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India Achieves Near-Universal Birth and Death Registration, Strengthening Civil Registration System for Evidence-Based Governance

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Recent Developments:

- According to the latest data released by the **Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India**, the country officially registered over **99%** of its estimated births and deaths during **2024**.
- **Birth registration** reached **99.1%**, while **death registration** increased to **99.4%**, marking a significant improvement in India's **Civil Registration System (CRS)** over the past decade.
- The achievement strengthens India's capacity to generate reliable **vital statistics**, improve governance, and support evidence-based policymaking.

Civil Registration System (CRS):

What is the Civil Registration System?

- The **Civil Registration System (CRS)** is a continuous, compulsory, and permanent system for recording **births, deaths, and stillbirths** occurring across the country.
- It provides the most important source of **vital statistics**, enabling estimation of **fertility, mortality, sex ratio at birth**, and population dynamics.
- The system is implemented under the **Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969**, which came into force in **1970** and was substantially amended through the **Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act, 2023**.

Institutional Framework:

- The **Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India**, functioning under the **Ministry of Home Affairs**, coordinates and monitors the Civil Registration System at the national level.
- Registration of births and deaths is primarily the responsibility of State Governments and Union Territory Administrations through designated local registrars.

Registration Process:

- Births and deaths should ordinarily be registered within **21 days** of occurrence.
- In hospitals and health institutions, the **Medical Officer-in-Charge** or an authorised official reports the event.
- For home-based events, responsibility rests with the head of the household or another legally prescribed informant.

Progress Towards Near-Universal Registration:

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Improvement in Registration Coverage:

- Registration coverage has improved steadily over the past several decades:
- **Up to 2000:** Birth registration stood at approximately **56%**, while death registration remained around **48%**.
- **2014:** Birth registration increased to nearly **86.6%**, while death registration reached **72.5%**.
- **2024:** Birth registration reached **99.1%**, and death registration reached **99.4%**.

State-wise Progress:

- During **2024:**
- **18 States and Union Territories** achieved **100% birth registration**.
- **21 States and Union Territories** achieved **100% death registration**.
- States such as **Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Goa** had already achieved universal birth registration during the early **2000s**.

Significance of Near-Universal Registration:

Reliable Vital Statistics:

- A complete **Civil Registration System** provides continuous and accurate demographic information essential for evidence-based public policy.
- It supports reliable estimation of fertility rates, mortality rates, life expectancy, infant mortality, and population growth.

Public Health Planning:

- Registration data enables governments to:
- Monitor disease patterns.
- Assess the effectiveness of health programmes.
- Identify vulnerable population groups.
- Plan vaccination and maternal-child health interventions.
- During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, timely death registration assisted governments in identifying high-risk districts and allocating health resources.

Monitoring Environmental Health Risks:

- Continuous mortality data helps assess seasonal mortality associated with:
- Heat waves.
- Air pollution.
- Extreme weather events.
- Disease outbreaks.

Supporting Decentralised Governance:

- District-level and sub-district-level registration data supports local planning far more effectively than national-level estimates.
- Local governments can design targeted interventions based on actual demographic changes.

Legal Identity and Welfare Delivery:

- Birth certificates establish legal identity and facilitate access to:
- Education.
- Aadhaar enrolment.
- Passport issuance.

- Voter registration.
- Government welfare schemes.
- Death certificates are essential for:
- Pension settlement.
- Insurance claims.
- Property succession.
- Banking procedures.
- Inheritance matters.

Other Sources of Population Data in India:

Population Census:

- Conducted every **10 years**, the Census provides comprehensive demographic information but cannot generate annual estimates.

Sample Registration System (SRS):

- The **Sample Registration System (SRS)** provides continuous estimates of births, deaths, fertility, and mortality through a nationally representative sample.
- It has historically been India's principal source for annual demographic estimates.

