

KS James' Suspension Shows Indian Govt Shudders at Surveys That Mirror Reality

Jawhar Sircar

The suspension of Professor KS James, Director of the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) appears unwarranted, mischievous, and quite untenable. By shooting the messenger, the Narendra Modi government has also sent a message – the Centre does not want to face any reality.

The IIPS, under the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, conducts the all-important National Family Health Survey ([NFHS](#)), along with the Assessment of National Rural Health Mission and the Global Adult Tobacco Survey. Its neutral data often contradicted the government's own claims and while it earned the respect of academics and data users, it certainly did not endear to the ministry and the regime.

After this unfortunate and unusual suspension, the health ministry did something more unusual, that is, it cited the reasons for its action through a 'brief note'. This purported note says his suspension is for “the irregularities ... mainly regarding [the] lapses observed in certain appointments, recruitments of faculty, Reservation Rosters, Dead Stock registers, etc.”

What About the IIPS General Council?

The 'brief note', however, makes no mention of further details and from my experience of over 40 years in administration and as a former secretary of a central government ministry, I feel it is difficult to hold a single officer solely responsible for filing up vacancies and not following the reservation roster.

These processes usually involve four to five levels of screening and approvals – and the director cannot be fixed unless he has repeatedly ignored advice and suggestions from other levels.

The general council at IIPS has 22 members of which the Union Health Minister is the president, Health Secretary is the vice president and the IIPS director is just one member. The council too has its responsibilities and should not be a rubber stamp.

It is my submission that such charges as given against the director are difficult to establish. It would be a different matter if financial irregularities were concerned. Non-maintenance of rosters is a charge that can be hurled against every second organisation in government.

KS James Stood His Ground

With over 26 years of experience in research in the field of population studies, James is reputed to

be one of the few upright officers who dared to stand up to the government. Under him, the NFHS maintained and gained credibility and he is said to have steered its policies in the right direction.

Take the NFHS-5 for example.

On 2 October 2019, the Modi government declared with much fanfare, that India was reaching open defecation-free status. But in 2021, when the NFHS-5 data was published, it revealed the real situation that most Indians knew. It showed that residents in over 25 percent of rural households still defecated in the open, and in some states like Bihar and Jharkhand, the percentage was as high as 40.

NFHS-5 also pointed out that almost 40 percent of Indians did not have access to clean cooking fuel, raising eyebrows on PM Modi's flagship Prime Minister Ujjwala Yojana.

In a news article, The Wire reported that Union health minister Mansukh Mandaviya had questioned the director and “spoke harshly to him about the anemia data and asked if this was part of some western conspiracy.” By talking to members of the general council, it appears that the director “stood his ground and continued to point to what the data was saying.” This meeting reportedly happened in February, but in May this year, news came out that the upcoming NFHS-6 will not record anemia.

It is not established that he was suspended for these reasons and the government has taken pains to mention the '11 charges' of irregularities against him in the 'brief note'. At the same time, the series of events over the government questioning IIPS's data in open meetings and the fact that the data constantly contradicted the government's claims cannot also be ignored.

Why is the Modi Government Evading the Census?

The suspension, in my opinion, tells a bigger story of how India is losing its credibility when it comes to data collection and interpretation.

India has had an excellent record of capturing data since 1872 when the first census was published. Decennial censuses have been held thereafter without a break for 160 years — improving its techniques. The 1941 census was conducted on a meagre budget in the middle of the Second World War and till today, we treat it differently. We look more kindly at the 1931 census as the last reliable colonial-era census.

This unbroken decennial census has been shattered for the first time since 1872 by PM Modi and Home Minister Shah. They decided that COVID was the perfect reason for not conducting it in 2021.

But by early 2022, almost everything was back to normal and we were only one year behind schedule in conducting the decennial census. Yet, this COVID alibi continued and even last week, the Home Minister replied to my parliament question, reiterating that COVID is delaying the census.

This is ridiculous and the only obvious reason is that government is afraid of facing the real ground picture that will emerge from the country-wise census that covers every household.

India's Lost Credibility When It Comes to Data

The government is not only apprehensive of what the 'mother of all data' census may reveal but also of what the Household Consumer Expenditure Survey may show. This critical survey analysis the most important issue of poverty levels and whether people have improved their lives.

This regime is constantly evading this survey and even after one was conducted in 2017-18, the results were withheld citing "quality issues". Insiders say that the real reason was that poverty levels had gone worse and the results of the next survey will almost surely not be published before the 2024 general election.

History will not be kind to what we are calling the 'data collection' during Modi's rule. Every reliable feedback agency has been taken over by his men or bludgeoned into submission— to repeat exactly what he says. Statisticians P C Mohanan and J Meenakshi resigned from the government-aided National Statistical Commission in protest in 2019 when Modi decided not to release data relating to unemployment before the general election.

This regime is living in a mythical reality, harping all the time on India's illustrious past – for which it hardly has any credit other than exaggeration and oversimplification. It points to a glorious future long after many of us are gone or relying on our short memory.

The only period it is uncomfortable with is the present— except for the make-believe *Vishwaguru* story. It shudders at any survey or census that mirrors the real situation on the ground. In the process, India has destroyed its long-nurtured, scientifically-oriented tradition of providing credible data.

India's data is now comparable to the Chinese ones that is notorious for fudging. With James's removal, this regime is tightening its throttle over what constitutes reality.

(Jawhar Sircar is a Rajya Sabha MP and a retired IAS officer. Among other positions, he has been CEO of Prasar Bharati, and Culture Secretary, GOI. He tweets at @jawharsircar. This is an opinion piece and the views expressed above are the author's own. The Quint neither endorses, nor is responsible for them.)

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