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Checkbox Caste: The Design Problem of Counting Jati

THE HINDU

9 July 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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 **The Hindu**

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THE LIFT LINE

Counting caste is not the hard part; designing the count so that the numbers serve justice rather than merely sorting people into permanent boxes is where **Census 2027** (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/census-2027/>) will succeed or fail.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The Government of India has announced that Census 2027 will include caste enumeration, the first time individual caste is recorded in a decennial census since 1931. The population enumeration phase is scheduled for February 2027 with a reference date of March 1, 2027, and the exercise will capture specific jati rather than only the broad SC, ST and OBC brackets. For the exam this is a rich GS1 and GS2 problem in social structure, social justice and the governance of data.

GS Paper 1: salient features of Indian society, diversity, and the role of caste; social empowerment.

GS Paper 2: government policies for vulnerable sections; welfare schemes and their design; issues relating to the development and management of social sector data.

For **Prelims**, hold the anchors: Census is a Union subject under Entry 69 of the Union List (List I, Seventh Schedule); the last full caste census was in 1931; the Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 was conducted separately and its caste data was never released in usable form; Census 2027 is India's first digital census. For **Mains**, argue that the value of caste data lies in its methodology, not merely its existence.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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India has counted caste in the past. Colonial censuses recorded caste up to 1931, and the 1941 caste data was not tabulated. After Independence, the decennial census enumerated only Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, leaving the population of Other Backward Classes uncounted, a gap that shaped decades of debate over reservation and welfare. The Mandal Commission, which recommended 27 per cent OBC reservation implemented from the 1990s, worked from 1931 figures for want of anything newer.

The SECC 2011 attempted a fresh caste enumeration but foundered: it threw up crores of caste and sub-caste entries riddled with spelling variants and duplications, and the caste component was never officially published. Census 2027, announced with caste enumeration and conducted digitally in two phases, is the state's second attempt to fill this gap. The editorial's argument is that the lesson of 2011 is methodological, and unless the design problem is solved first, richer data will not follow from mere political will.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The failure of SECC 2011 was a design failure

SECC 2011 collected caste as open text, allowing respondents to write any name, which generated an unmanageable list of over 46 lakh distinct entries once variants, synonyms and errors were counted. Without a pre-validated classification and trained enumerators, the raw responses could not be cleaned into policy-usable categories. The lesson is that caste data is only as good as the instrument that captures it.

A checkbox is not neutral

Deciding what options appear on the form, how jatis map to administrative categories, and who adjudicates disputed entries are choices loaded with consequence. Too coarse a classification erases distinctions that welfare targeting needs; too fine a one entrenches micro-identities and invites competitive claims. The design must serve the constitutional purpose of identifying backwardness for targeted upliftment, not simply record identity for its own sake.

REQUIREMENT FOR USABLE CASTE DATA	SECC 2011 SHORTFALL	CENSUS 2027 DESIGN TASK
Standardised classification	Open-text entries, 46 lakh-plus variants	Pre-validated jati directory with mapping
Trained enumeration	Enumerators without caste-coding protocol	Digital forms with dropdowns and validation
Clear administrative purpose	Data never released or used	Link to welfare and reservation targeting
Dispute resolution	No mechanism for contested entries	Transparent adjudication and appeal

The purpose must anchor the design

Caste data has genuine value: it can reveal which groups remain excluded from education, employment and public services, and can make reservation and welfare more evidence-based rather than resting on 1931 numbers. But the same data, if released and framed carelessly, can harden group boundaries and fuel identity mobilisation. The remedy is to tie the enumeration tightly to a stated welfare purpose and to release aggregated, purpose-relevant tables rather than a raw caste ledger.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Treat this as a **measurement problem before it is a political one**. Any social category that is enumerated must first be defined, standardised and validated, or the count produces noise, not knowledge. Ask three questions of any such exercise: what is the classification, who is trained to apply it, and to what administrative use will the output be put. Census 2027 will be judged not by whether caste is counted but by whether the count answers those three questions well enough to be usable. The transferable rule: data collection without a clean instrument and a clear purpose generates numbers that cannot be trusted or used.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Policy need (target welfare, update 1931 base) -> decision to enumerate caste in Census 2027 -> design choices: classification + trained enumeration + digital validation + stated purpose -> if design weak (like SECC 2011): unusable data, entrenched identity; if design strong: evidence-based welfare and reservation -> release aggregated purpose-linked tables, not raw caste ledger

WAY FORWARD

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- ❶ **Build a pre-validated jati directory.** Prepare a standardised, state-wise classification with mapping to administrative categories before enumeration, avoiding the open-text chaos of 2011.
- ❷ **Train enumerators and use digital validation.** Leverage (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/leverage/>) the census's digital, self-enumeration and dropdown features to constrain and clean entries at the point of collection.
- ❸ **Anchor the count to a welfare purpose.** Publicly link the caste data to specific targeting of education, employment and welfare so the exercise is evidence-driven, not identity-driven.
- ❹ **Release aggregated, safeguarded outputs.** Publish purpose-relevant tables with privacy safeguards rather than a raw caste roll that invites competitive mobilisation.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested caste as a determinant of social [stratification](https://ujjayari.com/vocab/stratification/) (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/stratification/>), the design and targeting of welfare schemes, and the use of data in governance. This editorial links those themes to the specific challenge of caste enumeration in Census 2027.

Practice question: “The utility of caste enumeration in Census 2027 will depend less on the decision to count and more on how the count is designed.” Critically examine in the light of the SECC 2011 experience. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion>)

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