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Con Without Pro = Con?

Interrogating the Caste Census

By: Satish Deshpande

In his desire to be distinctive, Anand Teltumbde tells a one-sided tale about the dangers of a caste census, belittling benefits and emphasizing costs.

Anand Teltumbde is today one of India's leading intellectual-activists, especially on matters of caste. He first rose to prominence as a commentator in the mid-2000s, when he started writing for the Economic and Political Weekly (where he later had a regular column). Though aware of his writings, I started following his work in earnest only after reading an incisive piece on reservations in Mainstream magazine in 2015. In it, he trenchantly made the points that upper-caste progressives (like myself) had often hesitated to foreground - that reservation was but a drop of social justice in the ocean of caste inequality, that it soaked up space for discussion on caste and prevented other important issues from emerging, and so on - and he did it while remaining pro-reservations.

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I have respected and admired his work ever since, especially *The Persistence of Caste* (2010, on the unspeakable atrocities at Khairlanji), *The Republic of Caste* (2018, based on his EPW writings), and more recently his critical biography of Ambedkar, *Icnoclast* (2024). Teltumbde's fame and the esteem in which he is held by his readers and admirers has grown manifold after his release from 31 months in prison as one of the accused in the Bhima Koregaon case, as he continues to take strong stands against the powers that be. He is now a marquee name among intellectuals in India and commands a large and growing reading public across the ideological and social spectrum.

With a great audience comes great responsibility - and great expectations. This is where things sometimes go wrong, as with *The Caste Con Census*. Like some thinkers, Teltumbde has a streak of contrariness, the need to be distinctive and at an oblique angle from what would be expected. Teltumbde's urge to always be somewhat different has brought us invaluable insights. Whether we agreed with him or not, we have all learnt much from Teltumbde's angular takes on reservations, on sub-quotas within the Scheduled Castes, on Ambedkarism, on Ambedkar himself, and now, on the caste census. But this perennial search for distinction can sometimes backfire. *The Caste Con Census* is emphatic, detailed, and mostly right about the many problems that a caste census will or could create; but its near-silence on the possible benefits shouts louder, luring the unwary reader into an anti-caste-census stance that the author himself rejects.

It is not only unwary readers but also hurried reviewers or harried sub-editors churning out headlines who are likely to fall prey to the slant of the book. The already considerable lean of the book towards an anti-caste-census posture will be stretched further for prospective readers by headlines such as these:

"Anand Teltumbde: 'A caste census cannot achieve social justice'" (*Hindustan Times*, Nov 29, 2025); "The Caste Con Census: Why Counting Caste May Wound More Than It Heals " (*Outlook India*, 21 Dec 2025); "Anand Teltumbde argues that a nationwide caste census cannot annihilate it" (*Scroll.in*, Nov 29, 2025); "Anand Teltumbde: 'Caste census is meant to distract us'" (*Mid-Day*, Mumbai, 16 Nov ,2025); "'Caste census is a con, it is no solution,' says Anand Teltumbde", (*The Print*, video, n.d.); " Anand Teltumbde's Insightful, Provocative Critique of Caste Enumeration" (*The Wire*, 23 Jan 2026); "If equality is the aim, a caste census can never deliver it" (*The Print*, 8 Nov, 2025).

If you read those headlines, you would find it very difficult to believe that the same author also said this:

For decades, we've had economic data, religious data, even data on forests and tigers, but not on caste, which continues to shape access to education, jobs, and dignity in India. Without such data, policies claiming to promote equality operate in the dark. So, a caste census is essential if we want to base social justice on evidence rather than assumption.

(Anand Teltumbde, emphasis added, Interview on publication of *The Caste Con Census*, in *Frontline*, 1 November 2025.)

Anti-caste-census positions are mostly taken by people who are explicitly or implicitly opposed to the social justice agenda. When an avowedly pro-social justice writer-activist like Teltumbde takes such a stand, then its impact is considerable. This book may have done more to discredit the caste census than any of its other opponents.

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The point is not that the caste census is a great and glorious thing, but that costs and benefits have to be measured against each other in relation to a larger objective for which it is a means. If the ultimate goal is the annihilation of caste, as Teltumbde himself believes, then it is unwise to look only at the negatives of the census without giving enough thought to the positives. This is especially true when there is little else in the world we live in that takes us towards this goal and far too many things that are taking us away from it. The crucial question here, of course, is what a utopian idea like "annihilation" might mean in the contemporary world. But I am getting ahead of the story.

The book has been extensively and favourably reviewed, mostly very favourably. A quick check reveals that every newspaper and magazine of note carried at least a short review, and it is too early yet for academic ones. Written for the general reader, the book is lightly footnoted (only nine in all), but well referenced (as many as twenty pages). As is usually the case with such books, the chapters are many (15 + Preface and Conclusion, 252 pages) and short (average about 10, ranging from 7-18).

