

BIRTH REGISTRATION IN INDIA

STATUS AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

1. Introduction

The civil registration system in India dates back to the middle of the 19th century. In the independent India; the Parliament enacted the law called Registration of Births and Deaths Act (RBD Act), 1969, which was enforced in most parts of the country in 1970. The Act provides a uniform law for compulsory registration of births and deaths across the country. However, keeping in view the diversity of the country, it allows State Governments to formulate rules for its implementation and appointment of various functionaries. The implementation of the law is the responsibility of the State Governments.

One of the important aspects of the law is that births and deaths are to be registered at the place of their occurrence that may not always be the place of residence of the parents/deceased. This provision has implications with regard to formulation of strategies for complete registration

2. Status of registration

Even after a span of 30 years of implementation of the provisions of this Act the current statistics indicate registration figures as less as 55% of the births and 46% of the deaths. In terms of numbers approximately 26 million births that take place in a year, out of which about 14 million only are registered.

There is considerable variation in the level of registration across the states in the country. In the States of Kerala, Goa and Union Territory of Pondicherry almost all births get registered. In Maharashtra, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal more than 90% of the births are registered with Karnataka and Haryana close behind with about 75 per cent of the births getting registered. Whereas only about 20% of the births were being registered in Bihar in 1995 and the situation has not improved. Even in states with high levels of birth registration, death registration levels lag behind. In Kerala, about 90% of the deaths get registered while it is lower in almost all states. Non registration of domiciliary, infant and female deaths contributes to the problem, as well.

3. National Policies

The National Population Policy has set the target of achieving 100 per cent registration of births and deaths by 2010. The Government of India is also a signatory to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Children, 1989 that recognises birth registration as one of the basic rights of a child.

Government of India is contemplating the preparation of a National Population Register and issue identity cards to the individuals. The updating of the population register for each of the birth and death that takes place in the country everyday requires an efficient civil registration system that registers every birth and death. Otherwise the Population Register would become outdated soon after it is prepared.

Apart from the above the national targets on reducing infant mortality rate to 30 per 1000 live births by 2010 would require planning and monitoring of the action plans taking into consideration the geographic variation in these indicators. Data for these purposes can only be available from a completely functional Civil Registration System. Hence it is in the interest of the individual and the society to ensure registration of all births and deaths

4. Reasons for low levels registration

Lack of public awareness and no demand for civil registration documents (birth/death certificates) is one of the biggest challenges and the reason for low levels of registration. Use of alternate documents, such as school leaving certificates, voters identity cards, etc., as proof of date and place of birth is widespread. However, in most cases such documents are not based on actual facts and are based on unsubstantiated information. As levels of registration are low, authorities are reluctant to insist on registration documents for various services. This has resulted in a sort of vicious circle – low registration is resulting from lack of demand for registration documents while registration documents are not insisted upon due to low level of registration.

There is inadequate attention from the civil registration machinery due to lack of understanding of the issues involved consequent lack of importance attached to the working of the system. In many areas this is true of even the senior functionaries of the State Government who oversee the work of the registrars. This calls for increased and continuous capacity building initiatives of registrars and related functionaries at all levels to be able to manage the system and facilitate easy accessibility of their services by the public.

The information in birth and death registers are not linked to other services and programmes. This has resulted in the potential in these data remaining largely unutilised. While inaugurating the National Campaign on Birth Certificates, President Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam stressed the responsibility of the state with regard to birth registration and the need to link the registration to other programmes. He said, “*Children are our greatest wealth. Every child born in the nation should be allowed to blossom. This is the responsibility of the state. To enable us to fulfil this responsibility the first action is identification of the child soon after its birth. This should be correlated to the nutritional programme, immunization programme, pre-education programme, educational programme, healthcare programme leading to the development of an enlightened citizen who will become an asset for national development*”.

Inadequate budget allocation by state governments for the civil registration activities is another reason for low levels of registration. It is adversely affected availability of stationery for e.g. sufficient forms, etc., manpower for registration work as well as inspections and supervision, processing of and dissemination of the data, etc. Considering that the registration work is handled by functionaries of various departments of the government along with the activities of their department, it is necessary that adequate attention is given by those departments for training and manpower development in an integrated manner.

5. New Initiatives

The office of the Registrar General, India has taken several steps to vitalise the Registration System and also to generate public awareness regarding registration. Some of the most important steps are given below.

