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Census 2027 Introduces Nationwide Caste Enumeration with Digital Census and Special Scheduling for Snow-Bound Regions

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Recent Developments:

- The **Census 2027** will include **caste enumeration in its second phase**, marking the first time after Independence that caste other than **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes** will be enumerated as part of the regular Census.
- The **Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs** decided on **30 April 2025** to include caste enumeration in Census 2027, and the Government subsequently notified its intention to conduct the Census.
- Census 2027 will be conducted in **two phases: House Listing and Housing Census** from April to September 2026 and **Population Enumeration** in February 2027 for most of India.
- For **Ladakh** and the snow-bound non-synchronous areas of **Jammand Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand**, Population Enumeration will be conducted earlier, in **September 2026**, because severe winter conditions make the normal enumeration period operationally difficult.
- The reference date for most of India is **1 March 2027**, whereas the reference date for Ladakh and the specified snow-bound areas is **1 October 2026**.
- Census 2027 will be **India's first digital Census**, with mobile-based data collection and an option for **self-enumeration**, supported by a central digital monitoring system.
- The Union Cabinet approved an outlay of **₹11,718.24 crore** for Census 2027, with around **30 lakh field functionaries** expected to participate in the exercise.

What is the Census?

Meaning and Purpose:

- A **Census** is the systematic collection, compilation, analysis and dissemination of **demographic, social, cultural and economic information** relating to the population of a country or a specified geographical area.
- Census data provide an essential statistical foundation for **public policy, welfare programmes, resource allocation, infrastructure planning, governance and evidence-based decision-making**.
- Census information is used by governments, researchers, policymakers and other institutions to understand **population structure, demographic trends, migration, housing conditions, education, fertility and socio-economic characteristics**.

Institutional Framework:

- The **Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India**, under the **Ministry of Home Affairs**, is responsible for conducting the Census.
- The Census is conducted under the **Census Act, 1948** and the **Census Rules, 1990**, as amended from time to time.

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- The Census is ordinarily conducted **every ten years**, with the **2011 Census** being the most recent completed Census before Census 2027.

Census 2027 — Two-Phase Structure:

- **Phase I — House Listing and Housing Census:** This phase will collect information relating to **housing conditions, household amenities and household assets** and will also create the basic framework required for population enumeration.
- **Phase II — Population Enumeration:** This phase will collect information relating to **demographic, socio-economic, cultural, migration and fertility characteristics** of individuals and will also include **caste enumeration**.
- An optional **15-day self-enumeration period** will precede the 30-day house-to-house enumeration period in Phase I.

Census in India:

Historical Evolution:

- The Census of India has been conducted regularly since **1871**, while the **first complete Census** was conducted in **1881**.
- Census 2027 will be the **16th Census in the series and the 8th Census since Independence**.
- The Census therefore represents one of India's most important long-term sources of **population and socio-economic statistics**.

Constitutional and Legal Position:

- The Census is primarily a **statutory exercise** conducted under the **Census Act, 1948**, rather than under a specific constitutional article mandating a decennial Census.
- The **Census Act, 1948** provides the legal framework for conducting the Census and enables the Central Government to notify the relevant Census arrangements.
- Census schedules and questionnaires are notified by the Central Government through the **Official Gazette** under the Census Rules.

Census 2027 — Major Technological Changes:

First Digital Census:

- Census 2027 will be India's **first digital Census**, with enumerators using secure mobile applications for data collection.
- Digital collection is expected to improve **speed, data quality, monitoring and timely availability of Census information**.

Self-Enumeration:

- Citizens will have an option of **self-enumeration**, allowing eligible respondents to provide their Census information digitally before the house-to-house enumeration period.

Digital Mapping and Geospatial Features:

- Census operations are incorporating **digital layout maps and geospatial tools** to improve the identification and coverage of buildings and households.

- The use of digital mapping can reduce dependence on manually prepared maps and improve the accuracy of **household coverage and enumeration boundaries**.

Data Security:

- Census 2027 is being supported by **secure digital infrastructure and designated data centres** to protect the large volume of demographic and socio-economic information collected during enumeration.

