

A key step by Bihar to promote better social justice

There are certain dates which acquire greater significance by a stroke of history, and October 2, 2023 is one such date – a day when the Bihar government released the data for a caste-based survey, known as the Bihar Jaati Adharit Ganana. Let us remember not to forget.

A caste-based census would provide accurate and up-to-date data on the distribution and socio-economic status of the various castes and communities in India. This data is essential for evidence-based policy formulation and implementation. It can help policymakers identify marginalised and disadvantaged groups and design targeted interventions to uplift them. India has a long history of caste-based discrimination and oppression. A caste-based census can help in recognising and quantifying the extent of historical injustices and disparities that exist in society. Acknowledging these disparities is a critical step towards addressing them.

Accuracy for efficacy

With accurate caste-based data, the government can develop more effective and targeted welfare programmes. These programmes can be tailored to the specific needs of different caste groups, ensuring that the benefits of government schemes reach the most vulnerable sections of society. Regular caste-based census data can help track the progress of different caste groups over time. This allows for the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and programmes aimed at social justice and affirmative action. It will also enable the government to make necessary adjustments to policies when needed. Caste-based data can help ensure fair representation of marginalised communities in government, education, and employment. Reservations and affirmative action policies are often based on caste, and accurate data is crucial to determine the appropriate level of representation required. A caste-based census promotes transparency and accountability in government efforts to promote social justice. It allows citizens to hold the government accountable for the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities.

Without accurate data, there is a risk of caste certificates being misused for personal gain or



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political purposes. A caste-based census can help verify and authenticate the caste status of individuals, reducing the likelihood of fraud and ensuring that benefits are directed to those who genuinely need them.

A subject of debate

However, it is important to note that the idea of conducting a caste-based census in India has been a subject of debate and controversy. Some argue that it could perpetuate and deepen caste divisions, while others believe that it is necessary to address historical injustices and promote social justice. The decision to conduct such a census involves careful consideration of these arguments and a balanced approach to address the complex issue of caste-based disparities in India.

Caste discrimination in India is a deeply entrenched social issue that has persisted for centuries. Several factors highlight the need for committed government intervention to address this problem. First, historical injustice. Caste discrimination has its roots in centuries of historical oppression and marginalisation. It has resulted in the social, economic, and educational backwardness of certain caste groups. Government intervention is necessary to rectify these historical injustices.

Second, constitutional mandate. The Indian Constitution recognises the existence of caste-based discrimination and inequality and provides for affirmative action measures (such as reservations in education, employment, and politics) to uplift historically disadvantaged groups. The government has a constitutional obligation to implement and enforce these provisions.

Third, human rights. Discrimination based on caste is a violation of human rights. The government has a responsibility to protect the human rights of all its citizens, which includes the right to equality, dignity, and non-discrimination. Committed government intervention is necessary to ensure that these rights are upheld.

Fourth, social cohesion. Caste discrimination perpetuates social divisions and hinders social cohesion. It creates a sense of inequality and injustice among marginalised groups and can lead to social unrest. Government intervention is

essential to promote social harmony and unity.

Fifth, economic development. Caste discrimination often leads to economic disparities, with certain caste groups facing limited access to education and employment opportunities. Government intervention through affirmative action policies can help bridge these gaps and promote economic development for all.

Sixth, education. Discrimination can hinder access to quality education for marginalised caste groups. Government intervention is necessary to ensure that educational opportunities are accessible to all, irrespective of caste, and that discrimination within educational institutions is eliminated.

Subject of employment

Seventh, employment. Discrimination in employment can limit job opportunities for certain caste groups. Government intervention is required to enforce anti-discrimination laws and promote fair employment practices, including affirmative action in the public sector.

Eighth, political representation. Dalits and other marginalised caste groups have historically been under-represented in political positions. Government intervention is needed to promote their political participation and representation, which is crucial for addressing their concerns.

Ninth, awareness and sensitisation. The government can play a significant role in creating awareness about the harms of caste discrimination and promoting social sensitivity and inclusivity through educational programmes and campaigns.

Tenth, legal framework. Government intervention is crucial to strengthening and enforcing anti-discrimination laws and policies aimed at eradicating caste discrimination. Without a committed government effort, these laws may remain ineffective.

