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thewire.in/politics/politics-of-caste-census-how-bjp-and-mandal-parties-view-the-contentious-issue



Crowds at a Congress party rally in Telangana. Photo: X (Twitter)/@INCTelangana

The demand for special status for Bihar, a long-standing issue for Janata Dal (United), was completely bypassed in the Budget for Hope 3.0 presented today by Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the parliament.

Another demand of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition partner, Nitish Kumar, was also ignored – a nationwide caste census. Nonetheless, Bihar got a handsome package of expressways, economic corridors, and power plants, all summing up to Rs 2,600 crore and more. And, Bihar’s chief minister seems to be happy with it.

Nitish Kumar’s shift from the INDIA bloc back to the NDA had diminished the weight of his demands for a nationwide caste census. The BJP, which leads the coalition government at the Centre, has consistently opposed conducting a nationwide caste census.

Background: Why caste census is important?

The implementation of the Mandal Commission and the ascendancy of caste-based politics in the 1990s sparked a revival of “Kamandal” politics, symbolising Hindu religious identity and practices. This era marked the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other right-wing groups, rallying around Hindu identity issues, notably the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

“Kamandal” politics, thus, emerged as a counterforce to Mandal politics, prioritising religious over caste identity. The BJP’s opposition to a caste census establishes the continuation of its emphasis on Hindu unity and its attempt to consolidate the Hindu vote bank. Implementing a caste census could potentially disrupt this narrative.

In 2021, the Union government dismissed the idea of conducting a Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC), labelling such an endeavour as administratively challenging and cumbersome, aside from the traditional enumeration of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The government cited a range of administrative, operational and logistical challenges.

The push for a caste census is particularly strong in the Hindi belt states, where the opposition believes that siphoning off a significant portion of backward caste votes from the BJP is crucial for their electoral prospects. Parties such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), which traditionally enjoy support from backward-class groups, view this less as a matter of welfare and more as a strategic move to consolidate their voter base.

After the shocking results of this year’s election, the BJP has also joined the race of wooing backward classes. In Haryana, with an impending election later this year, the BJP raised the creamy layer limit to Rs 8 lakh from Rs 6 lakh, also excluding income from salaries and agriculture, for OBC.

The prospect of a caste-based census opens Pandora’s box, with uncertain implications for welfare politics and the potential to realign political parties’ electoral bases. Nitish Kumar’s latest alliance with the BJP raises questions about his party’s commitment to social justice principles. His stance on reservations, based on caste proportions, now seems less stable.



Illustration: The Wire

Demand for reservations

In 2022, the Bihar government undertook a noteworthy initiative by conducting a caste-based survey, an effort that cost nearly Rs 5 billion from its contingency fund.

This comprehensive survey documented the 214 castes listed by the Bihar government. The findings revealed a significant demographic composition: Other Backward Classes (OBCs) constituted 27%, and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) 36%, together accounting for over 63% of Bihar's population. Additionally, the data highlighted that Scheduled Castes (SCs) made up about 20% (2.6 crore) of the population, while Scheduled Tribes (STs) represented a smaller fraction at 1.6% (22 lakh).

On November 9, 2023, the Bihar Assembly unanimously passed a Bill to increase reservation for Backward Classes, Extremely Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes from the existing 50% to 65%. The quota for the Extremely Backward Class (EBC) will be raised from 18% to 25%, for Backward Class (BC) from 12% to 18%, for Scheduled Caste (SC) from 16% to 20%, and for Scheduled Tribe (ST) from 1% to 2%. The existing 3% reservation for BC women has been scrapped.

The Patna high court dismissed the amendments passed by the legislature. The public interest litigation (PIL) filed against the reservation argued that the decision was based on the proportion of castes, not on adequate representation in government jobs. The government contended that it was based on a lack of representation rather than the proportion. Despite this, Nitish Kumar had explicitly paraded the slogan "*jiski jitni Sankhya bhaari, uski utni hissedaari*" in party meetings, indicating a proportion-based approach.



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As a result, only 35% of seats will be allotted for the general category. In its judgment, the high court also reasoned that the caste survey report relied upon by the state revealed that backward communities were adequately represented in public employment, both through

reservation and merit. The court added that the state should consider keeping total reservations within the 50% limit and exclude the creamy layer from these benefits.

Consequently, the Bihar government moved the Supreme Court on July 2, challenging the directive of the Patna high court. It will be interesting to see if the Supreme Court allows the 65% reservation against the 50% ceiling that it had previously set.

The crème layer in the beneficiaries

Reservation has now been in existence for over 50 years, and each year that equality is not achieved, reservation is extended. Communities listed as beneficiaries under positive discrimination policies are not removed from this list, even if their social and political conditions improve.

Despite these affirmative action policies, many communities that were previously low in the caste hierarchy remain at the bottom of the social order today.

There are no clear criteria for identifying the beneficiaries eligible for OBC reservations as outlined in the constitution, which threatens the legitimacy of these reservations. It's up to the discretion of states; the State Backward Commission decides if a given caste should be included in OBC.

The issue of reservation has become deeply intertwined with politics, reducing it to a mere vote bank strategy for politicians. This political reality has hindered significant attempts to eliminate reservation altogether, leading to the proliferation of various reservation schemes across different states.

JD(U) will have a bigger voice now that it's part of the Central government. Although recently, the deputy chief minister of Bihar Samrat Choudhary, who is from BJP, stated that the BJP supported the caste census in Bihar, yet there was no mention of it today.

The BJP faced the consequences of the Hindu vote bank being divided along caste lines in Uttar Pradesh, reducing its seats from 62 to 33 in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Now, while in coalition with Nitish Kumar, it will be interesting to see how the BJP navigates the case of the caste census and reservations.

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