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**Behind the Post 1991 'Challenge' to
The Functional Efficiency of India's
Established Statistical Institutions**

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BEHIND THE POST 1991 'CHALLENGE' TO THE FUNCTIONAL EFFICIENCY OF INDIA'S ESTABLISHED STATISTICAL INSTITUTIONS

Sheila Bhalla

During the early 1990s, the stage was set for the initiation of institutional changes which affected both the demand for, and the supply of, data from India's National Sample Survey's Field Operations Division. On the demand side, the IMF expected that India would sign up to the Special Data Dissemination Standard (SDDS) agreement, which required that India provide it with a much expanded 'economic performance' data set. On the supply side, the Ministry of Finance ordered the implementation of certain recommendations made by the Fifth Central Pay Commission, which included a ten percent across the board reduction in the number of field investigators and a new recruitment system.¹

Concurrently, the weakening of the CSO during the second half of the 1990's and the restructuring of the Economic Census from 1998 onwards combined to reduce the capacity of the Economic Census to carry out its mandate.

How did this happen?

The Fifth Central Pay Commission's Role

On 9th April 1994, a Resolution was published in the *Gazette of India*, appointing the Fifth Central Pay Commission.² Paragraph 2(d) of the Resolution reads:

To examine the work methods and work environment as also the variety of allowances and benefits in kind that are presently available to the aforementioned categories in addition to pay *and to suggest the rationalisation and simplification thereof with a view to promoting efficiency in administration, reducing redundant paper-work and optimising the size of the Government machinery.*³

As the Central Pay Commission's Report itself puts it, "This is a conscious departure from the past as far as the Terms of Reference of this Commission are concerned."⁴

Its significance was not lost on the press at the time. In Chapter 2 of its Report, the Commission notes that "a national newspaper" has commented that the 'efficiency clause' in the Commission's terms of reference has made it, in effect, an "Administrative Reforms Commission."⁵

Paragraph 2.14 of the Report outlines the Fifth Pay Commission's interpretation of this mandate in terms of measures which would constitute an 'efficiency programme' for the next 10-15 years. These include: i) passing on "certain non-core activities to private contractors", developing "partnership between Government, industry, academia and NGO's"; (ii) examining "new modes of recruitment, including contract employment"; and (iii) and looking "at various options of optimising the size of Government machinery."⁶

The Report then documents the commitment of the Commission to the official 'economic reforms' agenda of the government of the day, described in the Report as "the likely scenario in the political, economic, social and other spheres up to the year 2010."⁷ Its wide ranging coverage, unique in the history of Pay Commission Reports, includes major sections headed 'Security and International Environment' describing international and national security concerns, 'The Social Scene' dealing with poverty, food security, the status of women and backward groups, and 'The Economic Scenario'⁸, which suggests "major policy initiatives".

The Report then outlines the specifics in terms of the economic initiatives which, in the Commission's view, are implicit in the 'likely scenario'. These include: "An investment rate of 30 percent, and a rate of growth of GDP by 6 to 8 percent; An increase in employment generation by 3 percent; Dismantling of the permit-licences system; Disinvestment in the public sector; Corporatisation of departmental undertakings; Privatisation and contracting of services."⁹

The Commission recognised that there would be opposition to some of these measures. It acknowledged that: "The main opposition will come from the trade unions and associations. They will have to be handled with care and circumspection. There may be a need for a new policy on the formation of trade unions, on the pattern of what has been attempted for other countries. Workers will have to understand that in the perspective of globalisation, we have to compete or perish".¹⁰

Chapter 27 titled "Workforce Size Control" gets down to the nitty-gritties.

The 'Overall Strategy', includes: i) reducing the volume of work to be done by shifting the responsibility for doing specified tasks to non-central government entities including state governments, public sector corporations, the private sector, the cooperative sector and by first converting some institutions into autonomous bodies, to the resulting autonomous institutions; ii) organisational restructuring to reduce the number of employees required, including reduction in the number of ministries and departments; iii) computerisation to reduce the number of employees required; and iv) "Rightsizing strategies that will enable Government to shed some fat."¹¹

They list six 'right-sizing strategies': i) abolition of vacant posts; ii) freeze on recruitment; iii) 'across the board cut'; iv) statutory control on creation of new posts; v) voluntary retirement and vi) compulsory retirement.

The Report takes a strong stand on the first strategy. "We, therefore, recommend that no arguments should be allowed against the decision to abolish existing vacant posts."¹² One of the arguments which the Commission thus dismissed was set out on the previous page of its Report. It reads: "Another argument could be that abolition, like creation, should be a conscious decision based on functional considerations and it should be resorted to only if a surplus is identified after a proper work study."¹³ The 'functional considerations' argument could have been applied equally well to all of the first four strategies in the case of activities such as those of the Field Operations Division (FOD) of the NSSO.

However, it is the 'across the board cut' strategy which the Government adopted first. Its impact on field investigator strength was immediate. A second round of functionally

destructive institutional change took place in 2002 when the Pay Commission's recommendation regarding the introduction of a new recruitment system was accepted.

