

1971: The Eleventh Census of India

The Background

Almost every decennial Census in India had to face some challenge or the other. The first all-India census was actually planned to be taken by the British administration in 1861. But the first freedom struggle of 1857 made it impossible to launch. Ultimately, the regular census counts were initiated in 1867 and completed by 1872, though the intention was to take in 1871 a general population census aimed at obtaining statistics of the age, caste, religion, occupation, education and infirmities of the population.

The early censuses by the British Government were looked upon with suspicion by the people and the old census reports have recorded the incredible prejudices the people entertained, some suspecting that this was being done with a view to imposing poll tax, or to recruit at least one member of each family for military service, or to compel persons to proceed as labourers to distant settlements. Some even suspected that a census was being taken to provide wives for British soldiers ! In 1921, the non-cooperation movement in India created obstacles. In some areas the census enumerators refused to perform their honorary duties. Recourse to the penal provisions-of Census law had to be taken in quite a few cases in some parts of the country. In 1931, too, the non-cooperation movement and the Salt Satyagraha did not fail to have their impact on the conduct of the census. In 1941, the political situation had its influence on census taking but this time in a different way. While in the earlier censuses people tried to boycott the census, now in 1941 due to communal franchise, the problem was to tackle the attempts of the over-zealous to get more persons returned. And then, of course, there was the war on, and the very question of holding the census was in doubt.

The two censuses following Independence, *i.e.* in 1951 and 1961, were comparatively free from difficulties, though the 1951 Census could not cover the State of Jammu & Kashmir due to the situation prevailing there. The 1961 Census was perhaps conducted under least disturbed circumstances except that the linguistic frenzy was apparent in some areas, and certain preventive steps had to be taken to ensure peaceful enumeration. At the 1971 Census, the midterm general elections to the Parliament ordered in February 1971 led to an eleventh hour postponement of the Census enumeration by a month. Despite the administrative organisation having had to shoulder the responsibility for the nation wide general elections, it is a tribute

to the administration that it did not fail to handle the census enumeration with undampened dedication.

Though, right from 1871, attempts had been made to cover the entire country at each census, there had always remained till 1961 some pocket or other, such as a "native" State or some remote tribal area, which could not be covered. As already pointed out, in 1951, Jammu and Kashmir could not be covered and also the North East Frontier Agency. In 1961 while the entire country was covered, only a simplified schedule, different from the all India schedule, was canvassed in N.E.F.A. It was only in 1971 could it be claimed that the entire country was covered by a uniform census schedule without exception.

The Census Questionnaire

The 1971 Census canvassed a house list a few months before the Census, which was akin to that of the 1961 Census and it gave data on the number of houses and house-holds, the size of households, whether they lived in owned or rented houses and the different uses the houses were put to, and the material of wall and roof. An Establishment Schedule was also canvassed; it aimed at covering all census houses used as establishments and gives considerable data particularly on the unorganised sector of industry, *i.e.* those which are not registered factories. It gives information on type of goods manufactured, size of establishment, type of organisation (whether it was a public, private or co-operative institution), the type of power or fuel used etc. This Establishment Schedule covered also the trade and service establishments.

The questions included in the individual slip are as follows :

1. Name
2. Relationship to head
3. Sex
4. Age
5. Marital status
6. For currently married women only
 - (a) Age at marriage
 - (b) Any child born in the last one year
7. Birth place
 - (a) Place of birth
 - (b) Rural/Urban
 - (c) District.
 - (d) State/Country
8. Last residence
 - (a) Place of last residence
 - (b) Rural/Urban
 - (c) District
 - (d) State/Country
9. Duration of residence at the village or town of enumeration.
10. Religion
11. Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe
12. Literacy

13. Educational level
14. Mother tongue
15. Other languages
16. Main activity
 - (a) Broad category
 - (i) Worker
 - (ii) Non-worker
 - (b) Place of work
(Name of village/town)
 - (c) Name of establishment
 - (d) Nature of industry, trade, profession or service
 - (e) Description of work
 - (f) Class of worker

