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Caste Census: The Bihar Survey and the National Debate

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Caste Census: The Bihar Survey and the National Debate

In 2023, Bihar published the first big caste survey of a state in modern times. It set off a national argument. In 2025, the Union government decided to count caste in the Census. **This lesson explains what Bihar found, what the courts decided, and how Census 2027 will work.**



The Patna High Court gate. The Court upheld Bihar's caste survey on 1 August 2023. Photo: Shivamsetu, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons (File page).

At a glance

Four points to fix in your head

01
2 October 2023

Bihar released its caste survey findings.

02
63.13%

Reported share of OBCs and EBCs together in Bihar.

03
30 April 2025

Union decision to include caste in the Census.

04
Jan–Feb 2027

General population enumeration for most states and UTs.

Enumeration The head-count phase of a census.
EBC Extremely Backward Classes.
SECC Socio-Economic and Caste Census, 2011.
NCBC National Commission for Backward Classes.

1 Is a state caste survey the same as the national Census?

No. They are two different exercises with different legal footing. Bihar ran a **state caste-based survey** in 2023. The national **Census** belongs to the Union government.

The Census falls under **Entry 69 of the Union List**. **Article 246** gives Parliament exclusive power to make laws on Union List subjects. Census 2027 runs under the **Census Act, 1948** and the **Census Rules, 1990**, as amended.

Think of a school test and a board exam. A school can test its own pupils to plan its teaching. Only the board runs the official exam. Bihar's survey was like the school test. The Census is like the board exam.

A common mistake is to think the court gave states the Census power. It did not. The Patna High Court upheld Bihar's survey on **1 August 2023**. It accepted that a state may collect information to plan welfare measures. It did not hand Parliament's Census power to the states.

So keep three ideas apart. A survey is run by a state. The Census is run by the Union. Caste enumeration means counting caste inside the Census. (Source: Patna High Court judgment.)

2 Was 1931 the last time anyone collected caste information?

No, and the claim needs care. The **1931 Census** is the last *published* full caste count. People use it as the baseline in this debate. But caste information was collected after 1931 as well.

The **1941 Census** also collected caste information. Its caste results were never published. Later, the **Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011** collected caste details through a separate exercise. Its socioeconomic data came out without the caste data. The Home Ministry confirmed this on **26 July 2022**.

Independent India's censuses kept counting **Scheduled Castes (SCs)** and **Scheduled Tribes (STs)**. They did not count other castes separately. That is the real gap behind the demand.

Picture a class register. It lists two groups of pupils by name. Everyone else goes into one line. Later censuses treated castes outside the SC and ST lists in much the same way.

So avoid writing that India last collected caste data in 1931. Write that 1931 is the last published national caste baseline. (Source: Ministry of Home Affairs.)

> **Quick check 1.** Independent India's censuses stopped counting SCs and STs. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 What did Bihar's survey find?

Bihar's survey began on **7 January 2023**. The state released its caste population findings on **2 October 2023**. The reported population was about 13.07 crore. The main result was that Backward Classes and Extremely Backward Classes together formed the largest block.

Survey category	Reported share
Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs)	36.01%
Backward Classes (commonly called OBCs)	27.12%
Scheduled Castes	19.65%
Scheduled Tribes	1.68%
General or unreserved	15.52%

Contemporary reports put the Backward Classes and EBCs together at **63.13%**. (Source: Akashvani.)

One small mismatch confuses readers. Akashvani gave the Backward Classes share as 27.12%. The Indian Express gave 27.13% on release day. This is a reporting difference. It is not a change in the population.

Use the table with care. The shares add up to the whole state. The EBC group is the largest single slice. Quote any figure with its date and source.

> **Quick check 2.** Bihar's 2023 findings placed OBCs and EBCs together above 63%. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 Did the survey measure income too?

Yes. Bihar tabled the economic findings in both houses of its legislature on **7 November 2023**. They counted about **94.42 lakh families** with a total monthly income of **₹6,000 or less**. The reported share was **34.13%**.

Read this number carefully. It is the share of families inside the survey's stated income bracket. It is not a national poverty rate. It is not an international poverty rate either. Never relabel it as one.

Here is a simple way to see the difference. Suppose a school reports that one-third of pupils scored below 40 marks. That tells you about that school's test. It does not tell you how all schools in India are doing. The Bihar figure works the same way.

Why does income matter in a caste survey? Population shares show how many people belong to a group. Income figures show how those groups are doing. Planners need both before they design welfare schemes. (Source: Times of India.)

5 Why was Bihar's survey challenged in court?

Petitioners raised two main objections. First, they challenged the **state's authority** to run the exercise. Second, they raised **privacy** concerns about collecting religion, caste and monthly income details.

