

INDEX

1	Introduction.....	3
2	Mandal Commission.....	4
3	Caste Enumeration.....	5-6
4	Census Methodology in India.....	7-8
5	SC/ST Certification for Muslims.....	9
6	Delimitation.....	10-12
7	Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill 2026.....	13-14
8	Gerrymandering and Democratic Representation.....	15
9	Agenda 2.....	16
10	Overview.....	17
11	FTAs Signed.....	18
12	Recent Investments.....	19
13	Problems with the FTAs.....	20-21
14	Benefits of these FTAs.....	22
15	Fast Tracking of FTAs.....	23

INTRODUCTION

The census in India is one of the most important administrative and political exercises conducted by the state. It is carried out every ten years under the Census Act, 1948 and serves purposes far beyond simply counting the population. Census data forms the basis for parliamentary representation, reservation policies, delimitation of constituencies, fiscal planning, welfare distribution, and implementation of social justice programs. In a country as socially and culturally diverse as India, the census plays a central role in shaping governance and democratic representation.

After Independence, Indian leaders faced a dilemma regarding caste enumeration. While caste discrimination remained a major social reality, leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru believed that officially counting caste categories could reinforce social divisions and obstruct national integration. Therefore, post-independence censuses recorded only Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), while broader caste enumeration was discontinued after 1931.

However, the growth of reservation politics and social justice movements revived demands for updated caste data, especially after the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990. In recent years, debates surrounding caste census, Muslim SC status, delimitation, and representation have once again highlighted the constitutional and political importance of census operations. The Union Government's decision in 2025 to include caste enumeration in the upcoming census has further intensified these discussions.

MANDAL COMMISSION

Historical Background and Constitutional Significance

The Mandal Commission, officially called the Second Backward Classes Commission, was established in 1979 under Prime Minister Morarji Desai and chaired by Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal. It was constituted under Article 340 of the Constitution, which authorizes the President to appoint a commission to examine the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes.

The roots of backward class politics in India go back to the colonial period, when several princely states and provinces introduced reservation measures for socially disadvantaged communities. Social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, and B. R. Ambedkar strongly criticized the caste hierarchy and argued that structural inequalities could not be removed through formal equality alone. Ambedkar particularly emphasized that political democracy would remain incomplete without social democracy.

The Mandal Commission attempted to identify Other Backward Classes (OBCs) using social, educational, and economic indicators. Since no nationwide caste data existed after 1931, the commission relied heavily on 1931 Census figures and estimated that OBCs constituted nearly 52% of India's population. It recommended 27% reservation for OBCs in central government jobs, along with measures aimed at educational advancement and greater representation of backward communities in public administration.

The constitutional basis for these recommendations came primarily from Articles 15(4), 16(4), and 46, which permit special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes and direct the state to promote the interests of weaker sections. When Prime Minister V. P. Singh implemented the recommendations in 1990, massive protests erupted across the country, especially among upper-caste students. Despite this opposition, Mandal politics permanently transformed India's political landscape by empowering backward caste groups and reshaping electoral alliances.

CASTE ENUMERATION

Historical Evolution and Contemporary Debate

Caste enumeration refers to the collection of caste-wise population data during census operations. Under British rule, caste was comprehensively recorded from 1871 to 1931 as part of colonial administrative policy. However, after Independence, broader caste enumeration was discontinued because many national leaders feared that official recognition of caste categories would strengthen caste consciousness and weaken national unity.

Despite this policy change, reservation systems for OBCs continued to operate without updated demographic data. This created a major contradiction in public policy because the government recognized backward classes for affirmative action purposes but lacked accurate information regarding their actual population size and socio-economic conditions.

The last major attempt to collect caste data on a national scale occurred through the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) of 2011. Although socio-economic information was released, the caste data was never fully published due to concerns regarding duplication, spelling inconsistencies, classification errors, and methodological limitations.

Supporters of caste census argue that updated caste statistics are essential for evidence-based policymaking. According to them, caste inequalities continue to influence access to education, employment, land ownership, political representation, and welfare benefits. They also argue that accurate caste data is necessary for sub-categorization within OBCs so that dominant groups do not monopolize reservation benefits meant for more marginalized communities.

