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Preparing India for a Credible Digital Census

Context

- The **2027 Census** is one of the most important administrative exercises in India because it will influence **political representation**, welfare schemes, and future governance.
- The upcoming Census is unique due to two major developments: the inclusion of **caste enumeration** for the first time since Independence and the use of **digital enumeration** through smartphones and self-enumeration systems.
- While these measures may improve efficiency and data collection, they also raise concerns regarding accuracy, technology, confidentiality, and public trust.

Inclusion of Caste Enumeration

- The inclusion of caste-related questions is a major development because caste remains a sensitive social and political issue in India.
- Surveys conducted in **Bihar** and **Karnataka** demonstrated that disputes often emerge over caste classification and population figures.

- Many communities may reject the results if they believe they have been undercounted.
- To avoid confusion and inconsistency, extensive **pre-testing** of the questionnaire is necessary.
- Enumerators must clearly understand the concepts, definitions, and instructions before conducting the survey.
- Without proper preparation, inaccurate caste data could create social tensions and reduce confidence in the Census process.

Method of Enumeration and Political Representation

- India follows an **extended de facto method** of enumeration, where people are counted at their usual place of residence during the Census period.
- This method includes persons temporarily absent as well as visitors staying in a household during the enumeration period.
- However, this creates differences between Census population figures and voter population data.
- Such differences are politically significant because the Census will be used for the future **delimitation** of **Lok Sabha** and State Assembly constituencies.

Digital Enumeration and Technological Challenges

• Lack of Technical Skills

- A major concern is that many enumerators may not be adequately trained to use digital devices.
- Difficulties in operating electronic equipment were already observed during the **Socio Economic and Caste Survey** in Karnataka.
- Uneven technological skills among enumerators could affect the quality of data collection.

• Concerns Regarding Confidentiality

- There are also risks related to **data confidentiality** and accountability.
- If data collected on paper is later transferred to electronic systems, mistakes and misuse may occur.
- Family members or students assisting with data entry could compromise privacy.
- Since Census information includes sensitive details related to caste, migration, occupation, and disability, strict safeguards are essential.

Problems in Self-Enumeration

• Complexity of Census Questions

- Definitions related to **disability**, work status, occupation, and industry often require lengthy explanations.
- For example, the meaning of work in Census terminology includes unpaid and irregular economic activities that many people may not identify as employment.
- Incorrect understanding of such concepts can lead to inaccurate statistics and poor policy planning.

- **Respondent Fatigue**

- Another issue is **respondent fatigue**. Since information must be provided for every member of the household, long and complicated questionnaires may discourage careful responses.
- Some respondents may intentionally provide incorrect answers to avoid follow-up questions. Simplified language and better question design are therefore necessary.

- **Risk of Omissions and Fraudulent Enumeration**

- Past post-enumeration surveys have shown that **domestic helpers**, distant relatives, and unrelated persons living in households are more likely to be omitted from Census records.
- Self-enumeration systems may increase this risk because respondents may not fully understand who qualifies as a household member.
- There is also the possibility of **fraudulent enumeration**. Since Census figures influence reservations, welfare distribution, and political representation, some groups may attempt to manipulate population numbers.

Measures to Improve Accuracy

- Several measures can improve the quality and reliability of the Census:
 - Extensive **field testing** of questionnaires
 - Better training for enumerators
 - Simplified and clearly worded questions
 - Strong verification systems for digital data entry
 - Safeguards to maintain confidentiality
 - Questions designed to reduce omissions of household members
 - Monitoring mechanisms to prevent fraudulent enumeration

Conclusion

- The **2027 Census** combines technological innovation with complex social and political challenges.
- The inclusion of caste data and the use of digital systems can improve the **scope and efficiency of data collection**, but they also create risks related to accuracy, privacy, and representation.
- The success of the Census will depend on proper training, simplified questionnaires, reliable digital systems, and strict safeguards against omissions and manipulation.
- An accurate and credible **Census is essential for ensuring fair representation, effective policymaking**, and democratic accountability in India.

Preparing India for a Credible Digital Census FAQs

Q1. Why is the 2027 Census important?

Ans. The 2027 Census is important because it will influence political representation, welfare policies, and governance in India.

Q2. Why is caste enumeration significant in the Census?

Ans. Caste enumeration is significant because it is being included in the national Census for the first time since Independence.

Q3. What is the extended de facto method of enumeration?

Ans. The extended de facto method counts people at their usual place of residence during the Census period.

Q4. What challenge may arise from digital enumeration?

Ans. Digital enumeration may create difficulties for enumerators who are not skilled in using smartphones and tablets.

Q5. Why is respondent fatigue a concern in the Census?

Ans. Respondent fatigue is a concern because long and complex questionnaires may lead to inaccurate or incomplete answers.

