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Count Caste by All Means, But Abandon the Belief That Counting Settles Anything

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

20 August 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES**GS1****GS2**

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The Indian Express

20 August 2026

GS1

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"The editorial cautions against treating caste enumeration as a solution in itself. What comes after the count that would actually translate data into reduced inequity?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A census can tell you exactly how unequal a society is. It cannot, by itself, make that society less unequal.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This editorial complements the methodology-focused analysis of caste enumeration with a policy-outcomes lens, testing the distinction between data collection and policy action, a recurring GS1/GS2 theme in social-justice and welfare-policy questions.

GS Paper 1: Social empowerment, caste and social justice.

GS Paper 2: Welfare-scheme design, evidence-based policymaking.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Data as policy input, not policy output	Distinguishing information-gathering from the deliberate political action needed to act on that information	The editorial's central analytical distinction
OBC sub-categorisation	Dividing the broad Other Backward Classes category into sub-groups for more precise, equitable reservation benefit distribution	A concrete example of how disaggregated caste data could inform policy
Structural inequity	Deep-rooted, systemic disparity embedded in social and economic institutions, not resolvable by information alone	The condition the editorial argues counting cannot by itself remedy

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This editorial follows directly from the ongoing debate over India's current caste enumeration exercise (see the companion editorial on its methodology), engaging with the broader question of what the enumeration can realistically be expected to achieve once completed, distinct from whether the exercise itself is methodologically sound.

THE ANALYSIS

- 1. Data collection and policy action require distinct forms of political commitment.** Completing an accurate enumeration exercise demonstrates administrative capacity and political will to gather information; using that information to design and implement targeted reforms requires an entirely separate, subsequent political commitment.
- 2. Disaggregated data has genuine, specific policy uses.** Revealing within-category disparities, for instance among different OBC sub-groups, can inform more precisely targeted welfare interventions than current broad-category approaches allow.
- 3. Historical precedent shows data alone does not guarantee action.** The fate of the 2011 SECC caste data, collected but never released or used, is cited as a [cautionary](#) example of how data-collection effort does not automatically convert into policy outcomes.
- 4. Public expectation management matters.** Treating the completion of enumeration as itself a resolution of caste-based inequity risks diverting attention from the harder subsequent work of policy design and implementation.
- 5. The counter-risk of excessive skepticism must also be avoided.** Framing data collection as insufficient should not become an argument against pursuing it, since better data remains a necessary, if not sufficient, [precondition](#) for any future evidence-based reform.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

OBC sub-categorisation has been examined by the Justice G. Rohini Commission, constituted in 2017.

Reservation policy in India operates within the framework established by Articles 15(4), 16(4), and related constitutional provisions.

Do not treat this editorial as opposing caste enumeration; it explicitly supports data collection while cautioning against treating it as sufficient on its own, a nuanced distinction examiners may test directly.

THE DEBATE

FOR (proceed with enumeration, but manage expectations): Better data is unambiguously useful for policy design even if it does not guarantee that beneficial policy action follows.

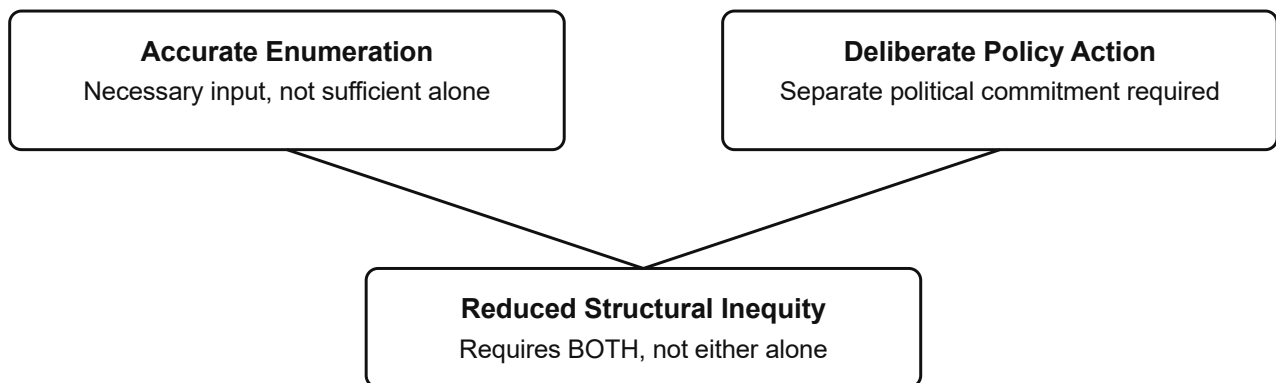
AGAINST (skepticism about political will risks becoming an excuse): Overemphasising the gap between data and action could be used, deliberately or not, to deprioritise the enumeration exercise itself.