States such as Bihar and Karnataka have already conducted caste-based surveys. In Karnataka, survey findings became linked with proposals to increase OBC reservation levels significantly. Advocates believe that modern governance requires accurate social statistics to measure inequality and design fair welfare policies.

Opponents, however, fear that caste enumeration could intensify caste-based politics and deepen social fragmentation. Critics argue that official counting of caste identities may encourage political mobilization based primarily on caste interests rather than broader democratic values. The Supreme Court has also observed that excessive caste-based political mobilization may distort representative democracy.

Another major issue concerns methodology. India has thousands of castes and sub-castes with regional differences in names and classifications. Questions therefore arise regarding self-identification, standardization of caste lists, categorization of sub-castes, and the possibility of political manipulation of data. Nevertheless, India's upcoming census is expected to become both the first digital census and the first full caste census since 1931.

CENSUS METHODOLOGY IN INDIA

Administrative and Constitutional Dimensions

The Census of India operates under the Census Act, 1948 and is conducted by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner. Under Article 246 of the Constitution, census falls within the Union List, making it the exclusive responsibility of the central government.

Traditionally, census operations are conducted in two phases: the house-listing and housing census, followed by population enumeration. The census gathers detailed information relating to population size, religion, language, literacy, occupation, migration, age structure, sex ratio, disability, and education. This information is extremely important because it influences parliamentary representation, delimitation of constituencies, allocation of central funds, welfare planning, and urban development policies.

India's 2021 Census was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in serious administrative and political complications. Many government programs and planning decisions continue to rely on 2011 Census figures, even though India's demographic profile has changed significantly over the past decade.

The forthcoming Census 2027 is expected to introduce major technological reforms such as digital self-enumeration, mobile-based data collection, GIS mapping, and real-time monitoring systems. Reports suggest that citizens may be allowed to self-register online before verification by enumerators. These reforms are expected to improve efficiency and reduce delays in data processing.

However, digital census systems also raise important concerns. India continues to face a significant digital divide, especially between urban and rural populations. Marginalized communities may face difficulties in accessing online systems, which could result in exclusion or undercounting.

Concerns regarding privacy, cybersecurity, and data protection have also become increasingly important in the digital era.

Questions have additionally emerged regarding the relationship between census operations and citizenship verification exercises such as the National Population Register (NPR) and National Register of Citizens (NRC). Minority communities, especially Muslims, have expressed apprehension regarding demographic verification processes and possible misuse of data.

Methodological accuracy is therefore essential because inaccurate census data can distort electoral representation, reservation policies, welfare distribution, and fiscal federalism. Thus, census methodology is not merely a technical administrative exercise but a matter with profound constitutional and political implications.

SC/ST CERTIFICATION FOR MUSLIMS

Constitutional and Judicial Debate

One of the most controversial issues connected to census and social justice debates concerns whether Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians should receive Scheduled Caste status. Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution empower the President to identify Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes through official notifications. However, the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950 restricted SC status exclusively to Hindus. This restriction was later extended to Sikhs in 1956 and Buddhists in 1990, but Muslims and Christians continue to remain excluded.

The original rationale behind this restriction was that untouchability was historically associated with the Hindu caste system. Critics, however, argue that caste-based discrimination often continues even after religious conversion. Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians frequently continue to face occupational segregation, social exclusion, economic deprivation, and residential discrimination despite changing their religion.

Several important committees and commissions have examined this issue, including the Sachar Committee in 2006 and the Ranganath Misra Commission in 2007. The Ranganath Misra Commission recommended removing religion-based restrictions on SC status. However, governments have remained cautious because the issue involves sensitive questions relating to minority rights, secularism, reservation limits, and religious identity politics.

Recent caste census debates have also focused attention on Pasmanda Muslims, many of whom belong to socially and economically backward occupational groups categorized as OBCs in several states. The broader constitutional debate therefore concerns whether affirmative action policies should be based primarily on religion or on actual historical discrimination and social disadvantage. The Supreme Court continues to hear petitions related to this issue, making it one of the most important unresolved questions in India's constitutional and social justice framework.