Reduction in the Number of Sanctioned Posts

In accordance with instructions issued by the Ministry of Finance for a ten percent cut in staff strength and in pursuance of a Department of Statistics letter dated 8th February 1995, 150 posts of Assistant Superintendent and 220 field investigators posts were required to be abolished. On 7th March 1995, the Office Order to this effect was issued by the NSSO's Field Operations Division (FOD).

As a result of the Order, the number of sanctioned field investigators fell from 1469 in 1993-94 to 1199 in 1997-98. Concurrently, the number of sanctioned field supervisors dropped from 1920 to 1745.

In these circumstances, the short fall had to be made good, at least in part. This was done by the *de facto* expansion of the Indian Statistical Service (ISS). The 2001 NSC observed that a large number of persons had been placed in the ISS in an ad hoc manner, and that they were not regularised until the Supreme Court directed that they had to be absorbed in the cadre with retrospective effect. The outcome was that the base of the service was "extensively widened while the number of positions at higher levels ... remained the same."¹⁴

Notwithstanding these ad hoc additions, the NSSO remained short of the required number of field workers. In 1999-00 for the first time contract investigators were hired. This may be viewed as a continuation of the earlier practice of making ad hoc appointments but without the hazards of having to regularise them later. It may be noted that at least the regularised ad hoc appointees had the advantage of being experienced hands; the same cannot be said of the contract workers.

This was the situation at the time the Fifth Pay Commission's recommendation for a unified, centralised Subordinate Statistical Service was put into effect.

Introduction of New Recruitment System

The introduction of the new recruitment system had an immediate, significant, negative impact on the numbers of NSSO investigators and superintendents who were recruited. "Once it became operational, other major shortcomings in the new system were revealed. The recruitment process took longer, and the recruits who joined the service were not necessarily proficient in the languages of the regions where their services were required."¹⁵

The old system worked better on these counts.

Before 2003-04, the NSSO had a separate cadre. Recruitment of NSS field investigators was done locally, at the level of NSSO regional offices, directly, for NSS service specifically. The CSO and other Ministries which had "isolated" posts filled them through different channels.

What the Fifth Central Pay Commission recommended was the creation of a *centralised* Subordinate Statistical Service for the NSSO FOD, the CSO and other Ministries. Recruitment was to be done by a Staff Selection Commission. The recommendation was accepted. An

Order constituting it was issued in 2002. This replaced the decentralised NSSO recruitment system.

When the two systems were merged to form a national Statistical Service, recruitment was to be done at the central level, not by the NSSO and not by the Ministry of Statistics, but by a Staff Selection Commission, similar in character to the UPSC, but for ‘staff’ rather than for ‘officers’.

During two years, 2002 to 2004, the mechanics of setting up the merged statistical service took time to work out. Meanwhile, no one was recruited. The result was that, for the NSSO, there was no option but to rely on outsourcing for the necessary manpower to conduct ongoing surveys, as there were only 400 NSS investigators to conduct the 66th Round.

In 2004, the new recruitment system was actually launched. However, it did not work very well.

To illustrate: In 2006-07, MOSPI, on behalf of the NSSO, asked the Staff Selection Commission to recruit about 350 fresh recruits at the ‘investigator grade 2’ level. Three hundred and fifty names were provided; appointment letters were sent. *One hundred and ten only joined*. MOSPI wrote again to the Staff Selection Commission, asking for an additional panel. They got 100 names; letters were sent. *One* joined. In 2007-08, MOSPI tried again to recruit. Three hundred and fifty names were sent; eventually 90-95 joined. The story was repeated in 2008-09.¹⁶

The result: the investigators/supervisors service of the Field Operations Division lost ground. Retirements, at an average rate of 120 per year, plus resignations, at an average rate of 30 to 40 per year, added up to a rate of attrition amounting to 150 to 160 per year. The backlog of unfilled posts rose. At its worst, the shortfall was 1,100 people.

The NSSO tried to make do with whatever they had, but the interim solution to the increasing shortfall of experienced field investigators created a new set of problems. As the 2012 Committee reported: “Attrition is normally at the supervisory level, but due to the huge shortage at the field investigators level, the NSS decided not to promote anybody for 4 or 5 years, although eligible cadre existed and so did vacant supervisory posts. To maintain field staff, supervisory personnel were sacrificed. Presumably, so was morale.”¹⁷

However, “allowing attrition at the supervisory level to continue proved to be a damaging decision. Scrutiny, inspection and supervision of field staff suffered. To deal with the problems it created, in 2008 56 people were promoted from field investigator status to supervisor status. The problem with this solution was obvious - it produced a gigantic gap at the bottom, at the field investigators level.”¹⁸ The number of field investigators dropped and the number of field supervisors moved up, despite being partially offset by a significant number of retirees and VRS cases.¹⁹ In 2010-11, for the first time, 200 ‘consultants’ were hired to cover a short fall in the required number of regular NSSO field supervisors.²⁰

Issues: Field Workers’ Qualifications and Delays in the Recruitment Process

A paper prepared by officials of the FOD states that the “most important requirement/qualification for primary field workers is knowledge of local language, culture and traditions,

as well as topography.”²¹ Yet, under the present dispensation, primary field workers are recruited on an all India basis and they may be deputed for work in field offices of particular regions without regard to their knowledge of the regional language, culture and traditions. Major problems often arise when this happens. Not only is the quality of the data collected compromised; the freshly recruited and posted field workers involved in such mismatches are more likely to resign.