The Patna High Court first halted the survey on **4 May 2023**. It then upheld it on **1 August 2023** in **Ankit Roushan v. State of Bihar**. The Court accepted the state's competence and the survey's welfare purpose. It applied the **proportionality** test to the privacy challenge. This test asks whether an intrusion is reasonable for the goal it serves.

Census privacy works differently. **Section 15 of the Census Act** denies a right to inspect individual census records. It also restricts their use as evidence. The exception covers specified prosecutions for offences under the Act.

The key idea is simple. Publishing group totals is one thing. Revealing one household's answers is another. The first helps planning. The second invades privacy. (Source: Patna High Court judgment.)

6 Did upholding the survey also uphold Bihar's 65% quota?

No. The two went to court separately. The survey was upheld in 2023. The quota increase was struck down in 2024.

Bihar's 2023 amendments raised reservation for the covered SC, ST and backward-class groups from **50% to 65%**. On **20 June 2024**, the Patna High Court struck down those amendments. The lead case was **Gaurav Kumar v. State of Bihar**, heard with connected petitions.

Bihar went to the Supreme Court. On **29 July 2024**, the Supreme Court refused an interim stay. It admitted Bihar's challenge for hearing. That was a step in the case. It was not a final judgment.

Reports in September 2026 still described the 65% increase as struck down. They also described protests demanding that the higher quota be put into effect.

Here is why this matters. A survey tells you how many people are in each group. A quota is a legal rule that must pass its own test. Good data does not make a rule valid on its own. (Source: Patna High Court judgment.)

> **Quick check 3.** Upholding Bihar's survey also upheld its later 65% reservation increase. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

7 Is 50% an absolute ceiling on reservation?

Not for every arrangement. There is a **general ceiling of 50%** for backward-class reservation. There are also separate rules that sit outside it.

Indra Sawhney v. Union of India set the general 50% ceiling in **1992**. The Supreme Court reaffirmed the rule in the Maratha reservation judgment on **5 May 2021**.

The **103rd Amendment** added **Articles 15(6) and 16(6)**. These provide for reservation for economically weaker sections (EWS). The Supreme Court upheld the amendment in **Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India** on **7 November 2022**. So avoid saying that 50% caps all reservation in every form.

One more point helps with exam traps. The Maratha judgment rejected population-based arguments as enough to cross the general ceiling. A group's population share alone does not justify a bigger quota. Caste data can inform policy. It cannot replace the legal test.

Picture a bus with 100 seats. The general rule keeps at most 50 for one kind of reservation. A separate rule for another group can still apply. The ceiling is a rule for one category, not a wall around everything. (Source: Supreme Court, 5 May 2021.)

> **Think it through: how would you turn a caste count into a welfare plan?**
>
> Suppose a survey reports population, school completion, household income and public employment by community. Which comparisons would you make before proposing scholarships or training programmes? Explain why you chose them.

8 Which constitutional provisions matter here?

Five provisions come up most often. Learn what each one does. Then keep three jobs apart: **counting** a community, **recognising** it as backward, and **granting** reservation.

Provision	What it does
Article 15(4)	Enables special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes, SCs and STs.
Article 16(4)	Enables reservation in state services for backward classes the state finds inadequately represented.
Article 46	Directs the state to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections, especially SCs and STs.
Article 338B	Provides for the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC).
Article 342A	Addresses the Central List of socially and educationally backward classes.

The **102nd Amendment** gave the NCBC constitutional status in **2018**. A body created by ordinary law is statutory. A body named in the Constitution is constitutional. That is the difference exams like to test.

The **105th Amendment** lets states and Union Territories keep separate lists for their own purposes. So a caste can be on a state list without being on the Central List. (Source: Constitution of India.)

Quick check 4. The 102nd Amendment gave the NCBC constitutional status. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

9 What did the Union decide in 2025?

The Union government decided to count caste inside the national Census. On **30 April 2025**, the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs decided to include caste enumeration in the upcoming Census. It chose the main Census instead of a separate survey.

On **4 June 2025**, the Home Ministry announced Census 2027 with caste enumeration.

Why does the choice of route matter? The Census has a firm legal base. The Census Act protects individual records. A stand-alone survey would sit on weaker ground, as the SECC 2011 experience shows.

Be careful with cause and effect. Bihar's survey came in 2023. The Union decision came in 2025. These are two dated milestones. It is not established that Bihar alone caused the Union decision. Many forces shaped the debate.

A good way to write it for an exam is to give the dates and stop there. State what happened and when. Avoid adding a reason that no source confirms. (Source: Home Ministry.)

10 How will Census 2027 record caste, and why is that disputed?

The population-enumeration questionnaire was notified on **14 August 2026**. **Question 10** reads "Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribe (ST)/Caste." For respondents outside the SC and ST groups, it uses an

open caste field. The enumerator writes down the caste name the person declares.

The dispute is about names. The same community may be known by different names. Some names are synonyms. Spellings and usage also differ across regions. An open field can produce many variants of one community.

