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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Will the Caste Census Inflate OBC Numbers? The Evidence Says No

 INDIAN EXPRESS

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GS1

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Census returns are confidential and cannot be used to grant or deny any individual benefit. If that is so, why does the fear of strategic misreporting in a caste census persist so strongly in public debate?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)

The Indian Express

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

*You cannot have a **perverse** incentive without a reward. Census returns are confidential, so the reward does not exist.*

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Caste enumeration sits at the intersection of social justice, constitutional law and statistical governance. It is among the most examinable GS1 and GS2 topics of this cycle, and this editorial supplies the **empirical** and legal counter to the most common objection.

GS Paper 1: Salient features of Indian society; social empowerment; caste and social **stratification**.

GS Paper 2: Mechanisms and institutions for the protection of vulnerable sections; welfare schemes; government policies.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Section 15, Census Act, 1948	Individual census records are confidential and inadmissible in evidence	The provision that removes the alleged incentive
Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011	A separate enumeration whose caste data were never fully released	The precedent for classification failure
Indra Sawhney (1992)	Upheld 27 per cent OBC reservation, capped total reservation at 50 per cent, introduced the creamy layer	The constitutional ceiling any enumeration will press against

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The History of Caste Enumeration

YEAR	DEVELOPMENT
1931	Last full caste enumeration in the decennial Census
1951 onward	Independent India enumerated only Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, not other castes
1979	Mandal Commission constituted under B. P. Mandal; reported 1980
1990	Mandal recommendation of 27 per cent OBC reservation in central government services implemented
1992	Indra Sawhney v. Union of India upheld 27 per cent, capped total reservation at 50 per cent, mandated exclusion of the creamy layer
2011	Socio Economic and Caste Census conducted; caste data never fully released in usable form
Forthcoming Census	Caste enumeration to be included

The Constitutional Architecture

PROVISION	CONTENT
Article 15(4) and 16(4)	Enabling provisions for special measures and reservation in favour of backward classes
Article 340	Presidential power to appoint a commission to investigate the conditions of backward classes
Article 338B	National Commission for Backward Classes, given constitutional status by the 102nd Amendment, 2018
Article 342A	Specification of socially and educationally backward classes
105th Amendment, 2021	Restored the power of States to identify their own socially and educationally backward classes

The **Rohini Commission**, constituted in **2017** under Article 340, examined the **sub-categorisation of OBCs**, on the finding that a small number of dominant communities had captured a **disproportionate** share of the 27 per cent quota.

THE ANALYSIS

1. The incentive argument fails at the first step. A perverse incentive requires a reward. **Section 15 of the Census Act, 1948** provides that individual census records are not open to inspection and are not admissible in evidence. A census entry therefore cannot be produced before any authority to claim a benefit. Caste certificates, which actually unlock reservation, are issued by revenue authorities under State-specific procedures involving documentary proof and community verification, a process entirely separate from the Census. Misreporting to the enumerator yields nothing usable.

2. The empirical record contradicts the prediction. National Sample Survey rounds from **1999-2000 to 2017-18** recorded the OBC share within a broadly stable band of roughly **41 to 44 per cent**. Reservation benefits existed throughout that period. If self-reported caste were elastic in response to benefit availability, that elasticity should have shown up across nearly two decades of large-sample surveys. It did not.

3. The counter-argument about salience deserves an honest hearing. A decennial Census conducted amid intense national debate is not psychologically identical to a routine statistical survey. Salience can alter response behaviour, and the stability of past survey data does not conclusively rule this out. The right response is not to dismiss the concern but to note that it is testable through post-enumeration surveys, which are a standard census quality-control instrument.

4. The real risk is classification, not candour. India has thousands of caste names, with regional variants, synonyms, differing transliterations and overlapping sub-caste identities. A respondent answering truthfully may give a name that maps to several entries, or to none, in a State list. **SECC 2011** is the

cautionary precedent: it collected caste data that proved so difficult to classify that it was never fully released in usable form. That was a failure of instrument design, not of respondent honesty.

5. Accurate enumeration is politically consequential regardless of accuracy. If enumeration confirms an OBC share materially above the 27 per cent quota, it will generate pressure to revisit the **50 per cent ceiling** set in **Indra Sawhney**. This is a real consequence, but it is an argument about what to do with data, not an argument against collecting it. Conflating the two is the most common error in this debate.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Census Act, 1948; Section 15 makes individual returns confidential and inadmissible in evidence.

The last full caste enumeration in the decennial Census was 1931.

Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC), 2011: caste data never fully released in usable form.

Mandal Commission: constituted 1979 under B. P. Mandal, reported 1980; 27 per cent OBC reservation implemented 1990.

Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992): upheld 27 per cent OBC reservation, capped total reservation at 50 per cent, mandated exclusion of the creamy layer.

Article 340 (commission on backward classes); Article 338B (NCBC, constitutional status via the 102nd Amendment, 2018); Article 342A; 105th Amendment, 2021 restored States' power to identify SEBCs.

Rohini Commission, constituted 2017, on sub-categorisation of OBCs.

NSS rounds 1999-2000 to 2017-18: OBC share broadly stable at roughly 41 to 44 per cent.

*The **Census** and the **SECC** are different exercises under different legal authority. The Census is conducted under the **Census Act, 1948** with statutory confidentiality; the SECC 2011 was an executive exercise outside that Act, which is precisely why its data could be considered for release. Do not treat the two as interchangeable.*

THE DEBATE

FOR (fears of inflation are unfounded): Section 15 removes any usable reward for misreporting, since census returns cannot establish an **entitlement**. Two decades of NSS data show a stable OBC share. The identified risk is classification difficulty, which is an instrument-design problem with known solutions.

AGAINST (the concern is not baseless): A politically salient Census differs from a routine survey in ways that historical stability cannot fully settle. More importantly, accurate enumeration will itself generate pressure to breach the Indra Sawhney ceiling, so the exercise is consequential whatever the numbers show.

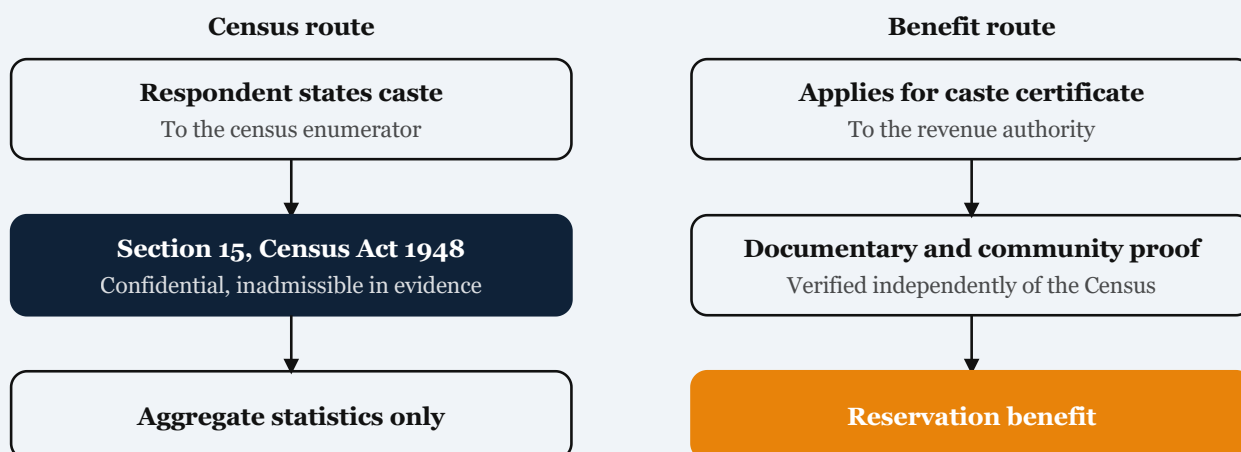
Balanced verdict: The two sides are largely arguing past each other. The incentive objection, taken on its own terms, is weak: the law removes the reward and the data contradict the prediction. The salience concern is legitimate but testable through post-enumeration verification. The ceiling concern is real but is an argument about policy response, not about data collection. Sound policy requires accurate data, and the case for withholding measurement because the results may be politically inconvenient is not a statistical argument at all.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

When someone predicts strategic misreporting in a data-collection exercise, run a three-step test before accepting it. First, identify the specific reward the misreporter obtains, and check whether the law actually delivers it. Second, look for a natural experiment: has a comparable exercise already been run under similar incentives, and what happened. Third, ask whether the objection is really about the data or about the policy the data might justify.

Applying that test here: the reward does not exist because of Section 15, the natural experiment is two decades of NSS rounds showing stability, and much of the objection is in substance about the fifty per cent ceiling rather than about enumeration accuracy. Separating those three questions is what makes the answer analytical.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



The two routes never connect, which is why the alleged incentive has no payoff

The misreporting fear assumes a bridge between the left column and the right one. Section 15 is precisely the provision that prevents such a bridge from existing.

TAKEAWAY BOX

You cannot have a perverse incentive without a reward. Census returns are confidential, so the reward does not exist.