Source: **The Hindu**

Analysing India's Budgets for Justice

Context

- The lack of targeted funding for justice reforms in the Union Budget 2026–27 reflects India's continued neglect of the **rule of law** as a pillar of **economic growth** and democratic governance.
- Although large amounts are spent on the justice system, the allocation of resources remains deeply uneven.
- Across 11 high-GDP States, around ₹2 lakh crore was spent on justice-related institutions in 2024–25, accounting for nearly 4.6% of State budgets.
- However, the majority of this expenditure is concentrated on **policing**, while sectors such as the **judiciary**, **legal aid**, **prisons**, and **human rights bodies** remain significantly underfunded.

Structure of Justice Expenditure in India

• Dominance of Police Funding

- More than 80% of justice-related expenditure is allocated to the police system and around ₹1,616 per capita is spent on policing, making it the largest component of justice budgets.
- Since policing is a core responsibility of the State, substantial funding is necessary.
- However, most police expenditure is directed towards **salaries**, administrative management, and infrastructure such as vehicles and computers.
- Less than 1.5% of police budgets are spent on **training**, while only around 1% is allocated to **forensics**.

• Underfunding of the Judiciary

- The **judiciary** receives less than 1% of total State budgets despite handling enormous **caseloads** and judicial delays.
- District courts alone manage seven times more cases than High Courts, yet they receive only three times the budget.
- Limited investment in judicial infrastructure and staff creates delays in dispute resolution and affects public confidence in the legal system.
- India currently has only 15 judges per 10 lakh population, far below the **Law Commission** recommendation of 50 judges per 10 lakh people.
- In addition, every judge requires several clerical and support staff members for efficient functioning.
- Insufficient judicial capacity slows down economic activity, weakens contract enforcement, and reduces access to timely justice.

Crisis in Supporting Institutions

• Condition of Prisons

- The 11 States discussed account for nearly 60% of India's prisoners, with prison occupancy reaching 137%, higher than the national average.
- Despite this, prisons receive only 0.14% of State budgets.
- Very little funding is directed towards prison staff development, welfare, or **rehabilitation**
- On average, only ₹0.23 out of every ₹100 spent on prisons is allocated to training.
- High vacancy rates and overcrowded prisons create poor living conditions and reduce the possibility of reforming inmates.

• Neglect of Legal Aid

- **Legal aid** receives the least amount of funding among all justice institutions.
- Since legal aid is the primary mechanism through which poor and marginalised citizens access justice, inadequate funding directly affects **equal justice** and constitutional rights.
- Limited financial support reduces the reach of legal services and delays legal representation for vulnerable groups.
- As a result, economically weaker sections often struggle to defend themselves within the legal system, increasing inequality in access to justice.

Systemic Priorities and Institutional Imbalance

• Focus on Enforcement Over Justice

- The current distribution of funds reflects a justice system primarily designed around **enforcement** and **surveillance** rather than fairness and accessibility.
- Strong emphasis on policing creates a system capable of producing arrests and detentions but less effective in delivering remedies and protecting rights.

- Data from the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)** show that nearly 26 lakh people were arrested in 2024, many from socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

- **Weak Oversight Institutions**

- Institutions responsible for accountability and rights protection also suffer from neglect.
- **State Human Rights Commissions (SHRCs)** receive only around 80 paisa per capita despite their statutory responsibility to investigate rights violations and monitor safeguards.
- Many SHRCs continue to function with over 40% vacancies, limiting their effectiveness and weakening independent oversight.
- Without strong accountability institutions, citizens face greater difficulty in seeking protection against abuse of power.

The Way Forward: Need for Recalibration of Justice Budgets

- A balanced justice system requires equal attention to all its pillars, policing, judiciary, prisons, legal aid, and oversight institutions.
- Excessive dependence on policing creates pressure on other institutions and results in delays, overcrowding, and procedural inefficiencies.
- Greater investment in judicial infrastructure, legal representation, prison reforms, and professional training would strengthen the overall justice delivery mechanism.
- A more balanced allocation of resources would also improve **accessibility, fairness**, and institutional accountability.

Conclusion

- While policing receives the largest share of resources, institutions essential for ensuring **rights, fairness**, and **accountability** remain underfunded.
- Shortages of judges, overcrowded prisons, weak legal aid systems, and ineffective oversight bodies undermine public trust and disproportionately affect **marginalised communities**.
- A meaningful recalibration of justice budgets is essential for building a **people-centred** and constitutionally grounded justice system.
- Strengthening every component of the justice ecosystem would not only improve access to justice but also support **democracy**, social stability, and long-term economic development.

Analysing India's Budgets for Justice FAQs

Q1. Why is policing criticised in the justice budget?

Ans. Policing receives the largest share of justice funding, while other important institutions remain underfunded.

Q2. How does judicial underfunding affect justice delivery?

Ans. Judicial underfunding causes delays, case backlogs, and shortage of judges.

Q3. Why is legal aid important in the justice system?

Ans. Legal aid helps poor and marginalised people access fair legal representation.

Q4. What problem exists in Indian prisons?

Ans. Indian prisons face overcrowding, staff shortages, and poor rehabilitation facilities.

Q5. Why are State Human Rights Commissions important?

Ans. They protect citizens' rights and provide independent oversight against abuse of power.

Source: **The Hindu**

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