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Making Sense of the National Population Register

By: K. Narayanan Unni

There is much to be said for preparing a National Population Register as recommended by the UN. But the design of the 2026/27 Census form suggests that data for both the census and NPR will be collected at the same time, which is not appropriate since the data required for the two are different.

In 2010, the population enumeration for preparing a National Population Register (NPR) along with the house listing operations of the Census of 2011, evoked frequent criticism of the NPR. The use of the NPR in Assam to prepare the National Register of Citizens (NRC) wherein everyone had to prove their citizenship contributed to this criticism. In the process, the benefits of an NPR were ignored.

Population Register and its Uses

A population register has been defined by the United Nations as, "an individualized data system, that is, a mechanism of continuous recording, and/or of coordinated linkage, of selected information pertaining to each member of the resident population of a country in such a way to provide the possibility of determining up-to-date information concerning the size and characteristics of that population at selected time intervals."¹ The United Nations Member States have the responsibility to recognize all individuals present in their territory as a person before the law, without prejudice to nationality (or lack thereof), legal status, gender or duration of stay. The population register must contain all people who are residing in an area.

The population register needs to be continuously updated for every birth and death. Similarly, it needs to have a system of updating it to take into account international migration so as to give an almost real-time picture of the population.

The United Nations Legal Identity Agenda envisages providing a legal identity to every person by 2030. Establishment of a population register is an important step in this direction. There are several other uses of a population register as a standalone database:

1. Since all usual residents are in the population register, it provides the population of the country, excluding short-term visitors, at the reference date of its preparation.
2. Once some sort of identity number, similar to or same as the Aadhaar, is provided to everyone, and it is used in records of school, employment, social security administration etc., it can help generate many useful statistics and facilitate targeted delivery of subsidies etc. better than what Aadhaar is doing now by making use of family linkages within households.
3. Once every person on a particular day is included in a register with identification particulars, any undocumented migrant after that date will not be in the register. They are prone to be identified easily and this could also become a deterrent to potential immigrants without documents.
4. By accounting for the changes in the population due to births, deaths and immigration/emigration, the register can give the population of the country on any subsequent date. In other words, the country could shift to a register-based census to obtain the total population. However, getting information like the number of graduates, the number of workers etc. would require the identity numbers being available in other databases so that they can be linked. Such a census would be on a de jure basis, which means people are counted at their residences as against being counted at the place where they are during the census (de facto basis)
5. The population register itself or in combination with other registers linked through the identity number can be used as sampling frames for preparing more efficient samples than is possible without such a register.

Indian Scenario

The Citizenship Act was amended in 2003 by inserting [Section 14A](#) for preparation of a national register of citizens. Its subsection (1) provides that the Central Government may compulsorily register every citizen and issue national identity cards to him or her. The procedure for registration is prescribed in the Citizenship Act (Registration of Citizens and Issue of Identity Card) Rules, 2003. These

rules define a Population Register as the register "containing details of persons usually residing in a village or rural area or town or ward demarcated area within a ward in a town or urban area". The continuous updating of the register visualized in the UN definition is absent in this definition.

It does not help when public functionaries make statements about the lack of a relationship between the NPR and NRC; such views conflict with the legal provisions.

By combining such registers all across the country, the National Population Register is formed, though the term "National Population Register" is not mentioned in the Act or the rules. Preparing a national register is indirectly envisaged so that duplicate entries formed by some persons being enumerated at more than one place can be identified and removed.

Rule 4(3) envisages preparation of Local Registers of Indian Citizens based on the local population registers by verifying the particulars of each individual collected during the house-to-house enumeration. Thus, the population register and the citizen register are organically linked as the latter is prepared from the former and any statement to the contrary is wrong.

It is also worth noting that the law provides for identity cards only to citizens. On the other hand, Aadhaar numbers are allotted to all residents. Though the Aadhaar card is not an identity card as it just provides the number and the details need to be verified, it is being used as an identity document as envisaged under the UN Legal Identity Agenda.

Indian society is not used to records. It is very difficult to prove that one's parents, especially the mother or grandmother is/was an Indian citizen. For instance, my mother did not have any property in her name and if I am asked to produce proof that she was born in her home town in Kerala, I cannot do so. There was no registration of births at the time and the school where she studied has been demolished and I have no idea where the records are. This may not be much of an issue in Kerala as very few older Malayalees would be citizens from other countries living in the state. However, for those living in border areas, experiencing large-scale international migrations, there will be large numbers of people whose citizenship status cannot be verified from any records. The problem of uniquely identifying citizens for preparing the NRC in Assam gave much bad publicity to NPR.

Census and NPR: How are they different?

Though the majority of the population would be covered by the census and the NPR, there are significant differences between the two.

The census enumerates usual residents present at the residence at least for a part of the census period and also visitors present throughout the period, irrespective of citizenship. Non-resident Indians are not included unless they are in India during the census enumeration period. On the other hand, the NPR would include only usual residents, irrespective of nationality, who have been residing at least six months or are likely to stay for six months. It excludes citizens living abroad, but includes non-citizens living in the place for more than six months.

