

Population Data in India: A Historical Perspective

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Historical Background

It is worthwhile to mention that census has been one of the old institutions in human history. The purpose of ancient and medieval census was mainly for extracting revenue or for the purpose of conscriptions in the military services. In the census of western countries in many instances slaves and foreigners were not counted, and there was non-reporting of women and children in many ancient and medieval censuses. Sometimes it seemed that wealth rather than people was the true basis of the count. Census was also not a regular exercise as we see in the modern times. Census in earlier centuries has lot of problems of under enumeration particularly in town and city areas.

In Europe, modern census was taken in Iceland in 1703 followed by Sweden in 1750, Great Britain in 1801, Austria in 1818, Greece in 1826, and Italy in 1861. In Norway, the first modern census was taken in 1801, but was also a census in 1769 which not so good. The census in United States was however held in 1790.

In India, it was decided by the British government as early as in 1856 to hold a census in 1861. But the census could not be held due to the uprising of 1857. In 1865, the government of India and the home government again agreed that a general population census would be taken in 1871. But, the years 1867-72 were actually spent in census taking. This series of censuses was in fact known as census of 1872, which was neither a synchronous census nor covered the entire territory controlled by the British. In fact, the first synchronous census may be called to have begun from the census of 1881. The 2011 Census conducted in February 2011 is the 15th census in India. This paper discusses the changing nature of the economic and social data available from the censuses in India.

Census in Modern India

The census in independent India is a part of the Ministry of Home Affairs unlike British Census being controlled by an independent statistical authority answerable to the British Parliament directly. In US, census is a part of the Department of Commerce. While there is nothing wrong Census of India being part of the Ministry of Home Affairs, but it reflects our perception about census rooted in the colonial legacy. In the census of independent India, the question on caste

was dropped, but the information on scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) were collected. They were called special groups in 1951 Census. Until 1981 census, SCs could only belong to Hindus and Sikhs, while STs could belong to any religion. However, since 1991 census scheduled castes could also belong to Buddhist religion. While the question on caste was dropped, the question on religion was continued in spite of India adopted a secular constitution. However, it was done on the pretext that it was necessary to know the religious status of a person in order to determine his or her SC status. This was in marked contrast to British Census which introduced religion in 2001 census on the voluntary basis and in US asking a question on religion in census is prevented by American constitution. The impact that the question on religion in census has unleashed has been explored elsewhere in detail (Bhagat 2001). Here it is suffice to say that in several countries of western world interest in ethnicity and religion arose in the censuses during the 1990s primarily due to states being wary of these identities due to growing immigration. Further, the enumeration of SCs and STs in the Indian censuses is tied to the defined territory as per Presidential Order. As a result if a SC and ST migrate from their state of origin to another state, they are likely to lose their SC and ST status if the destination state does not include their caste/tribe name in their list of SCs and STs. During the census, enumerators were given the list of SCs and STs in each state and they were asked to enumerate only those whose caste status matched with the given list. This is premise on the fact that SCs and STs are official categories and not based on self reported status as perceived by the respondent. In contrast to Census, in the National Sample Surveys (NSS) and National Family Health Surveys, SCs and STs are self reported categories. This distinction is very important while comparing the SC and ST populations from two different sources.

The 2001 census report on religion mentioned that over the censuses in independent India, people have reported 1700 religions and faiths but in census publication only six religions namely Hindus, Muslim, Sikh, Christians, Jain and Buddhist were published. It tried to classified people on the basis of membership to the religious groups rather than the religious faith and practices followed by them. Therefore census figures are misleading so far the religious diversity of the country is concerned. In the opinion of Amartya Sen each one of us has multiple identities in relation to religious faith, cultural practices and occupational status. However, religious identity (alternatively competing with caste identity) is being politicized to override all other identities. Hindu majority- invented through census is shaping the political imagination of India. It survives and prospers on the idea of monolithic Muslims who in reality are also divided in various faiths, castes and linguistic groups (Sen 2006:170). We should also remember that, “Our religion is not our only identity, nor necessarily the identity to which we attach the greatest importance” (Amratya Sen, 2005: 56).

While population data by religion was published, data on the educational level and workforce structure by religion was not published until 1991 census in independent India. It is only in 2001 census that provided data on literacy and educational levels and also the worker and non-worker

composition of population by religious categories. We now come to know that Jains are most literate community and the Muslims the least. These figures point to the responsibility of the state in uplifting its downtrodden citizens and reshaping the inter-group relationship based on compassion and justice.

