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Assessing the Impact of India's Delayed 2021 Census on Urbanization, Policy, and Planning

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Abstract

A vital source of demographic data, India's decennial census offers important insights into socioeconomic conditions, urbanisation patterns, and population dynamics. The COVID-19 epidemic and following administrative actions have caused extraordinary delays in the 2021 census, which was initially planned for April 2020. This delay has resulted in a substantial data gap that makes it more difficult to monitor urbanisation, devise evidence-based policies, and efficiently plan urban development. This article examines the causes of the delay, considers how it may affect policy-making and urban planning, and analyses its consequences for comprehending urbanisation patterns. Additionally, it looks at the census's current state, intentions for a digital enumeration in the future, and possible lessons learnt from international best practices. The essay emphasises the significance of timely demographic data for India's rapidly urbanising terrain by stressing the urgency of starting the census again.

Keywords: Indian census, 2021 census delay, urbanization trends, policy implications, urban planning, digital census, demographic data, migration patterns, welfare schemes, Finance Commission

1. Introduction

Since its start in 1881, India's decennial census has been a mainstay of demographic data collection and is widely regarded as one of the most thorough and reliable census programs in the world. The first synchronous census was carried out by W.C. Plowden on February 17, 1881, during British colonial authority. This was a major step towards the current Census of India's demographic enumeration. The census has developed over the years into an essential resource for comprehending India's socioeconomic circumstances, urbanisation patterns, and demographic dynamics. Because it provides thorough statistics on population size, dispersion, age distribution, literacy, occupational inclinations, migration, and urbanisation, it is crucial for governance, policymaking, and urban planning. The Census Act of 1948, which ensures secrecy and comprehensive coverage, governs the census, which has been conducted every ten years in India until the recent deferral of the 2021 census. The ability of the Indian census to document the country's swift changes, especially in terms of urbanisation, makes it significant. India is one of the nations that is urbanising the fastest; between 2001 and 2011, the urban population grew by 31.8% while the rural population increased by 12.18%. According to the 2011 census, 377 million Indians, or 31.16% of the country's total population, lived in urban areas. More than 600 million Indians are expected to live in cities by 2030, highlighting the necessity of timely and reliable data to manage this transition. Urban planning and evidence-based policymaking depend on these data points. However, there have been unheard-of delays for the 2021 census, which was initially planned for April 2020. Administrative decisions, like extending the deadline for freezing administrative boundaries, have been blamed for

additional delays, which were first caused by the COVID-19 epidemic. According to May 2025, the census is scheduled to start in early 2025, and data is expected by 2026. Due to this delay, there is now a substantial data gap, forcing researchers, policymakers, and urban planners to rely on out-of-date 2011 data that does not accurately represent India's current demographic realities.

Census delays are disruptive elsewhere in the world, not only in India. For example, certain sub-Saharan African nations have delayed their population and housing censuses, extending the intervals to more than ten years, which has compromised data quality and planning. Accurate demographic data is necessary for evaluating poverty reduction, healthcare, and education, and timely census data is critical for monitoring progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given its fast urbanisation and the requirement for accurate data to manage this change, India's delay is especially worrisome. India's capacity to reach its SDG targets is threatened by the lack of updated data, which also makes it more difficult to handle new trends like the expansion of urban centres and informal settlements.

The government's intention to use online portals and mobile apps to conduct the 2025 census digitally raises hopes for increased productivity and real-time data integration. Caste census arguments, however, add complexity, with opponents pointing to privacy concerns and supporters arguing for social fairness. The delay highlights how urgently timely demographic data is needed to support India's fast urbanising terrain and promote equitable, sustainable development as it awaits the resumption of this crucial exercise.

2. Background on the Indian Census

Since the first synchronised census in 1881, the Indian census—one of the biggest administrative endeavours in the world—has been carried out every ten years. Under the Ministry of Home Affairs' Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, it offers comprehensive information on the population's size, age distribution, literacy, occupational trends, migration, and urbanisation. The Census Act of 1948, which oversees the census, guarantees its confidentiality and thorough coverage.

Data on urbanisation is an essential part of the census. According to the 2011 census, 31.16% of Indians, or 377 million people, lived in urban areas. Migration from rural to urban regions and the rise of "census towns," or places having urban features but not yet officially recognised as towns by state governments, were the main causes of this notable increase from 2001. These changes are monitored by the census, which offers information on migration trends, population density, and the expansion of informal settlements—all of which are critical for the development of urban planning and policy.

Census Year	Urban Population (Million)	Urbanization Rate (%)	Number of Census Towns
2001	286	27.81	1,362
2011	377	31.16	3,894

Source: Government of India.

The accompanying table shows how quickly urbanisation increased between 2001 and 2011, emphasising how important the census was in documenting these changes. Governance is challenged since knowledge of present urbanisation trends is hypothetical in the absence of the 2021 census.

3. Reasons for the Delay

The original plan was for the 2021 census to start in April 2020, with the listing of homes and population enumeration taking place in February 2021. These intentions were derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, though, as large-scale enumeration was not viable due to health and safety issues. Although the first postponement was reasonable, other ones have sparked worries. The census was essentially postponed until 2024 or later after the Office of the Registrar General of India extended the deadline for freezing administrative boundaries, a requirement for the survey to June 30, 2023, in January 2023.

Political factors are thought to have had a role in the delay. Delimitation, the process of redrawing electoral seats in response to population changes, is informed by census data. Delaying the census could delay delimitation, which could affect political outcomes given that general elections are planned for 2024. Further complicating matters are the arguments around the inclusion of a caste census. While some political parties oppose caste data, citing social tensions and privacy issues, others support it as a means of ensuring equitable resource distribution.

