Concerns about India's first digital but delayed census

Census data needs to be verifiable and accurate so it can be used effectively in formulating welfare policies

THe delay has severely impacted the development planning in India.iStock

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India has finally got around to organising its 2021 census — three years after it was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first Census of India was conducted in 1881 and has been conducted every decade since then. The last census was held in 2011.

It is one of the largest data collection exercises in the world. This will be the first digital census of India. Citizens will have the choice of self-enumerating by filling the census form digitally.

They are expected to do it through a special mobile app developed by the Office of the Registrar General of India in 16 different Indian languages. This will eliminate the need for enumerators, saving the government time and money.

However, questions are being raised about switching to the digital option, especially as only half of the 1.4 billion Indian population has access to smartphones.

According to Usha Ramanathan, an independent law researcher: "Even with income tax filing, which is supposed to be easy, most people still have to use a chartered accountant.

"Then take the COVID-19 vaccine registration platform Cowin, for instance. Not only have other tech solutions been necessary to support the flawed government portal but the fact that you can request a

change in name, year of birth and gender, shows the level of error they're looking at."

Moreover, reports suggest women are half as likely to have internet access than men, raising questions about the participation of women in the exercise.

There's also apprehension about potential privacy breaches. There have been several data breaches in the past where the private data of millions of Indians has been put up for sale on the dark web.

There have been suggestions that before rolling out the census to the public, the government should carry out a pilot survey, where the app will be tested and any problems rectified in order to achieve the desired precision and accuracy.

Inexplicable delay
Significantly, it is the delay in the census exercise that has led to questions about the government's intentions. There has been an inexplicable delay in initiating the census exercise even after the pandemic was over.

The disbursal of government welfare schemes rely on the census data for effectiveness. As the latest demographics are not available, this can put the vulnerable communities at risk of being left out. This itself should have prompted the government to initiate the census exercise post haste.

Before the census exercise is carried out, the delimitation of the boundaries of the administrative units have to be frozen. However, this was delayed due to "technical reasons".

Some scholars attributed this delay to the National Population Register (NPR) exercise which was meant to be the first step towards preparing the controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC).

There is a concern the NPR could lead to exclusion of specific marginalised communities

. Experts believe that the NPR has a political agenda and can be used as a tool to disempower and disfranchise certain communities such as Muslims in India   .

Another cause of delay has been the demand for a caste census from various groups, which would provide data on the social and economic status of different communities.

Experts claim that the government is not willing to conduct a caste census. This is evident from the Union government's reply to Maharashtra state government's petition on collecting data on the Backward Class of Citizens (BCC).

The Union government claimed that it would be "administratively difficult and cumbersome".

While many states want to conduct a caste census, there has been a tussle between the Union and the state governments over the issue, causing significant delay in conducting the general census.

Why census data is needed
This delay has severely impacted the development planning in India. The development indicators of a nation are built on the census data and the lack of availability of the data can result in faulty indicators.

The unavailability of accurate data can also lead to an imbalanced allocation of resources to the states from the Centre. This has impacted the implementation of various schemes of the government where many communities and individuals have often alleged that they have been neglected while drafting the schemes like the National Food Security Act, 2013, and the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.

Due to the lack of recent census data it has been alleged some states have been underrepresented in this year's general election.

India's population has significantly increased since 2011 but the process of delimitation of parliamentary and state legislative constituencies has not happened. This is the reason why many states which have seen significant gains in the population claim that they are under-represented in the current Lok Sabha.

Moreover, the recently enacted Women's Reservation Act, which seeks to allocate one-third of seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies to women will become effective only after delimitation of the constituencies.

There are also concerns about the government's claim of transparency in survey methodology and the effective collection of data after the standing committee on statistics was disbanded and subsequently replaced by the Steering Committee for National Sample Survey.

Some critics claim the steering committee can be easily influenced by the government which can have a negative impact on the integrity of the census exercise.

Since this census will impact the rapidly transforming nature of India's social, economic and political administration as well as government policies in coming years, it's important it be carried out with utmost care and caution.

The government can allay the apprehensions of citizens and critics by ensuring census data is verifiable, accurate and can be used effectively for the welfare policies and plans that the government seeks to implement.

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