

India to conduct caste census

By Arun Kumar and Keith Jones
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India's Congress Party-led coalition government has decided that the 2011 decennial census will be a "caste census"—the first in the almost 65 year history of independent India.

On August 12, Pranab Mukherjee, India's Finance Minister and the head of a United Progressive Alliance (UPA) cabinet subcommittee tasked with weighing the merits and modalities of a caste census, told India's parliament that the subcommittee had decided in favor of a caste census. But the final decision as to "how and when this should be done" will be taken by the full cabinet in the coming weeks.

Those who have been agitating for a caste census want it to be included in the so-called "headcount" phase of the census, rather than in the newly-introduced biometric phase, the aim of which is to issue every Indian 15 and older with a national identity card.

There are also continuing disputes within the government and India's political elite as to whether the census should seek to count the size of, and collect socioeconomic data on, all India's 5,000-odd caste groups or only those targeted by the Indian state's reservation (affirmative action) programs, i.e. the Scheduled Castes (the descendents of the untouchables), the Scheduled Tribes, and the Other Backward Classes.

According to a report in the *Hindu*, Mukherjee's subcommittee has recommended that the government conduct a full caste census, the first since 1931. This would involve every Indian, from the *Pariahs*, *Chamars*, and *Mahars*—ex-untouchable groups who continue to suffer from caste discrimination and make up a grossly disproportionate number of the landless and illiterate—to those who, in reactionary caste terms, are defined as high Brahmin, being called on, if not compelled, by the state to identify themselves by their *jati*.

(The idealized version of the caste system outlined in the classic Brahminical Hindu texts speaks of a hierarchical order of four castes. In practice, however, India's caste system, which has its roots in the division of labor in an agrarian society, functions through *jati*, regionally-based endogamous groups.)

Whatever form India's caste census ultimately takes, the mounting of a caste-based census is a retrograde and reactionary step. It will contribute to the further caste-ization of Indian politics and life, serving to split the working class and oppressed toilers on caste lines and strengthening, thereby, the domination of the Indian bourgeoisie.

The campaign for a caste census has been spearheaded by three opposition parties, the Janata Dal-United (JD-U), the Samajwadi Party (SP), and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD).

These parties or their predecessors came to the fore in the 1980s as the proponents of the extension of reservation—the setting aside of a percentage of all public sector jobs and places in government-supported educational institutions for select socially disadvantaged groups—to the so-called Other Backward Classes or OBCs. (Shortly after independence, India's Congress party government had instituted 15 percent reservation for the Scheduled

Castes and 7.5 percent reservation for the Scheduled Tribes.)

Ultimately, the Indian government did institute a 27 percent quota for the OBCs. That it did so in the 1990s coincident with the Indian bourgeoisie's embrace of neoliberal policies, involving the dismantling of public and social services and massive tax cuts for the rich and big business, is not accidental, nor incidental.

Reservation is predicated upon acceptance of the existing socioeconomic order. Rather than challenging the bourgeoisie's economic and political dominance, it proposes that the misery of Indian capitalism be distributed more "equitably," by demanding that the upper castes accept their "fair share" of unemployment and poverty.

And this is in a country where more than 75 percent of the population and hundreds of millions—from all caste groups—suffer from stunted growth and malnutrition and live in abject poverty.

The JD-U, SP, and RJD have long argued that the 27 percent reservation for OBCs is woefully insufficient, because the OBCs constitute a much more substantial fraction of India's population. The population figure they routinely cite is 52 percent. An Indian government survey, the National Sample Survey, meanwhile, estimates that OBCs constitute 32.5 percent of India's population.

In any event, the JD-U, SP, and RJD politicians calculate that an OBC headcount will provide new ammunition for their demand for increased OBC reservation.

There is every possibility that these politicians' attempts to prove the numerical weight of the OBCs will result in counter-mobilizations by rival political and caste leaders. In late colonial India, under conditions where the British were using census figures to divvy out government posts and seats on religious-communal lines, there were repeated "census wars" pitting Hindu and Muslim communalists against each other.

Already Janata Dal-United President Sharad Yadav has warned of a "volcanic eruption" if caste-based enumeration is not undertaken in the coming census. For his part, the RJD's supremo, Lalu Prasad Yadav, has argued that a caste census will boost the pride and confidence of all *jatis* by providing them with proof of their numerical strength.

Between them the JD-U, SP, and RJD have less than 20 seats in the 543-seat Lok Sabha (India's lower house of parliament). If they have been able to impose their will it is because the other parties are also deeply implicated in caste politics, invoking caste appeals in their election campaigns and basing their electoral strategies on the creation of "caste combinations."