Household Surveys:

- Surveys such as the **National Family Health Survey (NFHS)** provide valuable demographic and health indicators but do not produce annual district-level estimates.

Importance of CRS Compared to Other Sources:

- Unlike the Census or household surveys, the **Civil Registration System** generates continuous, event-based demographic information throughout the year.
- A complete CRS therefore fills a critical gap in India's demographic information system.

Factors Behind Rapid Improvement:

Factors Driving Birth Registration:

- Expansion of institutional deliveries through government health programmes.
- Birth certificates becoming mandatory for:
- School admissions.
- Identity documents.
- Welfare benefits.
- Aadhaar enrolment.

Factors Driving Death Registration:

- Expansion of institutional healthcare access through public health insurance.
- Wider coverage under **Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY)** increased formal reporting of deaths.
- Death certificates became essential for pensions, insurance settlements, inheritance, banking, and property transfer.

Role of Digitalisation:

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- The **Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act, 2023** strengthened digital registration mechanisms.
- The amendment enabled a digitally integrated birth registration system linked with educational institutions and public services.

Administrative Factors:

- Improvements also resulted from:
- Greater public awareness.
- Better institutional healthcare.
- Improved registration infrastructure.
- Enhanced administrative capacity at the State level.

Challenges Remaining:

Regional Disparities:

- Registration coverage continues to vary significantly across States and between rural and urban areas.

Delayed Registration:

- Many births and deaths are still registered after the prescribed **21-day** period, reducing the usefulness of real-time demographic information.

Under-registration of Infant Deaths:

- During **2024**, nearly **84.2%** of registered infant deaths occurred in urban areas, while only **15.8%** were reported from rural areas.
- Considering higher infant mortality and larger populations in rural India, the figures indicate substantial under-registration of infant deaths in rural regions.

Medical Certification of Cause of Death:

- Registration of death does not automatically ensure **Medical Certification of Cause of Death (MCCD)**.
- Many deaths continue to lack medically certified causes, limiting the usefulness of CRS for epidemiological research, disease surveillance, and public health planning. The Government is also working to strengthen the **Medical Certification of Cause of Death** system alongside CRS improvements.

Measurement Limitations:

- Completeness of CRS death registration is estimated using **Sample Registration System** data.
- Since several studies indicate undercounting within the Sample Registration System itself, actual completeness of CRS registration may differ from current estimates.

Way Forward:

Improve Data Quality:

- Future reforms should focus not only on universal coverage but also on:
- Timely registration.
- Accurate demographic records.
- Better verification mechanisms.
- High-quality digital databases.

Strengthen Medical Certification:

- Expand institutional medical certification of deaths to improve disease surveillance and mortality analysis.

Reduce Regional Disparities:

- Strengthen registration infrastructure in underserved districts and rural areas through greater administrative capacity and public awareness.

Develop Internal Migration Database:

- India can consider establishing a systematic mechanism for recording internal migration to improve urban planning, welfare targeting, disaster management, and labour market analysis.

Enhance Digital Integration:

- Further integrate CRS databases with other digital governance platforms while ensuring privacy, cybersecurity, and responsible data governance.

Conclusion:

- India's achievement of near-universal **birth** and **death registration** represents a major milestone in strengthening administrative governance and demographic statistics.
- Sustained improvements in **data quality**, **timeliness**, **medical certification**, and **digital integration** will enable the **Civil Registration System** to become a robust foundation for evidence-based policymaking and inclusive governance.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Terms:

- Civil Registration System (CRS).
- Vital Statistics.
- Stillbirth Registration.
- Sample Registration System (SRS).
- Medical Certification of Cause of Death (MCCD).
- Vital Events.
- Demographic Transition.
- Population Register.
- Evidence-Based Governance.

Important Acts and Institutions:

- Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969.
- Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act, 2023.
- Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India (ORGI).
- Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).
- Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY).
- Sample Registration System (SRS).
- National Family Health Survey (NFHS)