

Scientists, Opposition slam Centre over IIPS Director's suspension

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Members of Opposition parties and of the scientific community have expressed their anger and dismay at the Central Government's move of Friday in [suspending Professor K.S. James](#), Director and senior Professor at the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), which conducts crucial data collection for the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), among others. The Centre has cited contemplated/pending disciplinary proceedings against Prof. James.

Some of them have highlighted the Centre's continuing uneasy relationship with data-based evidence on development.

"It is most unfortunate that one of India's most eminent demographers and a man who gave new direction to the IIPS is being treated in this manner. It is possible that the Modi Government is unhappy with some results of the [NHFS-5](#) (Ujjwala, anaemia, ODF or Open Defecation Free) and wants to put off NHFS-6, which was to have commenced in June 2023, indefinitely," Congress general secretary in-charge Jairam Ramesh told *The Hindu*.

He further said that internal committees of the Health Ministry seem to have cleared Dr. James of any wrongdoing, which indicates that recent actions against him have been taken on "political considerations". "The Modi Government cannot work with professionals and scholars who don't meet the test of ideological purity," Mr. Ramesh said.

Trinamool Congress (TMC) Rajya Sabha MP Jawhar Sircar asserted that the Centre seemed afraid of a realistic picture. "NFHS brought out uncomfortable data which punctured the rosy picture that the government wants us to believe it has created. It's time that the reality of India is presented to the public," Mr. Sircar said. He added that Prof. James' suspension had been carried out as "uncomfortable and real data was presented".

Mr. Sircar also asked the Centre to immediately release the results of the Consumer Expenditure Surveys (CES).

N. K. Premachandran, Lok Sabha member of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, also said that the Centre is uncomfortable with facts. "It's undemocratic, shows the Centre's dictatorship-like attitude, and is an attempt to hide the real face of India," he said. Demanding that the suspension be revoked immediately, he added that Prof. James had been "made a scapegoat".

A senior scientist who did not wish to be named said "nobody is surprised by the move".

The IIPS' mandate is to contribute to the improvement of the population health outcomes and their determinants, and the achievement of health equity through programmatic initiatives.

The Centre was informed through NFHS-5 that 40% households did not have access to clean cooking fuel (questioning the impact of the Centre's Ujjwala Yojana), and that in rural areas, more than half (57% households) do not have access to LPG or natural gas. It also noted that anaemia is on the rise in India. It found that 19% households lacked toilet facilities and their members defecate in the open.

Sources said the suspension of Prof. James comes at a time the Centre has tweaked the NFHS to exclude anaemia and disability from the survey, with the view that they were being accommodated in other surveys. The sources noted that active discussions are ongoing on redrawing data collection parameters to accommodate the country's national diversity and local anthropometric measurements.

The NFHS-5 used childhood stunting, female labour force participation rate and life expectancy at birth to highlight alleged anomalies. However, while some health activists have welcomed the change, others say international data parameters must be seen as aspirational.

The Health Ministry on Saturday released a one-page note on Prof. James' suspension. The Ministry added that it had received complaints regarding irregularities in recruitment and compliance with the reservation roster at the IIPC. "A fact-finding committee examined each of the complaints and found prima facie irregularities in 11 of the 35 complaints received. The irregularities were mainly regarding lapses observed in certain appointments, recruitments of faculty, reservation rosters, dead stock registers, etc. The fact-finding committee has also recommended detailed inquiry against the registrars concerned for the corresponding period and the Director concerned," the Ministry stated.

Professor James, who holds a Ph.D. in demography from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, has been a Visiting Fellow at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, and the University of Southampton, the U.K., among others, and has co-authored books and major reports, including the *India Ageing Report 2017* for the United Nations Population Fund, and *Population Ageing in India* for the Cambridge University Press.