

## [India's Climate Policies Fall Short Because They Refuse to See Caste](#) (The Quint Op-ED)

India's [historic decision in April 2025](#) to include caste enumeration in its upcoming national census marks a watershed moment for the climate justice movement in India. For the first time since 1931, the world's most populous nation will systematically count its caste populations, creating unprecedented opportunities to understand how social hierarchies intersect with climate vulnerabilities. Yet this breakthrough also exposes a glaring truth: for nearly a century, India has crafted climate policies while remaining willfully blind to who actually bears the burden of environmental disasters.

The consequences of this data apartheid are stark. [Recent research](#) reveals that marginalized caste groups face 25-150% higher heat exposure during work compared to dominant caste groups, controlling for education, income, and geography. [Heat action plans](#) across Indian states systematically exclude caste-based vulnerabilities despite clear evidence that occupational segregation determines climate exposure. Meanwhile, climate vulnerability assessments like [Mapping India's Climate Vulnerability](#) that guide billions in adaptation funding operate through frameworks that render caste invisible.

### **The Hidden Architecture of Climate Inequality**

India's approach to climate vulnerability assessment exemplifies sophisticated technical methodologies built on fundamentally flawed social assumptions. India's climate vulnerability assessments, including the Department of Science and Technology's [Common Vulnerability Assessment Framework](#), incorporate socioeconomic indicators such as population density, income levels, and healthcare access without explicitly disaggregating by caste, despite evidence that caste significantly shapes climate

vulnerability. This creates an illusion of social neutrality while obscuring how centuries of caste-based resource exclusion shape contemporary climate risks.

Consider the framework's calculation of "adaptive capacity" - a composite measure including access to healthcare, education, and economic resources. Without caste data, policy makers cannot see that [71% of Scheduled Castes work as agricultural laborers](#) earning below poverty thresholds. They cannot track how Dalit women construction workers, despite representing significant portions of heat-exposed labor, remain invisible in occupational safety planning. Most critically, they cannot design interventions that address structural inequalities rather than merely their symptoms.

These omissions translate into life-and-death decisions when climate disasters strike. When devastating floods hit Kerala in 2018, [Seena's](#) Dalit family walked three kilometers to a relief center at a temple, only to be told they weren't allowed to enter because they weren't from the dominant Nair community. In 2019, when Cyclone Fani hit Odisha, [Bijoy's Dalit family](#) was initially turned away from relief shelters. When finally allowed entry, they were told to ["stay in a specific part of the shelter and would not come close"](#) to dominant caste families. When using the single water pump, other caste members would ["wash the hand pump with water and clean their hands before they used it."](#)

Because caste status never appears in vulnerability frameworks, disaster response protocols treat such exclusions as logistical oversights rather than structural failures requiring systematic redress.

This data blindness isn't accidental - it's systematic. India's [Climate Vulnerability Index](#), developed by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, maps district-level climate risks using exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity indicators. Yet none capture how caste determines access to resilience resources. When Tamil Nadu registers as highly climate vulnerable, we cannot distinguish between

upper-caste farmers with irrigation access and landless Dalit agricultural workers dependent on rain-fed crops.

### **From Abstract Statistics to Political Power**

As anti-caste scholar Sumeet Samos & Arjun Ramachandran argues in [The Quint](#), existing datasets from government surveys "have struggled to galvanise Bahujan mobilisation or invoke moral outrage due to a lack of caste-disaggregated clarity." The same problem plagues climate policy. Each year, we hear that marginalized communities face disproportionate climate risks, yet these figures remain "distant and abstract" without caste-specific data that communities can use to demand concrete interventions.

Samos demonstrates how caste enumeration transforms political discourse from symbolic recognition to structural redistribution. Applied to climate policy, caste-disaggregated vulnerability data would similarly shift adaptation, mitigation and disaster risk management strategies from generalized programs to targeted interventions addressing root causes of environmental inequality. [International climate finance mechanisms](#) increasingly demand vulnerability assessments to allocate funding.