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In summary the basic difference is that the NPR is based on de jure population while the census is based on de facto population. It is actually possible to bring them closer by making the census a de jure population enumeration. Except for a small percentage of the population who are nomadic tribes or are homeless, everyone has a residence can be associated with the NPR.

The details collected during the enumeration may be different as the census is required to collect a lot of information required for a variety of purposes and the name of the individual is not important except for identification. On the other hand, the name is the most important data item in the NPR as it is an integral part of one's identity. It has to be collected with utmost care without any spelling errors.

It is also important to note that the purpose of the census is to generate statistics on population by various socio-economic categories for the smallest geographic region in the country on a specific date. On the other hand, the NPR database once created needs updating on a real-time basis and can be considered a live database of the people living in a country.

The census data are treated as confidential both by the law and by the [United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics](#). It cannot be provided as evidence in a court of law. The information provided by the respondent in a census is generally not verified with reference to any document. On the other hand, every item of information provided to the NPR is to be verified.

Though there is no provision for publication of the NPR, the names of persons in the citizens register that are derived from the NPR will be published and thus there is no guarantee of confidentiality of the information in the NPR.

Issues in Combining Data Collection for NPR and Census

The government has notified 40 questions for the 2027 census that has already started in the snowbound areas. It appears that many of the questions, like particulars of parents and spouse, permanent address etc., do not have any statistical uses and are meant specifically for the NPR. The information sought in the questionnaire also include the mobile number, Aadhaar number, Voter ID number and Passport number (if holding Indian passports). These are to be provided, if available.

Since, the confidentiality provisions apply differently for census and NPR data, combining both into one questionnaire may make the process legally questionable.

A large proportion of the enumerators would have worked in the previous censuses and in many other surveys. They will have to unlearn a significant portion of what they were previously trained for and start writing (keying in) names and addresses accurately. Writing the address for every individual itself is going to be a tedious exercise for many enumerators who are not tech savvy.

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The respondent may not have the Aadhaar number, passport number and electoral ID number for every member of the household, including the household staff who may be living with them. In the case of institutional households, like student hostels, working women's hostels, paying guest accommodations, etc., the situation will be even more challenging. The warden or person in charge of the facility is the respondent for the census. He or she has to collect the information from all individuals living in the institution. While the mobile number and to some extent the Aadhaar number may be easily available, the same cannot be said about voter ID and passport numbers. They may not be available with many individuals as the documents may have been kept at their homes. The same is the case of inter-state labour migrants.

This means that the required information may not be available to the enumerator for a significant percentage of the population who actually possess an Aadhaar number/voter ID and/or a passport.

Way Forward on the NPR

The NPR is a useful tool for streamlining several facets of public administration as people within households get linked. This is a feature absent in Aadhaar mainly because of the nature of the Aadhaar enrolment process. The government needs to make the entire NPR preparation process transparent and inclusive. It does not help when public functionaries make statements about the lack of a relationship between the NPR and NRC; such views conflict with the legal provisions. It would be better to treat the NPR as separate from the NRC. Since the 2003 Citizenship Act does not talk about an NPR or population registers, such a separation will not violate the 2003 Act. However the provisions in the 2003 rules of the Citizenship Act which refer to a population register would need to be amended.

If the issues are tackled in a proper manner, it should be possible to have the NPR ready in one or two decades.

In my opinion, it is better to amend the Aadhaar Act to provide for creating a database of residents. The Aadhaar Act says that every resident is entitled to get an Aadhaar number. So there is no reason why the Unique Identification Authority of India's responsibility cannot include maintaining a database of all residents. The treatment of the Aadhaar Act as one relating to subsidies should also be changed. The Act needs to recognise the fact that Aadhaar is now being used in several places where there are no subsidies involved. The provisions in the 2003 Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of Identity Card Rules) can talk about taking off from this database instead of creating new population registers.

The birth and death registration process should be linked to the NPR for automatic updating of the database. For proper updating, it is necessary to ensure that all births and deaths are registered in time. The immigration/emigration services should also be connected to the NPR so that those who are not in the country are not in the register. Methods can be devised to treat short-term emigrants who may return.

The enumeration of population for the NPR was done in 2010 during the first phase of the Census of 2011. The NPR was later updated and Aadhaar numbers were added to the database. However, this was never taken to its logical conclusion: continuous updating. Today, that database is outdated and would contain millions of people who are dead and would not include millions of children born later. Due to the insistence on Aadhaar numbers of children at time of school admission, etc. a large percentage of the children may be in the Aadhaar database. This will help to bring NPR up to date to some extent. Once the systems for integration of birth, death and migration with the population register is ready, then the existing register can be updated through field visits. If the issues are tackled in a proper manner, it should be possible to have the NPR ready in one or two decades.

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Footnotes:

1 Series_M67Rev3en, Paragraph 1.80 (Section IV. Census methodology, B. Register-based census) in "United Nations: Principles and Recommendations for Populations and Housing Census, Rev 3"