Census Act 1948, Section 15 confidentiality; last full caste census 1931; SECC 2011 caste data never fully released; Mandal Commission 1979, report 1980, implemented 1990; Indra Sawhney (1992) 27 per cent and the 50 per cent ceiling plus creamy layer; Article 340, Article 338B via the 102nd Amendment 2018, Article 342A, 105th Amendment 2021; Rohini Commission 2017; NSS OBC share broadly stable at roughly 41-44 per cent.

Is there ever a defensible case for a State declining to measure a social characteristic because the results may be politically destabilising?

Connects to past UPSC Mains questions on caste as a factor in Indian politics, on reservation policy and the creamy layer, and on the sub-categorisation of OBCs.

“Objections to caste enumeration are more often objections to what the data might justify than to the accuracy of the data itself.” Critically examine.

Source: Will the Caste Census Inflate OBC Numbers? The Evidence Says No — [Ujiyari.com](https://ujiyari.com) | Free UPSC & State
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• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in The Indian Express, the argument is that the widely voiced fear that people will falsely self-declare as Other Backward Classes in a caste census in order to capture reservation benefits is empirically unsupported, because successive National Sample Survey rounds from 1999-2000 to 2017-18 show the OBC population share remaining broadly stable at roughly 41 to 44 per cent, and because Section 15 of the Census Act, 1948 makes individual returns confidential and inadmissible in evidence, so a census declaration cannot be converted into an entitlement.



SUPPORTING

- The incentive alleged does not exist in law: because census records of individuals are confidential and cannot be produced before any court or used to establish any claim, a person who misreports caste in the Census gains nothing that could be used to obtain a benefit.
- The empirical record contradicts the prediction, since the OBC share reported in large-sample surveys conducted over nearly two decades has remained within a narrow band rather than drifting upward, despite reservation benefits having been available throughout that period.
- The genuine methodological risk lies elsewhere, in the difficulty of recording and classifying thousands of caste names, synonyms, sub-castes and spellings consistently, which is a problem of questionnaire design and expert classification rather than of respondent honesty.



COUNTER

The counter-view is that survey self-reporting and a full census differ in salience: a census conducted amid intense public debate about reservation may prompt strategic responses that a routine statistical survey does not, and that even accurate enumeration will generate political pressure to expand reservation beyond the fifty per cent ceiling laid down in Indra Sawhney, making the enumeration consequential regardless of its accuracy.



WAY FORWARD

The argument implies that effort should shift from policing respondent motives to strengthening instrument design: a structured caste questionnaire with pre-coded entries

drawn from State lists, expert anthropological classification of returns, publication of the methodology in advance, and a clear public statement that census returns carry no entitlement consequence for any individual.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Caste enumeration in the Census has been opposed on the ground that it creates incentives for strategic misreporting. Critically examine this argument in light of the confidentiality provisions of the Census Act, 1948 and available survey evidence. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The decision to enumerate caste in the forthcoming Census has revived an old objection, namely that respondents will misreport their caste to gain access to reservation benefits, inflating the recorded Other Backward Classes population. The Indian Express argues that this objection fails on both legal and empirical grounds, and that the real risk lies in classification rather than in candour.

BODY

The legal argument rests on Section 15 of the Census Act, 1948, which provides that records of individual census returns are not open to inspection and are not admissible in evidence. The consequence is decisive for the incentive argument: a census entry cannot be produced to claim a reservation benefit, a certificate or any other entitlement, since caste certificates are issued by revenue authorities under State procedures on the basis of documentary and community verification entirely separate from the Census.

A respondent who misreports therefore acquires nothing usable. The empirical argument is equally direct. Successive National Sample Survey rounds between 1999-2000 and 2017-18 recorded the OBC share of the population within a broadly stable band of roughly 41 to 44 per cent, even though reservation benefits were available throughout and respondents had every opportunity to overstate. Prediction and record diverge.

Against this, the counter-argument has genuine force: a decennial Census conducted amid sustained national debate carries far greater political salience than a routine sample survey, and salience can alter response behaviour in ways that historical survey stability does not fully rule out. The more durable concern, however, is methodological.

India has thousands of caste names with regional variants, synonyms, spelling differences and overlapping sub-caste identities, and the 1931 Census, the last full caste enumeration, together with the Socio Economic and Caste Census of 2011, whose caste data were never fully released, both illustrate how classification difficulty rather than respondent dishonesty defeats usable output.

CONCLUSION

A balanced answer should hold that the incentive objection is weak because the law removes the incentive and the data contradict the prediction, while accepting that accurate enumeration will itself generate political pressure around the fifty per cent ceiling in Indra Sawhney. The priority is instrument design, a structured pre-coded questionnaire with expert classification, rather than suspicion of respondents.

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