The tenor of most reviews (though there are some partial exceptions, as in *Scroll.in*, *Frontline*, *Outlook* and *Mainstream*) suggests that the popular impact of the book will be to harden prejudices against the caste census. This is regrettable, particularly because the author himself wants a caste census, despite all its drawbacks. To understand how and why this has happened, one needs to get into the argument of the book and its presentation.

The title of a book is meant to announce in advance the argument that it aims to construct. This is where the damage begins, and it is severe. Apart from the cover design (which suggests that the caste census is a deadly monster), there is the ambiguous pun on the word "con" in the title. Does the book argue that the census itself is a con or fraud, or is it only the consensus around the census that is a fraud, or are both frauds?

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When the consensus around something is attacked as fraudulent, the audience tends to imagine that things would be different had the consensus been genuine. But there has never been a consensus on the caste census, or any real possibility of one. The demand dates from the previous century, well before the emergence of hegemonic Hindutva. Such demands have always been resisted strongly by the governments in power, both at the centre (where it was the Congress for most of the time) but also in most states. This is because the ruling caste-class regime never wanted it, least of all a universal census that would expose not just known inequalities but also the relatively unknown extent to which opportunities continued to be monopolised by a few castes. Wherever censuses have got conducted, it has been half-heartedly, and due to electoral compulsion and sustained pressure.

Moreover, the book's attempts to expose the false consensus are dwarfed by its much more vigorous efforts to discredit the census itself. In fact, the evils of the census are a constant theme, from start to finish, while the critique of the consensus is confined to the latter quarter of the book. The reader cannot be faulted for misreading authorial intent when they come away with the impression that, overall, a caste census is a terrible thing, regardless of the consensus around it.

What makes things really difficult is that Teltumbde's arguments about the possible dangers of a caste census are not wrong. Though these arguments are well-known in the literature, the current understanding is far more nuanced and acknowledges fundamental ambiguities. Indeed, Teltumbde is well aware of these ambiguities and makes frequent mention of them in his account. But the oversimplified moral he extracts and repeatedly hammers home, namely that the census fixed previously fluid caste identities and

blocked potential social mobility, contradicts his own nuanced account of the historical evolution of caste and its transformative encounter with the colonial census. The many instances cited in chapters 3 and 4 showing the contradictory effects of enumeration¹ are erased in the one-sided conclusion that the census made caste a more rigid and regressive institution than it was.

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In any case, the fluidity-to-rigidity story of the impact of colonial census enumeration is far too simplistic. Briefly, pre-census fluidity was always a localized exception, applicable only in rare instances due to the coming together of favourable factors: the general rule was fixity of relative status; and post-census rigidity is overstated, given that the entry of a new ruler "without caste" (the British Raj) gave an unprecedented opportunity for the middle and lower castes to mobilise and petition the state for recognition of higher status. Teltumbde has given space to the newer literature that recognizes these contradictions and ambiguities in chapter 5, which is markedly different in tone from the previous two chapters. And chapter 6 begins by acknowledging that census data provided vital ammunition for Ambedkar to demand representation for the Depressed Classes. But the overall tenor of the book remains unaffected by such ambiguities, implacably maintaining that the caste census can only result in troubles.

Another major charge against the census is that it is likely to fuel demands for sub-division of reservation quotas and break the unity of the lower castes, especially the Scheduled Castes. This is quite plausible, though the Bihar experience may give one pause. Moreover, caste-and tribe-wise data on the Scheduled Castes and Tribes has been available for some time now, so a caste census is unlikely to add much to already simmering conflicts. But Teltumbde is very concerned, and he even fears that such calls for sub-division may eventually result in the dismantling of reservation itself. Here again I cannot help feeling that he is being unfairly one-sided. The unity that Teltumbde speaks of was already undermined by the heavily skewed distribution of the fruits of reservation. It is often those who have the highest stakes in the status quo who call for unity, and accuse those who are demanding their due share of breaking this unity or siding with the enemy. Sadly, this has been broadly true of the struggles for redistribution of reservation quotas in many regions and states. An ethically and politically sustainable unity can only be based on a fair distribution of costs and benefits.

The solution that he offers for the problem of concentration of reservation benefits is to bar the immediate family members of those who have benefited from reservation in the past from accessing reservation. This may help the wider dissemination of reservation benefits beyond such families, but it is likely to leave uninterrupted the dominance of particular castes or sub-castes because of their accumulated reservation-based caste capital. The objective of sub-division of quotas is to reduce inter-caste inequalities within the Scheduled Castes rather than inter-family inequalities within the more advanced Scheduled Castes.

But there are two other proverbial elephants in this room that the dominant common sense prevents us from noticing.