Critics have proposed a preloaded caste list, often called a dropdown. A list would reduce spelling variants. But a list can leave out a community, or force someone to pick a label they reject.

Think of a form where you type your town. People may write one town in five spellings. A dropdown fixes that. But if your town is missing, you are stuck. The caste question faces the same trade-off on a far larger scale.

These are method questions. They are not questions about whether caste will be counted. (Source: NDTV, 30 August 2026.)

> **Think it through: how would you design the caste question?**
> Compare an open text field with a preloaded dropdown. How would each handle synonyms, migration, an unlisted community and a person who rejects the available labels?

11 What is the Census 2027 schedule?

Census 2027 runs in two phases. **Houselisting** came first. It was planned for April to September 2026. Each state or Union Territory chose one continuous 30-day period, after 15 days of self-enumeration.

Population enumeration is the second phase. It collects individual demographic and socioeconomic details, including caste.

Area	Population enumeration
Most states and UTs	January–February 2027, per the 30 October 2026 announcement. Reference date: 1 March 2027.
Ladakh and specified snow-bound areas of J&K, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand	September 2026. Reference date: 1 October 2026.
Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, non-snow-bound Uttarakhand	Self-enumeration 16–30 November 2026. Door-to-door 1 December 2026–4 January 2027. Revision 5–9 January 2027.

The **reference date** is the moment the count is taken as of. It is not the first day of fieldwork. The general reference date is 00:00 hours on 1 March 2027. The advanced schedule uses 5 January 2027. Notifications dated 5 September 2026 replaced the earlier timetable for the four states. (Source: Home Ministry.)

> **Quick check 5.** As of October 2026, every state had the same population-enumeration timetable. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

12 What happened in the courts in October 2026?

Three developments came in the last weeks of October. None of them stopped the Census.

On **12 October 2026**, the Supreme Court asked the Solicitor General for a note on Census data-collection procedures. The plea raised worries about caste self-declaration without verification. The Court did **not** issue formal notice. It did not invalidate self-declaration. It did not stop the Census. Treat it as a request for procedural clarification.

On **28 October 2026**, the Supreme Court declined to entertain the OBC Federation of India's request for a preloaded caste dropdown. It allowed the petitioners to approach the Registrar General and Census Commissioner. A report on 31 October called the dropdown a policy matter. It said the petition could be treated as a representation to the Census authorities.

Another 31 October report reaffirmed Uttar Pradesh's enumeration dates of 1 December to 4 January. It rejected rumours of postponement that arose from the separate 30 October notification.

Where does this leave things? National caste results are not available yet. The general population count was scheduled for January–February 2027. Until then, the debate rests on notified questionnaires and schedules. (Source: LiveLaw.)

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Census 2027

MCQ on Caste Census

Try 6 practice questions on this topic.

Practice MCQs

1. On what date did Bihar release the results of its caste-based survey?

A. 2 October 2023

B. 7 January 2023

C. 15 August 2023

D. 30 April 2025

See answer ↓

2. According to the Bihar caste survey, what combined share of the state's population do OBCs and EBCs make up?

A. About 40%

B. About 63%

C. About 75%

D. About 50%

See answer ↓

3. On 30 April 2025, what did the Union Cabinet decide regarding the next national census?

A. To restrict caste data collection to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes only

B. To conduct caste enumeration as a separate survey from the census

C. To skip the 2026-27 census entirely

D. To include caste enumeration within the main census itself

See answer ↓

4. Before the 2026-27 exercise, in which year did India last collect detailed caste data (beyond SC/ST) in a census?

A. 1931

B. 1971

C. 1991

D. 2011

See answer ↓

5. According to the Bihar caste survey, what share of the state's population did the "General" (forward castes) category make up?

A. About 45%

B. About 25%

C. About 15.5%

D. About 35%

See answer ↓

6. Who was the first Chairman of the Backward Classes Commission (the Kalelkar Commission)?

A. Jagjivan Ram

B. Kaka Saheb Kalelkar

C. BD Sharma

D. BR Ambedkar

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** Bihar released its caste-based survey results on 2 October 2023, after door-to-door data collection that began on 7 January 2023. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** OBCs (27.12%) and EBCs (36.01%) together make up 63.13% of Bihar's population, according to the 2023 survey. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The Union Cabinet decided that caste enumeration should happen within the main census itself, not as a separate survey, to reduce political contestation. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** India last collected detailed caste data beyond SC/ST in the 1931 census, nearly a century before the planned 2026-27 exercise. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The General category made up about 15.52% of Bihar's population, according to the 2023 caste-based survey. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** Kaka Saheb Kalelkar served as the first Chairman of the Backward Classes Commission, set up in 1953. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3
4. **False.** ↑ 4
5. **False.** ↑ 5

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