The 2012 *Report* notes that:

At present, there is a two-year gap between the initiation of a recruitment process to fill up vacancies notified and the completion of the recruitment process. In the interval, applicants may well find other jobs. The delays may make it necessary to hire contract workers locally, which means that local FOD officials must arrange to invite applications, recruit and train them only to lose them again at the expiry of their contract.²²

State level officers complain that this process takes up more time than they are able to devote to their official work.

To deal with some of these problems the 2012 *Committee on Unorganised Sector Statistics* recommended that:

The requirements for primary field workers should be identified not only in terms of a minimum educational standard, but also in terms of language qualifications that would specify working knowledge of English, proficiency in the language of the region, and basic knowledge of computers. Further, to avoid undue delays in recruitment, steps should be taken to streamline present procedures with a view to ensuring that the time taken is reduced to a minimum of three months. A Committee may look into the matter to evolve suitable measures.²³

Expanding the Demand for Data: The IMF's Special Data Dissemination Standards

The Special Data Dissemination Standards (SDDS) of the (IMF) was designed by them as a 'surveillance mechanism' following the Mexican financial crisis. In the words of an ESCAP (2010) document²⁴, it “represents the benchmark data standard for countries that might seek access to international capital markets.” Inevitably, the SDDS standards tend to coincide more nearly with the priorities of actual or potential lenders rather than with the priorities of developing country borrowers. That the SDDS standards did *not* include certain socioeconomic data sets which reflect the aspirations of most developing countries, such as those relating to achievement of Millennium Development Goals, was also noted by the ESCAP 2010 team.

The Indian Government did not go blindly into accepting the SDDS requirements. It sought the views of other countries on SDDS²⁵ before signing up. Their responses indicated that opinion was divided.

Some countries saw the SDDS standards as a costly imposition and expressed doubts about how well SDDS statistical standards would succeed as a surveillance mechanism over an indebted country's financial system. They noted that before the SDDS was implemented, there had been no consultations with member countries by the IMF. This resulted in the perception

that the SDDS was being forced upon them. Implementing the “stringent provisions” of the SDDS came at a cost. It demanded major changes in their statistical systems and “diversion of scarce resources to development of data categories for which there was little domestic demand.” If they did not comply, they risked removal of metadata pages from the IMF’s website, an action that might undermine the credibility of their statistical system. In short, once a country subscribes to the SDDS, they are locked in; observance of the standard is mandatory.

However, several countries thought the SDDS standards were useful. They provided investors with timely, relevant information, enabled countries to compare their own methodologies with those of other countries, and provided internationally comparable statistics.

The result: India subscribed to the SDDS with effect from 27th December 1996.

The then Department of Statistics (DOS) was given the responsibility for coordinating ‘real sector data’ comprising national accounts, production indices, price indices and labour market data. The NSSO was assigned the work of supplying labour market data. The CSO was mandated to provide the other three data sets.

On the labour market, the SDDS required quarterly estimates of employment, unemployment and wage rates at the all India level, with a time lag not exceeding one quarter.

At that time India did not meet most of the SDDS standards. However, a transition period was provided for up until the end of December 1998, and India succeeded in fulfilling all the standards set for it by then, except those related to estimates to be generated by the quarterly labour force survey, to be based on data collected during the quarterly sub-rounds of NSS annual thin sample surveys.

Sidelining the Governing Council of the NSSO

According to the Minutes of its 66th meeting, the Governing Council was officially informed that the Government of India was “likely to sign” the IMF’s Special Data Dissemination Standards about ten days beforehand. The meeting was also informed that the NSSO was to provide “quarterly estimates of employment and unemployment based on on-going annual NSS Rounds”, and that their Survey Design and Research Division (SDRD) had already been asked to take up a pilot study for generating quarterly estimates. The Director of the SDRD, who was present, reported to the Council that the work had already started on the annual data of the 45th, 46th and 48th Rounds, and that a preliminary report would be ready in early 1997. Apparently the Chairman of the Governing Council expressed his reservations about the use of annual thin samples for this purpose. He suggested that the quarterly estimates based on small samples “might be subject to a wide margin of error.”²⁶

What emerged from the pilot study, however, was something which could not be identified as an ‘error’. As the Chairman pointed out in a subsequent meeting, held 7-8 August 1997, “with the predominance of agriculture in rural areas, both employment and unemployment (particularly of females) are subject to seasonal variability. Since such variability is real, it does not make the quarterly estimates non-reliable.”²⁷ Subsequently a similar exercise was carried out using the 43rd and 50th ‘full sample’ quinquennial Rounds with similar results.²⁸

In the August 1997 meeting, the Secretary of the Governing Council informed the members of the Council that member countries had the option of exempting themselves from supplying data on any two variables or indicators. He suggested that the Governing Council might take advantage of this provision. Following a subsequent decision by the Governing Council, it was decided to make use of what became known as the “as relevant” flexibility clause of the SDDS agreement.