Caste Enumeration in Census 2027:

Meaning of Caste Enumeration:

- **Caste enumeration** involves collecting information on the caste identity of individuals as part of population enumeration.
- Such data can provide evidence on the **population distribution, socio-economic conditions and relative deprivation** of different caste groups.
- Reliable caste data can potentially support more evidence-based approaches to **welfare targeting, social justice, affirmative action and policy evaluation**.

Why Census 2027 is Significant:

- Since Independence, the regular Census has enumerated **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes**, but the Government did not enumerate the population of other castes through the regular Census.
- Census 2027 will therefore represent a major change by including **caste enumeration within the regular Census exercise itself**.
- This distinction is important because the **Socio-Economic and Caste Census, 2011** was a separate exercise and its caste data were not finalised and published in the same manner as the regular Census data.

Socio-Economic and Caste Census 2011:

Background:

- The **Socio-Economic and Caste Census, 2011** was conducted separately from the regular population Census, with the **Ministry of Rural Development** responsible for the rural component and the then **Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation** responsible for the urban component.
- The Census organisation provided **technical and logistical support** to the exercise.

Status of Caste Data:

- The socio-economic data of SECC 2011, excluding caste data, were finalised and published, while the caste data were not released as an official nationwide caste population dataset.
- The Government had noted difficulties in **classification and categorisation of caste names**, including variations in how people reported their caste identities.
- Therefore, Census 2027 faces an important methodological challenge of converting potentially diverse individual caste responses into **consistent, standardised and analytically usable categories**.

Historical Caste Enumeration in India:

1931 Census:

- The **1931 Census** is generally regarded as the last Census in which comprehensive caste-wise data other than the categories subsequently treated separately were collected, tabulated and published before Independence.
- After Independence, the regular Census continued to enumerate **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes**, while caste-wise enumeration of other groups was discontinued as a matter of policy.

- Consequently, the **1931 Census** became an important historical reference point in discussions concerning the caste composition of India.

Post-Independence Constitutional Framework:

- The Constitution provides a framework for addressing the socio-economic and educational backwardness of disadvantaged groups through **affirmative action and institutional mechanisms**.
- **Article 16(4)** enables the State to make provisions for reservation in public employment in favour of backward classes that are not adequately represented in State services.
- **Article 340** empowers the President to appoint a Commission to investigate the conditions of **socially and educationally backward classes** and recommend measures for their advancement.
- The **Mandal Commission** is an important example of a major backward-class assessment that operated in an environment where comprehensive contemporary caste population data were unavailable.

Arguments in Favour of Caste Enumeration:

Evidence-Based Welfare:

- Caste data can provide more precise information on the **socio-economic conditions of different communities**, helping governments design better-targeted welfare interventions.

Identification of Disparities:

- Reliable data can help identify disparities in **education, employment, income, representation and access to public resources** among different social groups.

Evidence-Based Affirmative Action:

- Updated population and socio-economic information can strengthen the empirical basis for evaluating **reservation and other affirmative-action policies**.

Social Justice:

- Comprehensive data can help identify historically disadvantaged groups and support policies aimed at achieving **greater social and economic inclusion**.

Policy Evaluation:

- Caste-disaggregated data can help assess whether existing welfare and affirmative-action policies are reaching their intended beneficiaries and whether policy redesign is required.

Arguments Against Caste Enumeration:

Reinforcement of Caste Identities:

- Critics argue that official enumeration could strengthen **caste consciousness and social divisions** by making caste categories more prominent in public policy and political discourse.

Risk of Political Competition:

- Caste data may intensify competition among communities for **reservations, welfare benefits and political representation**, potentially creating new political pressures.

Classification Difficulties:

- Caste identities can involve **regional variations, sub-castes, overlapping identities and differences in self-reporting**, making standardisation technically difficult.

Privacy and Data Protection:

- Caste information constitutes sensitive personal and social information, requiring strong safeguards against **unauthorised disclosure, misuse and discriminatory profiling**.

Excessive Focus on Caste:

- Critics argue that excessive policy focus on caste could divert attention from broader determinants of deprivation such as **poverty, education, healthcare, geography and occupational vulnerability**.

