

No population Census — in the dark without vital data

The Indian decadal Census has been delayed by more than three years now despite several concerns having been raised about the consequences of not having a Census. In fact, there is an overwhelming misconception among officials on substituting the Census with alternative ways and means of counting the population.

The Census is not limited to offer a population count. It includes a wide range of locational, familial and individual information that serves to understand the changing population dynamic in its entirety. The first and foremost limitation of avoiding a Census lies in the reliability of all our large-scale surveys such as National Family Health Survey and Periodic Labour Force Survey carried out on a Census frame that is one and a half decades old.

The need to understand many changes

Further, this decade-and-a-half has been a period of potential transformation not only in population count and its composition but also on many other features relating to education, occupation, employment, health (COVID-19) and livelihoods. Considering the significance of examining these features, delaying the Census sounds most irresponsible. To think of an alternative to the Census is naive. However, there is universal echo on conducting a caste Census to serve political ends more than development planning, which undoubtedly reveals the limited understanding on the utility of a Census and its relevance for course correction in many presumed strategies for human welfare.

Missing the 2021 Census can never be an excuse given that a general election was conducted in the midst of all uncertainties. The machinery needed for a Census exercise is perhaps quite comparable to that of an election. Therefore, it feels like the Census is being avoided more than being delayed, with undue reasons.



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The Census is not limited to being a mere population count; it includes a wide range of crucial locational, familial and individual information

However, opinions are not scarce on evaluating government schemes and programmes in terms of their coverage and consequential impact. Unfortunately, without a proper denominator, monitoring the success of any programme will be misleading.

The urgency of having a population Census and not delaying it any more has numerous grounds of reasoning, particularly a rapid demographic transition and the resultant demographic dividend. A population Census is more than necessary to reveal these changes along with familial structures, locational distribution and occupational composition. Further, in the absence of a Census frame, the surveys carried out will be less reliable and representative which has been the basis of generating a whole host of SDG indicators. And the measure of progress in the SDG claimed, based on these indicators, may well be under scrutiny given their statistical inadequacies.

The world population prospects reveal unique features of population change and good demographic data, which will be of great significance for population giants such as India and China more than for other regions of the world. Given that the world population scenario is greatly influenced by Indian population features, it is essential to have the reality of its population features obtained in the Census rather than presuming estimated values based on past trends that depend on projections and extrapolations. Rendering the Census exercise to be a mere population count is a misnomer that needs to be reiterated for a wider audience.

In the prevailing SDG environment, there has been an obsession with regard to the generation of a wide range of indicators with disaggregation below the sub-national level. Such indicators pertain to many dimensions that need a standardisation by population count (not only aggregate but also its segmented count by age,

sex and many other attributes), that is compromised in the absence of a Census. Approximated numbers or survey-based estimates are quite insufficient to represent changing realities.

The caste Census cry

While the urgency and the immediacy of a Census exercise does not appear to be on the horizon, political masters are engaged in raising the need for a caste Census to serve their purposes. In fact, a caste auditing in India at a time when we claim everything to be rosy seems to be out of place.

The history of the Census exercise makes it clear that such an auditing was made in its initial phases, and that its discontinuation must have a reason. No one should be misled that a caste auditing is backed by a genuine intent of reading inclusion of different caste groups. It is largely to establish differential entitlements citing a lack of representation and deprivation. However, tangible endowments are perhaps a limited way to diagnose deprivation rather than making an assessment of the intangible domains such as education and occupation. Unfortunately, there is a complete absence of any systematic assessment of mobility in the said domains of education and occupation against the axis of caste despite sustained affirmative action for so long.