DELIMITATION

Delimitation is the process of redrawing the boundaries of constituencies according to changes in population. In India, this process is important because ideally each elected representative should represent roughly the same number of citizens. Over time, because of migration, urbanisation and uneven population growth, some constituencies become far more populated than others. Without delimitation, some MPs may end up representing larger populations, creating inequality in representation and weakening equal vote value.

The delimitation process is carried out by an independent delimitation commission appointed by the President of India. The commission generally consists of a retired Supreme Court judge, the Chief Election Commissioner or their representative and State Election Commissioners.

North vs. South Conflict

The biggest point of contest around the exercise is a North vs South divide, with North India with significant population growth benefitting with more proportionate seats, while South India — a significant contributor to the GDP (around 30–31%) — getting its proportionate seats reduced over lesser population growth rate due to effective family planning practices. Southern states have, time and again, flagged that mere population alone shouldn't be the criteria for such revisions, or additions.

Going by the government's proposal, the biggest gainers would be Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Maharashtra.

If seats are redistributed according to present-day population, northern states are expected to gain a much larger share of seats in Parliament. Southern states fear this could reduce their influence despite stronger performance in healthcare, literacy and demographic stabilisation.

Representation and Equity

The representation argument is based on the democratic principle of “one person, one vote.” According to this view, states with larger populations should naturally have more MPs because they contain more citizens. Supporters argue that every citizen’s vote should carry roughly equal weight, and that the current arrangement underrepresents highly populated states. The equity argument focuses on fairness between states.

Southern states argue that they implemented policies encouraged by the Union Government, especially population control measures, and therefore should not lose political influence because of successful governance.

Fiscal Federalism

Fiscal federalism refers to the financial relationship between the Union Government and the states, particularly regarding taxation, revenue sharing and distribution of funds.

Several southern states have argued that they already contribute significantly to India’s economy and tax revenue while receiving comparatively lower redistribution benefits in some areas. Their concern is that reduced parliamentary representation after delimitation may also reduce their influence over national financial policymaking.

Political implications

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Recent developments

Women's Reservation Bill and Delimitation Bill 2026 have reignited debates on federalism, representation equity, and political balance.

CONSTITUTION (131ST AMENDMENT) BILL 2026

This is the core constitutional amendment enabling structural transformation.

Key Provisions:

- Expansion of Lok Sabha: Amends Article 81 to increase the strength from 543 to 850 seats (815 States + 35 UTs).
- Delimitation Decoupling: Modifies Article 82 of the Constitution of India to remove the mandatory link between delimitation and every Census.
- Enables delimitation based on the latest available Census (likely 2011) rather than waiting for the post-2026 Census.
- Amends Article 170 of the Constitution of India (State Assemblies) and provisions related to SC/ST reservation.
- Fast-tracks Women's Reservation by amending Article 334A of the Constitution of India to operationalize 33% quota immediately after delimitation (target: 2029 elections).

Delimitation Bill 2026

Provides the institutional mechanism for redrawing constituencies.

Key Provisions:

- Establishes a new Delimitation Commission headed by a Supreme Court judge.
- Members include Election Commission representatives and state election officials.

- Powers equivalent to a civil court.
- Mandate:
 1. Reallocate seats across states
 2. Redraw constituency boundaries
 3. Determine SC/ST and women's reservation

Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill 2026

- Extends delimitation and women's reservation to UTs with legislatures:
 - Delhi
 - Jammu & Kashmir
 - Puducherry

GERRYMANDERING AND DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION

Gerrymandering refers to the manipulation of electoral boundaries in order to favor specific political interests. Although India uses independent Delimitation Commissions rather than direct legislative control over constituency boundaries, concerns regarding political representation and regional imbalance continue to exist.

Additional concerns also exist regarding minority representation, reservation of constituencies, and urban-rural imbalance. Critics argue that any unfair delimitation process could indirectly resemble gerrymandering by creating political advantages for certain regions or groups.

Therefore, fair delimitation remains essential for maintaining representative democracy, political equality, and federal balance in India.

