



Census in India: From colonial control to democratic governance - A historical study

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Abstract

The Indian Census is the most comprehensive single source of statistical information on numerous elements of the Indian population. This dependable and time-tested activity, which has a history of 130 years, began with the first asynchronous census performed in several regions of India in 1872. After that every 10 years one it was conducted in all over India. The Indian Census provides intriguing data for scientists and academics in demographics, economics, anthropology, sociology, statistics, and other subjects. This decennial census will be carried out by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, which is part of the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Indian government. The Census Act of 1948 set a framework for the census, as well as the tasks and responsibilities of Census officials. In May 1949, the Indian government began taking measures to acquire regular population size statistics. The system was created to generate information related to population statistics such as vital statistics and censuses. Later, this office was assigned the responsibility of carrying out the country's Registration of Births and Deaths Act of 1969. The article portrays the history of the Census, its relevance, and the functions of the government.

Keywords: Census in India, Government of India, demography, Act of 1948, Minister of Home Affairs

Introduction

The Indian census is one of the world's greatest administrative tasks. It is the process of collecting, compiling, and analyzing data on economic, social, and demographic issues in a certain region or nation. It provides information on current demographic trends as well as the status of the country or place. Every 10 years, the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of the Ministry of Home Affairs conduct the census. The Census Bureau was formed to conduct the Census of India till 1951. The census is performed in accordance with the Census Act of 1948. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the then-Home Minister, introduced the bill for this Act. The census is carried out under Article 246 of the Indian Constitution. It is mentioned in the Constitution's Seventh Schedule as serial number 69. The information gathered during the census is strictly secret, and even judges cannot access it.

Meaning and definition

The term 'Census' is derived from the Latin word 'censere', which meaning 'to assess or rate'. A census is an official survey of a country's population to determine population size and demographics. They collected the information like age, occupation, birth, death, literacy, ECT...

Historical background of the India Census

Ancient and Mediaeval Times

According to early literature the 'Rigveda' India's population size was relatively steady about 800-600 BC. Kautilya's 'Arthashastra', a third-century BC, advocated for the use of population data to evaluate governmental tax policy. The 'Ain-i-Akbari', an administrative report from the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar, provides exact information on population, occupation, wealth, and other aspects.

Beginning of the All-India Census

The initial proposal for conducting a population census covering the whole of India was scheduled for 1861. Owing to the disturbances caused by the uprising of 1857, which affected large parts of the country, it was decided in 1859 that undertaking such a census at that time would be inappropriate. In a letter dated 4 May 1865, the Government of Bengal revived the proposal for a nationwide population census. The letter stated that the reasons which had justified postponing the census in 1861 were no longer valid and that the absence of reliable demographic data had been acutely felt throughout the administrative system.

Based on this, the Governor-General in Council recommended to the British Government that arrangements be made for conducting a general population census in 1871. The Secretary of State for India accepted this proposal. Following this approval, the Government of India requested all local governments to submit reports on the best methods for conducting the census by January 1, 1870. The Madras Government replied that a census was not a new procedure in the region and that it could be conducted without any difficulty if proper instructions were provided.

The responsibility for organizing the 1871 census was entrusted to the Board of Revenue. Previous censuses had also been conducted under its guidance, and no other department possessed the necessary experience or administrative machinery. As an initial step, District Collectors were instructed to submit plans regarding the special arrangements and estimated costs for conducting the census in their respective districts. The instructions previously issued by the Board of Revenue for the quinquennial census operations formed the basis of the rules followed in the 1871 census.

The Board of Revenue prepared detailed instructions for the guidance of district and village officials. Under this system, the chief revenue officer in each district was made fully

responsible for the census operations within his area. In municipal areas, the census work was organized and supervised by the municipal commissioners in coordination with the district collectors. This administrative arrangement continued until 1961.

The first stage of the census involved numbering and marking every house in each village and ensuring that all inhabitants of even the smallest hamlets were included within the correct village boundaries. The actual enumeration and filling of forms were completed within a period not exceeding fifteen days. After the data was collected, the enumerators' work was carefully verified by the district authorities. On November 15, 1871, the census records for all towns and villages were finally revised. A special census was also conducted to count travelers and persons who were not at home during the main enumeration. In rural areas, the census was conducted by village officials under the supervision of the senior revenue officers of the district. In municipal towns, the responsibility for the census work rested with the municipal commissioners. The census form first recorded the type of house, i.e., multi-storied house, tiled house, or thatched house. Information regarding age, religion, caste, race, country of birth, occupation, and literacy was collected from each person. For individuals under the age of twenty, additional details regarding attendance at school, college, or private coaching classes were recorded. Separate columns were provided for recording instances of blindness, deafness and muteness, mental illness, and leprosy.