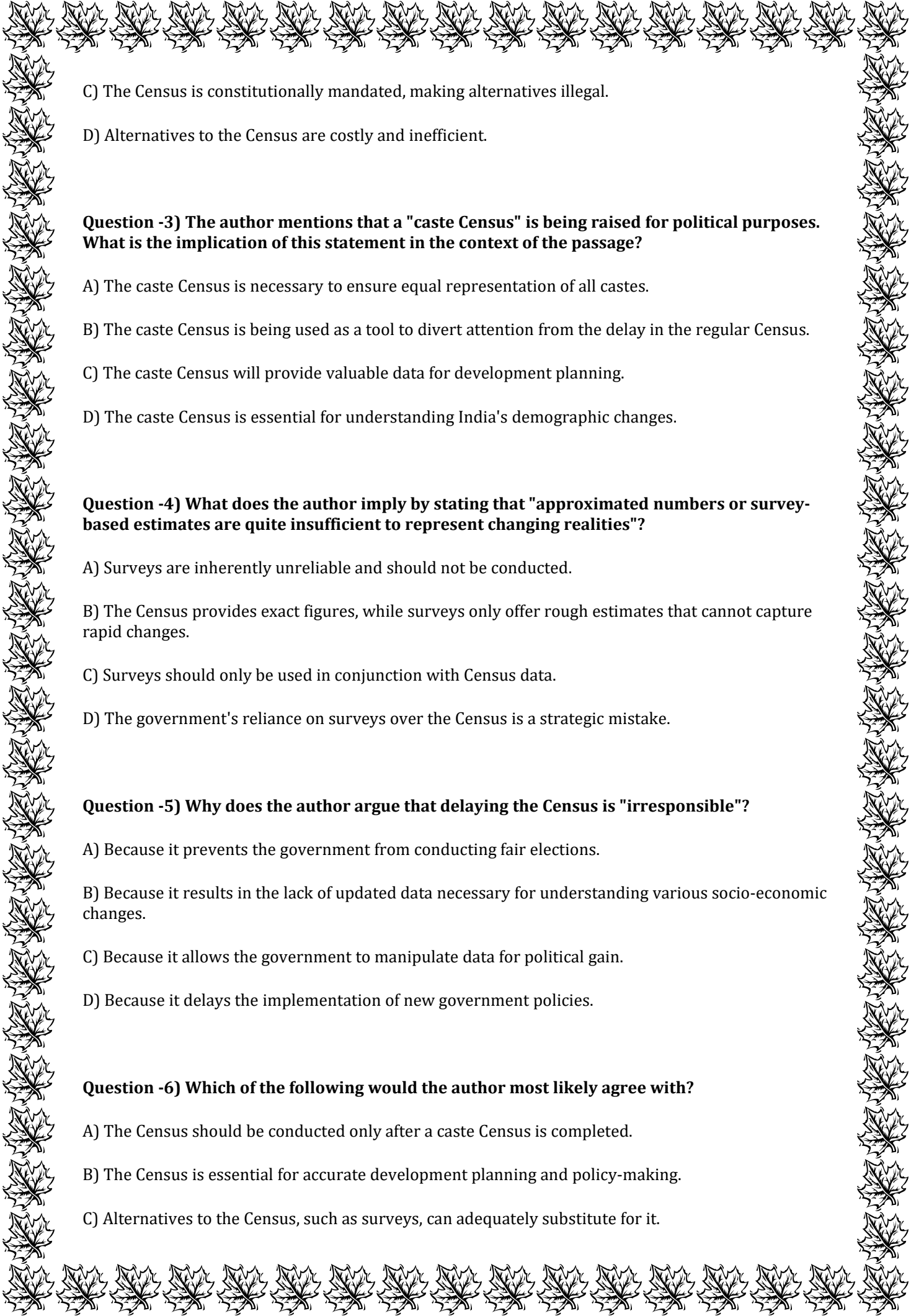
Finally keeping the Census at bay is perhaps in the interest of the state to claim progress and betterment basing on numerators alone without its appropriate denominator in the computation of indicators. Hence, the scientific community should convey the need for a Census without any further delay to get out of the illusion that surveys and many other administrative statistics are a replacement for the Census. So the key apprehension remains: has the Census been delayed? Or is there a convincing attempt to avoid the Census?

Question -1) Which of the following best expresses the main concern of the author regarding the delay in conducting the Indian Census?

- A) The delay in the Census could lead to inaccurate data collection, affecting large-scale surveys.
- B) The delay shows a lack of commitment to political transparency.
- C) The delay in the Census could undermine the government's efforts to promote economic growth.
- D) The delay in conducting the Census is a result of political instability in the country.

Question -2) According to the passage, why is it naive to think of an alternative to the Census?

- A) Alternatives to the Census are difficult to implement due to political opposition.
- B) The Census provides a comprehensive understanding of demographic changes, which alternatives cannot match.



C) The Census is constitutionally mandated, making alternatives illegal.

D) Alternatives to the Census are costly and inefficient.

Question -3) The author mentions that a "caste Census" is being raised for political purposes. What is the implication of this statement in the context of the passage?

A) The caste Census is necessary to ensure equal representation of all castes.

B) The caste Census is being used as a tool to divert attention from the delay in the regular Census.

C) The caste Census will provide valuable data for development planning.

D) The caste Census is essential for understanding India's demographic changes.

Question -4) What does the author imply by stating that "approximated numbers or survey-based estimates are quite insufficient to represent changing realities"?

A) Surveys are inherently unreliable and should not be conducted.

B) The Census provides exact figures, while surveys only offer rough estimates that cannot capture rapid changes.