For me, by far the most surprising aspect of *The Caste Con Census* is its conception of caste abolition. Perhaps I am missing something crucial, but I simply cannot understand how one of our most insightful thinkers on caste can believe that:

The abolition of caste, often dismissed as utopian, is in fact quite straightforward in principle. It requires a legal and social prohibition of caste-based distinctions in both state administration and civil society. Had the state pursued this rigorously, outlawing caste-based practices and launching mass educational efforts against caste, the system could have been dismantled within a generation or two. (p.90)

This quotation is taken from a short section titled "Caste abolition was quite possible" (Ch.6, p.88-91). It ends with this sentence: "The true solution lies not in institutionalising caste for redistributive purposes but in working towards its annihilation through universal measures of empowerment" (p.91).

In other words, Teltumbde seems to be saying that annihilation must be preceded by a socialist revolution. But isn't this precisely what was precluded by India's "passive revolution" - the transfer of power from a foreign to an indigenous elite with no change in fundamental social and economic structures? And if, today, such a revolution seems even more distant than it may have seemed in the 1940s and 1950s, isn't the idea of annihilation robbed of all meaning if we insist that it is a post-revolutionary event, because it would

then be "permanently postponed"?

What, one might rhetorically ask, did the abolition of untouchability in 1950 do for the Bhotmanges of Khairlanji in 2006? Would they be alive if "caste" too had been "abolished" then, along with untouchability?

My second thought was that this might be another trademark Teltumbde contrary view leading to unexpected insights. Is he going to argue that we must rethink the idea of annihilation to make it more relevant to our times, I wondered. But that was not where he was going, so I went back to puzzle over his claim that caste abolition was "quite straightforward in principle".

This claim is all the more puzzling because the book itself is strewn with repeated examples of Teltumbde's understanding of caste - and hence its abolition - as being anything but straightforward. The larger body of Teltumbde's work, too, is chock full of evidence of the complexity of caste and the depths to which it is entrenched in our social fabric, apart from being embedded in material life. The abolition of such an entity cannot be achieved by laws or regulations, even if these would make a difference. What, one might rhetorically ask, did the abolition of untouchability in 1950 do for the Bhotmanges of Khairlanji in 2006? Would they be alive if "caste" too had been "abolished" then, along with untouchability?

Perhaps one should not make too much of a short two-and-a-half page section in a two-hundred-and-fifty page book, so I will pocket my puzzlement and leave it at that. But the core question remains: What meaning can we give to the utopian but indispensable idea of annihilation in the second quarter of the twenty-first century?

My own sense is that our time demands that we move beyond the original 1930s notion of annihilation as a "big bang" kind of thing - as complete destruction, erasure, rooting out, extinguishing and so on. Even our Indian language equivalents for it have the same totalising flavour - *sarvanaash*, *uchhedan*, *unmoolan*, *vinaasha*... Contemporary meanings of annihilation have to be more modest, more retail than wholesale.

There are many reasons for this. The 1930s were a period of revolutionary ferment in many parts of the world, including India. This was the time of the Great Depression and the lead up to World War II. At home, the freedom struggle entered its decisive phase in this decade, which also hosted the intensification of anti-untouchability struggles as well as the initial crystallisation of Hindutva. This was a time when the impossible seemed possible, when society seemed to be malleable. Importantly, this was the time before the electoral politics of universal franchise, and this was the time when the idea of reservation was just germinating.

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Today, caste is entrenched in electoral politics; reservations are a major mobilizational force despite their objectively small scope, and caste has been brought back into the mainstream of public discourse after the Mandal moment of the 1990s. Today, all caste groups from top to bottom have developed strong vested interests in their caste identities, though for very different reasons. Such a thing cannot be erased in one stroke. Today, the utopian goal of annihilation can only be reached by the road of attrition - or the slow erosion, whittling down, and relativisation of the various vested interests that nurture caste.

As this is not the place for a full elaboration, let me simply say that I believe the caste census will be a powerful force for attrition. The very problems and troubles that Teltumbde rightly claims the census creates will also accelerate attrition, initiate a *reductio ad absurdum* of vested interests, and take us slowly but surely towards "abolition".

To expose the other elephant in the caste census room we need the help of Ms. Sudha Narayana Murty, the First Lady of our First Family of IT. Last October, when the Government of Karnataka's state-wide comprehensive caste survey (officially named the Social and Educational Survey 2025) was being conducted in Karnataka, Ms. Murty is reported to have given a signed declaration to the enumerators who visited her home, stating that since she and her husband were "not part of any backward community" they "did not see any need to participate in the survey" (*The Times of India* Bengaluru edition, 16 October 2025). As often happens with statements by First Ladies, this one too made headlines and created quite a stir. And though the Murt(h)ys² are reported to have been polite, their

attitude to the survey presumably inspired residents of upscale gated colonies in Bengaluru to deny entry to survey officials, to set dogs on them, or to yell at and humiliate enumerators before turning them away - all incidents reported in the local press. The Karnataka Chief Minister was compelled to respond on social media that "This survey is not limited to any one caste; it is a scientific effort to shed light on the lives of every individual in the state... [...] assuming that it is a backward classes survey is wrong." (*The Indian Express*, 23 October 2025).

