

## **National Population Register (NPR) in India - A Step towards Register Based Census**

Dr. Chandramouli

The Census in India is the largest administrative exercise in the country which counts and collects information on various demographic, socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the entire population of the country. The first census in India was held in 1872 in an asynchronous manner, but from 1881 onwards population censuses in the country are held every ten years without any interruption. The 2011 Census in India would be the fifteenth national census in the country.

2. In view of the growing need for a credible identification system in the country due to various factors, like internal security, illegal migration etc, India is contemplating the preparation of a National Population Register (NPR) by collecting specific information on each person residing in the country. The proposed NPR would contain such information as, name, sex, date of birth, current marital status, name of father, mother and spouse, educational level attained, nationality, occupation/activity pursued, present and permanent addresses. The database would also contain the photograph and finger biometry of persons above the age of 15 years. Under this scheme, every individual would be assigned a unique National Identification Number (NIN). The NPR is expected to be ready by 2014.

3. This move has generated a fair amount of debate and discussion. On the one end of the spectrum are those who argue that the NPR would be the first step towards a register based census and that the regular decennial census based on a house to house enumeration of the entire population would ultimately be phased out. At the other end are those who swear that a register based census is impossible in India given its size and complexities. They are of the opinion that the present method of conducting a decennial census by a house to house enumeration of the entire population is the only way to generate the social, economic, cultural and demographic profile of the country. While there is merit in the arguments of both the camps, the balance of convenience would lie more towards the centre.

4. There are several databases in India like electors list, driving licenses, passports, PAN cards (Income Tax), list of persons below the poverty line, ration cards, farmers cards to name a few. All these have a limited reach and are stand alone databases. In order to avoid duplication, save costs and allow interoperability, a standard database covering the entire population is an urgent necessity. The fundamental purpose of the NPR is to provide a credible database for identification

of the individual and avoid all the shortcomings in the existing databases. This would, apart from the implications on improving the internal security of the country, would greatly enhance the targeting of various beneficiary oriented schemes of the Government and non Governmental agencies. There is therefore considerable weight in the argument that such a Register should be created.

5. The next issue to be considered is whether, given the size and complexities, such an effort is sustainable. Creating the base database is a costly exercise but is very much in the realm of the possible. The challenges lie in developing a system which would update the database dynamically and keep it live at all points of time. This would mean capturing every event of birth, death and migration on a real time basis across the length and breadth of the country. Having achieved this objective, the next would be to communicate this information on an anytime anywhere basis. This would require the establishment and maintenance of a massive ICT infrastructure throughout the country. Granted that the will to do this is there and the resources for the same are committed, sustainability of the system is also feasible.

6. Having established the need to create the National Population Register and the feasibility of its maintenance, we now proceed to examine whether the Register would replace the Census in due course. The decadal population Census in India gives a snapshot of the population at a particular point of time - the reference date. The count apart, the Census gives out data on the age profile, the sex composition, religion, social status, mother tongue, language, educational status, occupation, migration, fertility etc. In addition, the Housing Census also throws up a large number of indicators like type and quality of housing stock, amenities available to households, certain assets owned and services available. The cross tabulation of various indicators give policy planners and others robust inputs for programme planning and implementation on a full count basis. The Register coupled with sample surveys would allow the generation of many of the indicators but would not present as comprehensive a picture as the Census.

7. An additional argument in favour of the Census is that the individual respondent is given an assurance that the information collected is confidential and that no individual information would be revealed to any third party. As anonymity is assured, the information is free of biases. Register based information, is by its nature, not confidential and hence may be prone to other influences.

8. In the circumstances, India has decided to canvass a separate Schedule for collection of information for the creation of NPR rather than extracting information from Census Schedules for this purpose. The two operations, the census and the NPR, have also been separated by a week to ensure the integrity of the two datasets.

9. The National Population Register when operational would enable the generation of a few sets of indicators in real time but would not completely eliminate the need for a comprehensive Census. It would definitely however, shorten and simplify the existing Census and thereby enhance its qualitative aspects. This would also enable the conduct of Census at more frequent intervals instead of once in a decade.

10. The challenges in creating the National Population Register in India are immense. Greater still are the challenges in dynamically updating it and keeping it live on a real time basis. Privacy issues would add to the pressure. Keeping abreast of quantum technological innovations in the field of ICT and adapting it optimally would be an added challenge. India is confident that it would be able to overcome all these challenges and successfully reach its objective. Register based Census coupled with conducting a regular Census by a house to house enumeration of the entire population would be the optimal mix for the foreseeable future.

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