



## Census in India

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### Overview

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- **Definition:**
  - **Population Census** is the total process of **collecting, compiling, analyzing** and **disseminating demographic, economic and social data** pertaining, at a specific time, of all persons in a country or a well-defined part of a country.  
It also **provides the trends in population** characteristics.
  - The **Indian Census is one of the largest administrative exercises** undertaken in the world.
- **Nodal Ministry:**
  - The decennial Census is conducted by the **Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner**, Ministry of Home Affairs.
  - Until 1951, the Census Organisation was set up on an **ad-hoc basis** for each Census.
- **Legal/Constitutional Backing:**
  - Census is conducted under the provisions of the **Census Act, 1948**.  
The bill for this Act was piloted by **Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel**, the then Home Minister of India.
  - The population census is a **Union subject under Article 246** of India Constitution.  
It is listed at **serial number 69** of the **seventh schedule** of the constitution.
- **Confidentiality of Information:**

The information collected during the population Census is so confidential that it is **not even accessible to the courts of law**.

The confidentiality is guaranteed by the **Census Act, 1948**. The law specifies penalties for both public and census officials for non-compliance or violation of any provision of the Act.

- **Significance of Census:**

- **Source of Information:** The Indian Census is the **largest single source of a variety of statistical information** on different **characteristics of the people of India**.  
Researchers and Demographers use census data to **analyze growth and trends of population and make projections**.
- **Good Governance:** The data collected through the census is **used for administration, planning and policy making** as well as **management and evaluation of various programmes** by the Government.
- **Demarcation:** Census data is also used for **demarcation of constituencies** and **allocation of representation to Parliament**, State legislative assemblies and the local bodies.
- **Better Access for Businesses:** The census data is also important for business houses and industries for **strengthening and planning their business for penetration into areas**, which had hitherto remained, uncovered.
- **Giving Grants:** Finance Commission **provides grants to the states on the basis of population figures** available from the Census data.

## History of Census

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- **Ancient and Medieval Period:**

- **Rigveda:** The earliest literature 'Rig-Veda' reveals that some kind of population count was **maintained during 800-600 BC** in India.
- **Arthashastra:** 'Arthashastra' by 'Kautilya' written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC prescribed the collection of **population statistics as a measure of state policy for taxation**.
- **Ain-i-Akbari:** During the regime of the Mughal king **Akbar**, the administrative report 'Ain-e-Akbari' also **included comprehensive data pertaining to population**, industry, wealth and many other characteristics.

- **Pre-independence Period:**

- **Initial Attempts:**

- The history of the census began with 1800 when England had begun its Census.
- In its continuation, a census was conducted in **Allahabad** (1824) and in **Banaras** (1827-28) by **James Prinsep**.
- The first complete census of an Indian city was conducted in **1830** by **Henry Walter in Dacca** (now Dhaka).

The Second Census was conducted in 1836-37 by **Fort St. George**.

- In 1849, the Government of India ordered the local governments to conduct **quinquennial** (five-yearly) returns of population.
- **First Non-synchronous Census:** It was conducted in India in 1872 during the reign of **Governor-General Lord Mayo**.
- **First Synchronous Census:** The first synchronous census was taken under British rule on February 17, 1881, by **W.C. Plowden** (Census Commissioner of India).

Since then, censuses have been undertaken **uninterruptedly** once every ten years.

## Major Events/Findings in India's Census

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- **First Census (1881):**

It laid main emphasis on the classification of **demographic, economic and social characteristics** of the entire continent of British India (**except Kashmir and French and Portuguese colonies**).

- **Second Census (1891):**

- It was **conducted almost on the same pattern** as of the 1881 census.
- Efforts were made for 100% coverage and the Upper part of present-day **Burma, Kashmir and Sikkim were also included**.

- **Third Census (1901):**

In this Census, Balochistan, Rajputana, Andaman Nicobar, Burma, Punjab and remote areas of Kashmir were also included.

- **Fifth Census (1921):**

- The decade of 1911-21 has been the only one till now to **witness a decadal population decline of 0.31%**.

This was the decade that ended in the **flu pandemic of 1918** which cost at least 12 million lives.

- India's population was continuously increasing until Census 1921 and still has been doing so after the 1921 Census.

Therefore, the census year of 1921 is called the year of "**The Great Divide**" in the demographic history of India.

- **Eleventh Census (1971):**
  - It was the second Census after independence.
  - It added a question for **information on fertility for currently married women.**
- **Thirteenth Census (1991):**
  - It was the fifth Census of independent India.
  - In this Census, the **concept of literacy was changed and the children of the 7+ age group were considered literate** (as compared to 1981 when children up to the age group of 4+ were treated as literate).
- **Fourteenth Census (2001):**
  - It witnessed a quantum **leap in the technology front.**
  - The schedules for the phases were scanned through high speed scanners and handwritten data from the schedules were converted into digitized form through **Intelligent Character Reading (ICR).**
    - An ICR captures handwriting from image files. It is an advanced version of Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology in which printed characters are captured.
- **Fifteenth Census (2011):**
  - In the 2011 Census, **significant fall in case of EAG States** (Empowered action group states: **UP, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Jharkhand, MP, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan & Orissa**) was noticed for the first time.
- **Sixteenth Census (2021):**
  - **Census 2021** was **postponed** owing to the outbreak of **Covid-19** pandemic.
  - However, it will be the **first digital Census**, also with a provision for **self-enumeration.**
  - 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.

## Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC)

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- **About:**
  - The **Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC)** was conducted in 2011 for the first time since 1931.
  - It seeks to canvass every Indian family in rural and urban India, and ask about their:
    - **Economic status**, to allow Central/State authorities to come up with a range of indicators of deprivation which could be used by each authority to define a poor or deprived person.
    - **Specific caste name**, to allow the government to re-evaluate which caste groups are economically worse off and which are better off.

- **Difference Between Census & SECC:**

- **Field of Coverage:** The Census provides a portrait of the Indian population while the **SECC is a tool to identify beneficiaries of state support.**
- **Confidentiality of Data:** The Census data is considered confidential, whereas the **data of SECC is open for use by Government departments** to grant and/or restrict benefits to the people.

- **Significance of SECC:**

- **Better Mapping of Inequalities:** SECC has the potential to allow for a mapping of inequalities at a broader level.

It will be useful to establish statistical justification for **preserving caste-based affirmative action programmes** or welfare schemes.

- **Legally Imperative:** It is also legally imperative as the courts require a 'quantifiable data' to **support the existing levels of reservation.**
- **Constitutional Mandate:** The Constitution of India also favours conducting a caste census.

**Article 340** mandates the appointment of a commission to investigate the conditions of **socially and educationally backward classes** and make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by governments.

- **Associated Concerns with SECC:**

- **Repercussions of a Caste Census:** Caste has an emotive element and thus there exist the political and social repercussions of a caste census.
  - There have been concerns that **counting caste may help solidify or harden identities.**
  - Due to these repercussions, nearly a decade after the SECC, a **sizeable amount of its data remains unreleased** or released only in parts.
- **Caste is Context-specific:** Caste has never been a proxy for class or deprivation in India; it **constitutes a distinct kind of embedded discrimination** that often transcends class.