The argument for taking advantage of the “as relevant” clause relates to the informal character of agricultural employment in India. As reported in SM Vidwans (2002), it ran as follows. “Labour market data do not have the same macroeconomic implications for India as they do for highly industrialised countries, in the sense that they are not considered to be useful indicators of short-run pressures on the economy, particularly in view of the substantial proportion of value-added generated by the agricultural sector, and the structure of that sector.”²⁹

Thus the periodic labour force survey project was put on hold for some time. It was refloated only two years later after the Governing Council of the NSSO had been officially dissolved in 2006.

Dissolution of the Governing Council and Revival of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey

The dissolution of the NSSO’s Governing Council in 2006 marks the opening of a new phase in the management of the Indian statistical system. Some background may be in order here.

The NSSO and its Governing Council had been created simultaneously by a Resolution dated 5th March 1970. From 1970 to 2006 the Governing Council provided the oversight and direction for the operations of the NSSO. As the 2009-10 Report of the National Statistical Commission put it, the Governing Council enjoyed “autonomy in the matter of collection, processing and publication of survey data, thus ensuring freedom from undue interference.” The 2001 Rangarajan Commission had observed that “the greatest strength of the NSS lies in its complete freedom from administrative and political influence, which is ensured through its Governing Council comprising academicians, professional statisticians and users.”³⁰

Ironically, the background to the dissolution of the Governing Council of the NSSO lies in one of the recommendations of the *Report of the 2001 National Statistical Commission* (Rangarajan Commission), which envisaged the creation of a Statutory National Commission on Statistics “independent of the Government and responsible to the Parliament in respect of policy-making, coordination and certification of Core Statistics.”³¹

Following the decision of the Cabinet to accept the recommendations of the Rangarajan Commission, the Government of India set up the *National Statistical Commission (NSC)* through a resolution dated 1 June 2005, published in the *Gazette of India Extraordinary*. The Commission was constituted on 12th July 2006 with Prof. Suresh D. Tendulkar as part-time Chairman.

The Commission *in its very first meeting held on the day it was constituted*, i.e., 12th July 2006, recommended as follows. ‘Since the NSC has come into existence as an independent body and has authority as per the Resolution, the Governing Council of NSSO in the present

form would not be needed. The NSC will carry out the functions of Governing Council through an alternative mechanism.³²

The government acted expeditiously on this recommendation. The Cabinet in a meeting on the 10th of August decided to dissolve the Governing Council. It was dissolved with effect from 30th August vide a Resolution issued by MOSPI on that date. Its functions were vested with the Commission.

The new Commission's alternative to the Governing Council was the NSSO Steering Committee, which was constituted on 15th December 2006 with 16 members (8 officials and 8 non-officials), including the Chairman and the Convenor. However, its mandate was more limited and its status that of a 'routine committee' rather than that of a 'High Level Committee' as in the case of the Governing Council. That it fell short of the requirements of a substitute for the erstwhile Governing Council was recognised by the National Statistical Commission itself in its Annual Report for 2009-10.³³

Thus when the three year tenure of the Steering Committee expired on 14th December 2009 the NSC decided to look after NSSO operations on its own with the assistance of expert Working Committees, constituted for each NSS Round. The Working Committees' role was to assist NSC "in formulating methodology and overseeing the entire gamut of survey operations for that Round."³⁴

Revival of the Periodic Labour Force Survey Project

The issue of conducting a periodic (quarterly) labour force survey was revived in June 2008. A Committee on Independent Survey on Employment and Unemployment which had reported in November 2008, had been constituted on the recommendation of the 91st meeting of the NSSO Governing Council held much earlier on 10th June 2005.³⁵ The Committee was assigned the task of providing an integrated overview of the technical aspects of four related proposals. The generation of quarterly estimates of employment and unemployment as envisaged under the SDDS was listed as number four. The most important of the other three related to the Planning Commission's requirements for an independent *annual* survey on unemployment and unemployment.

Of the two, the Committee felt that a successful annual survey strengthened along the lines of the Planning Commission's stated requirements was the first priority. On the project of generating quarterly labour force data the "Committee was of the view that it would not be possible to collect data on employment and unemployment survey through contract investigators/officials".³⁶

The issue of conducting a periodic (quarterly) labour force survey was brought up again a month later at a workshop arranged by the NSC in Delhi on 18th December 2008. A consensus emerged in favour of doing so.

In subsequent discussions with officials, issues of sampling, subject coverage, and fieldwork for a periodic labour force survey were raised. The DG (NSSO) informed the Commission that the NSSO would not be in a position to carry out the survey due to "existing resource constraints".³⁷ The Commission Chairman, however, took the view that these surveys could

be limited to urban areas. After deliberations, the Commission recommended that a detailed proposal for conducting such a survey should be prepared by experts. It was decided to constitute an expert group headed by Professor Amitabh Kundu.