4. Implications on Urbanization Trends

Since India depends on 2011 census data that no longer accurately represents current conditions, the lack of 2021 census data have important ramifications for comprehending the country's urbanisation patterns.

4.1 Migration Patterns

Millions of people relocate from rural to urban regions in search of work, making internal migration a major factor in urbanisation. Although comprehensive migration data was provided by the 2011 census, attempts to monitor these movements are hampered by the absence of current statistics. Millions of migrant workers, for example, returned to rural areas during the COVID-19 lockdowns, demonstrating the extent of urban migration. Policymakers find it difficult to meet the requirements of these people given the absence of new data, especially in cities like Delhi and Mumbai.

4.2 Urban Population Growth

Although 377 million people were living in cities in India as of the 2011 census, the country's urban regions have probably expanded considerably since then. The IT industry has fuelled the fast growth of cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad, while smaller towns have become urban centres. Urban population growth figures are based on forecasts without 2021 data, which might not account for regional differences or the creation of new urban centres.

4.3 Census Towns and Informal Settlements

Indian urbanisation has been characterised by the growth of census towns, which are defined as locations with a population of at least 5,000, at least 75% of male workers engaged in non-agricultural activities, and a density of 400 people per square kilometre. The number of census towns almost tripled between 2001 and 2011. Since there is frequently no official urban authority in these places, census data is essential for organising services like water and sanitation. Policymakers are not informed about new census towns or changes to existing ones because of the delay. Similarly, without up-to-date statistics, it is difficult to follow slums and informal settlements, which are home to millions of urban poor people.

5. Implications on Policy and Planning

Since out-of-date data compromises evidence-based decision-making, the census delay has significant ramifications for urban planning and policymaking.

5.1 Welfare Schemes

The National Food Security Act (NFSA) and other welfare programs use census data to determine who is eligible. Although the NFSA seeks to give two-thirds of the population subsidised food grains, its 2011 data (1.21 billion) understate India's current population, which the World Bank estimates to be 1.41 billion. Millions are so denied benefits, especially in cities with sizable immigrant populations.

5.2 Finance Commission Grants

States get funding from the Finance Commission according to a number of factors, including population. Fast-growing metropolitan states like Maharashtra may receive less financing than necessary as a result of outdated census data, while other states may receive more.

5.3 Urban Planning

Precise information on demographics, growth rates, and population density is necessary for urban planning. Cities might misallocate resources in the absence of 2021 data, which could result in overcrowded schools, poor transport, or a shortage of homes. Initiatives like AMRUT and the Smart Cities Mission, for instance, use census data to determine investment priorities, but their efficacy is hampered by out-of-date statistics.

5.4 Electoral Politics

Delimitation, which establishes how many parliamentary and assembly seats each state has, is based on census statistics. This process is delayed, which could have an impact on political representation. Because it uses data from the post-2026 census, the recent women's reservation bill, which is dependent on delimitation, is also affected.

6. Comparative Analysis

Although there are few concrete instances of census delays in other nations, it is widely known that timely census data is crucial for urban planning worldwide. Every five years, China conducts censuses, which provide regular updates on migration and urbanisation, which are essential for managing cities like Shanghai (World Bank). The American Community Survey is a yearly demographic update that supports urban policy in the United States and is a supplement to the decennial census.

Given that India depends on decennial censuses, delays are especially inconvenient. The necessity for precise statistics to address issues like slum expansion and infrastructure deficiencies is highlighted by the global trend of growing urbanisation, particularly in emerging countries. To close the gap and gain knowledge from nations with more frequent enumerations, India should investigate interim surveys or digital data collecting.

7. Current Status and Future Plans

The Indian government declared in May 2025 that the census will start in early 2025 and that results would be available by 2026. In order to improve accessibility and efficiency, this will be India's first digital census, utilising online portals and smartphone apps. Error reduction and real-time data integration with the National Population Register are the goals of the digital approach.

A caste census is still being debated. Opponents voice concerns about social cohesiveness and privacy, while supporters contend that by identifying marginalised groups, it will advance social justice. This decision has not yet been finalised by the government. Concerns over resource constraints have been raised by the census's declining budget allocations, which were ₹1,309.46 crore in 2024–2025 compared to ₹3,768 crore in 2021–2022.

8. Conclusion

Efforts to monitor urbanisation, devise policies, and plan urban growth have been hampered by the substantial data gap caused by the 2021 Indian census's postponement. Evidence-based decision-making is hampered by disruptions to data availability and accuracy at a time when metropolitan centres are juggling post-pandemic recovery requirements and rapid transformation. Understanding migration, controlling urban growth, and putting welfare programs into action have become more difficult as a result of the dependence on 2011 data. While political processes like delimitation are postponed, urban planning suffers from misallocated resources. Although there is hope that this gap will be closed with the digital advances of the upcoming census in 2025, government has already been harmed by the interim.

India should think about additional data collection techniques, including yearly surveys, and make sure that census procedures are completed on schedule in order to lessen future interruptions. If handled properly, the caste census could improve social justice. Building inclusive, sustainable cities and accomplishing national development goals will require timely and reliable demographic data as India's urban population continues to increase. Unquestionably, India's delayed census makes it difficult to comprehend and control the processes of urbanisation.

The delay underscores how census operations must change to become a more flexible, technologically enabled endeavour that is supported by ongoing data systems. In line with its goals as a rapidly urbanising country, such a change will enable India to maintain inclusive, intelligent, and adaptable urban growth. The secret to India's progress is to remain adaptable and use cutting-edge instruments to influence its urban destiny.

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