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## The biggest head count ever

By K Jayshankar

It is an event that probably occurred for the first time about 4000 years ago in China. The ancient Egyptians and the Persian Empire also conducted the exercise, and currently two of the world's largest democracies are in the midst of it. The event, if you are still wondering what it is, is the Census!

While in the United States the census exercise began from January 25th, 2010, in India it began on April 21st. There are a host of other interesting contrasts as well. For a start, to count 308 million people (the current estimate of the population), the exercise is expected to cost over \$11 billion in the United States, a nation which is mostly urbanized (over 81%). In India, a largely rural nation, the census exercise will involve counting and profiling about 1.2 billion people, at an estimated cost of \$1.3 billion.

In both countries this is a constitutional exercise conducted every 10 years - in the United States this will be the 21st time this federal project has been undertaken since the first one in 1790, and in India since it was started in 1872, this is the 15th census, held without interruption at the beginning of every decade. While the census has generated excitement in India, it is not without controversies in the United States. The US census includes citizens, non-citizen legal residents, non-citizen long-term visitors and illegal immigrants.

Further, it is based on actual number of persons living in residential structures in the country. As the census data becomes the basis for apportioning seats in the United States' House of Representatives (and, consequently, creates the members of the Electoral College who have a vital voice in electing the President and Vice President of the United States), the decision to count non-citizens in the official census has always caused much political rancor. That apart, advocates of individual rights take their needs for privacy to extreme levels and even refuse to participate in the national head count, undeterred by the mandatory nature of the exercise and the penalty of \$5000.

The Indian operation, on the other hand, has many interesting facets. Touted to be the 'the biggest exercise... since humankind came into existence,' not only is it considered to be the largest head count ever conducted, it seeks multitude of information like no one else! Consider this: information is being sought on basic issues like gender, education, religion, occupation, etc. but also about domestic matters like, availability of drinking water and toilets in households. And, for the first time ever, information will be gathered on the number of bank account holders, use of internet, ownership of computers and mobiles.

This ambitious exercise undertaken by the government not only involves physically counting every person in the country but also has a biometric angle. It is credited with another first, the plan to photograph and finger print every individual above 15 years of age and thereby create a National Population Register and a comprehensive national data base! Truly a phenomenal task far removed from the way the ancient Romans estimated (from *censere*, the Latin root of the modern word census) the numbers of all adult males who could be enrolled for military service.

While the United States has its Census Bureau, which is a division of the Department of Commerce, and India has a Registrar and Census Commission to carry out the mission, the world's most populous country, China, does not have a single, central agency. Instead, it collates numbers provided through multiple bodies, including the government's arm, units of the Communist Party, commune leaders and factory heads, etc., which has often made many overseas bodies to look at the numbers with skepticism.

Is the government asking too much and intruding into areas where they have no business? The ghost of Big Brother looms large in the minds of some. But many in the developing economies hold contrarian views. In the absence of robust records, and lack of accurate market place information, the government becomes the primary instrument for gathering, sifting and updating such large databases. It is hardly necessary to highlight that accurate & updated information becomes a basic input for planning the allocation of scarce and valuable national resources for building the country. To ensure that information is confidential, the Indian government has mounted a campaign to make citizens aware that this is a compulsory exercise and that the data is confidential in all respects and cannot be accessible even to courts. Similar campaigns are also being held in the United States to allay fears of intrusion.

For a moment let us ignore the economic benefits of this exercise and understand the challenge of the task. As befitting the gargantuan task of counting over a billion people, in India over 2.5 million census officials have been tasked with visiting not just urban centers but also to cover over 700 towns and more than 600,000 villages across the length and breadth of the country. This is no exercise for the faint-hearted. It is a mean test of managerial & organizational capabilities, in the form of logistics planning, IT, and motivating enumerators who are going to tackle a landscape of an amazingly diverse nation. But officials believe that accurate execution is a way of finding out 'how well government programmes are reaching their intended target and plan for the future,' according to the Census Commissioner.

Nigeria's first national census was conducted in 1921, though the first census in the country was the one in Lagos in 1866. With advances in information technology making it possible to slice and dice information in myriad ways, it will be interesting to see what the next census reveals about the emerging profile of Nigeria.

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