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Census 2027 — Caste Data, Delimitation and India's Political Reshaping

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2 April 2026 · POLITY · SOCIAL ISSUES · GS2

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Census 2027 — Caste Data, Delimitation and India's Political Reshaping

 Business Standard

2 April 2026

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"For the first time since 1931, India will collect caste data in Census 2027 — does this represent a long-overdue evidence base for welfare policy, or an accelerant for caste-based electoral fragmentation?"

THE CORE ARGUMENT

India's Census began on April 1, 2026 — the first since 2011, delayed by COVID and political disputes. The inclusion of **caste data** for the first time since 1931 is historically significant: it will produce India's first accurate picture of OBC population shares, potentially reshaping welfare policy, reservation politics, and — through delimitation — parliamentary representation itself.

WHY CENSUS 2026-27 MATTERS

14 Years Without a Census

The last Census was 2011. That means:

- India's entire COVID-19 response was built on demographic data that was already 9–14 years old
- PMJDY, PM-KISAN, MGNREGS targeting all used outdated population estimates
- The National Register of Citizens (NRC) process was halted partly due to absent Census data

The **House Listing phase** (April–September 2026) and **Population Enumeration** (February 2027) will finally produce updated data.

The Caste Data Decision

The government's decision to include **caste data** in Census 2027 is politically explosive:

LAST COLLECTED	1931 (BRITISH INDIA CENSUS)
1941 onwards	Caste data collected but not published (SC/ST only from 1951)
2011 SECC	Socio-Economic Caste Census — data collected but barely released
2027 (proposed)	Full caste enumeration as part of main Census

THREE DIMENSIONS OF IMPACT

1. Welfare Policy: The Evidence Deficit

India's OBC reservation policy (27% in central government jobs/education) is based on the **Mandal Commission's 1980 estimate** that OBCs constitute 52% of India's population. No verified national-level figure exists.

Accurate caste data would:

- Enable evidence-based targeted welfare programmes
- Allow assessment of whether reservations are reaching the most backward sub-groups or being captured by dominant OBC communities
- Inform sub-categorisation within reservations (as recommended by the recently constituted Justice Rohini Commission)

2. Reservation Politics

The **Supreme Court's 2024 ruling** (in Punjab SCs sub-categorisation case) upheld states' rights to sub-categorise within SC reservation — a precedent likely to extend to OBCs. Caste Census data will become the evidentiary foundation for:

- Sub-categorisation within OBC reservations
- Potential revision of reservation percentages
- Arguments to exceed the **50% cap** set by Indra Sawhney (1992)

3. Delimitation: The Political Earthquake

The Delimitation Commission will redraw parliamentary and assembly constituencies based on Census 2027 data. The implications:

- **North vs South:** Southern states (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra) have lower population growth due to better development outcomes; they risk **losing Lok Sabha seats** to northern states (UP, Bihar, MP) which have grown faster — exactly what the 84th Amendment (2001) freeze was meant to prevent

- **Urban constituencies:** Metros have grown faster than rural areas; urban seats will expand
- **Scheduled Tribe constituencies:** New data on ST population distribution will redraw reserved constituencies

UPSC MAINS RELEVANCE

GS2 — Polity/Governance: Delimitation, representation, Mandal Commission, OBC sub-categorisation, census and governance.

UPSC RELEVANCE

House listing April–September 2026; Population Enumeration February 2027; first since 2011

CASTE IN CENSUS:

Last collected comprehensively in 1931; SECC 2011 data largely unreleased

MANDAL COMMISSION (1980):

Estimated OBCs at 52% of population; recommended 27% reservation in central government

OBC RESERVATION:

27% in central government services and educational institutions (Indra Sawhney case, 1992)

50% CAP:

Supreme Court in Indra Sawhney (1992) ruled reservations cannot exceed 50% of total seats/posts

84TH CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT (2001):

Froze delimitation based on 1971 Census until 2026 to prevent southern states from losing seats

JUSTICE ROHINI COMMISSION:

Set up 2017 to study sub-categorisation within OBC reservations; submitted report in 2023

DELIMITATION COMMISSION:

Constitutional body that redraws electoral constituencies; last operational delimitation was 2008 (based on 2001 Census)

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