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## **Government not for caste census**

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*Opinion in Cabinet divided*

New Delhi: Despite the growing demand for collection of caste-wise data during the ongoing Census exercise, the Union government has decided there will be no change in the way the population is being enumerated. At the same time, it is ready to discuss and consider other ways of generating a more accurate statistical picture of the caste composition of Indian society, highly placed sources told The Hindu on Tuesday.

With a number of national and regional parties demanding that the current census be modified to include caste, the Cabinet discussed the matter in order to firm up the government's position before Wednesday's discussion in Parliament. But though the status quo is to prevail, the meeting saw sharp divisions between Ministers arguing for and against change. According to sources, there were three distinct positions: those opposed to any collection of caste data, those opposed to the use of the census but not to some other statistical or survey method, and those in favour of including caste in the census.

The Census of India, which was first conducted synchronously in 1881, collected universal caste-wise population data until 1931. Though the census continues to count the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, the Other Backward Classes have not been enumerated for 80 years, prompting some parties to argue that their share of the population — and, thus, to the reservation pie — might be higher than what the Mandal Commission extrapolated from decades-old census data.

At Tuesday's Cabinet meeting, Home Minister P. Chidambaram, whose Ministry oversees the census, argued against the demand to include caste. He said the enumerators lacked the sociological sensitivity to record and classify the population on the basis of caste and sub-caste. According to sources, he suggested that the backward classes commissions at the State and Central levels be better placed to conduct a detailed survey. Others not inclined towards a caste census were Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Human Resources Minister Kapil Sibal.

The meeting ended with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pointing to the need for more discussion in government and within the UPA constituents.

Opposition parties, including the BJP, the SP, the RJD, the JD(U) and the CPI, have been demanding that since reservation and other benefits were given to people on the basis of caste, the government should reintroduce caste in the census.

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