Balanced verdict: The most productive framing treats enumeration as a necessary but insufficient step, valuable and worth pursuing rigorously, while insisting equally strongly on parallel commitments to translate resulting data into concrete policy action.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

When an information-gathering exercise (a census, a survey, an audit) is proposed as addressing a structural problem, separate the value of better information from the separate, harder question of whether the political and administrative will exists to act on it. Both matter, but conflating them leads to either overpromising what data alone can achieve or undervaluing the genuine usefulness of accurate information.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



TAKEAWAY BOX

A census can tell you exactly how unequal a society is. It cannot, by itself, make that society less unequal.

Justice G. Rohini Commission (2017), OBC sub-categorisation; Articles 15(4) and 16(4).

Is it ethically sufficient for the state to gather data on inequity without a committed follow-through plan to act on it?

Connects to past UPSC Mains questions on affirmative action and evidence-based welfare policy in India.

“Accurate data is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reducing structural inequity.” Examine with reference to India’s caste enumeration efforts.

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● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Indian Express supports the collection of caste data through the current enumeration exercise but cautions strongly against treating the count itself as a policy solution, arguing that reliable statistics can meaningfully inform welfare targeting and evidence-based policy design but cannot, by themselves, resolve entrenched structural caste-based inequities that require sustained, deliberate policy action beyond data collection.



SUPPORTING

- Accurate, disaggregated caste data can improve the precision of welfare-scheme targeting and highlight previously invisible disparities between and within caste categories, a genuine policy-relevant benefit of enumeration.
- Historical experience with the 2011 SECC and other data exercises shows that even when useful data becomes available, translating it into actual policy change requires separate, deliberate political and administrative will that data collection alone does not guarantee.



COUNTER

A counter-view holds that skepticism about the political will to act on caste data risks becoming a reason to deprioritise the enumeration exercise itself, when in fact better data is a necessary precondition for any future evidence-based reform, even if it does not guarantee that reform will follow.



WAY FORWARD

The editorial's position is that caste enumeration should proceed as a genuinely valuable evidence-gathering exercise, but public and political expectations should be calibrated realistically: the count is an input to policy debate, not a substitute for the harder political work of translating data into effective, targeted structural reform.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Examine why accurate caste enumeration, though a necessary input for welfare targeting, is not by itself sufficient to address structural caste-based inequities. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Indian Express examines the limits of caste enumeration as a policy tool, arguing that while accurate, disaggregated caste data serves a genuine and valuable purpose for welfare targeting, expecting the count itself to resolve structural caste inequities conflates data collection with policy action.

BODY

The editorial's central caution is definitional: enumeration produces information, a necessary input for evidence-based policy design, but information is not itself a remedy for the underlying structural conditions it describes. Reliable, disaggregated caste data can genuinely improve welfare-scheme targeting precision, for instance by revealing disparities within broad caste categories that aggregate data conceals, informing debates on OBC sub-categorisation, and providing an evidentiary basis for reservation-policy calibration that has historically been contested for lacking robust data support.

However, the editorial cautions that historical experience, including the fate of the 2011 SECC data itself, shows that the availability of usable data does not automatically translate into policy action; that translation requires separate, deliberate political will, administrative capacity, and sustained follow-through that data collection alone cannot substitute for or guarantee. This distinction matters practically because public and political debate can sometimes treat the completion of a data-collection exercise as itself a form of closure or resolution on caste-based inequity, when the harder, more consequential work, deciding what specific policy actions the data should inform and then implementing them, remains entirely undone at that point.

CONCLUSION

A complete Mains answer should treat data collection and policy action as analytically separate stages requiring separate forms of political commitment, since conflating them risks either overstating what an enumeration exercise alone can achieve or, conversely, becoming a reason to deprioritise valuable data collection due to skepticism about subsequent political will.

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