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## The Big Picture: Census- Challenges & Importance

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There have been rising instances of attack on field enumerators conducting **National Sample Survey exercise** in some areas of Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal owing to **apprehensions and mistrust** people have gathered regarding the **new citizenship law** and the **pan India NRC exercise**.

- This can negatively affect the house-listing operation and the updation of the **National Population Register (NPR)** exercise, which is set to begin in April for Census 2021.
- In this backdrop, conducting household and other surveys with the 'Census as the frame' would be very tough going ahead.

## Census

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- A population Census is the process of collecting, compiling, analyzing and disseminating demographic, social, cultural and economic data relating to all persons in the country, at a particular time in ten years interval.
- India is recognised for its '**Unity in diversity**' and the Census gives the citizens a chance to study this diversity and associated facets of their nation through its society, demography, economics, anthropology, sociology, statistics, etc.

## Historical Background

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- The earliest literature '**Rig Veda**' reveals that some kind of population count was maintained during 800-600 BC.
- Kautilya's Arthashastra (written around 321-296 BC) laid stress on Census taking as a measure of State policy for **purpose of taxation**.
- During the regime of Mughal king Akbar, the administrative report '**Ain-e-Akbari**' included comprehensive data pertaining to population, industry, wealth and many other characteristics.
- The **first Census** was conducted in India in 1872 (although non-synchronously in different parts) during the reign of **Governor-General Lord Mayo**. The first complete synchronous Census was conducted in 1881.
- With a history of more than 130 years, it has proved to be a reliable exercise that is conducted every 10 years.
- **Census-2021** is the 16<sup>th</sup> such exercise since inception and 8<sup>th</sup> since independence.

## How is the Census Conducted?

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- The primary tool of Census operations is the **questionnaire** that is developed over the years, taking into account the changing needs of the country.
- It is a **list of questions** that helps the government collect all the necessary details required about citizens. The questions enhance the credibility & quality of data if various dimensions of socio-economic issues are well incorporated in the questionnaire.

The name of person, relationship with the head, sex, date of birth and age, current marital status, religion, mother tongue, literacy status inter alia are some of the fundamental questions which are asked by the **enumerators** (a person employed in taking a Census of the population).

- The Census-2021 exercise would be conducted in two rounds:
  - **Household Schedule:** The first round will be conducted in 2020, wherein the enumerators would go on a house-to-house basis to **record amenities** in each household.
  - The second round– '**Headcount**' would be carried out in early 2021 approximately 6 months after the first round.

### **Census Act, 1948**

- Although the population Census of India is a major administrative function, the **Census Organisation** was set up on an **ad-hoc basis** for each Census till the Census of 1951.
- The **Census Act**, enacted in **1948**, then provided for the permanent scheme of conducting population Census with duties and responsibilities of Census Officers.
  - The Act makes it obligatory on the part of every citizen to answer the Census question truthfully and also penalises for giving false information.
  - One of the most important provisions of the Census Act 1948 is that it makes provisions for the **maintenance of secrecy of the information** collected at the Census of each individual. All information collected under the Census is **confidential** and is not shared with any agency- Government or private.

### **Authority Involved**

The Government of India in May 1949 decided to initiate steps for developing the systematic collection of statistics on the size of the population, its growth, etc.

- For this purpose, it established an organisation viz. **Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner** under **Ministry of Home Affairs** (which is responsible for conducting the decennial Census).
- Later, this office was also entrusted with the responsibility of implementation of **Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969** in the country.

### **Importance of Census**

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- **Comprehensive Source of Data:** Census is a data collection exercise. It gathers **knowledge about the demographic dividend** of the nation which is vital for many purposes.
 

Various surveys like health survey, education survey, agriculture survey, etc. are based on this comprehensive data.

