

June 28, 2026

Caste Census: Useful Affirmative Step, But No Magic Wand

Insights from Western Madhya Pradesh

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A caste census would make caste's pervasive influence harder to ignore, spurring caste groups to assert constitutional equality against those above them. But there is the challenge that these groups will continue discrimination against those below.

The caste census has been the subject of debate in *The India Forum* ("Con Without Pro=Con?" by Satish Deshpande, 21 April 2026, "Can a Caste Census Cause Attrition of Caste?" by Anand Teltumbde, 11 May 2026; "The Telangana Caste Survey: An Overview" by Bhangya Bhukya, 13 May 2026, "What Telangana's Census-Scale Survey Reveals About Caste in Modern India" by Srinivas Goli, 11 May 2026). These are some reflections on the proposed caste census based on our experience in education and caste dynamics in western Madhya Pradesh (MP).

Resisting Invisibilisation

The caste census would be a peg that would make it more difficult to render invisible the widespread prevalence and influence of caste in our society. Speaking from the lens of school education, which one is more familiar with, there has always been a tendency to keep caste out of classroom discussion.

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In the late 1980s, when those of us at the non-governmental organisation Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh were working on the social science curriculum and tried out a draft chapter on the historical evolution of caste, there was immediate resistance. Teachers said that untouchability had been abolished and caste should not be a subject for discussion.

When pressed with data and the undeniable details of caste discrimination all around us, the argument shifted: such a chapter, they said, would add to divisiveness in society. But since some teachers with a Dalit background in the group "silently" but strongly supported the idea, the chapter was grudgingly accepted.

To be fair, this is not an easy topic to discuss in rural classrooms, where both teacher and students have caste identities known to all. There are expectations to adhere to caste norms outside the school premises, and so any expression of opinion in the classroom is usually seen through the lens of caste. One teacher noted that he was always a little nervous while teaching this chapter.

A Dalit teacher, on the other hand, followed a remarkable approach. He discussed the history of caste but did not focus much on contemporary caste issues. However, he made sure that any Dalit parent who came to the government school with a query about their child was invited inside the office-at a time when many such parents would prefer to speak from a distance.

He would have them sit on a chair like any other parent, while he scanned the files to answer questions about scholarships, transfer certificates, and so on. This was noticed by everyone. In this school, teachers from other castes silently supported him, and there was a sense of fraternity within the mixed staff.

Twenty years later, while working with a National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) team, there was a chapter in the Class 6 textbook that included an excerpt from Om Prakash Valmiki's book *Jhootan*. This describes how he was asked to sweep the floor of the classroom when he was grudgingly admitted to a government school just around the time of independence. Again, in a teachers' meeting at the Regional Institute of Education Bhopal, many objected to this case study with similar arguments.

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A woman teacher, hesitantly first, but with great courage supported the case study with her classroom experience. She said that after she had taught the chapter, she was shocked to hear a student teasing another, "*Tere ko bhi jhadu lagana hoga.*" The other teachers jumped in to say, "This is why the excerpt should be dropped." She disagreed and said that she felt very troubled.

After a few days of reflection, she decided to devote an entire class to discussing caste discrimination in the society around them, with many familiar examples, and how this affected the dignity and self-respect of individuals. But she did not pull up any individual student.



Not surprisingly, when a new NCERT team worked on the so-called process of rationalisation of chapters during Covid-19, this excerpt was dropped, while other sections of the chapter were retained. Moreover, in a clear act of ideological editing, all references to Dalits in the social and political life textbooks were erased-along with any related examples or questions to ponder.

We are thus back to the processes that make widespread caste discrimination invisible. Everyone knows that caste is otherwise widely used as an undertone, an informal way of putting others down, and, in cases of conflict, as direct caste abuse.

An official caste census would be a peg to resist such efforts because it would not allow the elite to let caste remain an invisible factor. The analysis of census data could then be discussed in formal spaces-classrooms, courts, reports, or textbooks.

Challenging Those Above

The caste census would encourage challenges to those who have benefited from historical advantage. Many of the Other Backward Class (OBC) groups in MP are examples of social mobility that began with a historical advantage as landed cultivators, and then benefited further from the spread of education and OBC scholarships.

One remembers that, in middle school in the 1980s, many students came from these communities, and many government school teachers were drawn from them too. These teachers were vocal in pushing their communities towards education and non-farm employment in rural areas.