Ladakh and Snow-Bound Non-Synchronous Areas:

Why Enumeration Occurs Earlier:

- **Ladakh** and specified snow-bound areas are classified as **non-synchronous areas** because severe winter conditions make population enumeration during the normal February period operationally difficult.
- These areas will therefore conduct **Population Enumeration in September 2026**, several months before most of India.
- Their reference date will be **1 October 2026**, compared with **1 March 2027** for the rest of India.

Important Clarification:

- The earlier enumeration in Ladakh does **not mean that Ladakh alone is being given a separate caste Census**; caste enumeration is a component of **Phase II of Census 2027** and will be conducted across India according to the applicable Census schedule.
- Therefore, the key distinction is **timing and reference date**, not a separate legal framework for caste enumeration in Ladakh.

Significance of Caste Enumeration:

Governance and Public Policy:

- Comprehensive caste data can strengthen **evidence-based policymaking** by allowing policymakers to compare socio-economic outcomes across different social groups.

Social Justice:

- Reliable data can improve the identification of **persistent inequalities and under-representation**, strengthening the empirical basis of social-justice interventions.

Reservation Policy:

- Caste and socio-economic data can contribute to future debates concerning **reservation policy, representation and the identification of backward classes**, although enumeration by itself does not automatically determine reservation entitlements.

Cooperative Federalism:

- Since States have different caste structures and policy requirements, successful implementation will require effective **Centre-State coordination** regarding enumeration methodology, training and data use.

Data-Driven Governance:

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- Integration of caste information with demographic and socio-economic variables can facilitate more nuanced analysis of **multidimensional deprivation and social mobility**.

Key Implementation Challenges:

Standardisation of Caste Responses:

- The greatest methodological challenge will be converting **open-ended self-reported caste names** into standardised categories without suppressing genuine social and regional distinctions.

Data Quality:

- Large-scale digital enumeration requires strong systems for **verification, validation, error detection and quality control**.

Privacy:

- Sensitive caste information requires robust safeguards covering **data minimisation, access control, secure storage and lawful use**.

Social Sensitivity:

- Enumerators require adequate training to conduct caste-related questions in a **neutral, respectful and non-discriminatory manner**.

Interpretation:

- Population size alone cannot adequately capture social disadvantage because caste outcomes interact with **income, education, occupation, gender, geography and other socio-economic factors**.

Way Forward:

Standardised Classification:

- The Government should establish a transparent and scientifically robust methodology for converting self-reported caste responses into **standardised statistical categories** while retaining relevant sub-group information.

Independent Quality Assurance:

- Independent experts in **statistics, sociology, anthropology, data science and public administration** can strengthen validation and classification procedures.

Privacy-by-Design:

- Caste data should be protected through **strong encryption, restricted access, audit mechanisms, purpose limitation and clearly defined data-use protocols**.

Evidence-Based Policy:

- Caste data should be analysed together with **education, income, occupation, landholding, health, housing and other socio-economic indicators** rather than being treated as the sole measure of disadvantage.

Periodic Review:

- The Government should establish mechanisms for reviewing the methodology and ensuring that future policy decisions are based on **updated and scientifically validated evidence**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

- **Legal basis:** The Census is conducted under the **Census Act, 1948** and **Census Rules, 1990**, rather than through a specific constitutional article mandating a decennial Census.
- **Historical fact:** The **1931 Census** remains the principal historical benchmark for comprehensive caste-wise population data before Independence.
- **Important distinction:** **SECC 2011 was separate from the regular Census**, whereas caste enumeration in Census 2027 is being incorporated directly into the regular Census exercise.
- **Digital milestone:** Census 2027 will be India's **first digital Census** and will provide an option for **self-enumeration**.
- **Administrative scale:** The exercise has an approved financial outlay of **₹11,718.24 crore** and is expected to involve around **30 lakh field functionaries**.
- **Reference-date fact:** The reference date is **1 March 2027** for most of India and **1 October 2026** for Ladakh and the specified snow-bound non-synchronous areas.