Question 6 relating to fertility covers only currently married women and does not cover widows or divorced persons. This has been done having regard to convenience of canvassing as to evoke the most reliable responses. The answers to this question when tabulated according to the variables of age of mother, duration of marriage, educational level and religion are expected to yield some useful data on current fertility. Questions 7 and 8 relating to migration are expected to yield useful tabulations with reference to place of birth as well as place of last residence. The rural/urban flows are likely to be better reflected with reference to place of last residence. This will, however, cover only the latest movement and not the intermediate movements since birth. The economic Questions 16 and 17 have made some basic departure from the past. Each person was required to declare what his main activity was, that is, how he engaged himself mostly. A person was treated as a worker for his main activity if he participated in any economically productive work by his physical or mental activity. In respect of seasonal work, like agriculture, livestock-keeping, household industry etc., the main activity was ascertained with reference to the last one year's period. In regard to regular work in trade, profession or service, the main activity was that which was carried on in the last one week prior to the date of enumeration. Those whose main activity did not come under the category of "worker" fell under any one of the following types: attending to household duties, full time student, retired person or rent receiver, dependent, beggar or vagrant, inmate of a penal or charitable institution and others. Hopefully the "Others" were likely to cover persons seeking work and who did not come under the definite types of non-workers listed above. No specific question on un-employment was asked at this census as the previous experience had shown that unemployment and under-employment required enquiries in depth to get a realistic estimate and this was not possible in a quick massive operation such as the census. The Planning Commission felt that it was better not to attempt a question on unemployment at the census lest it gave a misleading picture. However, it may be stated that, at the request of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, a special questionnaire card was handed over to every person who had the minimum educational qualification of a university degree or a technical diploma. 2.2 million cards had been returned answered and these were processed and several useful tabulations (C series) on the pattern of educated employment and unemployment were prepared. However, it had not been possible to assess the exact degree of response or non-response in different categories and the data obviously suffer from this limitation.

The Tabulation Scheme

The 1971 Census has a fairly ambitious tabulation programme. There are eight series of Tables

A SERIES—General Population Tables (5 in number) showing the size of population, decadal variations in population from 1901, villages classified by population, towns classified by size and their growth rate from 1901 and particulars of standard urban areas.

B SERIES—Economic Tables (19 in number) giving various economic characteristics such as the industrial and occupational classification of workers cross-classified by age, educational level, employment status etc. for rural and urban areas; particulars of secondary work; details of non-workers.

C SERIES—Social and Cultural Tables (10 in number) giving the composition of households, distribution of population by age, sex and educational levels, mother tongue and subsidiary language, religion, and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

D SERIES —Migration Tables (6 in number) giving the break-up of migrants by place of birth as well as place of last residence. The characteristics of migrants by age groups, educational levels, duration of residence and marital status.

E SERIES—Establishment Tables (6 in number) giving the distribution of establishments of broad types as manufacturing, trade or other establishments, size of employment, types of fuel or power used for industrial establishments, household industries, etc.

F SERIES—Fertility Tables (5 in number) giving the distribution of married women, and the related births during the last one year, cross-classified by characteristics as educational level, present age, age at marriage, duration of marriage and religion.

G SERIES—Special Tables of Degree Holders and Technical Personnel (12 in number) giving fairly detailed tables on the distribution of the degree holders and technical personnel by subject fields, employment status, sector of employment, emoluments; the unemployed by duration of unemployment, level of education, etc.

H SERIES—Housing Tables (4 in number) giving the distribution of census houses by the uses they are put to, material of wall and roof, size of households and number of rooms occupied and tenure status.