National Campaign on Birth Certificates

The National Campaign on Birth Certificates is one of the most important initiatives that have been ever taken up in this area. This special campaign launched on 14 November, 2003, (Children’s Day) by the President of India has an objective of issuing birth certificates in a “campaign mode” to all children below 10 years in a phased manner.

The National Campaign was proposed because most of the Registrars were not issuing Birth Certificates free of charge on registration within 21 days as mandated by the RBD Act. It was felt that non-issuing of birth certificates was having a negative impact on the public’s perception on registration as the public did not get anything from the system immediately. It was also felt that a Government campaign for issuing birth certificates would not only help clear the backlog and generate awareness amongst the public, but would also improve the public perception about the service delivery mechanism of the Government. This would further help in improving performance of other programmes handled by the same field functionaries.

The campaign is divided into three phases. The first phase concentrates on the children who exist in the birth registers and are living in the same village/town where they have been enumerated. The second phase would cover the registered children now living in places other than their place of birth. The third phase would cover those children who were not registered and would involve steps for registration of their births as well.

As per the figures made available to the Office of the Registrar General of India, more than 20.0 million birth certificates have been issued during the Phase I of the campaign, which ended on 31st March 2004. The target that was laid down initially for the Phase I was issuing of birth certificates to 100 million children. Punjab, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh are the top performers among the larger states in the campaign while Lakshadweep and Pondicherry are in a position to claim that every one born there has been issued a birth certificate. The states, which felt that all children have birth certificates, were encouraged to publicise this fact so that parents of any left over children can approach the authorities for issue of certificates.

While Pondicherry combined the first and second phases, Punjab has started the second phase. Other states are yet to start the second phase of the campaign.

The third phase of the campaign needs careful planning for combining efforts from various quarters – administration, judicial process, civil registration machinery, NGOs and civil society organisations. Considering that more than 10 million children below age 10 remain outside the birth registers, the third phase is a mammoth task. However, it is necessary to complete this stage to have a logical end to the campaign.

Million plus cities

The large cities of the country account for more than their fair share of births as people from outside the cities use the medical facilities available therein. In view of this the working of the civil registration system in the large cities should be examples for others to follow. Thus there is a need to develop the system in these cities as early as possible. With this view, the ORGI

started an annual conference of the million plus cities on civil registration from 2002 wherein the representatives of the 27 municipal corporations with population above one million can exchange information, ideas, etc.

Consultations

A National Consultation on Improving Birth Registration was organised in March 2004 in collaboration with UNICEF. Similar state level consultations have been proposed and the one for Madhya Pradesh has been completed. Those for Rajasthan, Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh and Chhatisgarh are likely to be organised soon.

Birth Registration Advisors

With the support from UNICEF, services of Birth Registration Advisors were provided to about 150 districts for sensitising the civil registration machinery about their responsibility under the Act and help them streamline the registration work. They worked in each district for a month on an average.

6. Task ahead and strategies

The task ahead can be generally divided into three areas – awareness generation, capacity building and administrative steps. They can also be divided into immediate short term activities for the next one year or so and medium term strategies covering the next 4-5 years taking up to the end of the current decade. The following paragraphs discuss the general aspects with pointers to specific actions.

a) Awareness Generation

Awareness generation has to be taken up at various levels and have to be region specific. The target audience for such campaigns would include,

- i) general public about the need for registration and importance of birth/ death certificates, importance of reporting correct particulars including name of the child for entering in the birth register
- ii) hospitals, nursing homes and other medical institutions as well as para-medical personnel about their responsibility under the Act
- iii) members of elected bodies like panchayats, municipalities etc regarding the role that they can play
- iv) Government officials at various levels including the registration functionaries

A short term high intensity campaign followed by regular sustained publicity would be necessary. However, it has to be ensured that the campaign is backed up by the organisational capacity to cater to the demand that may be generated. Some of the specific steps that needs to be taken up in the short term are described in the following paragraphs. In some of the states these activities may have to be taken up in a phased manner.