The Kundu Committee, officially constituted by an order dated 24th of February 2009, submitted its Report on 8th January 2010.³⁸

Four features of this Report are worth mentioning. i) The Committee recommended adoption of a rotational panel sampling scheme, with quarterly periodicity. In this approach twenty five percent of the First Stage Units selected for a quarter are replaced in the next quarter with the result that seventy five percent of the sample units would be common in each successive quarter. ii) In addition to the usual labour force indicators³⁹, the Survey was to provide quarterly indicators of monthly remuneration for casual labour, regular wage/salary employees and self employed workers at the all India level. iii) However, there was no provision for distinguishing between formal and informal employment. Last but not least, it was recognised implicitly that (a) contract investigators could not be used to do the job, and (b) that the NSSO could not spare existing FOD cadre for the purpose either.

Thus it was recommended that the “actual field work may be entrusted to the Field Operations Division (FOD) with *pecially recruited field staff* with composite tasks of data collection, on/offline data entry, validation and transmission for data processing,”⁴⁰ and that a Nodal Periodic Labour Force Survey Centre should be set up under the NSSO for this purpose.

As recommended by the 2009 PLFS Committee, the NSSO decided to conduct a pilot survey, to be carried out in the urban sector of three states – Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and Odisha – from July 2011 to June 2012. Quarterly meetings were held by the NSSO to review the results as they became available. The *Phase I Report on Periodic Labour Force Survey (Pilot)* notes that the results of the pilot survey “have thrown up many challenges that require further study and analysis.”⁴¹

For example, following suggestions made by the FOD, changes were made in the field work schedule. Estimates of some labour force indicators using the estimation procedure of the rotational sampling scheme “turned out to be negative,” (!) with the result that it was decided to look into an alternative procedure. Concern was expressed about the fact that there was some divergence between the PLFS results and those of the usual NSS employment-unemployment surveys. The Phase I Report notes that the release of two differing sets of estimates from the same source “may invite criticism.”⁴²

In view of these concerns, it was decided to extend the Pilot Survey for one more year, from July 2012 to June 2013. The second phase of the survey is to be carried out in the same three states as during Phase I.

There the matter rests for the time being.

On India's Economic Census

The present state of affairs is that India's Economic Census is a foundational survey. It does, or is supposed to do, a complete count of all non-agricultural enterprises in India. Like the

Population Census, its origins go back to the British colonial period, and like the Population Census, it now covers all states, and generates data at the village, urban block, district, state and all India levels. It is the *only* source of statistics on *both* formal and informal enterprises, and the only *comprehensive* source of data on unorganised sector enterprises.⁴³

However, today, despite its promising beginnings during the British period, the Indian Economic Census data is known for its poor quality including the gross underestimation of the number of enterprises and workers in them, the ad hoc approach of the authorities to the timing of the Census and its periodicity and the absence of any provision for updating the data for inter-census years.⁴⁴

How did this happen?

Independent India inherited from the British a highly decentralised, vertically integrated statistical system. This institutional structure included at the top the counterpart of today's CSO and Economic Census, constructed during the first half of the 20th century.

A long succession of official Committees and Commissions had worked against considerable opposition to achieve this result.⁴⁵ However, it was only after the Bowley-Robertson Report (1934) titled *A Scheme for an Economic Census of India with special reference to a census of production and reorganisation of statistics* was in principle accepted that action was initiated to set up the nucleus of what became the CSO.

Thus, shortly before Independence, under directions issued by the GOI Ministry of Commerce and Industry, state level departments of industries were made responsible for enforcing the *Industrial Statistics Act* (1942), and for conducting an industrial census under the *Census of Manufacturing Rules* (1946).

It was confined to 29 industries and covered factories registered under the Factories Act (1948) employing 20 or more workers and using power. In most states, the directors of industries were appointed statistical authority under the act, and statistical sections were created in their offices to carry out the census in all its stages from field work "up to the compilation of industry-wise, district-wise and district-cum-industry-wise results before furnishing the returns and the state reports to the GOI."⁴⁶ *No subsequent Economic Census has enjoyed the operational advantage of access to a similar decentralised system of data collection and compilation.*

From Decentralisation to Centralisation (1953)

The government of newly independent India began in 1949 by setting up a statistical unit at the Centre in the Cabinet Secretariat. This became the *Central Statistical Organisation (CSO)* in 1951. The *National Sample Survey* was established in 1950. It was organised from the top down. At this stage the centralisation process appears to have been wholly benign and hugely constructive.

However, the government of newly independent India also

dismantled this decentralised system of industrial statistics, passed the *Collection of Statistics Act* (1953), framed rules under it for the conduct of a new survey called the *Annual Survey of Industries (ASI)* and transferred the entire responsibility for the ASI

to the newly created National Sample Survey system. The chief director of the National Sample Survey was appointed the national statistical authority for industrial statistics under the act.⁴⁷

Thus the industrial statistics system was divorced from its substantive state level departments and transferred to a “purely statistical survey agency severing the link between the data collection activity and the direct user of the data.”