If we compare the historical rise of the OBC groups with that of the numerically significant Scheduled Caste (SC) group of Balais in Malwa, it becomes apparent that the possession of land and caste norms were intertwined in laying the foundations of disadvantage. The caste census would provide an opportunity to map out clearly the advantage and disadvantage that landholding, shaped by the caste system, has created.

After independence, with the abolition of *begar* (forced, unpaid labour), a weakening of the *hali* system (a form of bonded agricultural labour tying workers to landowning families, often through debt), and the possibility for these communities to purchase land with dignity, many Balais-and later Charamkars-acquired small plots of land. They became peasant farmers while also providing agricultural labour, and the assertion of these groups as small peasant farmers began to take shape.

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Years later, during the soyabean expansion, the strong bargaining position of the SC communities for labour contracts was resented by all, especially by the now-dominant OBC castes. SC workers often challenged the OBC community for better wages or dignity. There were sporadic challenges at the social level too-over temple entry, the use of a common well, a barat (wedding) procession, or the installation of an Ambedkar statue in a village. In such circumstances, the OBC groups would fall back on the caste discourse of othering, abuse, and at times brutal violence.

A caste census is likely to spur more such assertions and to show less tolerance towards caste norms. Some sections of the SC community could challenge the dominance of the OBCs, though this is not easy, since their historical disadvantage has left them marginal to the agricultural growth story. However, the space they have acquired in lower-level government jobs provides both a world view and a motivation for such assertions.

Taking advantage of reservation, the SC community in this region was able to enter education and seek Class IV employment in expanding government institutions. The number of people in government employment may be few, but this lived experience of the power of constitutional equality fuelled the imagination of the entire community, along with the possibility of combating upper-caste domination. The reservation of parliamentary constituencies for SCs also increased the community's voice and helped many find government employment.

Today, rural non-farm employment is a significant source of income for marginal farmers and labourers, and this has introduced new dimensions. The upper-caste threat of withholding employment from labour that challenges caste norms has become weaker in a diversified market economy-so the assertions following a caste census would be stronger still.

In the non-farm sector, we find SC groups working in construction, transport, waste collection, and minor repair. Caste norms operate in the market without explicit assertion: the "dirty" jobs are reserved for certain groups. Alongside this, employers often combine caste othering with disdain for the poor, who are all labelled as "lazy and pampered by free food". Caste census data is needed because it would map this process of social streaming in ways that would be difficult to hide.

Limitations of a Caste Census

The demands emanating from a caste census would likely be expressed by specific caste groups rather than as a unified Dalit agenda. Without a social movement or a political party with a clear Dalit perspective, contestation-and the emergence of challenges to those above in the caste hierarchy-would be driven by individual caste advantage. Segregated caste and sub-caste alignments with established power centres would therefore play out.

In this region, if we look at the relationship between Balais and other SC communities such as the Charamkars, we find no notion of Dalit fraternity. The Balais treated the castes below them with disdain and adhered strictly to caste rules, and there was mutual resentment.

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Competition for labour contracts increased as many Charamkars began giving up their traditional role of skinning animals. Some acquired land. They were late entrants into education and government jobs, but the process had begun-following the same route as the Balais, though with a lag. At the village level today, the OBC and upper castes clearly play these groups off against one another, fuelling caste animosity.

The trajectory likely to be followed by these various caste groups is to seek constitutional equality with those above them in the hierarchy, while continuing to practise caste discrimination towards those below. With the prospect of a caste census, discussions are already taking place within caste groups. A section of the OBCs have added "Kshatriya" to their association's name, with a clear nod towards the Rajputs. The Charamkars, meanwhile, are seeking parity with the Balais within the SC grouping.

One structural change likely to limit the expression of such demands is the rapid decline of public services. Contestation for reserved public service jobs at the lower level-for teachers, self-help group (SHG) workers for mid-day meals, Anganwadi centres, nurses, ASHA workers, and panchayat secretaries-has been strong. But the tendency in recent years has been towards privatisation and sub-contracting across every public sphere, rather than an expansion of public facilities.

When these services are sub-contracted, the regular rules of reservation do not apply. As one example, there are thousands of guest teachers in government schools to whom these norms do not apply. The pie available for contestation is therefore shrinking rapidly, and so are the spaces in which constitutional equality norms can challenge caste norms. The caste census is not a magic wand, but it could spur demand for greater public services as a reaction.

***Acknowledgement:** I would like to thank Arvind Rajagopal for his encouragement while writing this piece.*

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