- a) Considering the growing proportion of births that take place in medical institutions the institutions can be targeted for focussed publicity initiatives. There can be signboards in every institution mentioning the details regarding the responsibility of the parents to give correct information to them so as to get the reporting forms filled up correctly. These may be strategically placed in places such as maternity wards, waiting rooms, OPD areas, etc.
- b) Though the law makes it necessary for every registrar to have a sign board showing the place and timings of his work, it is not always followed. There is also a need for information about rights and duties of the public and the registrar with regard to birth/death registration near all registration centres.
- c) Information brochures should be made available at all registration centres, hospitals and municipal and panchayat offices as well as with field workers of various departments including health. These brochures should be state specific and in the local language(s).
- d) The training programmes for elected representatives as well as various categories of government functionaries should include topics on birth registration - its importance and procedures as per the RBD Act. Appropriate types of materials have to be prepared.
- e) Continue advertising on various media. Focus on various target groups with specific messages. There is a need to create a variety of audio visual messages – both direct and indirect.

b) Capacity building

The public interface of the registration system in the country comprise more than 1,50,000 registrars and sub-registrars.

Most of them, excepting the clerical staff in some large cities, handle registration work in addition to other responsibilities. A significant proportion among them gets reassigned to other responsibilities and new set of people put in their place. Therefore training and capacity building can not be a one shot activity, but has to be a continuous activity. However, considering the fact that there has not been any significant systematic effort for training all the registrars the starting point has to be training of all registrars within a short span of time. Another area that needs attention is computerisation of the registration work. As there would not be enough workload for independent computerisation in most places, efforts should be for developing computerised registration services in an integrated manner with other civic services. Another area that needs attention is the use of the birth and death registration information for other activities. The birth registration information should be linked to immunisation services, maternal health related services, etc. Similarly there should be integration of birth registration with services for antenatal services. The various activities that are required in this direction are as below:

- a) Prepare adequate training materials. Print Registrar's Manual for those states for which it is still pending
- b) Support training programmes at state, district and sub-district level. The responsibility for organising the programmes have to be that of the registration system so that they have the feeling that it is their programme
- c) Wherever necessary support even printing of various forms purely as a short term measure
- d) Support computerisation of birth/death registration in an integrated manner along with other services.
- e) Demonstrate the integration of service delivery systems in selected areas.

c) Administrative steps

The registration work in the rural areas is handled by officials from a variety of departments – panchayat, health, revenue and police. There is a move to shift away from the police system for registration and today (September 2004), only Chhatisgarh, Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir has registration work in Police Stations. Of these, Haryana is also in the final stages of a decision to change it from the police system. However, at the next higher level is at the district in most states and the officials here (District Registrar/Additional District Registrar) are from Panchayat, Health, Statistics, Revenue, etc., but not necessarily from the same department. There is a need to have greater cohesion in the working of the various departments towards achieving 100 per cent registration.

There is a need to involve the field workers of health and child development systems like ANMs and Anganwadi workers in getting the domiciliary events registered and also getting the certificates delivered. The system can ensure 100 per cent registration except in places where these workers are not available. As almost the entire rural areas are covered by ANMs/Anganwadi workers, it would be possible to ensure that 100 percent registration take place in a large proportion of the area where it is not taking place now.

There are several places where the procedures followed are not friendly to the public and are also violating the provisions of the RBD Act. It is necessary to get clear cut administrative instructions issued in this regard. Involvement of Civil Society Organisations and NGOs is necessary in brining such instances to the notice of the concerned authorities.

Though it was proposed that the procedures for delayed registration should be streamlined, almost all states have not done any steps in this regard. Steps need to be taken as early as possible to put in place a proper mechanism that does not allow wrong/fraudulent entries and is people friendly.

There are a number of street children who are homeless and do not have any idea about their birth place or parentage. In programmes to get them registered there is a need to for cooperation between the administration and NGOs.

Another area where administrative action is required is to make birth and death certificates useful. Today even when such certificates are available they are not relied upon with the result that many children have different dates and places of birth on the birth register and other documents. It is necessary to ensure that public are not denied services that they are entitled to for want of birth registration documents that is not there due to inefficiency of the system and apathy of the officials. At the same time the use of such documents have to be promoted to ensure the creation of higher demand resulting in better coverage of birth registration. There is a need for sustained advocacy in this case.

The statistics generated from the registration data are useful for preparation and monitoring of action plans in the areas of health and family welfare. Unfortunately, this area has not received the attention that it should receive, even in states like Kerala where the birth registration is almost complete (in fact in the last few years it has registered more births than the number estimated using SRS birth rates). Even in states where the level of registration is only in the range of 70 percent it may be possible to get reliable statistics for various purposes. States need to be helped to generate useful tables for inclusion in the annual statistical reports of the Chief Registrars. Data dissemination workshops with participation of demographers, administrators, planners and

policy makers would be necessary for this purpose. In particular, the usefulness of the registration data on sex ratio at birth has to be brought home to the concerned.

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