

Head count

MUMBAI

India's forthcoming census will be consequential—and controversial

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HOW DO YOU count to 1.45bn? Start with 3.5m. That is the number of people who will knock on doors, compile spreadsheets and crunch data to conduct a new census in India, the world's most populous country. It is a colossal undertaking. Enumerators will venture into deserts, trek into jungles and climb soaring mountains to reach remote villages. The formidable task will be accomplished by breaking it up into phases: in April 2026 officials will collect data on every dwelling in India. The actual count of humans will begin in a handful of states and territories in October. The rest will follow in March 2027.

Like most countries, India usually conducts a census once a decade. But covid-19 disrupted plans for the 2021 edition and various excuses were offered for further delays after the pandemic receded. A full 16 years will have elapsed by the time the new census is completed. In the interim, hundreds of millions of Indians have risen from poverty, mobile broadband has blanketed the country and average incomes have doubled. All of that alone makes this count unusually important. But additional demographic and political factors make it the most consequential census since independence. It will reshape the country for decades.

The most anticipated effect is a boost in the quality of governance. Census figures form the bedrock of policymaking. Without up-to-date numbers, it is difficult for governments to target welfare schemes, essential services, infrastructure-building and much else that a poor and fast-growing country like India needs. Fresh figures should enable the central and state governments to vastly improve the design of their policies. New data may also provide evidence of the material improvements that Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, claims to have brought to people's lives since he took power in 2014.

Less predictable, but potentially far more momentous, will be the release of numbers about caste. India has an elaborate system of caste-based affirmative action and its politics is still dominated by caste coalitions. Yet no one has any idea how many people belong to which caste and where. For the first time since independence, the census will ask people about this sensitive subject. The results will produce winners whose numbers have grown, and who can thus demand a greater share of the pie, and losers, who cannot. That could rewrite the rules of Indian politics.

The census will also be the trigger for another form of affirmative action. India has mulled quotas for



women in national and state legislatures for three decades. Although the country had a female prime minister as far back as the 1970s, the overall representation of women in politics remains poor. Only 14% of lawmakers in the current parliament are women, and about a tenth in state assemblies. That is set to change. In 2023 India's parliament amended the constitution to reserve a third of its seats and those of state houses for women, with effect from the first election after the census. Some worry that powerful male politicians will game the system by installing wives or daughters, but quotas will boost women's representation at the highest levels of Indian politics.

The final and potentially most significant effect of the census is still unconfirmed, but widely expected. India is supposed to redistrict its parliamentary constituencies after every census. But this process was put on hold after 1971 to avoid penalising states that fared well in controlling their population. The result is a lopsided system where some lawmakers represent 3m people, while others represent half as many. The redistricting pause expires in 2026 and all indications are that the government intends to redistribute seats (and may increase their overall number, too).

That would enable India's cities, which function as its economic engines but wield almost no political power, to demand more attention and funding. And the richer, more progressive but less populous southern states would cede political power to the poorer, more populous north. Pundits say this would cement the dominance of Mr Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, which is popular in the north and a near nonentity in the south. Yet it is hard to argue against redistricting: a democracy where one vote is worth twice as much as another is unworthy of the name.

The forthcoming census, then, will transform how power is distributed in India by caste, gender, culture and geography. It will really count. ●

This will be the most important census since independence