



Delay in Decennial Census

This editorial is based on [Don't delay the census further](#) which was published in The Hindustan Times on 24/05/2023. It talks about the delay in Census and how new census will be different from the older one.

Prelims: [Census](#) provisions and history, [Public Distribution System](#), [NFHS 5](#), [Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner](#), [Finance Commission](#), [National Food Security Act, 2013](#)

Mains: Census: Significance, Implication of delay.

While inaugurating the new office of the Registrar General of India (RGI), the Home Minister said that the government will make sure that India's next census (whenever it happens) is smarter and more dynamic. Such objectives are laudable, but it is a matter of concern that the 2021 decadal census has seen such an unprecedented delay.

Some of the praiseworthy forthcoming changes include linking birth and death registration data to the national population register in real time. Not only will this give us a better idea of the state of the population, but it will also make existing databases, such as list of welfare programme beneficiaries and voter lists more accurate.

The census is a count of people in a certain area, but in India, it gives more information than just the number of people. A lot of the information in the census is meant to capture the dynamics within the population: The share of rural and urban population, their occupational status in farm and non-farm and main and marginal work, migration and its longevity, mother tongue and other languages spoken, quality of household dwellings and assets are some such statistics.

What is Census?

- The [census](#) is the process of collecting, compiling, analyzing, and publishing demographic, economic, and social data about a specific population.
- A census provides a detailed picture of the population and its characteristics, including age, gender, education, employment, income, housing, and more.
- The decennial census is conducted by the [Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner](#), Ministry of Home Affairs under the provisions of the Census Act, 1948.
- The census is carried out in two phases viz.
 - **First Phase** is the housing Census, where data on housing conditions, household amenities and assets possessed by households are collected.
 - **Second Phase** is where data on population, education, religion, economic activity, Scheduled Castes and Tribes, language, literacy, migration, and fertility are collected.

What is the History of Census in India?

- The first census in India was conducted in 1872.
- India's first proper or synchronous Census, one which begins on the same day or year across regions of the country, was carried out in 1881 by the colonial administration and has since happened every 10 years.
- The latest census in India was conducted in 2011, and the next census was scheduled for 2021 which has been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and other reasons.

What is Socio Economic Caste Census (SECC)?

- SECC was conducted for the first time since 1931.
- SECC is meant to canvass every Indian family, both in rural and urban India, and ask about their:
 - **Economic status**, so as to allow Central and State authorities to come up with a range of indicators of deprivation, permutations, and combinations of 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 were economically worst off and which were better off.
- SECC has the potential to allow for a mapping of inequalities at a broader level.

What is the Difference between Census and SECC?

- The Census provides a portrait of the Indian population, while the SECC is a tool to identify beneficiaries of state support.
- Since the Census falls under the Census Act of 1948, all data are considered confidential, whereas according to the SECC website, "all the personal information given in the SECC is open for use by Government departments to grant and/or restrict benefits to households."

What is the Significance of Census?

- **Determining Population Size and Demographics:** The primary purpose of a census is to provide an accurate count of the population residing in a particular area. It helps governments understand the size, distribution, and composition of their population. This information is essential for effective governance, policymaking, and resource allocation.
- **Planning and Development:** Census data helps governments make informed decisions about investing in urban planning, infrastructure, and public services by analyzing population trends and characteristics. It identifies areas that require specific attention, such as regions with high poverty rates or inadequate access to healthcare.
- **Electoral Representation:** Census data influences the redrawing of political boundaries and the allocation of seats in legislative bodies. It helps ensure fair representation by accurately reflecting population shifts and changes over time.
- **Resource Allocation and Funding:** Census data helps allocate government funding and resources to meet community needs for education, healthcare, social welfare, transportation, and infrastructure. Accurate data prevents underfunding or neglect of certain areas.
 - The [Finance Commission](#) provides grants to the states on the basis of population figures available from the Census data.
- **Economic Planning and Business Decisions:** Census data helps businesses identify consumer trends, target demographics, assess market demand, and identify opportunities for growth and investment.
- **Social Research and Policy Analysis:** Census data aids researchers, academics, and policymakers in studying trends, understanding societal changes, and evaluating policies. It contributes to evidence-based decision-making and informed public discourse.

What are the Implications of the delay in Census?

- **Targeting the Right Beneficiaries:**
 - Outdated Census information (available from the last Census in 2011) often becomes

- unreliable and affects those who do and do not receive the benefits of welfare schemes.
- For Instance, [National Food Security Act, 2013](#) which provides subsidised foodgrains to poor & vulnerable uses the census data to identify the beneficiaries.
 - According to 2011 census, India's population was about 121 crore and [PDS](#) beneficiaries were approximately 80 crores. However, the world bank has estimated India's population to be 141 crore, PDS coverage should have increased to around 97 crore people.
- Moreover, the [Finance Commission](#) uses census data while granting finances to the states. In absence of exact data allocation of funds to the states would be disproportionate.
- **Challenges for Research and Analysis:**
 - Researchers and policymakers may have to rely on outdated information or alternative data sources, which may not provide the same level of accuracy or granularity.
 - Census data are critical for other sample surveys conducted in the country as they use the Census data as reference. For instance, the latest [National Family Health Survey \(NFHS-5\)](#) released last year used 2011 census data.
- **Impacts the Political Representation:**
 - The Census data is also used to demarcate constituencies and allocate seats in Parliament and State Assemblies. The delay in the Census means that the data from the 2011 Census would continue to be used. This may not reflect the rapid changes in the composition of the population over the last decade.
 - Census data is used for delimitation of constituencies and for determining the quantum of reservation for [Scheduled Castes](#) and [Scheduled Tribes](#). The delay means that either too many or too few seats are being reserved for SC/STs and women in different regions.
- **Compromises the Migration Data:** The Census data is also important to understand migration and migration patterns and its economic impact. The delay in the Census means that the latest information on internal and international migration is not available for policy making and planning.
 - The Covid pandemic has exposed the need for Migration Data. During lockdowns, the govt - in the absence of adequate data - was unable to target migrant laborers stranded in cities far from their homes.
- **Missed Opportunities and Delayed Decision-making:** Timely census data is essential for identifying emerging trends, assessing needs, and seizing opportunities. A delay in the census can result in missed opportunities for targeted interventions, economic planning, and business decisions.

How will the 2021 Census be Different from Previous ones?

- 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.
- The 2021 census will have Other Backward Class (OBC) data, for the first time since the 1931 census.
- The 2021 census will be conducted in 18 languages out of the 22 [scheduled languages](#) and English, while Census 2011 was in 16 of the 22 scheduled languages declared at that time.
- The 2021 census will have a dynamic approach having 31 questions in the house-listing schedule, which include new questions on access to internet, laptop/computer, and LPG/PNG connection.
- First time that information of a person from the **Transgender Community and members living in the family will be collected.**

Conclusion

A delay in the census can have wide-ranging implications, including inaccuracies in population data, hindered planning and development, challenges in resource allocation, impacts on electoral representation, limitations in research and analysis, and missed opportunities for decision-making. It highlights the importance of conducting the census in a timely manner to ensure accurate and up-to-date information for effective governance and development.

Discuss the implications of the delay in conducting a census on governance, planning, and resource allocation.

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtiias.com/current-affairs-news-analysis-editorials/news-editorials/2023-05-25/print>

