

POPULATION CENSUS OF BRITISH INDIA

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Census was a method of population count conducted in ancient India and is still continuing. The well-known book of Kautilya (during Mauryan empire), Arthashastra, narrated Census as a part of governance for the purpose of taxation and implementation of state policy. However, apart from just population count, the official Census was initiated during modern times, by the British during their colonial rule in India. First attempts to assess the population were found in the cities of Calcutta and Benaras (1800). Later in 1814-15, a Census was done in the 'Island of Bombay'. In British provinces and princely states, Census was under the control of mainly police and Chowkidars.

Census in British India (1871-72) was the first attempt to gather data related to whole of India – British India and the native feudatory states. But the information from the princely states was only fairly accurate and the numbers were mostly estimates, so the Census limited itself to what was then British India. All the provinces were not represented and the information was gathered at different times, using different methods and agencies. Some of the reports from the provinces were collected six years before 1871.

The Census was conducted based on the categories of age, sex, caste, religion, education, occupation, dwelling, infirmity, nationality, language, and location (rural or urban). It carried information regarding female infanticide as well as details about the various castes that existed, ranging from 'superior' and 'intermediate' to 'agricultural' and 'labouring'. It gave figures for revenue collected per acre of land and per adult male agriculturalist.

The municipal authorities conducted the Census in the towns while in other areas paid enumerators, chieftains or common people were involved in doing so. There was a widespread fear among the people during the whole process due to the thought that they would be taxed in some way. They also felt that the government would profit from this exercise.

Going through some facts of the Census in British India of 1871-72, the density of the population was 131 persons per square kilometer. The total number of villages and towns added up to be 4,93,444. Less than 3 percent of the total population lived in towns. The household size was 5.14 persons per house. The number of males and females were found to be 98 million and 92.5 million, respectively. The sex ratio was 94 females per 100 males. At that time, adults were defined to be of age above 12 years. The number of children (below age 12) was 67 million while adults summed to be 123 million, giving an adult to children ratio of 100:54.

Since female infanticide was prevalent, the British had enforced a law in 1870 that applied special regulations to those districts and villages where there were fewer than 54 girls for every 100 boys. In Bengal, the number of male adults were 2 million less than female adults while male children were 2 million more than the female children. The reason for this variance can be attributed to the understating of girls that was prevalent, out of the fear that the objective of the Census was to find wives for the European soldiers.

73.7% of the population was constituted by Hindus and Sikhs and approximately 21.5% by the Muslims. Barely 5% as constituted by Buddhists, Jains, Christians, Jews, Parsis, Brahmoes, "hill men" and others whose religion are not known. The Census also had a count of the number of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Rajputs and many other castes for most provinces.

The occupation practiced by a maximum of people in British India was agriculture. Around 37.5 million people were involved in this job. It included men, women and children. There was very little information about the various occupations done by the women.

The Census of 1881 is said to be the first synchronous enumeration attempted for all of India. This was conducted by the Government of India and its local administration. It was quite different from the 1871 Census as it could cover all of British India (except Kashmir) and included the Feudatory states, the French and Portuguese colonies and also the province of Burmah. There were 18 provinces at the time and India was spread across 35,80,972.72 square kilometers with a population of 253.89 million. The number of villages and towns increased to 7,14,707 in this population count. The average population density was 184 persons per square kilometer and household size was 5.8 persons per occupied house. (4.63 million houses were unoccupied, including the shops in bazaars that weren't used as dwellings). The number of males were 129.94 million and females 123.95 million, across all age groups. Among every 10,000 people, 7,402 were Hindus, 1,974 Muslims, 253 'Aborigines', 135 Buddhists, 73 Christians, 73 Sikhs and 48 Jains. Hindustani or Urdu was the language spoken by the majority. Other than 106 Indian languages, 17 Asian, 28 European and one African language were spoken in British India. 90.9% of the population lived in rural areas. Most of the rural inhabitants dwelled in Assam, while the least were in Ajmer. The largest city in terms of population was Bombay followed by Calcutta and then Madras. The major caste in the Hindu population was Brahmins followed by Rajputs.

Moving on to the Census on 26th February 1891, the methodology of 1881 Census was followed. This time however, more efforts were made in the uncovered and difficult areas like Sikkim and Burma, areas under the forests and hilly tracts, railway establishments, cantonments, seafaring and floating population. Efforts were also made to translate some of the Census documents into Indian vernacular languages.

The third decadal Census took place on 1st March, 1901. The British territory had already widely expanded in India by then. Hence the extend of coverage also increased. Though the methodology was same, the work allocation became more streamlined. Each enumerator under the supervisors were assigned a block each that contained around 30-35 houses. A supervisory circle contained 10-15 compact group of blocks.

Reference date for the next Census came on 10th March, 1911. In this Census, wooden slabs were fixed on the walls for numbering of houses. A general village register was prepared

beforehand by the provincial superintendent. Special provisions were made for Tea Gardens, Mines, Factories, Ports, Boat population, pilgrims, etc. The 1911 Census publications provide data on Rural Urban Classifications. The criteria of being a city was to have a population exceeding 1 lakh. Growth of urban centres like Calcutta, Bombay, etc. as Cities have been documented too. Focus was given on conducting Industrial Census with an objective to

obtain information regarding the industrial growth of the country. A notable impact was made on this Census due to the aftermath of partition of Bengal in 1905 by the British. It had created major unrest in India led by the educated Bengalis. Due to pressure, this jurisdictional change was brought down by British in 1912. Therefore, though the 1911 Census was conducted in temporary jurisdictions as per the partitions, the published reports had to group the data together as per the administrative units prevalent at that point of time (1912).

The Census of 1921 was remarkable in the history of Census. Census was conducted overnight across India on March 18, 1921. Census Mauza Register was introduced. List of non-Municipal Towns was identified and marked based on trade, commerce and industrial conditions. The Non-Cooperation movement led by Mahatma Gandhi was taking place in India at the time. This had its impact on the Census process. Chemicals like Geru, Coal Tar, etc. was used for House numbering. An important thing noted in the Census of 1921 was the drastic decline in the population of India from the previous Censuses. This was due to the number of deaths reported due to the outbreak of influenza pandemic (Spanish flu) of 1918. 1.2 to 1.7 Crore deaths were reported out of fever, according to Census. This had a devastating impact than any other events in modern history.

Census of 1931 was the sixth conducted in India. It was governed by the Temporary Census Act 1929. Data on vital statistics, multilingualism, literacy and means of livelihood were collected and compiled. This was a successful Census conducted in British India even though there was an impact of Civil Disobedience Movement.

The last Census by the British Government was conducted on 1st March, 1941, based on the Census act of 1939. British was under financial difficulty due to the ongoing Second World War. Also, difficulties were faced by British due to the strong Indian freedom struggle. Hence Census couldn't be executed to its fullest all over India at a time. Enumeration was done in phases. A new Census schedule was designed for easier compilation. New questions on fertility and employment were added. Mechanization and technology were used reducing manpower in half.

This was the glimpse of how Census was done in British India. Census continued and still continues. It had ever transformed to cater to the different aspects of the Indian societal life.