Significance of India's Upcoming Census

Prelims – Indian Polity and Governance-Constitution, Political System, Panchayati Raj, Public Policy, Rights Issues, etc.

Mains – *General Studies- II* (Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation | Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests, Indian diaspora | Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance)

Why in news?

The Government of India has announced that the next Census will be conducted in two phases during 2026 and 2027, with the reference date for the data being March 1, 2027.

Census
• A Census is the total process of collecting, compiling, analyzing and disseminating demographic, economic and social data pertaining, at a specific time, of all persons in a country or a well-defined part of a country. • It provides the trends in population characteristics. • The Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, *Ministry of Home Affairs* conducts the decennial Census. • Census is conducted under the provisions of the Census Act, 1948. • **Historical Context** – The *first systematic attempt at a census in India was the Census of 1872*, undertaken by actual headcounts in most parts of the country, though it did not cover all British-controlled territories. • The *Census of 1881*, led by *W.C. Plowden* (Census Commissioner of India), marked a significant step towards a modern, synchronous census, *covering the entire continent of British India* (except Kashmir) and feudatory states. • Since then, censuses were undertaken uninterruptedly every ten years until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. • Since then, censuses have been undertaken uninterruptedly once every ten years until the Covid 19 in 2021.

Why was the 2021 Census Delayed?

- **COVID-19 pandemic** – The pandemic significantly disrupted operations, leading to the postponement of the 2021 Census and breaking India's long-standing decadal chain.
- **Disruption to primary education** – The Ministry of Home Affairs cited the need for approximately 30 lakh enumerators, mostly primary schoolteachers.
- Conducting the Census during or immediately after the pandemic could have severely disrupted primary education.

What are the significance of census for the Indian economy?

- **Fundamental statistical basis** – The national Census serves as India's foundational reality check, providing a comprehensive statistical image of its population and their socio-economic status.
- This vital data informs how the country has evolved over the past decade and offers crucial insights for *future policy-making and development*.
- **Inflation control and Interest rates** – The Monetary Policy Committee of the Reserve Bank of India decides inflation rates and interest rates base on the a consumption survey.
- The *Census provides the fundamental "reality" and baseline data* that these surveys rely on for accurate weighting and representation of consumption patterns.
- **Migration and Urbanization** – The 2011 Census revealed that *most Indian migration is local, not inter-state*, with a significant rural-to-rural flow.
- However, this *outdated data hinders effective policymaking for urbanization and migration's impact on resource allocation, employment, and social cohesion*.
- A new Census is crucial for accurate insights to guide governance and economic growth as India's reality has undoubtedly shifted.

What are the other Implications and Consequences of the Delay?

- **Data Quality Concerns** – The politicization of certain questions (like caste and language) could "vitiate the quality and credibility of the Census data" if individuals provide biased responses for political reasons.
- **Rising Costs of Accuracy** – With each passing year of delay, obtaining an accurate picture of reality becomes increasingly costly for surveys and analyses attempting to model India's current state.
- **Lack of Alternatives** – While administrative data from various government departments exists, it is often unreliable and inconsistent.
- Issues arise from varying definitions, collection methods, and potential bias from departments reporting their own successes, making it a poor substitute for a comprehensive and unbiased Census.
- **Outdated Policy Foundation** – India has been operating largely on over a decade-old data due to this extended six-year gap, creating an outdated foundation for policymaking and economic analysis.

What lies ahead?

- **Political Battleground** – The Census will fuel intense debates over caste data and delimitation (rebalancing political representation), significantly impacting federal dynamics and electoral strategies.
- **Economic Policy Reset** – New data will force critical revisions in inflation calculation (CPI weights) and resource allocation for welfare schemes and infrastructure, impacting RBI's monetary policy and government spending.
- **Foundation for Governance** – It will provide the updated reality of migration patterns and urbanization levels, essential for effective urban planning, service delivery, and understanding social cohesion in a rapidly changing India.

- **Data Integrity and Timeliness** – Key challenges will include ensuring data quality amidst politicization and achieving timely release to bridge the significant knowledge gap created by the delay.

Conclusion

- The *Census is not just a statistical exercise but also a critical tool for governance, policy and planning*.
- After a delay of over a decade, Census 2027 will serve as a much-needed reset for India's economy, governance, and democracy.
- Its timely and accurate execution will be essential to meet the aspirations of a rapidly changing India.

Reference

The Indian Express | India's Upcoming Census