A senior Congress Party leader explained that his party had no choice but to embrace a caste census after the official opposition, the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had declared itself in favor: "With the BJP supporting it, we will also have to go along."

A pivotal role in all this has been played by the Stalinist

parliamentary parties, the Communist party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist). They declared their support for a caste census last May and, even more importantly, have long supported reservation as a measure for “social justice.”

The Stalinists have joined most of India’s political elite in claiming that a caste census will make it possible to better tailor social welfare policies to the needs of India’s population—this under conditions where the Indian bourgeoisie, in its drive to make India a magnet for investment and a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism, has been starving education, health, and social services of funding.

Invariably the Stalinists point to the opposition to a caste-based census from some rightwing forces, including the Hindu supremacist RSS and much of big business, to try to give it a progressive luster. Undoubtedly, these forces’ advocacy of merit in opposition to reservation is a reactionary fraud, a means of justifying a social order characterized by extreme inequality, class oppression, and pervasive caste discrimination.

But that does not make caste-based reservation progressive, let alone a tool for social emancipation.

Reservation has manifestly failed to achieve its purported goal—the social and economic uplift of the lower castes. Although there has been 15 percent reservation for the Scheduled Castes or Dalits since 1950, the vast majority of Dalits live today in dire poverty. Moreover, India’s lower castes are still often denied access to village wells and other vital resources and are frequently the target of landlord/upper caste violence when they resist.

While the class oppression of the Dalits continues unabated, reservation has benefited a narrow petty bourgeois layer that now monopolizes, from generation to generation, the reserved education places and public sector jobs. From this layer has sprung a grasping political elite that seeks to lay claim to a share of the booty of Indian capital by proclaiming itself the spokesman for the Dalits.

This layer is epitomized by Mayawati, the current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). She routinely flaunts her wealth as proof of Dalit empowerment and pursues pro-investor policies with zeal. While Mayawati has embarked on a statue building program to honor Dalit leaders and promote “Dalit pride,” she has done nothing substantive to aid the state’s landless, most of whom are Dalits and OBCs.

As the development of “OBC politics” in the 1980s attests, reservation has not served to attenuate caste. Rather it has infused new life into India’s moribund and reactionary caste system. Although the development of capitalism has eroded much of the agrarian relations on which caste historically rested, caste identities have been strengthened through the political machinations of the Indian ruling class.

Far from being a progressive measure, reservation was pioneered by the British colonial state as part of their system of imperial control. India’s British overlords never abolished untouchability. In fact they greatly strengthened and systemized caste identities, by classifying Indians in their decennial census according to caste and by hierarchically ranking India’s *jati* from high to lower. Indifferent to the plight of the untouchables, the British introduced Scheduled Caste reservation as part of their divide-and-rule strategy.

On wresting control over India, the Indian National Congress, the bourgeois independence movement, was loathe to strike at the roots of untouchability and caste oppression by smashing landlordism and carrying out a radical redistribution of the land to the tiller.

Instead, as a sop to the tiny educated Scheduled Caste elite and with

a view to using them to control the impoverished Dalit masses, the Congress constitutionally enshrined and expanded reservation. Yet even Dr. Ambedkar, the untouchable leader who oversaw passage of the constitution and spearheaded the drive for reservation, insisted that reservation should only be a temporary measure.

Reservation for the untouchables, it need be added, had the support of sections of the Hindu right who saw providing certain limited benefits to the Scheduled Castes as a means of dissuading them from seeking to escape Hindu caste oppression by converting to Islam or Christianity. To this day, Christian and Muslim Dalits, in defiance of India’s claims to be a secular state, are denied reservation.

At independence, the Indian National Congress claimed to be striving to develop an egalitarian, democratic and, therefore, casteless society. Toward that end, the Congress government eliminated the caste column from all government forms and applications and decided in 1948 that Indians would not be asked to identify themselves by caste in future censuses. An exception was made in the case of the Scheduled Castes and later the Scheduled Tribes—an exception justified on the grounds that it was important to collect caste-specific data on their socioeconomic condition so as to ensure that there was a rapid improvement in their social and economic lot.

Six decades on, and after utterly failing to “raise” the Dalits and other lower castes, the Indian bourgeoisie is reviving a caste-based census. While it boasts of India’s economic might and celebrates the growing number of Indian billionaires, the reality is that the Indian ruling class presides over a country containing the world’s greatest concentration of poor people and lacking even a proper public education or health system. Unable to provide any progressive solution to the burning problems of India’s toilers, it turns ever more to reaction—to communalism, casteism and state violence—to protect its rule.

The authors also recommend:

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[25 May 2006]

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