

# Census sentiments

**JOSEPH MASILAMANY** a census taker in the 1980 Population and Housing Census, sees the nationwide head count from beyond its median numbers and mean aggregates

**MATHEMATICS** immersed in science gives us quantum physics. But demography interpreted in its arithmetical form gives us statistical poetry. Though, reading the face of an entire nation, through an intricate lattice of numbers may not be everyone's cup of tea - the World Bank puts it aptly: "Without good statistics, the development process is blind."

As staggering as the numbers may be, gathering statistical data is inevitable. A statistical blueprint conveys the plot for policymakers to plan strategies on their workbench. Data from census exercises are used as "critical indicators" to take the nation another step forward into the next Malaysia plan.

Such vital specifics as size, ethnic composition and distribution of the population render "essentially valuable information" for evaluating and implementing programmes in education, human resource, family development, housing, healthcare, rural development and transport. Without sustainable census data, policymakers cannot learn from past errors, and the public cannot hold them accountable.

In short, what the questionnaires yield from the field-count, encapsulate a demographic matrix of the nation and its people. Census data offer clues on how the ever-changing human puzzle could be matched in tandem with the numerical quotient.

By all counts, the 5th Population and Housing Census is a necessary largesse not only to policymakers but also to stakeholders in the private sector, academicians, researchers, social scientists and the student of humanities.

Since July 6, 30,000 census enumerators have fanned out across the nation and they will be hot on the heels of their target for another five weeks or so.

Unlike other surveys carried out by the Statistics Department, the population census registers the highest ever number of census enumerators dispatched nationwide.

For the census taker, the task will be arduous. It demands patience, grit, energy, tact, discernment and most of all, enthusiasm for the job.

However, the success and the quality of the exercise also depends on the cooperation of the respondents. As in every census exercise, getting people to reveal personal data is difficult. Nobody likes to be "profiled so closely and upfront". In a huge operation such as this, human nature itself will issue its very own brand of quirks. People will naturally be



First Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's wife Tun Sharifah Rodziah comes under census scrutiny in the 1970 head count, while the Tunku pays close attention.

PIX COURTESY  
OF STATISTICS  
DEPARTMENT

apprehensive when government agents arrive to peddle questions.

The word "census" is derived from the Latin term "censure" - which means, "to tax" - although the survey is not hosted by the Inland Revenue Board.

If in social circles, it is taboo to ask someone how much he or she earns, census takers are going to have a tricky time when they query, the "joint monthly household income" of a family. Respondents are known to be reluctant to reveal such data and deftly switch to the *lebih-kurang* (more-or-less) mode. It is here, where the census taker has to be tactfully assertive and mentally work out the sums.

As a census taker 20 years ago, I was assigned to an enumeration block which posed a tough challenge in every imaginable way. The area was largely a typical new village known as Hock Ann Estate on Old Klang Road. Nearby were Malay and Indian squatter colonies.

The toughest challenge was getting the residents to be interviewed, let alone gaining entry into their living rooms. At this sub-rural city-village, I learnt the hard way that a dark-skinned Afro-headed Indian

census taker would not get the customary welcome. More often than not, I was greeted with, "lu apa mau?" My feeble reply, "banci" was pathetic. "Apa banci? Melayu tak tau!" (what is census, I do not speak Malay) was the standard reply.

On the other hand - the Indian homes at the squatter colony were loud and boisterous. Everybody wanted to have a say while the head of the household was being interviewed.

Sometimes, a harsh dispute would ensue among the family members, with each one delivering a "hypothesis" on matters pertaining to dates, number of children born alive, age at time of

marriage and period of residency.

In these households, I had to use my eraser more often than it would have been necessary. Getting my answers "right" from the slew of responses from nearly everyone in the family was mind-boggling. I had to perform mental gymnastics and an unscheduled meta-analysis long before I could accept the answers as "accurate".

In one household, the host did not have an idea who I was, but he let me in after I flashed my badge. He seemed a little intimidating and tried to size me up by playing the tough guy. As much as I tried to explain who I was and the purpose of my visit in my smattering Tamil, he did not seem to be interested and gave vague answers to my questions.

However, the questionnaire had a query on ownership of electrical appliances in the household - and this question thankfully helped to ease the tension.

When I asked: "Do you have a radio and television set and other electrical appliances in your house?" - he responded with a blank stare momentarily and then, in an almost apologetic voice said: "Yes I have, but I will buy the licence for them tomorrow."

In the eighties, radio and television licences were required by law and the respondent apparently thought, I was an enforcement officer. And of course, I did not let the cat out of the bag but played along.

Now having a more "authoritative hold" on him - I advised him to buy his licences promptly and continued with the rest of the questions with earnest cooperation from him.

Little tricks like this were not taught at our two-week census school. There is no rule book or syllabus, when it comes to engaging with the public. It is a motley mix out there, with each individual and community having unpredictable sentiments.

Interviewing the Malay population was a lot more easier as there was no language barrier. The Malays are hospitable and the chances of a census taker earning a lunch or refreshment from his hosts was more often a possibility. Just one sticky patch though. The census carries a question as to the number of wives one has and requires details of each marriage - whether married once, twice, three times or four. Of course, not everybody is keen to shout it out loud. And for the census taker it would mean another extra effort at filling in the blanks.

But by all counts, a census of the population, has a nice script, a big cast and a colourful montage.

**Without sustainable census data, policymakers cannot learn from past errors, and the public cannot hold them accountable.**