Census of 1881

The Census of 1881 was the first systematic organized census conducted the entire Indian subcontinent. Held on 17 February 1881, with enumeration extending into the following morning, it covered eleven British provinces and seven princely states, excluding only French and Portuguese territories. Conducted under the legal authority of Act XIV of 1880, this census laid the foundation for the modern administrative and organizational framework of census operations in India. Extensive preparatory measures, including the listing of settlements, appointment of responsible officials, maintenance of payment registers, and organization of enumerators on a circle basis, ensured greater accuracy and effective supervision. The findings revealed a population decline of nearly four million, mainly due to the severe famine of 1877-1878, with total famine-related population loss estimated at about eight million by 1881.

Census of 1891

The second census of India, conducted on February 26, 1891, marked a significant step in refining the census methodology. It followed the general framework and categories of information used in the 1881 census; greater attention was paid to regions such as Sikkim and the northern parts of Myanmar (Burma). In an effort to improve accuracy and public understanding, selected census materials were translated into Indian languages, which facilitated the census operation.

A notable development of the 1891 census was the decision by the princely states of Travancore and Cochin to make independent arrangements for conducting the census and publishing its results. This census operation required the services of nearly 1,50,000 enumerators, including

government officials and a considerable number of unofficial volunteers; many of whom worked without pay. The census process began with preliminary enumerations in early January, and unlike previous practices, the final census count was conducted overnight. This change in procedure did not cause any difficulties or compromise accuracy. Special efforts were also made to ensure the early publication of the results, and by March 18, 1891, district-wise approximate population figures were released.

Census of 1901

The third census of India, conducted on March 1, 1901, reflects a systematic approach to census-taking under British administration. In the British-controlled territories of the Indian subcontinent, census operations were carried out under the supervision of government superintendents. Each enumerator was responsible for a clearly defined enumeration area comprising thirty to thirty-five houses. To improve accuracy and organization, the house numbering system was thoroughly revised during this census.

Considerable importance was given to recording social and religious identities. Hindu castes were meticulously recorded; the tribal or caste names of Jains and followers of other religions were also recorded. This reflected the administration's growing interest in the social structure of India. A significant change was also introduced in the questions related to language: instead of asking about knowledge of a foreign language, enumerators recorded whether a person 'knew' or 'did not know' a particular language. This made the process clearer and more practical.

The 1901 census is particularly notable for the introduction of the 'slip system' for tabulating data. This marked a significant advancement in census compilation and analysis. The enumeration method remained largely unchanged from previous censuses, the final count was conducted on the night of March 1, 1901. Provisional population figures were released on March 8, 1901, and these differed from the final results by only 0.024 percent, demonstrating a remarkably high level of accuracy.

Census of 1911

The fourth census of India, conducted on March 10, 1911, marked a significant advancement in census administration by introducing several improved procedures. To ensure accurate identification and enumeration, wooden boards were affixed to the walls of houses, corresponding to the number of households in each area. The availability of a general village registers, prepared in advance by the provincial superintendent, further aided in the systematic organization of the census operations. The census forms and instructions were translated into local languages, enhancing clarity and accuracy during the enumeration. Special efforts were made to achieve complete population coverage through surveys focusing on tea plantations, mines, factories, ports, boats, pilgrimage centers, railway settlements, military cantonments, and other special areas. This census also provided detailed statistics on rural and urban populations, clearly highlighting the differences between village and city life.

A notable feature of the 1911 census was the introduction of a special form for industrial establishments employing twenty or more persons, reflecting the growing attention to industrial activities. The cost of the census remained comparable to that of the 1901 census, primarily due to the

continued use of the previously introduced slip system of tabulation. This ensured efficiency and avoided unnecessary expenditure of time and resources.

Census of 1921

In the history of census operations in India, the 1921 census occupies a unique and significant place, as it was conducted under extraordinary administrative and social circumstances. It was conducted nationwide on a single day, March 18, 1921, under the statutory authority of the Census Act IV of 1920 and the rules framed by the Government of India and the respective local governments.

Great care was taken in fixing the census date. Factors such as the phase of the moon and the timing of major festivals and celebrations were carefully considered. Moonlight was deemed essential to facilitate the movement of enumerators during the night-time enumeration; large religious gatherings were avoided to ensure that people were in their usual places. The census was initially planned for the full moon night of February; the date was shifted to March after the Madras Government cautioned that a February census would clash with the Mahamaham festival in Kumbakonam. This rare festival, which occurs once every seventy-two years, attracts over half a million pilgrims to a town that normally has a population of less than sixty thousand, making an accurate census impossible.

