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Counting Heads in a Conflict Zone

By: Aijaz Ashraf Wani

In Jammu and Kashmir, population statistics are not neutral facts. Numbers are routinely manipulated by governments and communities to assert power and identity.

In the context of broader debates on using numbers in modern state-making, democratic governance, and identity politics, Vikas Kumar's *Numbers as Political Allies*, set in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), provides valuable insights into how census data shape political and economic power.

Given the importance of census statistics for any country or region because they impact policy-making and public life, one expects that the census will be carried out with utmost caution, precision, and neutrality. One expects both the government as well as the public to be sensitive towards this process. However, Kumar shows that despite their enormous significance, numbers are not always neutral and without bias. Numbers and statistics can be—and are—regularly manipulated by governments as well as communities to serve their respective narrow interests rather than the larger public good.

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As Kumar reveals, the census in J&K is not neutral—it is closely entwined with geopolitical considerations, regional conflicts, and sectarian rifts. Covering the period from 1951 to 2011, the book investigates the “local enumeration practices, revealing how insurgency, administrative delays, inadequate institutional capacity, and sectarian mobilisation have affected data accuracy and reliability”. It argues that the lack of reliable data in Jammu and Kashmir is mainly a result of political decisions and ongoing institutional practices, rather than simple technical mistakes.

Theoretically, the book pivots around how statistics function as a contested terrain of legitimacy, sovereignty, and representation rather than as a technical tool. Kumar conceptualises the census through three critical lenses—as an insignia of modernity, a collective self-portrait, and a public good. Numbers become more than just statistics in a region where the popular imagination remains dynamic—they become prospective determinants of sovereignty and identity.

Kumar sees the census as an administrative exercise that has a political and symbolic significance. In the Indian context and especially in J&K, the census reinforces state sovereignty and asserts a vision of order, rationality, and inclusivity. In J&K, stakeholders generally show little concern for the accuracy of the census. Their primary interest is in ensuring that the numbers—manipulated or not—support their own agendas. “Kashmiris are not worried about the quality of census as long as it does not challenge Kashmir's electoral grip over the state, while Jammu's concern with data quality is limited to undermining the dominance of Kashmir. The government is indifferent to the problem, while the academia has not examined it either”, Kumar writes.

Like many other instruments, the census too is used by the state with a specific objective and it is not a neutral activity. “The resumption of census”, writes Kumar, “and elections that are among the best-known routines of modern democracies was seen as a key measure of return to normalcy. The quality of data was, understandably, of secondary importance under these circumstances”. On the other hand, the opposing side (separatists and militants) see these activities as politically motivated and issue threats to officials and the public to stay away from the census. But in 2011 they wanted people to participate, on the grounds that the state had to show demographic change in order to marginalise a particular community. This explains why the author not only finds technical errors in the data, but also sees it as motivated.

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The manipulation and poor quality of census figures reflect these deeper struggles for power and control in the region. Deep divisions based on majority-minority status, region, and religion impact the integrity of data collection and raise questions about the credibility of

the resulting data. In an environment of mistrust, census data serves as an instrument for communal and regional power struggles rather than as an input for policy-making. The numbers feed into the grievances of political (mis)representation and political (il)legitimacy.

Quoting different sources, Kumar shows how the fear of being marginalised led to systematic exaggeration of household populations by enumerators from the same religious community to boost the overall share in population. Kumar also details how many marginalised groups—including Gujjars, Bakarwals, Shina speakers, Scheduled Castes, and boat dwellers—have often been overlooked or misclassified in official records. This exclusion is due to several persistent challenges such as topography, migration patterns, logistical problems, and bureaucratic apathy.

The Gujjar-Bakarwal population alleges that their long-standing neglect is reflected, amongst other things, in their under-enumeration (they believe they should be around 20% of the population, roughly two and a half times their 2011 population) and do not trust the census. The undercounting of Bakarwals is evident in that their population contracted in Kashmir between 2001 and 2011 while it grew by 150% in Jammu. “This contraction of Bakarwal population is inexplicable amidst the pervasive overcount in Kashmir”. Similarly, their 150% population growth in Jammu is beyond explanation unless “we assume massive under-enumeration in the 2001 census, or some other issue”. Kumar’s research helps to explain how categories such as tribes, faiths, and languages in the census enumerations become domains for (mis)recognition and (in)visibility. It documents how administrative strategies like undercounting nomadic communities or misclassifying tribal groups connect with the political issues of marginalisation, encroachment, and cultural loss.