In the process,

the decentralised system was transformed into a completely centralised system, with the authority to take all decisions about the survey vested in that central agency, with no mechanism for the states to share in the decision-making process. The only concession offered to states was that a copy of the ASI filled-in schedule was to be made available to them to enable them to make advance provisional tabulations for their states. The states are now completely dependent on the decisions of the central agency for statistics in this sector which are also vital to them.⁴⁸

The revival of the Bowley-Robertson proposals for a full-fledged Economic Census did not take place until the late 1970s.

The Economic Census: 1977 and After

India's Economic Census was designed explicitly to provide a sample frame for conducting 'follow-up' surveys of unorganised enterprises. The first Economic Census was carried out in 1977. The first 'follow-up' unorganised enterprise survey was undertaken the next year, in 1978. It covered unorganised manufacturing enterprises, complementing the already existing *Annual Survey of Industries*, which had been launched in 1960. The idea was that the two surveys, together, would cover the entire population of manufacturing enterprises.⁴⁹

“The main objective of the Economic Census continues to be to generate an updated frame of enterprises for the 'follow-up' surveys. An equally important function, introduced from the 1998 Fourth Economic Census, is to generate data for a state-wise Directory of Establishments having 10 or more workers. This is to be used to prepare a Business Register”⁵⁰, as recommended by the 2001 Rangarajan Commission and reiterated by the NCEUS 2008 *Report on Definition and Statistical Issues*.

The Weakening of the CSO and the Restructuring of the Economic Census

The weakening of the CSO during the second half of the 1990s and the restructuring of the Economic Census from 1998 onwards combined to reduce the capacity of the Economic Census to carry out this mandate.

Between 1997 and 2001, the CSO, which is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the Economic Census, was headless; the post of Director General was allowed to fall vacant. With no one at the top to take charge, the *Conference of Central and State Statistical Organisations (COCSSO)* – the key agency for the CSO's role in coordination – was not convened for several years. Concurrently, the *Enterprise Survey Division* of the Economic Census was transferred to the NSSO. While the CSO's institutional disasters may have been

dealt with appropriately, there is still no designated permanent professional cadre at the operational base of the Economic Census.

So who now collects and compiles the Economic Census data?

In 1978 there had been a full-fledged Enterprise Survey unit within the Economic Census which conducted the follow-up surveys on Directory Establishments. The NSSO did the Non-directory and Own Account Enterprise surveys. This practice continued from 1978 up to the 1998 Fourth Economic Census. Since then, the Census has been conducted in collaboration with the Directorates of Economics and Statistics (DES) of States and Union Territories. For the 1998 Census 298 temporary posts were created at State headquarters, and only 14 in the CSO. For the work of the 5th Economic Census 2005, 235 posts were created at State headquarters; none in the CSO. The entire follow-up enterprise survey, including the one on Directory Establishments, had been carried out by the NSSO. But as normal attrition took place and vacant sanctioned posts remained unfilled, the Economic Census Enterprise Survey unit gradually became defunct.

If the Economic Censuses are to be conducted every five years, as recommended by the 2001 National Statistical Commission, and subsequent committees⁵¹, and if the compilation and updating of the Business Register is to be taken up seriously, it has been estimated that 20 to 30 posts will be needed at the CSO level, together with the upgradation or creation of posts at both the CSO and the State levels. Although the creation of posts at the state level might help to deal with the operational problems of conducting the Census, no suggestions had emerged about what to do about the lack of a permanent Economic Survey cadre at the District level until the 2012 Committee on Unorganised Statistics submitted its Report. Implementation of the five substantial recommendations on the Economic Census in chapter seven of this Report would go a long way towards re-establishing the Economic Census on firm foundations.

The Achilles' heel of the Economic Census has been and remains the poor quality of the statistics collected. In the 1990 Third Economic Census it is known that there was massive undercount of both enterprises and employment in them.⁵² With respect to the estimates of enterprise numbers, the 2001 Statistical Commission reported that "the divergences in the number of enterprises as between the two sources are mainly due to an under-listing of enterprises by the enumerators in the Economic Census."⁵³ A recent study, Sanyal (2011), demonstrates that the gross underestimation of the number of enterprises, and therefore the number of workers, highlighted by the 2001 NSC, continues.⁵⁴

The most obvious problems have been at the operational base of the organisation for the conduct of the Economic Census – at the enumerators' level. Enumerators hired for the Economic Census in the past have often been under-qualified for the job, under-trained and under-supervised. In a recent, (February 2010), presentation by the Economics Statistics Division (ESD) of the CSO on the conduct of the 5th Economic Census, it is noted that training deficits exist at two levels: training at the enumerator level and training of personnel engaged for tabulation and coding. It is pointed out that closer monitoring of field work is also required.⁵⁵

An ESD account of who served as enumerators for the 5th Economic Census and what problems were encountered illustrates the nature of the challenges facing the 6th Economic Census. To quote: Since “the School Teachers, educated unemployed youths, even Shop inspectors, Gram sevaks, Anganwadi sevaks and college students, etc were employed for the Census, sometimes with no knowledge of field work at all, it was difficult to train them and make them understand so many concepts of the complicated EC schedule.”⁵⁶ The enumerators, hired just for a brief period, (one and a half months), “and that also with insufficient honorarium, lacked proper dedication to finish the work in the utmost sincere way.” This situation has been aggravated by the 2006 Supreme Court ruling that school teachers cannot be used for any field work other than the Population Census. They had constituted the back bone of the Economic Census enumerator contingent.