The 1921 census also introduced the Mauza register system, representing a significant process improvement. At the same time, the Non-Cooperation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi severely impacted the census operations, creating difficulties for census officials in many parts of the country. The significant was the 1921 census's close connection with the aftermath of the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic, commonly known as the Spanish flu. Census data recorded between 12 and 17 million deaths due to influenza during this period. This pandemic, caused by the H1N1 influenza A virus, had a devastating impact on India's population, and its effects were clearly reflected in the census figures.

Census of 1931

India's sixth census was conducted on the night of February 26, 1931. This marked another significant stage in the systematic documentation of India's population under British rule. It was conducted according to the Provisional Census Act of 1929 (Act X of 1929) and the rules framed by the central and local governments. In terms of administrative structure, no changes were made to the provincial boundaries that existed during the 1921 census, ensuring continuity in territorial coverage.

The 1931 census collected broad and comprehensive information on the population. Data was gathered on population size, age and sex structure, birth and death statistics, knowledge of multiple languages, literacy levels, and means of livelihood. Special attention was paid to occupational details, including primary and secondary occupations, and various other socio-economic characteristics. The previous censuses of 1911 and 1921, the separate special industrial census report, which had been conducted independently, was discontinued in 1931.

Census of 1941

The seventh census of India was conducted in 1941 under the Census Act of 1939 (Act XXIV of 1939). The reference time for this census was set as sunrise on March 1, 1941.

This was the last census conducted in pre-independence India under British rule. The census was carried out amidst challenging circumstances due to World War II, financial constraints, and heightened anti-British sentiments associated with the independence movement.

Due to these challenges, the planned simultaneous enumeration method over a single night could not be implemented. A major procedural change was introduced; to reduce labour, effort, and cost, the traditional method of a preliminary enumeration followed by a single-night verification was abandoned. Instead, a non-simultaneous enumeration method was adopted. Larger areas were assigned to each enumerator, resulting in a reduced number of enumerators and easier training.

This method carried the risk of double counting or omissions due to population movement during the two-to-three-week enumeration period, precautionary measures were taken through careful questioning, public awareness campaigns, and reliance on civic responsibility and the competence of the staff. The enumeration was conducted over twenty days in rural areas and thirteen days in urban areas. The enumerators revisited the areas on March 1, 1941, to update records regarding births and deaths that had occurred before 6:00 AM on that day. This census also introduced administrative and technological innovations, including a simplified census form, new questions on fertility and employment, and the use of mechanical devices for tabulation. Due to wartime and administrative limitations, the published results were limited, and many supplementary tables were omitted from the final reports.

The Permanent Census Act, 1948

The Permanent Population Census Act, officially known as the Census Act of 1948 (Act No. XXXVII of 1948), was enacted on September 3, 1948. This Act empowers the Central Government to conduct a nationwide census after formally declaring its intention.

The Act provides for the appointment of a Census Commissioner responsible for overseeing the census throughout India, and a Superintendent of Census Operations in each state responsible for conducting the census in that state. It also allows for the appointment of additional officers to assist in census operations and ensure proper supervision. Under this Act, appointed census officials are authorized to ask prescribed questions. All information collected strictly confidential, will be used only for statistical purposes, and cannot be submitted as evidence in court.

Census of 1951

The 1951 census largely followed the procedure of the 1941 census. Twenty days, from February 9 to 28, 1951, were allotted for the enumerators to complete the census work, including in urban areas. In 1941, when the final verification was done in a single day, the 1951 census allowed three days March 1, 2, and 3 for final verification and corrections. As in 1941, a combination of the 'de jure' and 'de facto' methods were used in this census. This meant that both a person's usual place of residence ('de jure') and their actual location on the census day ('de facto') were recorded.

Census of 1961

The 1961 census marked a standardization of census operations in independent India. It was conducted under the

Indian Census Act of 1948 (Act No. XXXVII). the 1951 census, state superintendents were no longer permitted to add questions, ensuring uniformity in the census form across the country. The Registrar General of India carefully finalized the questionnaire after extensive discussions in Delhi, consultations with central ministers, the Planning Commission, and state offices. As a result, a much more refined and scientific census was conducted.

The census enumeration began on February 10, 1961, and lasted for five days, concluding at dawn on March 1, 1961. This census introduced modern concepts of buildings, dwellings, and households, along with a house numbering system, identity cards, and a census register, which improved the quality and reliability of the data. Several tables, particularly those relating to occupation and employment, were revised for greater accuracy. The surveys and publications were conducted on rural handicrafts, fairs, and festivals. Several monograph series and census atlases were published, providing comprehensive analytical information on India's population and socio-economic conditions.