At the same time, Kumar highlights cases of over-counting, particularly in the 2011 census, where “fictitious residences, inflated slum statistics, and inflated child counts were coordinated to reflect demographic dominance”. The sharp increase of the Muslim population of J&K and Muslims in Kashmir in the age group of 0–9 during the 2011 census raises questions. Similarly, “defying the conventional wisdom, the state, which was above the all-India CSR (child sex ratio) till 2001, reported a sharp decline in 2011, placing it among the worst performing states in the country”. There seems to be a lot of overestimations of boys or “reporting girls as boys”.

The census data shows that there is a huge disparity in urban growth between Jammu city and Srinagar. During 2001–11, the Srinagar Urban Agglomeration grew by 27.93%, while the Jammu Urban Agglomeration grew by only 7.38%. At the same time, the slum population of Jammu contracted by 81%, while that of Srinagar (including Ganderbal) grew by 150%. This is intriguing, because one would expect the slum population (and urban expansion) in Jammu to increase more during this period because people were migrating to the region due to the conflict.

One of the book’s strengths lies in its methodical attention to field-based insights and archival data. The analysis is grounded in official records, comparative state statistics, and interviews.

The book also closely examines how faulty data shapes voting boundaries, which illustrates how democracy itself suffers when numbers are distorted. “Just as the government in developing countries”, writes Kumar, “may be inclined to under-report headcounts to claim success in population control, communities competing for the public pie overstate their headcounts with an eye on the distribution of developmental funds, delimitation of electoral constituencies and demarcation of administrative units”.

In J&K, we have seen all of this, with delimitation of constituencies being the latest example. Kumar’s analysis reveals that the errors have consequences because they feed into conceptions of demographic engineering, impact inter-regional rivalry, and foster exclusion. The issue is not just about statistical accuracy but also about how these numbers are influential in shaping public discourse, the delimitation of electoral constituencies, resource distribution, and the very terms of citizenship and political identity in J&K.

One of the book’s strengths lies in its methodical attention to field-based insights and archival data. The analysis is grounded in official records, comparative state statistics, and interviews. However, the empirical scope of the book is limited to the 2011 census, and it does not seek to closely understand events after the abrogation of Article 370 and the division of the state into the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Though the author provides some highlights, a more detailed analysis would have been helpful in correlating historical patterns with contemporary developments.

In addition, Kumar acknowledges he had limited access to government records, which led to an over-reliance on oral testimony and circumstantial evidence, especially on bureaucratic decisions and irregularities in enumeration. Although informative, these observations cannot always substitute for systematic data auditing or official transparency.

The book's ideas remain conservative and muted even if it rightly critiques the limitations of the Census Act of 1948 and calls for modifying it. Given the scope of the issues uncovered, one would have expected a more ambitious roadmap for democratising statistical governance, developing public trust, or testing out community-led enumeration methodologies.

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Notwithstanding these limitations, the book contributes to understanding the significance of studying statistics in conflict regions. This is one of the most exhaustive and critical examinations of the census practices in Jammu and Kashmir. The book's strength is in showing that numbers are not just neutral facts reflecting reality, but are actively disputed and contested. It demonstrates how data can be used to conceal or create power and dominance.

Kumar's most important message is that data should be seen as a public good—something that belongs to the people, not just the state. This perspective has the potential to bring about the greatest change. It calls for not just openness and responsibility in data collecting but also trust, involvement, and communication. Kumar thus offers a measured yet powerful critique of the belief that technical solutions alone can sustain India's statistical system. With regard to inclusion, representation, and justice, he exhorts us to view the census as part of the greater democratic infrastructure rather than as an isolated event.

Even if the book is focused on census enumeration in J&K, its consequences reverberate far beyond the region. In other multi-ethnic, federal democracies, especially those struggling with migration, minority rights, and regional asymmetries, the book's findings on the politicisation of numbers, the institutional fragility of census operations, and the limits of legalistic administration resonate powerfully. “The obsession with the religious composition of the population has meant that every policy and administrative decision is evaluated for its potential demographic impact”. The census is no exception to this underlying rule.

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