***Yet how can India credibly identify its most climate-vulnerable communities without disaggregated social data?***

Current climate finance tracking reveals [41% of claimed adaptation finance](#) fails to address actual climate risks. [India's climate finance requirements](#) are estimated at \$160-288 billion annually through 2030. Without caste-conscious vulnerability assessments, these massive financial flows risk reinforcing existing inequalities.

## **The Politics of Environmental Enumeration**

The [Modi government's reversal](#) on caste census - moving from calling it "divisive" to describing it as "historic" reflects growing recognition that effective governance requires accurate social data. Yet translating this commitment into climate-conscious governance requires confronting how India's social hierarchies shape environmental vulnerability.

As scholar Gail Omvedt noted in her [analysis](#) of caste enumeration, gathering caste information provides a 'crucial foundation' for addressing discrimination. Post-independence India's abandonment of caste enumeration left policy makers and social activists 'disarmed in their efforts to analyze and act' – a problem that extends directly to climate policy.

Caste operates as invisible infrastructure maintaining inequality through its invisibility. [Analysis of India's National Action Plan on Climate Change](#) by National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) reveals that while the plan acknowledges vulnerable populations, it operates on assumptions that climate actions will 'by default benefit marginalized communities' rather than implementing targeted mechanisms to ensure systematic inclusion."

## **Toward Climate Justice Through Census Populism**

Caste enumeration enables what scholars call "census-populism" – using official data to build cross-caste coalitions around shared socioeconomic conditions rather than identity alone. Applied to climate policy, this framework suggests caste-disaggregated climate vulnerability data could unite marginalized communities around shared environmental risks, moving beyond cultural tokenism toward material demands for climate justice.

Such data would expose how adaptation investments flow primarily to already-privileged communities. Heat action plans would be required to address [occupational segregation](#) that concentrates climate risks among marginalized people. Early warning systems would need to reach informal settlements where displaced climate migrants, disproportionately from marginalized castes, concentrate.

Most importantly, marginalized communities could use caste census data to claim space in climate governance. Rather than appealing for inclusion based on humanitarian grounds, they could present evidence of systematic exclusion from climate resilience investments and demand structural redress.

### **The Census as Climate Justice Tool**

The upcoming caste census creates unprecedented opportunities for climate justice advocacy. Civil society organizations can demand that climate vulnerability assessments incorporate caste data from enumeration exercises. Environmental justice researchers can document how caste-based exclusion amplifies climate risks across sectors and regions.

Caste enumeration would move political discourse "beyond cultural tokenism and symbolic representation to insist on accountability and material justice." The same transformation could revolutionize climate policy, shifting from abstract vulnerability metrics toward concrete, caste-conscious adaptation strategies.

The state governments that design climate action plans currently operate with incomplete social data. [Bihar's recent caste survey](#) revealed demographic realities dramatically different from decades-old assumptions.

*How many other states are designing climate interventions based on colonial-era social mappings?*

India's climate policies will remain fundamentally unjust as long as they operate through frameworks that render social hierarchies invisible. The caste census offers an historic opportunity to move beyond technocratic climate planning toward truly inclusive environmental governance.

Census politics has already begun and is well underway, unleashing political movements that transform disparate communities into cohesive blocs demanding structural change. Climate policy makers can either recognize this transformation and build caste-conscious adaptation frameworks, or risk having climate interventions bypassed by political movements demanding structural environmental justice.

Whether India seizes this opportunity or continues privileging abstract vulnerability metrics over social realities will determine not just climate outcomes, but the very meaning of climate justice in the world's most populous democracy.

The choice is clear: continue climate policies that preserve existing inequalities through data blindness, or use the caste census as a tool for building climate resilience that reaches all Indians, regardless of the accident of their birth. It is better to have transparent caste politics now than environmental catastrophe later.

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