

The politicisation of caste data

Survey findings deserve public scrutiny before becoming instruments of mobilisation

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For over a decade, Karnataka has collected caste data without establishing a transparent, democratic process for interpreting its significance. On July 16, BJP MLC Keshava Prasad called for the latest Social and Educational Survey report to be tabled in the legislature and debated for three days. While the demand is politically motivated, the underlying principle is valid: a report with the potential to reshape reservations, welfare priorities, and political representation should not remain solely under government control.

The state's prior experience underscores this necessity. In 2015, a comprehensive socio-economic and educational survey covered approximately 5.98 crore individuals. Successive governments avoided public engagement with the findings. The Jayaprakash Hegde-led Backward Classes Commission submitted its report in February 2024. Following a Cabinet review in 2025, the government commissioned a new survey. The survey commenced on September 22, 2025, utilising an estimated budget of Rs 420 crore. The Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes submitted its report to then Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on May 27, 2026. However, public knowledge remains shaped more by political claims and selective leaks than by an official release. The government's response that the Cabinet will review and decide perpetuates a cycle of data collection, concealment, and speculation.

In the absence of an official report, community organisations mobilise around unofficial figures, political parties disseminate data that supports their interests, and rumours gain the status of statistics. Dominant communities fear underrepresentation, smaller communities fear erasure, and marginalised groups suspect that unfavourable findings will be suppressed. Each unreleased report thus becomes a focal point for competing anxieties.

The survey also presents limitations that warrant public examination. Enumeration was voluntary following a Karnataka High Court directive that citizens could not be compelled to participate and that collected information must remain confidential. Bengaluru, in particular, posed significant challenges for enumeration. At one point, statewide household coverage reached approximately 85%, while Bengaluru's coverage lagged considerably; subsequent extensions improved participation, yet a substantial segment remained uncounted or withheld information.

No comprehensive dataset is without flaws. However, these limitations necessitate that the government release the methodology, coverage rates, definitions, coding pro-

cedures, procedures for handling missing data, and margins of uncertainty alongside the conclusions. A caste survey should not be regarded as an unquestionable numerical verdict; rather, it constitutes evidence that requires transparent interpretation.

While individual household records must remain confidential, anonymised aggregate findings, district-level patterns, socio-economic indicators, and the report's recommendations can be published without compromising citizen privacy. The government should issue a detailed technical note, allow independent academic review, and establish a secure process for qualified researchers to access anonymised data. Public access should be structured and regulated, not entirely restricted. Then debate not merely which caste is numerically larger, but what the survey reveals about deprivation.

Three considerations

Karnataka's political discussion has become trapped in a demographic auction: communities are treated as claimants presenting population strength in exchange for a greater share of state benefits. But the commission's statutory purpose is not to award influence to the largest bloc. It is to identify social and educational backwardness. Landlessness, schooling, occupational vulnerability, access to public employment, housing and regional inequality matter as much as population.

A substantive debate must therefore distinguish among three questions often conflated in political discourse: Who is underrepresented? Who is socio-economically disadvantaged? And which policy instrument—reservation, targeted welfare, educational investment, or regional development—is most appropriate? Karnataka should establish a statutory publication protocol for such commissions. Reports should be released within a fixed period after submission; methodology and aggregate data should be published simultaneously; an independent expert panel should review data quality; and the legislature should debate the findings before major policy changes are announced.

Caste data is frequently justified on the grounds of social justice. This justification is credible only if the data is managed democratically. Information collected from citizens using public funds should not be transformed into electoral intelligence accessible primarily to ministers, party strategists, and influential caste associations.

Suppression has already produced suspicion. The state must choose between an evidence-based public argument and a private contest based on leaks. A caste survey becomes an instrument of justice only when its numbers cease to be political property and become part of the democratic commons.

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