AGENDA 2:

Discussing recent Indian trade policy, with emphasis on FTAs and state-based investments

A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is a treaty between two or more countries designed to reduce or eliminate barriers to trade—such as tariffs, quotas, and duties—on goods and services exchanged between them. The goal is to boost economic cooperation, increase market access, and make imports/exports cheaper and easier.

OVERVIEW

Over the past decade, India has strengthened its position in global commerce through a new generation of FTAs aimed at expanding market access and deepening economic partnerships. India now has nine FTAs covering 38 countries, reflecting its growing integration with global markets.

The rationale for India's FTAs includes: diversification and expansion of export markets; selectively cheaper access to raw materials, intermediate products and capital goods; and seeking openings in modes and sectors of India's interest in services trade.

Indian exporters are increasingly leveraging FTAs, as indicated by the rise in preferential Certificates of Origin issued — 720,996 in FY 2024–25, up from 684,724 in FY 2023–24.

Purpose: To create a more open, predictable, and transparent trading environment.

Scope: Beyond tariff reductions, modern FTAs include rules on investments, intellectual property rights (IPR), government procurement, and services.

Distinction: Unlike Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) which use a "positive list" (specific items), FTAs often use a "negative list," covering almost all traded items.

Types: Includes bilateral agreements (two countries) or regional blocs.

FTAS SIGNED

India has aggressively pursued bilateral agreements to integrate with the global economy while bypassing Chinese dominance. Key agreements and negotiations include:

- **India-UAE CEPA:** A comprehensive partnership agreement implemented in 2022 that covers goods, services, and digital trade.
- **India-Australia ECTA:** This agreement came into effect in December 2022, securing access to critical raw materials.
- **India-EFTA TEPA:** An agreement signed with the European Free Trade Association in March 2024.
- **India-Oman CEPA:** Signed in December 2025, this deal eliminates duties on 99.38% of Indian exports to Oman.
- **India-New Zealand FTA:** Negotiations concluded in December 2025, completing India's strategy to have deals with all RCEP members except China.
- **India-UK CETA:** Signed in July 2025, this agreement grants duty-free access to 99% of Indian exports. It aims to double bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030. **India-EU FTA:** Termed the "mother of all deals," this was signed in January 2026. It covers nearly 99% of India's export value to the bloc and opens access for Indian traditional medicine (AYUSH) practitioners

RECENT INVESTMENTS IN TERMS OF STATES

The more recent FTAs — with UAE, Australia, EFTA, the UK, and Oman — consist of cleverly structured pacts combining tariff reductions, access to services, investments, and protections that serve to increase exports and imports in a more balanced way while keeping vulnerable industries safe. After signing the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with New Zealand India now has FTA with all Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) countries, except China.

Key sectors gaining from recent FTAs include:

- Textiles & Leather — Duty-free access in the UK market, estimated at \$3–4 billion.
- Chemicals & Pharmaceuticals — A 30–40% increase in India's chemical exports to the UK is anticipated, worth an estimated \$650–750 million for 2025–26.
- IT & Services — UK has provided comprehensive market access in 137 sub-sectors including IT/ITeS, financial services, education, healthcare, and professional services.
- MSMEs — Entrepreneurs and women-led MSMEs can expand exports in sectors such as garments, leather goods, and handicrafts.

PROBLEMS WITH THE FTAS

a) Widening Trade Deficit

The majority of India's FTAs have failed to produce their desired results and have contributed to India's high trade deficit. India's imports from its FTA partners have increased more than its exports. In the period between 2017 and 2022, India's exports to its FTA partners increased by 31%, while its imports increased by 82%. In Q1 FY26 (April–June 2025), imports from FTA countries jumped to \$65.3 billion, up 10% year-on-year, while exports fell to \$38.7 billion, down 9%. The result was a \$26.7 billion trade deficit — about 59% higher than a year earlier.

b) Low Utilisation Rate

India's FTA utilisation remains very low at around 25%, while utilisation for developed countries typically sits between 70–80%. This low utilisation highlights India's alarming failure to take advantage of the benefits made available through its bilateral and multilateral trade agreements.

