

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