An important improvement to the EC Schedules may be at stake. The 6th Economic Census has introduced improvements designed to capture own account enterprises of the kind that had tended to be missed out in all earlier Economic Censuses. This has been achieved by the introduction in Schedule 6A of a series of questions addressed to self employed persons in households. They are asked whether their ‘establishment’ has a fixed structure outside the house, or an establishment outside the house without a fixed structure, or an establishment within the house. Hopefully, this may lead to an improvement in capturing the own account enterprises. But unless enumerator qualifications improve it is doubtful whether the full potential of this welcome addition to the questionnaires will be achieved.

What Needs to be Done?

In short, to raise the quality of the data generated by the Economic Census to a level which instils confidence, much needs to be done. Reviews of past experience have highlighted five specific problems. These problems relate to: i) the timing and periodicity of successive Economic Censuses; ii) the failure of a three-tier training model, adopted for the 5th Economic Census, to deliver the required grasp of concepts and definitions to the trainees; iii) uncertainty regarding the adequacy of funding; iv) the need for a designated, regular, professional cadre at the State and District levels and effective coordination and monitoring from above; and, last but not least, v) worries about getting enough qualified recruits for the work of the 6th Economic Census.

“An ad hoc approach to the timing of the Census, its periodicity, and provision for updating the data for inter-census years has played havoc with the systematic development of appropriate institutional and procedural measures for conducting India’s Economic Censuses”⁵⁷. This was presumably due in part, to the fact that for a number of years the CSO, which is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the Economic Census, remained headless. So far, five Economic Censuses have been conducted, in 1977, 1980, 1990, 1998 and 2005. This implies a history of inter-census gaps of 3, 10, 8, 7 and now again, 7 years. It has been repeatedly recommended that, from the standpoint of providing a frame for the unorganised enterprise sample surveys, Economic Censuses need to be conducted at regular intervals, ideally every five years. In the past, the rationale for undertaking a fresh EC has generally

not been spelled out. Recently, however, officials of the ESD MOSPI have suggested that from the standpoint of the planning process at the national, regional and local levels, the Census results should come out in time for their use in the exercises for the Five Year Plans.

The 2012 Report of the *Committee on Unorganised Sector Statistics* recognised the importance of enhancing the capacity of the State level Directorates of Economics and Statistics to organise large scale statistical surveys and to make arrangements to provide at the State and District levels, ‘human resources’ capable of updating the Economic Census frame and preparing the Business Register during the inter-census periods.

Given appropriate measures to do this, the 2012 Committee recommended “a planned programme to bring the four complementary projects viz., (i) Economic Census, (ii) Business Register, (iii) Annual Survey of Industries and (iv) Annual Survey of Non-Manufacturing Industries (including construction and ITC sector), on a compatible platform to derive fuller advantages of complementarities.” The ‘compatible platform’ they had in mind was a much improved Economic Census. The Committee also recommended that this programme should be treated as a Central Sector Plan Scheme.⁵⁸

The Government of India has accepted the Report of the 2012 Committee. Not only this. According to a report in *Business Standard*⁵⁹ MOSPI is planning an *Annual Survey of Services*. It is to be ‘based on’ the 2012 Economic Census which provides the basic data on the number of service enterprises and workers employed in them, which can be used as the sample frame, i.e. on the ‘compatible platform’.

Thus there is reason to hope that the Economic Census will be placed on a firmer foundation, and that action will be taken on the other three “complementary projects” mentioned in the Recommendations chapter of the 2012 *Report of the Committee on Unorganised Sector Statistics*.

Notes

1. The Ministry of Finance ordered a ten percent cut in staff strength in 1995. An order constituting the Subordinate Statistical Service was issued in 2002.
2. For details see GOI, Ministry of Finance, *Report of the Fifth Central Pay Commission*, January 1997, Volume I, Annexe – 1.1, page 15.
3. Italics are mine.
4. See page 83, paragraph 2.1 chapter 2, Volume I, Commission’s *Report*.
5. See page 83, paragraph 2.2 chapter 2, Volume I, *ibid*.
6. Volume 1, chapter 2, page 87 *ibid*..
7. Page 89, chapter 3, Volume I, *ibid*.
8. On this, see page 93, Volume I *ibid*.
9. Page 93, Volume I, *ibid*.
10. See paragraph 8.23, page 125, *ibid*..
11. Paragraph 27.2, pages 242-243 *ibid*.
12. Paragraph 27.9, page 244, *ibid*..
13. Paragraph 27.7, page 243 *ibid*.
14. Page 490, paragraph 14.10.27, 2001 *National Statistical Commission Report*, Volume II.

