

Census as a Mirror of Past and Present

Why in news?

A recent study of India's experience under colonial rule concludes that data from the Census of India reveal that between 1880 and 1920 approximately 100 million Indians died due to British policy in India.

How is Census of India conducted?

- The Decennial population census is conducted **every 10 years**.
- The population census activity includes the process of collecting, compiling, analyzing and disseminating the data collected.
- The first census activity in India was initiated in **1865** for the **1872** census by the then British Government.
- Post-Independence, the **Census Act, 1948** was passed which lays the guidelines and procedures to conduct the census.
- The first census for Post-Independent India was in the year **1951**.
- The conduct and analysis of the Census in India is done by '**Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner**' under the aegis of **Ministry of Home Affairs**.
- The data collected during the census is critical for planning, analysis, policy formulation and other aspects where data plays a crucial role.
- The census data forms a very important baseline for tracking progress, planning relevant policy interventions.

The 2021 census would be the first census in India where the enumeration would be done digitally.

TIMELINE OF CENSUS IN INDIA



800 BC

Rig-Veda has evidences for maintenance of some kind of population count



300 BC

Kautilya's Arthashastra prescribed the collection of population statistics



1590

Ain-e-Akbari included comprehensive data pertaining to population



1865

A modern population census was conducted non synchronously (at random intervals) in different parts of the country.



1872

"1st population census of India" Includes questions such as name, age, religion, caste etc. but did not cover all territories possessed by the British.



1881

1st synchronous census in India.
After 1931 caste based censuses were stopped by the British.



1951

Independent India publishes separate data on SCs and STs but not on other castes.



2016

Socio-Economic Caste Census was conducted but it was not made public. Conducted by Ministry of Rural Development in rural areas, Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs in urban areas.



What is the recent study about?

- Population figures are available from the time of the first Census of India in **1871**.
- The Sullivan-Hickel study utilized the age-wise population distribution in the census to draw conclusions about the evolution of economic conditions in colonial India.
- **Findings** - The mortality rate in British India is seen to rise steadily after 1881, recording an increase of close to 20% by 1921.
- As it is unusual for the mortality rate of a country to rise continuously due to natural causes, this suggests that the living conditions worsened during this period.
- The mortality rate dipped in 1931, which was the last census conducted in British India, but the last famine recorded in the country took place in Bengal in 1943.

What does this indicate?

- By pointing at the sustained rise in the death rate at the height of the Raj, the Sullivan-Hickel study proves **Dadabhai Naoroji's claim** of the economic impoverishment of India under British rule.
- The belief that British policy in India caused repeated famines is strengthened by the fact that there has not been a single famine since 1947.
- This is despite a population explosion following a sharp fall in death rates.
- The decline in the mortality rate surely signals improved living conditions.
- The Census shows that in the 1950s, life expectancy at birth of Indians increased by more than it did in the previous seventy years.

What is the situation after 1947?

- The population numbers recorded after 1947 pointed to the improvement in the lives of Indians since the end of colonial rule in dimensions beyond income.
- It also points to a worsening **gender inequality** in India through the ratio of females to males in the population.
- It is believed that in the absence of factors that lower the life chances of women, including foeticide, this ratio would tend to one.
- The Census of India shows that we have not attained that level in our recorded history, except in pockets within the country.
- After declining for four decades from 1951 it started inching up in 1991.
- But in 2011, it was yet lower than what it was in 1951.

References

1. [The Hindu | Census as a mirror of past and present](#)
2. [Factly | How did the Census evolve over the years?](#)