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Census 2027 and the Delimitation Reckoning -- What the Numbers Will Trigger

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Census 2027 and the Delimitation Reckoning -- What the Numbers Will Trigger

 Business Standard

16 May 2026

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Census 2027 data will trigger the first delimitation exercise since 2001 -- how should India design delimitation rules to balance democratic representation with the development incentives that motivated states to control population growth?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

Business Standard argues that Census 2027 is far more politically consequential than its technical framing suggests. The demographic data will trigger the long-deferred delimitation exercise, determine OBC reservation quantum, expose the urban-rural allocation gap in welfare schemes, and reshape Parliamentary representation in ways that will reward states that did not pursue family planning (UP, Bihar, MP) at the expense of states that did (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka). The editorial calls for a constitutionally sound and politically durable delimitation formula before the 2027 data arrives.

WHY CENSUS 2027 IS DIFFERENT FROM EARLIER CENSUSES

India's decadal census has always had political consequences. Census 2027 is unusual because of a **cascade of deferred decisions** that all resolve simultaneously when the data arrives:

1. Delimitation – Frozen for Two Decades

Constitutional history of delimitation freeze:

- **84th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002:** Froze the delimitation of parliamentary and assembly constituencies based on the 1971 census **until the first census after the year 2026**
- **87th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2003:** Further adjusted this to: the 2001 census (for adjusting reserved seats) but kept the overall seat count frozen until after 2026

This means: **Census 2027 data will directly trigger a delimitation exercise** that will redraw constituency boundaries and, potentially, re-allocate the number of Lok Sabha seats across states.

2. The North-South Disparity Problem

The delimitation freeze was motivated by a specific political concern: **southern states should not be penalised for successfully reducing fertility rates**:

STATE GROUP	POPULATION GROWTH (2001-2011)	PROJECTED POPULATION SHARE 2027
UP, Bihar, MP, Rajasthan	High growth (>20%)	Will gain seats in delimitation
Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka	Low growth (<15%)	Risk losing seats in delimitation

The equity argument: Tamil Nadu and Kerala invested in women’s education, healthcare, and family planning for decades and achieved replacement-level fertility. Under a strict population-based delimitation, they would lose Parliamentary seats relative to high-growth states – effectively penalising successful governance.

The democratic argument: One citizen = one vote demands proportional representation. Freezing seat allocation indefinitely undermines this principle.

THE OBC ENUMERATION QUESTION

Census 2027 may – for the first time since 1931 – include a count of **Other Backward Classes (OBCs)**:

Why OBCs Have Not Been Counted

The Mandal Commission (1980) estimated OBCs at ~52% based on the 1931 census – this figure has been used for 40 years without updating. The politically sensitive nature of caste enumeration led successive governments to avoid it.

The Caste-Census Demand

Multiple state governments (Bihar, Karnataka, Telangana, Maharashtra) have conducted their own caste surveys in recent years. The Bihar caste survey (2023) found OBCs + EBCs at ~63% of the state’s population – significantly higher than the 1931-derived 52%.

If Census 2027 includes OBC enumeration:

- The official OBC population share will be established for the first time since 1931
- This will create pressure to revise OBC reservation quotas upward

- The 50% ceiling on reservations established in Indra Sawhney v. UoI (1992) will face challenge
- Sub-categorisation within OBCs (Supreme Court's 2024 judgment in Panjab v. Davinder Singh allowed sub-classification within SC/OBC) will become more targeted

URBAN-RURAL RESOURCE ALLOCATION

India's welfare schemes use census data for beneficiary identification and resource allocation:

- **PM-KISAN:** Uses agricultural household data
- **MGNREGS:** Budget allocation by state population
- **PM-UJJWALA Yojana (LPG connections):** BPL household count
- **Jal Jeevan Mission:** Household count for pipeline planning
- **PM Awas Yojana (rural):** Household shortage estimates

All these schemes are working with **2011 census data** – now 16 years old. The 2027 census will reveal significant divergences: states with rapid urbanisation (Gujarat, Maharashtra) will show fewer rural households; states with rural-urban migration (UP, Bihar) may show counter-intuitive patterns as migrant workers remain registered in rural homes.

THE EDITORIAL'S PRESCRIPTION

Business Standard calls for the delimitation commission to adopt a **formula that balances three principles:**

- 1 **Proportionality:** Constituencies should broadly reflect population – but with a phased adjustment rather than a single shock reallocation
- 2 **Development incentive preservation:** States with better demographic performance (low fertility, high female education) should not face arbitrary seat reduction. One mechanism: use a **composite performance index** (literacy + sex ratio + IMR + fertility) rather than pure population count
- 3 **Constitutional durability:** The formula must be acceptable to a qualified majority – avoiding a situation where southern states use their current Lok Sabha strength to block a delimitation they perceive as unfair

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 – Polity and Governance

Key arguments:

- Delimitation is a constitutional requirement (Articles 81, 82, 170, 172) – it cannot be deferred indefinitely without creating a democratic deficit
- The 84th CA (2002) freeze was a temporary fix that created a 25-year backlog
- OBC enumeration, if included, will have cascading effects on reservation policy and political mobilisation

GS Paper 1 – Indian Society

- Demographic transition in India: south-north disparity; fertility decline patterns
- Caste census debate: political economy of OBC enumeration

Keywords: Census 2027, delimitation, 84th CA 2002, OBC enumeration, Mandal Commission, Indra Sawhney 1992, 50% cap on reservations, fertility rate, south-north disparity, PM-KISAN, MGNREGS, ORGI.

Business Standard frames Census 2027 not as a demographic survey but as a political trigger. The data will set off the delimitation exercise, revise OBC reservation arithmetic, and expose the urban-rural divergence in welfare scheme targeting – all simultaneously. The editorial's core warning is about sequencing: India needs to design the rules of the delimitation game before the census data arrives and creates competing constituencies defending their current seat counts. Designing fair rules for a game already in progress is far harder than designing them in advance.

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