Shifting to Register-Based Census

What is the issue?

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- Activities for the next decennial Census of India falls due in 2021.
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- It is high time that India takes note of the transformation in census methods elsewhere in the world.
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What is the recent development?

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- There has been a remarkable transformation in census methods elsewhere in the world, mostly in Europe, in last two decades or so.
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- The traditional census approach adopts the questionnaire-based method.
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- Instead, attempts are being made to use data from various administrative data registers.
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- Mostly, data from government sources are used, to produce useful statistics.
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What are the noteworthy methods elsewhere?

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- **Austria** - The traditional census involves a high burden for respondents, and a huge cost (€72 million).
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- In 2000, the Austrian government decided that the 2001 census would be the last traditional one.
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- Consequently, a register-based “test census” was conducted in 2006, successfully testing the methods, data procedures and use of registers.
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- The first complete register-based 2011 census had no burden for respondents, and the cost declined to €10 million.
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- Most of the data were already available in several registers like the Integrated Data Bases for persons, families, households, buildings and dwellings, and locations of work.
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- Data was also available from municipalities, geo-information statistical databases and interactive maps.
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- The difficult task of combining all large registers was done by using a special identification number for persons.
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- At times, same variables featured in many registers.
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- Variables not in any register, such as “language mostly spoken” and “religion”, were collected by suitable sample surveys.
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- **Germany** - Germany conducted a nationwide census in 2011 after a 20-year gap.
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- This first register-based census was a multiple-source, mixed-mode method to collect data from administrative registers.
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- They include population registers, full enumerations and a sample survey.
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- **Others** - In Swiss too, since 2010, information is primarily drawn from population registers and supplemented by sample surveys of about 5% of the population.
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- Nordic countries such as Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark have a long tradition of using administrative registers for producing official statistics.
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- They now conduct population censuses using administrative data registers rather than through a nationwide survey of households.
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- Netherlands has held virtual censuses since 1981, using the Population Register and surveys.
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- Estonia, perhaps the most advanced digital nation in the world, used a combined census methodology using several registers along with an e-census

in 2011.
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- However, Estonia is now moving towards a completely register-based census for 2021.
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- UK would replace the decennial census beyond 2021 by statistics produced by more regular and timely administrative data.
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- Greenland in North America and Singapore and Bahrain in Asia are also making effective use of registers for their censuses.
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What lies ahead for India?

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- India should think beyond the traditional questionnaire-based approach.
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- While the country's 2011 Census cost about Rs 22 billion, the 2021 Census could cost about Rs 46 billion.
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- Instead, billions of rupees can be saved by making use of the administrative data of several available registers instead.
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- Nevertheless, it would be a challenging task for a country like India with 1.3 billion.
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- But, India does have the statistical and technological expertise.
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- Several government registers can be combined along with tax, hospital and educational records to produce statistics similar to the census.
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- The loss of information, if any, should be minimal, and can easily be compensated by suitable sample surveys.
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Source: Business Standard

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