**Sources of Population Data in India**

As elsewhere in the world, data for population studies in India are obtained from census enumeration, vital registration and sample surveys. In the following sections a discussion on these sources and the nature of data is being presented.

**Population Census**

The first attempt to obtain the size of population in India was made during 1867-72. But this counting was not synchronous, as it was not conducted at the same time in different parts. It did not cover the whole country also. However, as remarked later by Kingslay Davis, a famous demographer, this attempt was “an auspicious beginning of census taking in India”. From 1881 onwards, census counting has taken place on synchronous basis at an interval of every ten years. The 2001 census, the first in the new millennium, is the fourteenth in the series and the 2011 is the recent one and fifteenth in the series. Up to 1931, Indian census had adopted *de facto* approach, and from 1941 onwards it switched over to *de jure* approach.

For a large population like that in India census taking is a gigantic task, perhaps the largest administrative exercise in the world. The responsibility of conducting census operations in India rests with the central government. It is union subject with the Ministry of Home Affairs in charge. A senior officer of the Indian Administrative Service, with experience in census operations, is appointed as the Census Commissioner. Similarly, for each state/union territory and officer designated as Director of Census Operations is appointed. The responsibility of actual counting rests with thousands of enumerators, who are drawn from primary and other schools, village ‘patwari’ (in case of rural areas) and local officers. An enumerator is required to visit every household within the area allocated to him for collecting required information. The Indian Census Act of 1948 authorizes the enumerators to ask the prescribed questions and the respondents are legally required to furnish the details truthfully. The Act guarantees that the collected information will be confidential and used only for statistical purpose, and not as evidence even in the court of law.

**Vital or Civil Registration**

The system of registration of vital events in the country was introduced by the British government way back in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was concerned mainly with mortality data. This was the time when the death rates were very high in India due to poor sanitary and public health conditions. Any improvement in sanitary conditions, therefore, required complete and accurate data on mortality rates. It was with this objective that the British government had introduced vital registration system. It was only in the then Central Provinces where a system of registration of births was also available as early as in 1866. The Births, Deaths and Marriage Registration Act was introduced in 1866 by the British government. The Act, however, covered only areas ruled by the British. Moreover, as registration under this law was purely voluntary, the Act served very little purpose. The coverage and the quality of data were very poor. Furthermore, as the system was concerned mainly with the collection of data on epidemic and diseases, it served very little purpose for the study of dynamics of population change. The overall responsibility of recording and tabulation of data rested with the Sanitary Commissioner, and later with the Director of Health Services.

In the post-independence period, realising the importance of data on vital events in planning for social and economic development, the government took several remedial steps to improve the quality and coverage of civil registration system. In 1960, the responsibility of collection, tabulation and publication was shifted to the Registrar General, who also looked after census operations in the country. The Registration of Births and Deaths Act was passed in 1966, which provided for compulsory registration of births, still births and deaths. Any failure to register such events was made punishable under the Act, which is in force throughout India now.

The Registrar-general, who is also the Census Commissioner, is the central authority in charge of the registration system. He is entrusted with the task of consolidation, tabulation and publication of data on vital events. He is also responsible for periodic evaluation and promotion of vital registration system in different parts of the country. In each state there is a Chief Registrar who looks after the civil registration in his state. The office of Registrar General publishes annual volume on Vital Statistics in India, which provides data on number of births and deaths, age of deceased persons, infant mortality rates, cause of deaths etc.

Despite the fact that any failure to register vital events has been made punishable, and that birth and death certificates are essential now days in legal disputes, such disputes involving property, civil registration system in India is far from satisfactory.

**Sample Registration System**

In order to make a more reliable and accurate data available on vital events, the Government of India introduced several measures during the Third Five-Year Plan. One among them was the introduction of a system, known popularly as ‘Sample Registration System’ in the year 1963-64. The SRS data on births and deaths are more reliable and are based on the technique of ‘dual report system’. In this, information about births and deaths is collected on a continuous basis by a resident part-time enumerator, generally a teacher. Then, every six months an official conducts an independent retrospective survey. The data obtained through these two operations are matched. The unmatched and partially matched events ae verified in the fields, and thereafter an unduplicated count of births and deaths is obtained. SRS data provide estimates on births and deaths for various states and union territories for rural and urban areas respectively.

SRS was initiated by the office of the Registrar General of India on a pilot basis in some selected states in 1964-65. The system became fully operational during 1969-70 covering about 3,700 sample units. Thereafter, the sampling size has been periodically increased. At present, SRS covers a total of 6, 671 sample units – 4, 436 in rural areas and 2, 235 in urban areas.

**Sample Surveys**

Apart from the sources discussed above, there are several demographic sample surveys conducted from time to time by various government and non-government agencies. They provide useful information on different aspects of population ordinarily not available in the census or vital registration system. Two of them deserve special mention here: the National Sample Surveys (NSS) and the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS).

In 1950, the Government of India set up a National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) with an objective of collecting comprehensive data pertaining to various social, demographic and economic aspects, on a regular basis, through sample surveys on a nation-wide scale. The first round was conducted in 1950-51, the latest was conducted in 2014-15.

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS), a Ministry of Health and Family Welfare project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the first round (NFHS-1) was conducted in 1992-93 and the recent one (NFHS-5) in 2018-19.

NFHS provides invaluable database on demographic and health-related parameters at national and state level. Some of the issues covered in the surveys include fertility and nuptiality, infant and child mortality, the practice of family planning, maternal and child health care and utilization of services provided for mothers and children.