c) Trade Diversion & Import Dependence

This pattern reflects textbook trade diversion. Tariff cuts under FTAs have made partner-country goods cheaper in India, so imports of inputs and fuels have surged. Meanwhile, comparable export gains have not materialised. India has opened the door wide for its FTA suppliers, who send in raw materials and components, but domestic manufacturers have not matched this by penetrating foreign value chains.

d) Weak Global Value Chain (GVC)

Integration India's exports to ASEAN have sharply declined while imports remain strong, compounded by delayed FTA renegotiation. The challenge lies in aligning FTAs with India's manufacturing ambitions, ensuring reciprocal gains, and leveraging sunrise sectors to achieve sustainable, export-led growth.

e) Rules of Origin Abuse

India has faced the issue of a secular rise in trade deficit and a reduction in export potential of competitive sectors. Relaxation of stringent rules of origin (ROO) requirements, trade facilitation measures, and domestic policies are needed to improve the scope and potential of future FTAs.

f) Weak Negotiating Capacity

One of the main challenges for India is the lack of subject matter expertise and institutional memory in trade negotiations. Foreign negotiators tend to have more experience, putting India at a disadvantage. Foreign negotiators are battle-hardened with years of expertise, unlike in India where officials are rotated periodically.

g) China Dependency Persists

Despite stated intentions to reduce import dependence on China, India's trade deficit with Beijing widened to \$99.21 billion in 2024–25. India imports between 60–80% of its Rare Earth Permanent Magnets from China, highlighting a significant vulnerability in supply chains for strategic industries.

In summary, India's FTA strategy has entered a more ambitious and structured phase since 2021, but significant structural challenges — particularly the persistent trade deficit, low utilisation, and weak GVC integration — remain hurdles that policy reforms must address to fully realize the benefits of these agreements.

BENEFITS OF THESE FTAS

- **Market Access:** The India-EU deal is expected to remove duties on over 99% of India's export value to the region. Similarly, the Oman pact offers duty-free access to 98.08% of tariff lines.
- **Boost to Labor-Intensive Sectors:** Sectors such as textiles, leather, gems, jewelry, and footwear stand to gain significantly from duty elimination.
- **Services and Mobility:** New agreements focus heavily on services. The Oman deal allows for the long-term stay of Indian professionals and 100% FDI in key service sectors. The EU deal aids Indian traditional medicine (AYUSH) practitioners.
- **Strategic Sourcing:** Agreements with Australia and GCC nations secure energy sources and critical minerals necessary for India's growth.
- **Investment Inflows:** These partnerships aim to attract foreign investment. For example, the India-UK pact targets a bilateral trade of \$100 billion by 2030.
- **Integration of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs):** Recent FTAs explicitly focus on MSMEs integration into the global economy as MSMEs contribute 50% of the country's exports.
- **Mobility:** Recent deals aggressively push for the movement of professionals.
- UK deal includes social security exemptions, and the New Zealand pact includes visa quotas for Indian workers.
- **Geo-economics (Supply Chain Diversification):** The "China Plus One" strategy drives India to forge ties with friendly nations to reduce economic dependence on a single supply chain.

FAST TRACKING OF FTAS

Here are the FTAs that India fast-tracked, announced by Commerce Secretary B V R Subrahmanyam as part of India's revamped foreign trade strategy:

India announced it would fast-track FTAs with at least six nations — the UAE, the UK, Australia, Canada, and the EU — over a few months, in line with its revamped foreign trade strategy. The earliest one was expected to be linked with the UAE.

Of these, the ones that actually came through quickly were:

India–UAE CEPA (May 2022) — aimed at raising overall trade to \$100 billion in five years, removing or lowering tariffs on more than 80% of goods.

India–Australia ECTA (December 2022) — described as historic, aiming to double bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030, with 100% of Australian imports from India getting immediate duty-free access by 2026.

India–New Zealand FTA (2025) — a fast-tracked pact aimed at doubling trade to \$5 billion in five years, granting 100% duty-free access to Indian exports in New Zealand.

The reason for fast-tracking these specifically: India had walked away from the China-backed RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) and was therefore not part of any major regional trade arrangement, making bilateral FTAs more strategically urgent to avoid being shut out of global markets.