

by Debarshi Dasgupta

“YOU count, therefore we count,” is the catchy slogan coined to explain to an estimated 1.19 billion Indians why they should be part of the mammoth, Rs 2,200-crore, 2011 census. But making Indians feel they count is no easy task for the 2.5 million census enumerators, who have

to grapple with not just one India, but the many within, from a middle class embracing new ways of living, to tribes still clinging to an ancient past.

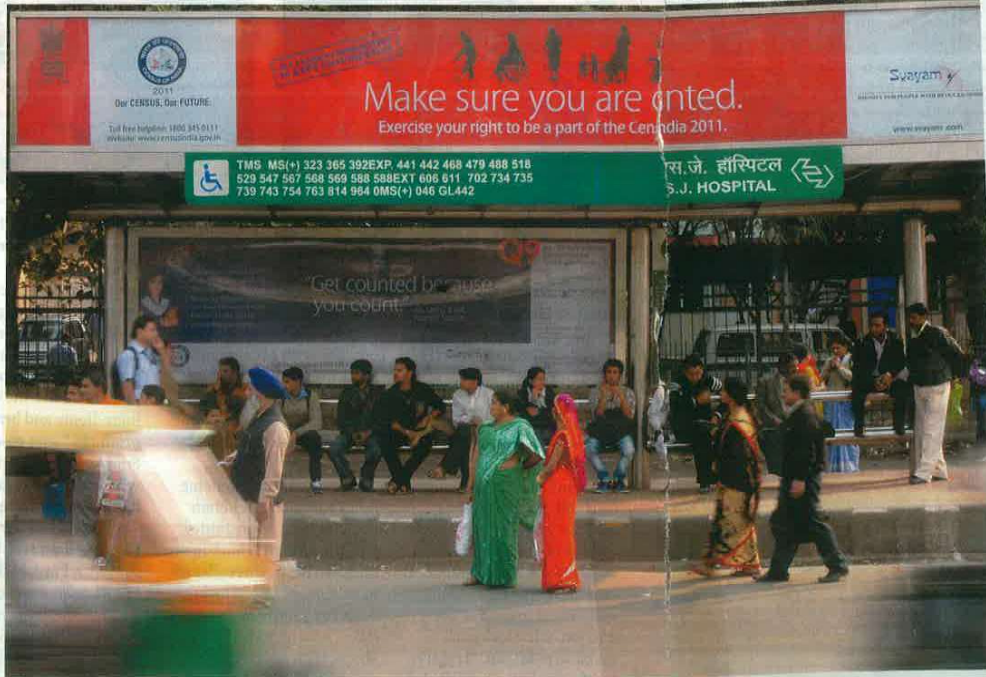
One of the stiffer challenges they face is counting the Sentinelese people, who are among the first inhabitants of India. Descendants of people who first moved out of Africa about 70,000 years ago and now restricted to one of the Andaman and Nicobar islands—the North Sentinel Island—the Sentinelese have posed three main obstacles to enumerators, according to census officers. One, they are perceived to be hostile to outsiders; two, nobody speaks their language; and three, there is an official dictat that the Sentinelese be left to themselves.

In the past, census enumerators have chosen to leave sacks of edibles, mainly fruits such as coconuts, along the coastline of the North Sentinel Island to lure them out of their habitat. Once out, they are photographed and a headcount is carried out of the people shot. This probably makes the Sentinelese the only community in India not to be asked a single question that enumerators ask others Indians. Using this ‘lure-and-shoot’ method, the 2001 census placed their population at 39, when they are believed to actually number anywhere between 50 and 200.

The 2011 census, too, will follow a similar practice, but critics say it should be doing a lot better. Vishvajit Pandya, a professor of anthropology who has studied the islands’ indigenous people, and even, he says, “walked on the shores” of the North Sentinel island, terms the decision by the census officials to yet again stay away from the Sentinelese as just “lethargy”: “Why can’t they fly a chopper low over the island with advanced imaging equipment to get a much better estimate of the Sentinelese people and their livelihood?” he asks. He points out that a coast

by the Sentinelese after they encroached on their territory. “All that the census has put out so far on the Sentinelese is pure speculation,” Pandya says.

Where the census seems to be doing a lot better is in keeping up with a changing Indian society. Reflecting growing inclusiveness—perhaps too eagerly for the conservative—the census form includes for the first time a separate box labelled as “others” in the column that records the sex of the respondent. This seemingly small change is a big step forward for transgenders and others who wish to record themselves as a category distinct from men and women. Earlier,



Everyman, Woman And...

...others. Times have changed, Census 2011 leads India anew.



INDIAN COAST GUARD/AP

For A Right Count

- In a first, transgenders have the choice to get themselves counted as ‘others’, and not as males or females
- Categories of the disabled go up from just five to eight
- There is a much wider list of the remunerative work women do
- Sex workers get category, not clubbed with beggars
- But difficulties remain in counting some primitive tribals

Adding on Top, a Sentinelese takes aim at an aircraft, 2004; left, the census gets state publicity on a New Delhi road

they were forcibly bracketed either with males or females. Another visibly progressive step is expanding the list of disabilities covered by the census from just five in 2001 to eight now.

“Enumerators have also been trained to realise and tell people that disability is not something that we ought to be ashamed of,” says trainer Madhu Grover. The move is significant, given that disability is grossly underreported in India at just 2.1 per cent; a developing country like Vietnam reports a disabled population of 6 per cent.

But the biggest change in the census approach relates to counting India’s women and girls. Nowhere is this more visible than in its publicity outreach, with a logo featuring women and girls and ads prominently showing women, from those working in fields with babies strapped to their backs, to urban working women in western-style formalwear with male colleagues in the background. “We have asked enumerators to go beyond traditional notions of who can head a household. Very often, in the absence of a husband who may have moved elsewhere for work, it is the wife who makes all the decisions in the house. Yet, it is the husband who she usually thinks of when asked to name the household head,” points out C. Chandramouli, Census Commissioner of India.

The census will also reflect, far more than before, the entire range of remunerative work that women do that goes unrecognised by society. Enumerators have been asked to be sure to include under the rubric of work such tasks as selling fish or weaving, earlier dismissed as not being proper work. The 2001 census was way off the mark in this respect, recording for example an implausibly low female work participation rate of 9.4 per cent in a city like Delhi. “It’s entirely possible that a lady earns money by, say, selling Tupperware or Amway products from home but stays silent when asked if she works—just because her husband asks her to shut up,” says Varsha Joshi, the director of census operations for Delhi. This time, enumerators have been trained to draw women out on how they contribute to the nation’s economy.

Finally, in this wired world, where social network sites can even help depose entrenched dictators, the census too has taken on board the importance of being on Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, playing out on its Facebook page has been a fierce debate, revealing its own way of India’s changing social mores. Atheists have been expressing their displeasure in large numbers on being left out from the six identified religions on the forms. The census has had to respond by clarifying, as Joshi explains, “that people who wish to declare religions other than these six, or even those who wish to declare them as atheists, could do so”. Amen to that. ■