15. Page 48, 2012 *Report*.
16. Footnote 23, page 49, *ibid*.
17. Paragraph 6.3.1.3, page 49, *ibid*.
18. Paragraph 6.3.1.3, page 49, *ibid*.
19. Compare figures for 2008-09 and 2009-10 in Annexures A and B, 2012 *Report*.
20. For details, see Annexure C, *ibid*.
21. Page 7, paper prepared by the FOD (2011) "*Present System of Data Collection in Unorganised Sector Statistics – an appraisal.*" (Supplied by officials.)
22. Paragraph 6.3.1.5, page 50, 2012 *Report*.
23. Page 50, paragraph 6.3.1.5, *ibid*.
24. See page 6, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Committee on Statistics (2010), *Proposed Core Set of Economic Statistics for Asia and the Pacific. (Note by the ESCAP Technical Advisory Group on the Development of Economic Statistics.)*
25. See page 6 Kolli, Ramesh "*Implementation of SDDS – Experience of India.*" Available at www.statssa.gov.za/commonwealth/presentation-r-kolli.pdf. Downloaded 16 May, 2013.
26. NSSO Governing Council, 66th Meeting, (16 December 1996), *Minutes*.
27. NSSO Governing Council 68th Meeting (7-8 August 1997), *Minutes*.
28. NSSO Governing Council, 70th Meeting, (14-15 April 1998), *Minutes*.
29. Page 3950, Vidwans, SM, (2002), "Indian Statistical System at the Crossroads II: Expansion of National Sample Survey", *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 21.
30. See paragraph 4.28, page 34, 2009-10 NSC *Annual Report*.
31. *Report of the 2001 National Statistical Commission, Volume 2*, paragraph 14.5.2, page ????
32. *Annual Report of the National Statistical Commission 2009-10*, page 10, paragraph 1.5. Italics mine.
33. Page 10, paragraph 15, NSC *Annual Report* for 2009-10.
34. Page 49, NSC *Annual Report, 2010-11*.
35. GOI MOSPI NSSO (November 2008) *The Report of the Committee on Independent Survey on Employment and Unemployment*, Annexure 1, page A-1.
36. November 2008 *Report* paragraph 14.9 on page 15, *ibid*.
37. The massive shortfall in the number of NSS field investigators peaked at that time.
38. *The Report of the NSC Committee on Periodic Labour Force Survey* dated 31st December 2009, was officially submitted on 8th January 2010.
39. Worker population ratios, labour force participation rates, unemployment rates by Current Weekly Status approach, their changes as between quarters, all India numbers of workers by gender, industrial and occupational classifications.
40. 2009 *Report of the NSC Committee on Periodic Labour Force Survey*, page 13, paragraph 3.51.
41. GOI MOSPI NSSO (August 2012) *Phase I Report on Periodic Labour Force Survey (Pilot) (July 2011-June 2012)*, page 4, paragraph 1.3.1.
42. 'Examples' drawn from three sections of Chapter 3, *Phase I Report*: section 3.2 (page 20), section 3.3 (page 21) and section 3.5 (page 23).
43. The unorganised/informal enterprise surveys cover only specified branches of the economy, e.g. manufacturing, trade, transport and services.
44. See especially paragraphs 6.3.2.1 to 6.3.2.5, pages 52 and 53, 2012 *Report*.
45. These include the *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission* (1918) and the *Report of the Economic Enquiry Committee* (1925).
46. Page 3823 Vidwans, SM, (2002): "Indian Statistical System at the Crossroads I: Ominous Clouds of Centralisation" *Economic & Political Weekly* 37 (37) 14 September.

47. Page 3823, Vidwans, SM, (2002), *ibid*.
48. Page 3823, *ibid*.
49. 2012 *Report*, paragraph 6.3.2, page 51.
50. 2012 *Report*, paragraph 6.3.2, page 52.
51. Including the *MOSPI Working Group on the 6th Economic Census* (October 8th, 2012) and the 17th *Conference of Central and State Statistical Organisations (COCSSO)*, February 2010.
52. See 2001 Rangarajan Commission Report, Volume II, page159, citing evidence presented in the *Report of the Expert Committee to Examine Wide Variations in Data Sets on the Same Subject* (February 2000).
53. The two sources are *Economic Census* of 1990 and *Unorganised Enterprise Surveys of Trade, Hotels and Restaurants and Transport* of 1990-91. See page 192, 2001 *Report of the National Statistical Commission, Volume II*.
54. T.K. Sanyal (2011) *A Note on Comparison of EC 2005 estimates and NSS estimates of 62nd Round and 63rd Round*. (Supplied by officials.)
55. See paragraph 6.3.2.4 of the 2012 *Report*.
56. See ESD CSO (2010) *Planning for the Conduct of the 6th Economic Census*, pages 3-4.
57. 2012 *Report*, paragraph 6.3.2.5, pages 53-54.
58. See paragraph 6.3.2.5(iii), chapter six and paragraph 7.4.4, pages 53 and 64, 2012 *Report*.
59. *Business Standard*, 24th September 2012, page 5.

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