

Caste Based Census

The demand for a caste Census has become a heated political issue, fuelled by calls from opposition leaders, NGOs, and, more recently, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) also adding itself to the cohort.

What is a Caste Census?

A caste census involves enumerating India's population based on caste categories. While Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have been recorded in every census since 1951, data on Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and sub-castes has been absent, leaving critical gaps in policymaking and affirmative action initiatives.

Need for a Caste Census:

1. Addressing Inequities: Helps identify intra-caste disparities and ensures equitable allocation of resources.
2. Empirical Evidence for Policies: Provides a data-driven basis for affirmative action.
3. Monitoring Effectiveness: Enables assessment of existing reservation policies.
4. Governance: Guides resource allocation and better implementation of welfare schemes.

Example: Bihar's 2023 caste census revealed that 84% of the population belongs to OBCs, EBCs, and SCs, necessitating targeted measures.

1. Social Justice: Fulfills constitutional mandates for equality and non-discrimination.

Historical Background

1. Colonial Era:
 - First caste census in 1871-72.
 - Last caste data collected in 1931 under British rule.
2. Post-Independence:
 - Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) of 2011: Identified over 46.7 lakh caste/sub-caste groups but faced significant data inconsistencies.

Implications of a Caste Census:

- Social
 - Better identification of disadvantaged groups.
 - Reinforces caste-based identity, potentially deepening divisions.

Example: Bihar's findings challenged dominant caste narratives.

- Political
- Reshapes political strategies by identifying neglected caste groups.

Example: Post-Bihar census, calls for proportional reservations surged.

- Could weaken broader Hindu identity politics.
- Economic
 - Enables resource allocation based on need rather than assumption.
 - Facilitates targeted economic development programs for backward groups.
- Governance
 - Helps track implementation and impact of welfare schemes.
 - Aids in prioritizing infrastructure and healthcare interventions.
- Legal
 - Provides empirical justification for affirmative action in courts.
 - Addresses challenges in implementing SC, ST, and OBC reservations.

Challenges to Caste census:

1. Complexity in Classification: Similar-sounding castes or regional variations lead to misclassification.

Example: ‘Sen’ in Bengal (upper caste) vs ‘Sain’ (OBC barber caste).

1. Upward/Downward Mobility Claims: Self-reporting influenced by perceived benefits.

Example: Bihar caste census faced controversies over classification issues.

1. Administrative Feasibility: Inadequate training of enumerators and lack of infrastructure.
2. Data Integrity: Risks of data manipulation due to political and social pressures.
3. Societal Divisions: Potential hardening of caste identities.

Case Study: Bihar Caste Census (2023)

Impact:

- Triggered demands for proportional reservations.
- Strengthened the narrative for caste-based welfare.

Way Ahead

1. Standardized Methodology: Clear guidelines for classification to avoid errors.
2. Training of Enumerators: Specialized training to ensure accurate data collection.
3. Data Confidentiality: Strict measures to protect the privacy of respondents.

4. Incorporating Technology: Use AI and geospatial tools for accurate data mapping.
5. Proactive Policy: Utilize findings to create inclusive and targeted welfare programs.
6. Stakeholder Engagement: Involve academia, policymakers, and social leaders to ensure credibility.

Conclusion:

A caste census, while fraught with challenges, offers an unparalleled opportunity to address systemic inequities and foster inclusive growth. By leveraging accurate data for policymaking, India can move closer to its constitutional ideals of equality, justice, and dignity for all citizens.

Niti Aayog: Trade Watch Quarterly

The NITI Aayog's Trade Watch Quarterly (TWQ) report for Q1 FY25 highlights India's trade performance, opportunities from global trade realignments, and challenges such as trade fragmentation and carbon tariffs.

Key trends and insights from the report:

- Data Points:

Regional Performance:

- North America (21%) and the European Union (18.6%) are pivotal markets.
- Trade with FTA partners grew by 12% in exports and 10.3% in imports.
- Sectoral Performance:
 - Growth sectors: IT services, pharmaceuticals, electrical machinery, and mineral fuels.
 - Declining sectors: Labour-intensive goods like textiles, pearls, and leather.

Strategic Policy Interventions:

1. Infrastructure Development:
 - Expansion of the Trade Connect e-Platform for streamlined exporter support.
 - Enhanced logistics under the National Logistics Policy.
2. Export Incentives:
 - Continued support through schemes like RoDTEP (Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products).
3. Technological Integration:
 - Emphasis on digital trade and innovation to unlock high-growth sectors.
4. PLI Schemes:
 - Scaling manufacturing in sectors like electronics, textiles, and automobiles.
5. Strengthening FTAs:
 - Strategic agreements with partners like the UK and EU to reduce trade barriers.

Emerging Risks:

1. Geopolitical Shifts:
 - Opportunities from U.S.-China trade tensions but risks of overdependence.
2. EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM):
 - Tariffs of 20–35% on Indian exports of carbon-intensive goods like steel and aluminium starting 2026.
3. Manufacturing Challenges:
 - High input costs and fragmented production systems reducing competitiveness.
4. Labour-Intensive Sector Decline:

- Structural inefficiencies in textiles, pearls, and leather sectors affecting global market share.