C) Surveys should only be used in conjunction with Census data.

D) The government's reliance on surveys over the Census is a strategic mistake.

Question -5) Why does the author argue that delaying the Census is "irresponsible"?

A) Because it prevents the government from conducting fair elections.

B) Because it results in the lack of updated data necessary for understanding various socio-economic changes.

C) Because it allows the government to manipulate data for political gain.

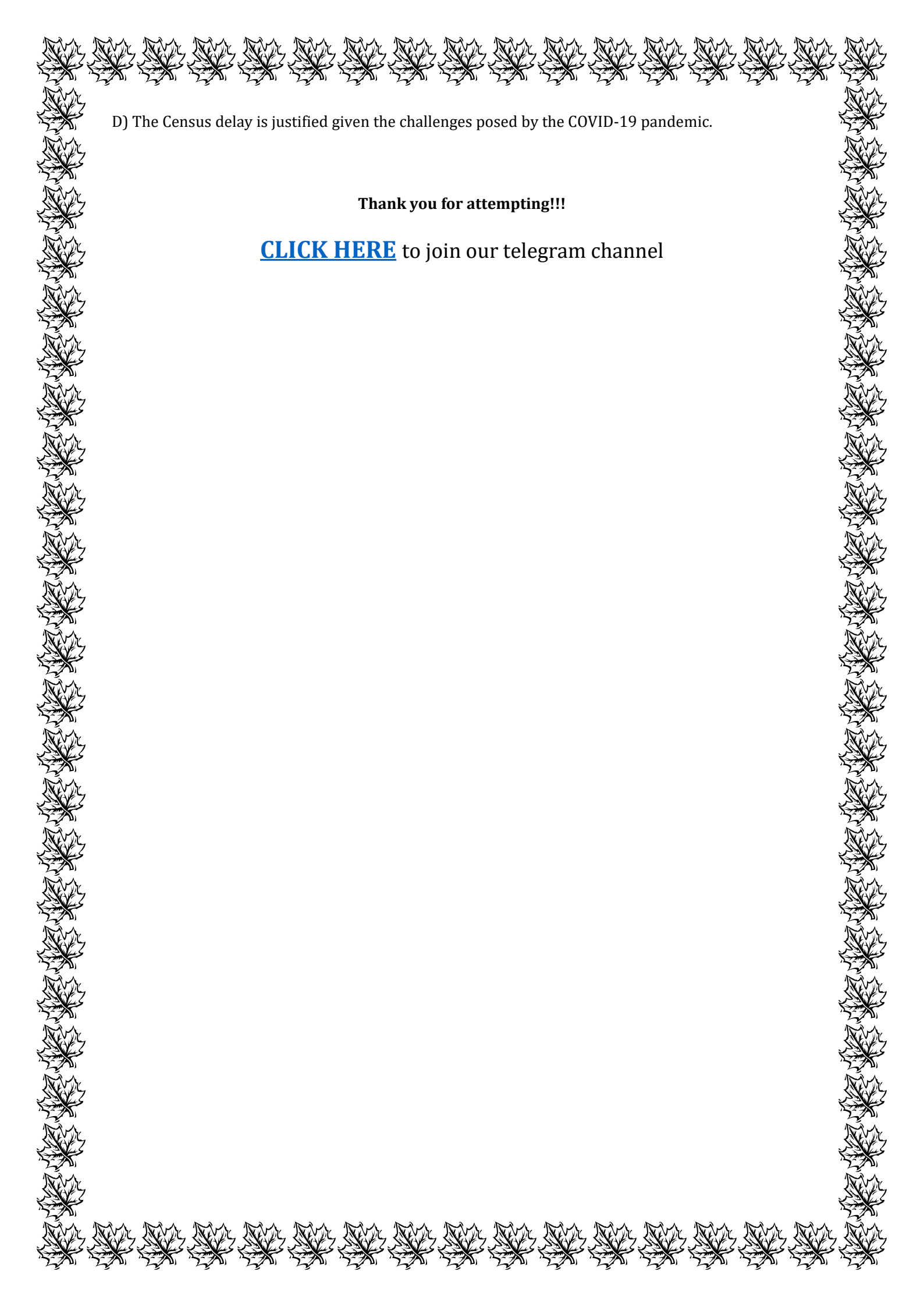
D) Because it delays the implementation of new government policies.

Question -6) Which of the following would the author most likely agree with?

A) The Census should be conducted only after a caste Census is completed.

B) The Census is essential for accurate development planning and policy-making.

C) Alternatives to the Census, such as surveys, can adequately substitute for it.

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D) The Census delay is justified given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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