

What is India's population of other backward classes?

New Delhi - Even as the government has decided to extend 27 percent reservation in institutions of higher education to other backward classes (OBCs) from June 2007, it is yet to ascertain the precise population of this community.

According to government sources, there are several figures floating around that seek to ascertain what percentage of India's 1.17 billion population belongs to this section of the society.

The latest census, conducted in 2001, did not collect information on OBCs.

When the question on the size of OBC population was placed before Human Resource Development Minister Arjun Singh recently, he did not have the precise figures.

'I think, that should be decided by people who are more knowledgeable. But the point is the OBCs form a fairly sizeable percentage of our population,' the minister said.

'There is no final, conclusive empirical evidence of the size of OBCs in India. That could have come only from the census,' said Yogendra Yadav, noted social scientist and professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Studies here.

'But the urban, upper and middle class Indians had opposed the idea of counting the OBC population through census. And they are the same ones who are opposing reservation for OBCs,' Yadav told IANS.

'In my opinion, the OBC population of our country is between 40-44 percent. I am basing this on the national election studies conducted over the past two decades by our centre.'

But B.P. Mandal Commission - whose recommendations on reservation for members of the scheduled castes and tribes in government jobs had stirred the hornet's nest in 1990 - has estimated the OBC population in the country at 52 percent.

The pro-reservation lobby uses this data to push for 27 percent reservation for OBCs in institutions of higher education, while others say after the new system is implemented, the total quantum of quota for socially backward groups will rise to 50 percent.

Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes form an estimated 25 percent of India's population, though the veracity of this figure has also been challenged. Together, these groups form a formidable vote bank for the political class which explains the bipartisan support for quotas.

But another estimate drawn from the data compiled by the National Sample Survey Organisation - which functions under the ministry of statistics and programme implementation - places their number at 36 percent of the population.

If Muslims and are excluded from the estimate, the proportion falls further to 32 percent.

This apart, the National Family Health Statistics - a survey conducted in 1998 by the Directorate of Health Services - has also estimated the non-Muslim OBCs in the country. As per its statistics, India

has 29.8 percent OBCs.

'The various data in the official domain do not present the true picture of India's OBC population. The National Sample Survey had a methodological problem where people were asked if they were OBCs,' Yadav said.

'Many of the respondents were not aware of their status in terms of caste. That is why the National Sample Survey data under-reports

the population of OBCs in India,' he added.

Sections of the student community, especially upper caste students in major cities, have been protesting the proposal, with medical students and resident doctors of the government-run hospitals going on a strike in the capital.

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