



Census 2021

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This article is based on **“Conduct the decadal Census of India, 2021”** which was published in The Hindustan Times on 02/06/2021. It talks about the importance of census and why the 2021 census should not be delayed.

Many legacies of the colonial raj continued after 1947. The **Census of India** is one of the many. The term census is derived from the latin term from censere, which means to assess.

Population censuses, typically with a semi-decadal (five-year) or decadal frequency are recognised as indispensable to national resource planning. In India, a census is conducted every decade and **Census 2021** will be the 16th national census of the country.

However, owing to Covid-19 pandemic, we are midway into 2021 and there is no sign of the Census. As the census shapes political structures, economic decisions, development goals, delaying it will have its costs.

Census in India: Background & Importance

In 1858, the Government of India Act 1858 was passed in the British parliament, the company was liquidated, and its authorities were transferred to the British Crown. By this time, the British Crown had taken near-absolute control of India.

- **Intention:** In order to administer the dominion, the British government needed detailed, reliable data on the people and where they lived.
The British government sought to conduct Census in India, as they had been doing it at home since 1801.
- **Origin:** The newly established office of the registrar general and census commissioner launched and completed the first Census of India in 1881.

- **Positive Feedback Loop:** While the intended objective of the Census was to exploit Indian resources and Indians to the maximum, once the data became available, it found traction among a diverse range of user groups.
 - Education departments used the data to plan for primary education.
 - Public works departments used it to plan road networks.
 - Planners used it to locate electric power plants, trunk lines & railways.
 - As the data began to impact infrastructure, it facilitated large-scale population movements and rapid growth of port cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras.
- **Importance:** 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.

It provides valuable information for planning and formulation policies for Central and the State Governments and is widely used by National and International Agencies, Scholars, business people, industrialists, and many more.

Why should we care about the Census in 2021?

- **Delimitation Exercise:** The political balance in the Lok Sabha is about to transform when the next delimitation exercise concludes in 2026.
 - If census 2021 doesn't happen, the states with the poorest record of population management, largely in northern India, will increase their relative presence massively.
 - On the contrary, South and West India will be disadvantaged.
 - Thus, there is a need for a wider palette of demographic variables to inform the exercise.
- **Distribution of Proceeds:** Finance commissions provide guidance on the distribution of tax revenues between the Union and the states.

As the Goods and Services Tax makes deciding the basis of distribution more controversial, the population plays a key role in routing revenue and like in delimitation, disadvantages success and rewards failure.
- **Checking the Polarised Discourse:** Many arguments made by majoritarian politicians are about what they allege to be a shrinking majority and explosive growth of minorities.
 - The Census is the objective, all-India process for determining the situation on the ground.
 - Not only does this give us population data, we can also use various statistical measures such as birth and death rates, fertility rates, gross and net birth rates, and thereby bringing facts to a polarised discourse.
- **Targeted Investments:** There are talks of large-scale investments in infrastructure to restart the economic cycle in Post-Covid-19 period.

The Census helps target the investments, by giving planners a sense of who benefits, how much, and at what cost.

Way Forward

Hence, given the importance of Census the decadal exercise of 2021 must be conducted keeping in the mind the following measures:

- **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.
- **Strengthening the System:** 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.
A safe, transparent, unbiased environment should be provided to the interviewers.
- **Strengthening the Campaigns:** Launching 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.

Conclusion

Census is the basis for reviewing the country's progress in the past decade, monitoring the ongoing Schemes of the Government and most importantly, planning for the future. That is why the Slogan is "Our Census - Our Future".

Drishti Mains Question

As the census shapes political structures, economic decisions, development goals, delaying the 2021 census will have its costs. Discuss.