Future Suggested Roadmap:

1. Boost Digital Integration:
 - Leverage digital platforms for trade facilitation and innovation.
2. Diversify Export Portfolio:
 - Focus on high-growth sectors like IT, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy.
3. Build Resilience Against CBAM:
 - Invest in green technologies and align with global sustainability standards.
4. Expand Trade Agreements:
 - Pursue FTAs with emerging economies for diversified market access.
5. Empower MSMEs:
 - Simplify regulations and provide targeted credit support for small exporters.

Conclusion:

India's trade growth is key to achieving a Viksit Bharat by 2047. Addressing inefficiencies, adopting technology, and strengthening global ties can establish India as a competitive trade leader.

Lake-Effect Snow

Lake-effect snow, a weather phenomenon associated with the Great Lakes region, has recently buried towns in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan under several feet of snow.

About Lake-Effect Snow:

- What it is: A localized weather phenomenon producing intense snowfall due to the interaction of cold air with the warmer waters of large lakes.
- Found in: Common in regions near the Great Lakes in the United States, particularly in states like New York, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.
- How it forms:
 - - Cold air, often from Canada, moves over the unfrozen and warmer Great Lakes.
 - The warm water transfers moisture and heat to the lower atmosphere.
 - Rising air cools, forming narrow bands of clouds that generate snowfall at rates of 2–3 inches per hour or more.
- Factors responsible:
 - - Cold Air: Must be significantly colder than lake surface temperatures.
 - Wind Direction: Dictates the specific areas affected by snowfall.
 - Geography: Physical features of land and water influence the intensity and location.
- Impacts:
 - - Localized heavy snowfall, often creating significant differences in snow accumulation over small distances.
 - Infrastructure disruptions, including roof collapses and stranded vehicles.
 - Annual snowfall in some areas exceeds 20 feet, impacting daily life and regional economies.

Kumhrar Site

The Kumhrar site, linked to Mauryan history, is under Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) excavation to uncover the 80-pillar assembly hall, the site of Emperor Ashoka's third Buddhist Council.

About Kumhrar site:

- Found in: First excavated between 1912–15 by D.B. Spooner.
- Location: Kumhrar, near Patna, Bihar.
- Historical Significance: Believed to be the conference hall for the third Buddhist Council under Emperor Ashoka's reign.
- Architectural Features:
 - Eighty Pillared Hall:
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 - - Parallel rows of 72 pillars found initially, with 8 more pillars unearthed later.
 - Sandstone pillars from Chunar, Uttar Pradesh, stood about 32 feet tall, with a lustrous finish typical of Mauryan architecture.
 - Wooden roof and floor with an entrance located on the southern side.
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 - Arogya Vihar (Gupta Period):
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 - - Hospital-cum-monastery run by Dhanvantari, evidenced by a terracotta seal inscribed with "Sri Arogyavihare Bhikshusamghasya."

MH-60R Seahawk Multi-Role Helicopters

The United States has approved a \$1.17-billion deal for support equipment and services for India's MH-60R Seahawk multi-role helicopters under its Foreign Military Sales programme.

About MH-60R Seahawk multi-role helicopters:

- Maritime Role: A variant of the Black Hawk helicopter tailored for naval operations.
- Procurement: India contracted 24 MH-60R helicopters from the US in 2020 for \$2.2 billion; nine have been inducted so far.
- Operational Use: Designed for anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, search and rescue, medical evacuation, and logistical missions.
- Advanced Arsenal: Equipped with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, MK 54 torpedoes, advanced sensors, and avionics.
- Key Features: Folding rotor blades, hinged tail for shipboard storage, and advanced data transfer systems.
- Proposed Upgrades: Includes tactical radio systems, infrared systems, external fuel tanks, and advanced test and repair equipment.

Windfall Gains Tax

The Government of India recently withdrew the windfall gains tax on domestic crude oil production and exports of diesel, petrol, and aviation turbine fuel (ATF).

About Windfall Gains Tax:

- Introduced in: July 2022 amid soaring global oil prices post-Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- What it is: A tax imposed to capture super-normal profits earned by oil producers and fuel exporters during times of high global crude prices.
- Aim: To curb export-induced domestic shortages and capture excess profits for government revenue.
- Products covered: Domestic crude oil, diesel, petrol, and ATF.
- GST Status: Not under GST; levied as Special Additional Excise Duty (SAED) and Additional Excise Duty (AED).
- Applicable to both domestic and private oil firms, including multinational corporations operating in India.
- Impacts on Indian Economy:
 - - Positive:
 - Helped generate ₹25,000 crore in FY23, cushioning revenue loss from domestic fuel duty cuts.
 - Ensured steady domestic fuel supply during global energy turmoil.
 - Negative:
 - Discouraged private refiners from boosting production.
 - Created an unpredictable tax regime, affecting investor sentiment.

World Drought Atlas

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the European Commission Joint Research Centre launched the “World Drought Atlas” during their 16th conference in Riyadh.

About UNCCD’s Drought Atlas:

- Released By: UNCCD and European Commission Joint Research Centre.
- Aim: To provide data-driven insights and guidelines to combat the increasing global drought risks and foster resilience.
- Factors Driving Drought Expansion:
 - Unsustainable water usage and competition.
 - Poor land management practices.
 - Climate change-induced rainfall variability.
 - Rapid urbanization and resource mismanagement.
- Key Data Points:
 - 75% of the global population could be affected by drought by 2050.
 - India faces substantial drought risks, with soybean yield losses and crop failures threatening millions in the agricultural sector.
 - “Day Zero” scenarios, like Chennai’s 2019 water crisis, exemplify the dangers of urban mismanagement.