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ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**DECADAL CENSUS DELAY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNANCE**

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DECADAL CENSUS DELAY: IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNANCE

Context

- The decadal Census exercise, initially scheduled for 2020-21, has been indefinitely delayed. As a result, several key reports on vital statistics have not been released for the past five years.

Census in India

- It 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.
- The population census is conducted by the **Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India** under the **Ministry of Home Affairs**.
- Frequency:** Decennial (i.e. interval of every ten years).
- Independent India's first census was held in 1951 and since then it has happened in the first year of every decade.
 - The most recent Censuses were conducted in 2011.

Census year on which projections are based	Projected population in crore					
	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021	2026
1991	101.2	109.4	117.9	126.4	-	-
2001	102.9	111.2	119.3	126.9	134.0	140.0
2011	-	-	121.1	129.1	136.3	142.6

Note: The figures in bold are actual Census data

Historical Context and Initial Delays

- The Census (2021) was postponed due to the **pandemic, with the government citing health concerns and logistical challenges**.
- The exercise was divided into **two phases**:
 - the house listing phase from April to September 2020, and
 - the population enumeration phase from February 2021.
- Both phases were delayed**, and no new schedule has been announced since.

Unreleased Reports

- The **'Vital Statistics of India Based on the Civil Registration System'** and **'The Report on Medical Certification of Cause of Death'** were last published for the year 2020.
- Additionally, the annual **'Crime in India'** report by the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) for the year 2023 is also **pending**.

State-wise Reports

- While some States and Union Territories, such as Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Delhi, Chandigarh, Mizoram, Goa, and Arunachal Pradesh, have published reports till 2022, others like Kerala and Mizoram have more recent data.

- However, the **lack of updated national reports** hampers comprehensive planning and policy-making.

Importance of Vital Statistics

- Vital statistics are crucial for **planning, monitoring, and evaluating** various programs related to primary healthcare, family planning, maternal and child health, and education.
- Census data is crucial for demarcating constituencies, planning key welfare schemes, and understanding migration patterns.
- These reports provide invaluable data on the occurrence and characteristics of vital events such as births, deaths, and stillbirths.

Reasons for Continued Delay

- **COVID-19 Pandemic:** The initial delay was due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government cited health concerns and logistical challenges as reasons for postponing the Census.
 - Field activities were suspended to prevent the spread of the virus.
- **Budgetary Constraints:** The **Union Budget for 2025-26** allocated a mere 574.80 crore for the Census, a significant **reduction from the ₹8,754.23 crore approved in 2019**.
 - This reduced budget has raised questions about the feasibility of conducting the Census this year.
- **Political Sensitivities:** Debates over caste-based census inclusion and regional demands for separate statehood have complicated preparations.
- **Administrative Readiness:** Census officials require extensive training, and their mobilization across states takes months of preparation.
 - These include the need to update the **National Population Register (NPR)** and the complexities involved in conducting a large-scale exercise.
- **State Elections:** Continuous state elections (West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, etc.) have diverted administrative focus from census activities.

Implications of the Census Delay

- **Impact on Social Policies and Welfare Schemes:** Reports on births and deaths have not been released for the past five years, affecting planning and evaluation of healthcare programs.
 - Additionally, reservations for scheduled castes and tribes, as well as food security entitlements, have been impacted.
 - For instance, the **National Food Security Act, 2013**, aims to cover **67% of India's population** for subsidized food grains. However, **due to outdated 2011 Census data**, approximately 10 crore (100 million) individuals may be excluded from these benefits.
- **Statistical Accuracy:** Many national surveys and studies rely on Census data as a foundational reference.
 - The delay compromises the accuracy of these surveys, leading to potential misrepresentations in data related to employment, health, and other critical sectors.
- **Imbalances in Representation & Resource Allocation:** The postponement affects administrative functions such as the delimitation of constituencies, which depends on up-to-date population data.
- **Economic Planning:** Accurate economic planning hinges on current demographic data. The absence of recent Census information hampers effective policy formulation and implementation, potentially affecting economic growth and development.
- **Private Sector Involvement:** Businesses, especially in sectors like **insurance and market research**, depend on accurate Census data to assess market potential and plan strategies.
 - The delay forces companies to rely on outdated information, potentially leading to suboptimal business decisions and increased costs for conducting independent surveys.

Way Forward

- **Immediate Rescheduling:** The government must announce a definitive timeline for conducting the census, ensuring minimal disruption to governance.
- **Interim Data Collection:** Until the census is completed, the government can use Aadhaar, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) surveys, and electoral rolls to estimate population changes.

- **Digital Registration:** In 2023, the Centre enacted '**The Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act**', mandating that all births and deaths occurring from October 1, 2023, be digitally registered through the 'Central Portal crsorgi.gov.in'. It aims to provide real-time data and improve the accuracy of vital statistics.
- **Digital Census and Self-Enumeration:** When the Census is finally conducted, it will pioneer a digital approach, allowing citizens to self-enumerate through a portal.
 - It aims to streamline the process and improve data accuracy.
- **Use of Technology:** Expediting digital data collection, using AI and machine learning for faster enumeration, and integrating real-time updates can improve efficiency.
- **State-Level Initiatives:** States can conduct independent surveys, especially in areas like migration, urban growth, and social welfare to mitigate data gaps.

Conclusion

- The delay in conducting the Census and releasing vital statistics reports underscores the need for timely and accurate data to inform public health and policy decisions.
- Ensuring the completion of the Census and the publication of vital statistics is essential for addressing the country's health and demographic challenges.

Source: TH

Mains Practice Question

Analyze the potential consequences of delaying the Census and the subsequent delay in vital reports on births and deaths since 2020. How might this impact public policy, resource allocation, and social welfare programs in India?