The processing and tabulation of the Indian Census data had been done entirely manually till 1961. Methods as tally mark system and slip copying and sorting were adopted at the earlier censuses. Since 1941, the recording of answers on individual slips and direct sorting of the slips for each characteristic was attempted. In 1961, data on the household schedule were processed on a sample basis on conventional mechanical punching and tabulation machines. Greater strides of progress were made in the succeeding decade and in the 1971 Census for the first time electronic data processing machines were utilised for producing several tables. The 'G' series of tables *i.e.* degree holders *and* technical personnel tables, the

E series of Tables *i.e.* establishment tables and the H Series of Tables *i.e.* housing tables on the basis of 20 per cent sample were produced by processing on a computer. As far as the regular census tables were concerned, the primary census data giving the distribution of population by their basic characteristics such as sex, literacy, scheduled caste/scheduled tribe, the broad industrial categories for each village and enumerator's block of each town were produced by 100 per cent manual sorting and tabulation. This had to be done in view of the tremendous magnitude of the problem of processing 548 million schedules. The preparation of inputs to a computer, if the entire data had been processed on the computer, would have entailed a delay of years. Data on 1 per cent sample of the individual slips have, however, been transferred on to magnetic tapes and almost all the census tabulations at national level are programmed to be brought out in advance by processing on the computer. Yet another advantage of putting this 1 per cent data on computer tape is that in due course it is proposed to make available copies of this tape on payment of cost to institutions or other data users who may wish to further tabulate the data for other characteristics. About 62 tape reels are needed for copying out the entire 1 per cent data and the time needed for copying is about 30 hours. The indentors for copying the data will be required to supply the tape and pay for the computer time at Rs. 550 per hour. A 20 per cent sample of urban data has also been put on the computer and the urban tables will be produced by electronic data processing. The rural tables have been prepared by manual processing of 10 per cent sample data. Both these will be combined in presentation of the final census tables.

The First Results

The 1971 Census has been attempting to make available the census data to the Government, scholars and other data users as promptly as possible. With this in view the Provisional Totals of the population giving the population distribution and its break-up by sex and literacy, were published on 12th April 1971, *i.e.* within less than 10 days from the date of completion of census enumeration which is a record for the census of any country in the world. The provisional figures compiled from the abstracts furnished promptly by over a million enumerators, and their relay by the quickest means and their analysis, mapping and printing within such an incredibly short time is a major achievement and a tribute to the efficiency of the administrative machinery in the country. The provisional figures differed from the final figures by just 0.11 per cent which proves the care with which the provisional figures were compiled. Further, data on rural/urban break-up, the population break-up of individual towns, the broad economic activity of population as cultivators, agricultural labourers and the non-agricultural workers were released four months later, on provisional basis. The final population figures giving the break up of population by sex and the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes down to the administrative unit level of a tehsil and town and also the data on religion down to the district level were released within a year of completion of census enumeration. Other final tabulations giving the broad age groups and industrial categories of workers, the mother tongue data, the particulars of individual scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are expected to be released before the end of 1972. So also the Primary Census Abstracts giving data down to the district level. It is gratifying that the District Census Handbooks of a number of districts in the country containing the Primary Census data for every village and enumerator block of a town have already been published in several States. The printing limitation has been holding up the publication of many more District Census Handbooks. Before the end of 1972, it is expected that a substantial number of census publications would have been released.

The Indian census is not content with providing merely skeletal statistical picture of the population of the country and its administration units. It presents detailed analytical reports which shed considerable light on the various facets of India's life and economy, and this has won for the Census the reputation of being the most fruitful single source of information on the people of the country. Several ancillary surveys were undertaken on ethonography, linguistics, rural crafts and so on. In the 1961 Census, a special survey of over 500 villages was undertaken. At the 1971 Census, about 200 urban centres have been taken up for a special study to throw light on the role of small towns. The Census Commission has also established the healthy tradition of closely associating scholars in its work. In 1961, a scheme of preparation of special monographs by scholars was started. The 1971 Census Commissioner recently had consultation with a number of scholars to explore the possibility of preparation of special monographs on the 1971 Census on a much wider basis. The Indian Census Centenary is being celebrated in October 1972. It is in the fitness of things that on this occasion Indian demographers in India and abroad are being brought together to discuss various aspects of the Indian demographic situation.