In conclusion, caste discrimination is a deeply ingrained problem in India that requires sustained and committed government intervention to address. Such intervention is not only essential to rectify historical injustices but also to uphold the principles of equality, justice, and human rights for all citizens, regardless of their caste or social background.

Hamas and its supporters are 'beyond belief'

The opinion in the West on the current Israel-Hamas war is not as one-sided as its coverage by CNN might make you feel. CNN coverage is influenced by the American liberal stance, which like liberal stances everywhere, thrives on feel-good morality and umbrage with very little introspection. This is less the case in Europe, and, particularly in countries such as France, there is a lot of sympathy for the Palestinian cause and even some attempts to defend the rash incursion of Hamas forces into Israel on October 7, which was the immediate cause of the war.

Effect on the Palestinian cause

It is understood by many European observers that the Hamas attack – though most still consider it wrong and indefensible – was the consequence of the relentless spread of Israeli settlements, largely encouraged by the Netanyahu governments and condoned by allies such as the United States. Hamas, too, has very clearly stated that its aim is to drive back such new or recent settlements. This relentless and aggressive pressure by Israeli settlers, abated by Israeli governments and condoned by global powers, is seen as resulting in the desperate attack by Hamas.

However, to my mind, the point is not who was more right and who was more wrong. The point is whether this war, which was finally caused by the Hamas attack on October 7 but also set up by Israeli settler aggression over the past few years, is going to solve anything or even help the Palestinian cause. The answer is no. If anything, it will harm the Palestinian cause.

Those who differ with me will note that, historically, Palestinians have had to indulge in drastic and violent acts to draw attention to their plight and the oppressive policies of Israel. They



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will point out that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), under Yasser Arafat's leadership, used such 'terrorist' acts to focus world attention on the Palestinian problem, and without such actions the Oslo Accords would never have happened. The West would have looked the other way while the Palestinians were slowly airbrushed out of history.

The past and the present

But there is a difference between then and now, the PLO and Hamas. The perception of this difference is lost on most Muslims and perhaps a bit too obvious to most people in the West. The difference is religion. PLO under Yasser Arafat was fighting a secular battle for a nation-state against a state that, whatever its defenders might claim, is defined by religion. The fact that this secular and nationalist Palestinian struggle was largely ignored by the supposedly secular West was not lost on Muslims, and, I have always argued, it contributed to the rise of political Islam from the 1970s onwards.

Today, we live in a world where political Islam is associated almost entirely with Islam – and almost all Muslims. Many Muslims have turned to extreme versions of religiosity and fundamentalism, and they increasingly define their existing or imagined states in religious 'Islamic' terms. Muslims who do not agree with these versions of political Islam are sidelined – both in non-Muslim discourse, where they seldom appear except as 'anti-Islamic' (which most of them prefer not to be) and in Muslim discourse, where again they and their ideas are briskly and unfairly dismissed as "not Muslim". What is happening to protesters in Iran is an on-going example.

This was obvious right at the start of the Hamas incursions into Israel: it was followed by

selfies of young men in Gaza shouting "Allah-o-Akbar" into their cameras, and the Hamas leadership claiming to counter "attacks on our religion". This was followed by interviews on CNN and elsewhere, where Israeli women and men, dressed like Europeans and Americans, rationally discussed their loss and Israeli unity, interspersed with shorter excerpts of Palestinians shouting emotionally and moving around in mobs.

In perspective

The attack by Hamas will be defeated – crushed is more likely – not by Israeli forces backed by the U.S., but by the force of this division to which organisations such as Hamas have contributed. If reasonable Europeans have to choose between Jewish fanatics in the settlements and Islamic fanatics in Gaza, they either will stay neutral or may even choose the Jewish fanatics, who dress and talk and act like them. Unfortunately, religious Muslims do not see this: they are so used to seeing things only through the prism of religion that their entire world is tintured just one colour. Instead of joining other people in secular political struggles, they insert their version of Islam into all politics – and sever themselves not just from non-Muslims but also from Muslims who think differently.

This, finally, is the reason why the Hamas attack is a blunder, regardless of whether Israel was more to blame for it or Hamas, regardless of who is more brutal or less justified. Hamas, thinking through the kind of prism that Arafat's PLO could mostly avoid, has essentially misread the situation. It is, as one writer put it as the title of a book, something "beyond belief!" That writer was wrong about some things to do with the non-West, but he was not wrong about this trend in Muslim societies.

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