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Kolkata, May 19 (PTI) The West Bengal government on Tuesday discontinued religion-based categorisation schemes and regularised 66 communities that were included in the state's OBC reservation list prior to 2010, restoring their eligibility for a seven per cent quota.

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The move followed the state cabinet's decision to scrap the existing state OBC list in compliance with a Calcutta High Court judgment in May 2024, which struck down the OBC status and certificates issued to 77 additional communities, primarily added between 2010 and 2012, declaring the inclusions illegal and unconstitutional.

Ahead of the proposed Census exercise in the state, the development is likely to reshape caste calculations and have far-reaching socio-economic consequences, experts opined.

The notification, issued by the state Backward Classes Welfare Department, said these communities, clubbed under a single category and three of whom are Muslim, will now be eligible for a seven per cent reservation in government services and posts.

The current regularisation replaced the previous system which allotted 10 per cent reservation under Category A, identified as 'more backward', and seven per cent under Category B, termed 'backward'.

The list includes several traditional and social communities such as Kapali, Kurmi, Sudradhar, Karmakar, Sutradhar, Swarnakar, Napit, Tanti, Dhanuk, Kasai, Khandait, Turha, Devanga, and Goala, among others.

The three Muslim communities included in this list of backward classes are Paharia, Hajjam and Chowduli.

Addressing reporters following a state cabinet meeting on Tuesday, state minister Agnimitra Paul had announced the scrapping of the existing OBC list, calling it a decision aimed at ensuring social justice and transparency in line with court directives.

This high court verdict cancelled roughly 12 lakh OBC certificates while protecting the positions of individuals who had secured them through the quota. The court ruled that certificates issued

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Experts said the move by the Suvendu Adhikari-led government could significantly alter the state's reservation landscape by intensifying competition among OBC groups, adding that the issue could assume greater significance in light of the upcoming census exercise in the state.

"The newer communities were added to the pre-2010 list during the final years of the erstwhile Left Front government and during the subsequent Mamata Banerjee era," said Jawhar Sircar, former top civil servant.

"A significant majority of these communities were Muslims and were targeted as vote banks without proper socio-economic surveys from expert agencies to back their inclusions," Sircar said.

He said that, unlike the roughly 24 per cent scheduled caste community presence in West Bengal, who are also mostly Hindus, the government's understanding of the OBC population continues to remain vague.

"With a large number of Muslims now disenfranchised from the OBC list, the impact is more likely to be political than socio-economic," Sircar said.

An OBC researcher and social justice activist, requesting anonymity, said the upcoming census data, once the exercise is completed in Bengal, is unlikely to record the true status of OBCs in the state, with a significant section of them now removed.

"Our research showed that on account of the higher quota, there was a marginal improvement in the presence of Muslims in the state's higher education institutions as well as in certain job sectors like the police force and teaching positions in schools and colleges. Now that they will have to compete in the general category, their representation is likely to slide drastically," he said.

Although the Mamata Banerjee administration included a large number of groups from the minority communities in the OBC reservation list, there were hardly any efforts to initiate targeted development programmes for their socio-economic advancement, besides offering them monthly stipends, Sircar said. PTI SMY NN

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