However, the censuses of modern India cannot be blamed for the shortcomings pointed above rather reflect the deep political processes unfolding in the country. This is no where better evident except for the demand of the re-inclusion of caste in 2011 census. The Central Government has now finally decided that the caste census will be held as a separate exercise in the latter part of the 2011.

Census in Globalised India

Census is an immensely rich source of data on age and sex structure, marital status, rural and urban composition, migration, worker and non-worker composition, and education right from the earliest census in India, although definition of each characteristics has also changed from census to census. As such, the users of census data must look at the changing definition of demographic characteristics which also reflects the changing nature of society and economy. As India entered into a new phase of globalization in the middle of the 1980s and a new economic policy was launched in 1991, census was expected to provide more data on the economic and living conditions of the Indian people. The 1991 census published huge data on household amenities like source of drinking water, source of lighting, toilet facilities and source of fuel used in the household. This data have been made available for both rural and urban areas and right up to district and city levels and also for SC and ST households. In 2001 census the household amenities were expanded to include wastewater outlets from the house such as connected to closed drainage, open drainage or no drainage. It also provided information on the availability of bath room and kitchen. One of the important additions in 2001 census was to know the assets that the households have possessed. This is important to understand the wealth distribution in Indian society in absence of information on income either from census and National Sample Surveys. Thus the 2001 census for the first time provided information on assets like radio/transistor, telephone, television, scooter and car etc., and also the household availing any banking services. The results of 2001 census show that about 13 per cent of the households have no access to electricity, 16 per cent have no access to safe drinking water and 27 per cent have no access to toilet facility even in urban areas. Further the 2001 census provided data on slums in urban areas for the first time, and added a question on commutation to know both distance and mode of conveyance used. It also reintroduced the questions on disability which was dropped in 1991 census after being introduced in 1981. Disability is divided into five types: namely in seeing, in hearing, in speech, in movement and mental. The census enumeration on disability shows that India has about 22 million disabled in 2001. The 2001 census for the first time in the history of census also took the signature or thumb impression of the respondent.

The 2011 census was conducted at a particular juncture of India's economic and demographic history. India has witnessed a rapid economic growth during the last one decade, experienced increased threat of terrorism, growing consciousness for gender equality and social justice and efforts to build an inclusive society. Most of these changes were reflected in the census exercise of 2011 census. Along with census, a National Population Register (NPR) was prepared for all residents aged 15 and above. The most of information collected in NPR was also available in the household schedule of census except the information like nationality declared and permanent address. It is not clear why population below age 15 is left out from the NPR. It is declared that the NPR will be used to provide UID (Unique Identity Number) to the residents in India. It would be curious to see how NPR and UIDs with biometrics would be helpful to the common people. In Census 2011, for the first time date of birth was collected along with age in completed years.

However, in a remarkable development in 2011 census, the gender identity is not simply male and female but the respondents were given options to report either as male, female and other. In earlier censuses, transgender/eunuchs were counted as males. Marital statuses of people were categorized as never married, married, widowed and separated/divorced in earlier censuses. The 2011 census provided separate codes for the separated and divorced categories. Further, among the categories of disabled population the category of mental was broken down to two categories namely mental illness and mental retardation. Similarly some other changes have also been done in the categories of workers. In earlier censuses workers were divided into main and marginal categories. The marginal workers who worked for less than 6 months was categorized as marginal workers who worked for less than 3 months and marginal workers who worked for more than 3 months but less than 6 months in 2011 census. Although these changes were minor, but necessary to capture the changing social norms and the structure of the economy in the country.

Census and Demographic Imagination

Census has been evolving overtime. It deeply reflects the social and economic changes and also the influences of the political processes. Its role has changed from an instrument of governance to an instrument in development planning. Further, census could also be a great aid in building an inclusive society. However, the use of census data in building society will depend upon our demographic imagination. For example, the 2011 census has shown that India's population is 1.21 billion, but it has also told us that India is also a country having the largest illiterate population (272 million in the age 7 and above). Similarly, it will also soon provide us the number of houseless population, the disabled population, population living in slum areas and even the number of beggars. However, these data hardly enter into the demographic imagination due to overriding concern of Census with size and growth of population.