are concerned about the manner in which affirmative action programmes based on classes and communities have been implemented so far.
- Be it the Gujjars, or Jats or the Patidars, or the Vanniyars, some sections have been linking their prospects of advancement to exclusive reservation.
  - In Tamil Nadu, Vanniyars' violent 1987-88 agitation resulted in the creation of a 'most backward classes' category entitled to 20% reservation.
  - Now, some sections of the Vanniyars are apparently dissatisfied about being clubbed with over a hundred other castes.
- It is a reflection on how reservation operates that some castes feel crowded out in the competition.
- They thus aspire for the safety of exclusive reservation.

## **What is the commission's mandate?**

- The proposed commission may not conduct an elaborate enumeration on the lines of the Centre's decennial census.
- Its mandate is to examine the methodology for collecting caste-wise particulars, conduct a survey based on that and submit a report.
- It will be quite a challenge to arrive at a sound assessment of the social and educational backwardness of each caste.

## **What was the Centre's initiative in this regard?**

- The Census of India has not collected caste-wise data since 1931, with the exception of details about SCs and STs.
- The Centre conducted a 'socio-economic caste census (SECC)' in 2011.
- It was an attempt to link the collection of caste data along with socio-economic data.
- This was done so that there could be a comprehensive assessment of levels of deprivation and backwardness in society.
- However, presumably because of the lack of reliability of the data collected, or its political and electoral sensitivity, the caste portion of the SECC has not been disclosed so far.

## **What is the way forward?**

- The TN government could possibly seek access to the SECC data pertaining to Tamil Nadu as part of its exercise.
- However, it should not treat this as a politically expedient move to quell a possible electoral setback due to the agitation of one party or community.
- Rather, it should seek to rationalise and deepen its social justice policy with a true assessment of the backwardness of various castes.
- In all cases, progress towards a casteless and equal society ought to remain the state's ultimate goal.

**Source: The Hindu**