It is unfair to single out Ms. Murty for she is far from alone. Similar celebrity statements have been reported in the media before the 2011 and even the 2001 censuses, when there was some talk of including caste. When asked about their caste - in public and in non-deferential ways - the upper castes experience what might be called "caste umbrage". The dictionary defines the noun umbrage as "a feeling of pique or resentment at some often fancied slight or insult". In a society saturated with the hierarchical spirit of caste, upper caste status is meant to be recognised and respected wordlessly by the rest. A person inhabiting this status is not only offended if asked their caste by a lower status person (which is what most enumerators would be) they also feel *entitled* to be offended. Breaking this ingrained sense of entitlement is a necessary precondition for abolishing caste. A caste census will begin the breaking.

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Like all opponents of the caste census, Teltumbde repeatedly warns us that counting caste is not a neutral exercise, that the very act of counting changes caste - that to count is to intervene. In this he is quite right. But like other opponents of the census, he implicitly makes the assumption that not counting caste is neutral, that it is not an intervention. And in this he is profoundly wrong. If counting caste is a political intervention then (as argued sixteen years ago in Deshpande and John 2010³), not counting it is an even more powerful intervention because it is an *invisible intervention*.

Caste is what it is today, and upper caste attitudes are what they are, because of 75 years of active "not-counting". Even as it institutionalized reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (and later the Other Backward Classes), and (according to Teltumbde) abolished untouchability but failed to abolish caste, our Constitution gave the priceless gift of selective anonymity to the upper castes. This gift that keeps on giving has positioned lower castes as supplicants dependent on the reservation largesse handed out by a state effectively "owned" by the upper castes (Tharu et al 2007⁴). This produces the fatal asymmetry between the hypervisibility of the lower castes and the selective invisibility of the upper castes. It invisibilises the many ways in which the state subsidises the rich, and promotes the toxic mythology of merit vs. reservation. In sum, not counting caste helps to block the birth of a genuine anti-caste consciousness.

A caste census is an eminently and imminently possible event in today's world. And though it will not itself annihilate caste, and may even aggravate problems initially, it will also feed the forces that will begin the war of attrition that can weaken caste.

The policy-enabling data that the census might produce may or may not be translated into real policies. But its ability to force the upper castes to publicly speak their caste - in contexts where they have always presented themselves as being above it - will definitely erode the dominant common sense that protects caste from fundamental questioning. On the other hand, as identities subdivide and multiply in response to the census, the interests vested in them will wane, prompting more and more caste communities to look beyond their silos and recognise others with shared material and political circumstances.

Even if all the problems that Teltumbde sees in the caste census are true, the potential that the census holds in these ways is enough reason for us to give it a fair chance. A socialist revolution might bring caste annihilation, but it is beyond the horizons of our world as it is today. A caste census is an eminently and imminently possible event in today's world. And though it will not itself annihilate caste, and may even aggravate problems initially, it will also feed the forces that will begin the war of attrition that can weaken caste. As one of our leading thinkers on the caste question, I wish Anand Teltumbde had dwelt as much on the possible pros of the census as he has on its probable cons.

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Footnotes:

1 There are many instances, but here are three examples: ...[C]olonial enumeration transformed caste from a local, relational structure into a politicized and standardized identity, creating a feedback loop between colonial classification and indigenous assertion. What began as an administrative project evolved into a contest for symbolic capital, shaping the future of caste politics in India. (pp.51-52, Ch.3) Thus, while caste existed before colonialism, its solidification-through censuses, ethnographies and laws-transformed it into a pan-Indian political grammar, shaping not just colonial administration but seeding the emancipatory politics of the lower castes. The process that caused fragmentation locally, led to their integration regionally or nationally. (p.61, Ch.4) [T]he enumerations also provided insights into their numerical strength and a sense of shared victimhood which was harnessed by oppressed-caste leaders. The census became a mirror through which these groups saw both their marginalization and their potential power... It helped spawn a new counter-public of caste-based mobilization and anti-caste consciousness. (p.62, Ch.4)

2 Collectors of trivia may please note: while her husband spells his last name with an 'h', Ms. Murty eschews it, raising the Zen question of whether the 'h' should be absent or present when the couple is referred to.

3 Satish Deshpande and Mary E. John, "The politics of not counting caste", in *The Economic and Political Weekly*, v.XLV, n.25, 19 June 2010, pp.39-42.

4 A pioneering intervention that helped to uncover this insight is: S.Tharu, M.Prasad, R.Pappu & K. Satyanarayana, "Reservations and the Return to Politics", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 08 December 2007.