Census to include caste, Govt says will work out modalities

Express news service Tags : Parliament, UPA Posted: Sat May 08 2010, 23:30 hrs New Delhi:

Yielding to majority opinion expressed in Parliament during a two-day debate on the need for a caste census, the UPA government has decided to make suitable changes in its ongoing census exercise to include a headcount on the basis of caste.

Finance Minister and Leader of Lok Sabha Pranab Mukherjee said this evening that counting on the basis of caste would be included in Census 2011. “We will be doing it,” he said. Speaking to reporters after the Lok Sabha was adjourned sine die, Mukherjee said it would be the first time after 80 years that a caste census would be done. “The last time it was done, was in 1931,” he said.

Welcoming the move, Law Minister Veerappa Moily, who had been openly advocating a headcount on the basis of caste, said: “As for the modalities, we will work them out in the next few days”.

An indication that the government had accepted the demand voiced by a majority of lawmakers came a
couple of hours earlier when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told Lok Sabha that the Cabinet would shortly be taking a decision on the issue. “I am aware of the views of honourable members belonging to all sections of the House. I assure you that the Cabinet will take a decision shortly,” he said.

That the Prime Minister’s comments were promptly welcomed by the BJP as well as the Yadav trio — who had spearheaded the campaign for a caste-based census — who also thanked Congress president Sonia Gandhi, made it clear that the UPA government had changed its stand on the matter. An hour earlier, the BJP, SP, RJD and JD(U) had walked out of the House after expressing dissatisfaction over Home Minister P Chidambaram’s reply to the census debate. OBC leaders including Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lalu Prasad, Sharad Yadav and BJP deputy leader Gopinath Munde subsequently met Pranab Mukherjee where it seems that the government decided to reconsider its earlier stand. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pawan Bansal and Chidambaram were also present at the meeting.

Replying to the debate in Lok Sabha, Chidambaram had persisted with his ministry’s contention that the main aim of the exercise was merely headcount and including caste in the list would yield inaccurate results owing to
logistical problems. He had argued that the 21 lakh enumerators were neither qualified nor trained to make a caste census, given the complexity of the country’s social structure.

“The enumerator is not an investigator or verifier,” he said. “There is a central list of OBCs and state-specific lists of OBCs. Some states do not have a list of OBCs while some states have a list of OBCs and a subset called MBCs,” he said.

Quoting the Registrar General, Chidambaram said issues regarding methodology, avoiding phonetic and spelling errors, stage of canvassing of caste, maintaining integrity of enumeration and doing an accurate headcount of population will arise. He did though leave the door ajar on the issue, saying views of members would be a “valuable guide” to the government.

Just before the Lok Sabha debate, the government had convened a sudden meeting of the Cabinet earlier this week to discuss the issue of caste-based census where a majority of those who spoke favoured inclusion of caste. The two-day Lok Sabha debate also saw a majority of speakers advocate caste-based census.

Home ministry sources said that new forms would have to be printed where caste would have to included. “The
Ministry of Social Justice will have to do verification after the caste is named. That itself will be an exercise” a senior official said.