



# A short history of data

Posted at: 21/03/2019

## **Why the recent undermining of the credibility of India's statistical output is especially regrettable**

- Over the past two months, Indian national statistics and the organisations that administer them have faced a volley of criticism.
- In January two independent members of the National Statistical Commission resigned in protest, over alleged suppression of economic data by the government.
- More recently, amidst growing scepticism regarding India's official statistics, more than a hundred scholars comprising economists and social scientists released a statement decrying the fall in standards of institutional independence, suggesting political interference as the cause.

## **Pioneering history**

- While declining data quality has been an issue for a while, concern over institutional independence is new.
- What several of these criticisms reference is the fact that India's national statistics were once internationally renowned among economists and policy professionals for their reliability.
- The growth of India's vast national statistical infrastructure dates back to its first decade as an independent country.
- The birth of a new nation led to an explosion of national statistics, based on the need to plan the economy through Five Year Plans.
- These years would see the establishment of the office of the Statistical Adviser to the Government, bi-annual National Sample Surveys (NSS), the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO), and National Income Committees (that made the estimates similar to GDP measurements).
- The moving spirit behind these developments was Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, whom Jawaharlal Nehru described as the "presiding

genius of statistics in India,” and the institute that he had founded in Calcutta in 1931, the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI).

- While the British colonial government had made efforts to collect statistics on the subcontinent from the early 19th century, these were provincially organised and geared towards trade and administration.
- On the eve of World War II, it had become apparent, both to the colonial government and the Indian National Congress, that any concerted postwar developmental effort would require fine-grained statistical information on the national economy.
- It was this need that would elevate the profile of the Indian Statistical Institute and Mahalanobis, both internationally feted in the 1940s for their scholarly contributions to theoretical and applied statistics.

### **Launching sample surveys**

- By the middle of the twentieth century, the Indian Statistical Institute was globally recognised as a leader in the field of sample surveys.
- It would soon even begin training statisticians from other developing countries.
- The Institute’s fingerprints were readily apparent in the creation of India’s National Income Committee, the Central Statistical Organisation, the International Statistical Education Centre in Calcutta, and the National Sample Survey — all created around the mid-century mark.
- The inaugural National Sample Survey was, as the Hindustan Times reported in 1953, “the biggest and most comprehensive sampling inquiry ever undertaken in any country in the world.”
- The first survey, performed by hundreds of dedicated staff, involved manifold challenges according to reports: in Odisha’s forested areas investigators had to be accompanied by armed guards; in the Himalayas they waited for the snows to melt in the passes; in Assam they encountered “naked tribes” who did “not know what money means”; and elsewhere they waded through “deep jungles infested with wild-beasts and man eaters.”

### **High-definition snapshots**

- The results of the National Sample Survey offered high-definition snapshots of the country’s material life — casting light on cost of living, crop estimates, household consumption, industry, trade, and

land holding patterns.

- The Planning Commission, beginning in 1962, used the data the National Sample Survey generated by its household surveys to craft the country's poverty line.
- India was a frontrunner in this regard: the United States developed its own poverty line three years later.
- With their combined influence on the UN Statistical Commission and the UN Sub-Commission on Statistical Sampling, the Indian Statistical Institute and the National Sample Survey continue to have a lasting impact on estimating poverty across the developing world.
- Methods pioneered by the National Sample Survey have become the norm for household surveys across the globe.
- For example, the Living Standard Measurement Study surveys conducted in several countries by the World Bank can trace their lineage back to the work of Indian statisticians associated with the Indian Statistical Institute and the National Sample Survey.

### **An anomaly?**

- This distinguished history, which India can claim with pride, makes the recent undermining of the credibility of our statistical output especially regrettable.
- We can, however, ensure that when we look back on this several years from now, it represents an anomaly rather than a lasting, irreparable loss of institutional credibility.

The Hindu