Census of 1971

India's eleventh population census was conducted in two phases from March 10 to 31, 1971. The first phase involved house listing operations, including the preparation of lists of houses and schedules for institutions. The second phase involved enumerating individuals using forms containing 17 questions.

Building upon previous censuses, the 1971 census introduced new questions on the fertility of currently married women, migration, and more detailed economic activities. A significant innovation was the introduction of the 'Standard Urban Area' (SUA) concept, designed to more accurately measure and compare levels of urbanization across India.

Census of 1981

The 1981 census, the fourth population census of independent India, was conducted from February 9 to 28, 1981, and the final enumeration was carried out from March 1 to 5. It was conducted in a two-stage process using individual slips and household schedules. The household schedule had two parts: the first part recorded details such as religion, Scheduled Caste/Tribe status, language spoken, and household amenities like building materials, drinking water, electricity, and sanitation facilities; the second part recorded individual characteristics corresponding to the individual slips. A total of sixteen main questions were asked at the national level.

For the first time, data entry centers were established for the computerization of census data. This allowed for direct data entry onto magnetic tapes instead of punched cards. The National Informatics Centre Network (NICNET) was used to store the primary census abstract data, which marked a significant step in modernizing the census operations.

Census of 1991

The fifth census of independent India was conducted from February 9 to 28, 1991. Data processing was carried out manually in 163 Regional Tabulation Offices (RTOs) with the help of approximately 45,000 temporary staff. This census was sample-based, covering 20% of households in larger states and 100% of households in smaller states. For

the first time, an in-house computer center was established using a MEDHA 930/11 computer (CDC Cyber 930 version) for processing the census data. In the 1991 census, new questions and concepts were introduced to improve the collection of demographic and socio-economic information. This enhanced the quality and scope of the census statistics.

Census of 2001

India's 14th population census was conducted on March 1, 2001, using a form containing 23 questions. For the first time, all census schedules were digitized using scanning technology; this enabled the processing of approximately 202 million schedules containing about 1,028 million records in a short period. Intelligent Character Recognition (ICR) technology was used to convert handwritten data into digital format. A unique Permanent Location Code Number (PLCN) was assigned to each village and town. This can be updated in the future to reflect administrative changes, thereby improving the accuracy and usability of the census data.

Census of 2011

The sixteenth overall and seventh post-independence Indian Census was conducted from February 9 to 28, 2011. It marked a shift towards modern census practices, utilizing advanced technologies, large-scale data collection, and several new features. A key innovation was the adoption of Metadata and Data Standards (MDDS), which linked the Permanent Location Code Number (PLCN) system with a nationwide coding framework integrated with e-governance initiatives. For the first time, Geographic Information System (GIS)-based maps of all capital cities were created to support the census operations.

This census also introduced the recording of the third gender and created separate schedules for female-headed households. Extensive awareness campaigns were conducted through social media, rallies, television, and school programs. A barcode was provided for each census schedule, and in accordance with government policy, the complete 2011 census data was made freely available online through the official census website.

Significance of the Census in India

The Indian Census is the most reliable and comprehensive source of socio-cultural and demographic information. It collects data on a wide range of indicators, including Scheduled Castes and Tribes, language, religion, migration, disability, economic activity, literacy, housing and household amenities, urbanization, fertility, mortality, and many others.

Census data plays a crucial role in constituency allocation and delimitation, helping to define parliamentary and assembly constituencies, panchayats, and other local government units, as well as determining reservations based on population composition. It also serves important administrative purposes, allowing the government to assess national progress over the preceding decade, monitor ongoing programs, and guide planning, policy formulation, and program evaluation at both central and state levels. It informs financial grants, as the Finance Commission uses census data to allocate funds to states, and supports welfare programs by identifying beneficiaries, maintaining long-term records, and facilitating comparisons over time. From an economic perspective, the census helps businesses and

industries identify new markets and expand into previously untapped areas.

Challenges faced by the enumerators

Historically, conducting the census has faced operational challenges. Before independence, it was conducted annually for administrative purposes, and enumerators often dealt with obstacles such as missing house numbers, cultural objections, and dangers from wild animals. Early censuses were designed to serve the objectives of the British administration, emphasizing social engineering rather than providing a simple and accurate record of the population structure.

Conclusion

The Indian census continues to be an essential, important, and invaluable exercise for monitoring changes and trends in social, economic, and demographic aspects over time. The census is one of the country's most organized and widely respected undertakings; it reflects a long history of population enumeration dating back several centuries. The first official census was conducted in 1881, and since then, it has been conducted every ten years. India conducted its first digital census, although the 2021 census was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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