

**NEXT IAS**

**DAILY EDITORIAL  
ANALYSIS**

**TOPIC**

---

**The Perils of Delaying the  
Population Census**

---

[www.nextias.com](http://www.nextias.com)

## THE PERILS OF DELAYING THE POPULATION CENSUS

### Context

- The Indian decadal Census has been delayed by more than three years now despite several concerns having been raised about the consequences of not having a Census.

### About the Census

- It refers to a periodic and systematic collection of demographic, economic, and social data of a population within a specific region.
- It is typically conducted by governments to gather detailed information about the population's characteristics and living conditions.
- The Census provides crucial data that governments, businesses, researchers, and policymakers use for various purposes such as planning public services, allocating funding, and making informed decisions.

### Census in India

- The Census in India has been conducted regularly **since 1871**, and the first complete Census was conducted in 1881.
- Initially, the Census was **primarily aimed at assessing revenue and taxation needs** under British colonial rule.
- Over time, its scope expanded to include **demographic, social, and economic data**.
- It is conducted under the **provisions of the Census Act of 1948**, which empowers the Government of India to conduct periodic population surveys. It outlines the **procedures, responsibilities, and penalties related to census activities**.
- **Frequency:** The Census of India is conducted on the **Decennial Census (interval of every ten years)**, meaning it takes place every ten years.
  - ♦ The most recent Censuses were conducted in 2011.

### Why does the Census matter beyond mere numbers?

- **Beyond Headcounts:** The Census is not just about tallying heads; it encompasses a wide range of crucial information. It provides **insights into locational patterns, familial structures, and individual characteristics**.
  - ♦ Imagine it as a snapshot of our society—a comprehensive view that helps us understand the changing dynamics of our population.
- **Reliability of Surveys:** Large-scale surveys, such as the **National Family Health Survey** and the **Periodic Labour Force Survey**, rely on a Census frame that is now one and a half decades old.
  - ♦ Using outdated data affects the reliability and representativeness of these surveys. We need fresh information to make informed decisions about education, occupation, employment, health (including the impact of COVID-19), and livelihoods.
- **Course Correction and Strategy:** Over the past fifteen years, India has undergone significant transformations. These changes extend beyond population size and composition. We've witnessed shifts in education, employment patterns, and health outcomes.
  - ♦ Without a current Census, our strategies for development and welfare risk being misaligned. It's like trying to navigate without a compass—possible, but not advisable.
- **Political Echoes and Caste Census:** There's a universal echo for conducting a caste-based Census, often driven by political motives rather than genuine development planning.
  - ♦ However, this focus on caste alone misses the broader utility of a Census. It's not just about politics; it's about understanding our society comprehensively.

## Importance of Census in India

- **Understanding Demographics:** The census provides a snapshot of India's demographic structure. It tells us how many of us there are, where we live, our age groups, gender distribution, and more. It is crucial for **policymakers, researchers, and social planners.**
- **Resource Allocation:** Governments allocate **resources based on population data.** Whether it's building schools, hospitals, or roads, decisions hinge on accurate population figures. It helps distribute funds fairly across states and regions.
  - ♦ For instance, if a state has a rapidly growing population, it needs more schools and healthcare facilities.
- **Tracking Progress:** Decade by decade, the census paints a canvas of India's journey. One can see improvements in **literacy rates, healthcare access, and gender ratios.**
- **Planning for the Future:** By analysing trends from past censuses, demographers predict future population growth. It informs **urban planning, infrastructure development, and environmental policies.**
- **Social Justice and Equity:** The census ensures that marginalised communities aren't left behind. It captures data on **caste, religion, and other social parameters.** It helps identify disparities and design affirmative action policies.
- **Political Representation:** The census plays a very important role in **redrawing-of-constituency maps.** It determines how many seats each state gets in the Lok Sabha. Accurate population data **ensures fair representation.**

## Why is the Census Delaying?

- When it comes to the decennial Census—the grand national headcount that shapes our understanding of demographics, social structures, and resource allocation—time is of the essence.
- Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a situation where the Census, originally slated for 2021, remains in limbo due to delays.
- The **Centre's decision not to extend the deadline** for freezing administrative boundaries beyond June 30, 2024, raised hopes that the Census operations would finally kick off in October 2024.
- The **Budget for 2024-25** allocated a mere 1,309.46 crore for the Census—a **significant reduction** from the 3,768 crore allocated in 2021-22.
  - ♦ It hints that the **Census might not happen anytime soon,** even after considerable delay.

## Does Delaying the Census Matter?

- **Access to Welfare Schemes:** Conducting the Census on a priority basis is non-negotiable. Since the last Census in 2011, our population has grown, and so have the needs of our citizens.
  - ♦ Access to government welfare schemes—ranging from healthcare to education to employment—is often tied to Census data. Without an updated Census, many remain excluded from these crucial benefits.
- **Women's Reservation Act:** It aims to reserve **33% of seats in both Parliament and State Assemblies for women.** However, its implementation hinges on accurate Census data. Until we count heads and households anew, this transformative legislation remains in a holding pattern.
- **Economic Well-Being of Marginalised Communities:** There's a growing demand for a caste-based Census. Precisely understanding the economic well-being of marginalised communities requires granular data. Without it, **targeted policies and affirmative action** become shots in the dark.

## Urgency

- **Missing the 2021 Census cannot be justified,** especially when we managed to hold a general election amidst uncertainties. The machinery required for a Census is comparable to that of an election.
  - ♦ Delaying it further seems more like avoidance than a logistical challenge.
- **Demographic Transition and Dividend:** India is experiencing rapid demographic changes. A population Census is essential to reveal these shifts, including familial structures, occupational distributions, and geographical patterns.
  - ♦ Without this data, monitoring the success of government programs becomes misleading.

### Conclusion and Way Forward: What Needs to Happen?

- **Budgetary Provisions:** The 2025-26 Census Budget must be robust enough to accommodate the postponed 2021 Census. We need to allocate resources for house listing, housing census, and updating the **National Population Register (NPR)**.
- **Preliminary Preparations:** Thankfully, groundwork has been underway. State and Union Territory Census Directorates have been prepping—updating maps, testing questionnaires, and training staff. Once the new Census date is fixed, they're ready to roll. A quick refresher training is all they need.
- **Digital Census:** The future is digital. Collecting Census data via mobile apps streamlines the process. The 1,309.46 crore in the 2024-25 budget could fund essential preliminary activities, including finalising enumeration areas, refining questionnaires, and training core staff for the digital shift.
- The **Census isn't just about numbers or just a bureaucratic exercise;** it's about **empowerment, equity, informed policymaking,** and the **pulse of our nation.** Let's prioritise it, come what may. Our nation's well-being depends on it.

Source: TH



### Mains Practice Question

**[Q]** Is the absence of a recent population census a critical impediment to effective governance and policymaking in India? Can alternative data sources of population count adequately fill the gap?