- **Decision-making:** Census is significant for any country for **evidence-based decision making**.  
The data collected through the Census is used for **administration, governance, planning and policy-making as well as management and evaluation** of various programmes run or to be introduced by the Government, NGOs, researchers, commercial and private enterprises, etc.
- **Policy-making:** Census is responsible for taking the collected information **“from a dwelling unit to the delivery unit”**. It will boost coherence policy-making and scientific planning, resulting in optimisation of resources.
  - To scholars and researchers in demography, economics, anthropology, and many other disciplines, the Indian Census has been a fascinating source of data.
  - The collected data from the Census is **available to grassroots administrative authorities** of a particular region in order to take appropriate developmental tasks.
  - It helps in **effective targeting and better delivery of government programmes** to the most downtrodden sections of the society.
- **Demarcation:** Census data is also used for the demarcation of **constituencies and allocation** of representation to the Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies and local bodies.
- **Giving Grants: Finance Commission** gives grants to the states on the basis of population figures available from the Census data.

## How is Census-2021 different from Earlier Ones?

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- **Digital Data:** It is for the **first time the data is collected digitally** via mobile applications (installed on enumerator’s phone) with a provision of working in offline mode. This would help in reducing the delay and having the **results almost immediately**, unlike earlier cases where it used to take multiple years for the data to be analyzed and the reports published.
  - The data collected by enumerator on his/her phone will be **registered with the Census authorities**. In case of lack of network availability/connectivity, he/she will also have an option to collect the same information on paper and then make data entries onto the application (in offline mode).
  - **No document** will be required by the citizens to be shown as proof, and **self-declaration** will suffice the same.
- **Census Monitoring & Management Portal** will act as a single source for all officers/officials involved in Census activities to provide **multi-language support**.
- **No Caste Data:** The latest Census (as per the existing plan) will **not collect caste data**. While the **Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC)** was conducted alongside Census 2011, the outcome of the caste Census is yet to be made public.

- **Transgender Head:** It is for the first time that information of households **headed by a person from the transgender community and members** living in the family will be collected. Earlier there was a column for male and female only.

## Associated Challenges

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- **Errors:** There are two types of error during statistical exercise: **Content error, and Coverage error** which needs to be minimised.

People should not be considered as a mere headcount but as citizens having certain basic rights. Therefore, **accurate data collection with minimal exclusion** should be focused upon.
- **Furnishing of false information:** Due to **fear of losing intended benefits** of various schemes (or fear of losing citizenship this time) and **lack of education**, people fabricate and tend to provide false information. For example, people had apprehensions about the data collection of children not going to school and many-a-times they did not answer the survey questions.

In this regard, the Kerala CM urged the people to **acknowledge true information** and take the Census exercise seriously.
- **Associated Costs: Huge expenditure** (thousands of crores) is incurred by the government in conducting this exercise.
- **Security:** The move towards digital mode of collecting the data is a step forward to speed up the process of analysis. However, the **security** of the data being collected (especially on the application) and **adequate backup mechanism** for such data has to be looked into.

The mistrust and fear of misuse of data need to be minimized and mitigated.
- **Abuse of Data:** The availability of data with regional authorities has the potential for abuse of such data, as the concerned authority has access to everything about a particular family (ownership, caste, financial aspects, occupation, lifestyle, etc.).
- Lack of **community participation** and **inadequate training of enumerators** to collect the precise and accurate data acts as a big challenge in conducting the Census exercise.

## Remedial Measures

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- **Capacity-Building:** Proper training of enumerators (data collectors) and organizers should be organised.
  - Also, enumerators should be **well paid** to keep them motivated, as they are the focal point of data collection and ensuring data accuracy. As any disgruntled/aggrieved enumerator can hamper the quality of data.
  - A **conducive safe and secure environment** should be provided to the interviewers.

- **Strengthening the Data Quality:** This can be done by **minimising the coverage error and content error** (through increased list of questions in the survey). It will help in changing the discourse of the government's programme implementation.
- **Organizing Campaigns:** Launching of massive publicity campaigns in order to make people aware about the importance of Census in their life should be organized.
  - Relevant community political & religious leaders, college students (conducting flash mobs) should be involved in order to **spread awareness and educate people**.
  - Also, the government needs to create a **mass media campaign** through print & electronic media (through advertisements) in order to **allay the fears and doubts** haunting the minds of the people.

Census in India is the **largest single source** of a variety of **statistical information** on different characteristics of the people of India. It is a **sacred democratic exercise**. To follow an **integrated approach** should be the aim of all involved stakeholders in order to conduct this exercise in a hassle-free manner.