

# Constraints in Birth Registration

## Case Study in Andhra Pradesh

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Even after 36 years of the enactment of a legislation, birth registrations in most states do not cover all births. What are the constraints to efficient birth registration? How do people view the compulsory registering of births? This paper reports on a Readiness Assessment study on Universal Birth Registration in Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh. The study was aimed at assessing and documenting the existing civil registration system as well as identifying the strengths and weaknesses with regard to reporting births and issue of birth certificates.

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Birth registration and birth certificates contribute to an individual's sense of citizenship and belonging to the civil society. While inaugurating the second phase of universal birth registration the Union Home Minister Mr. Shivraj Patil said that a birth certificate was a first step in recognising the existence of a child and paving the way for fulfilment of rights as a citizen (*The Hindu April 22, 2005*). India is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which obligates the state to ensure that every child's right to birth registration is fulfilled (Articles 7 & 8 of the CRC) (*Innocenti Digest 2002*). India aims at achieving 100 per cent birth registration by 2010 as targeted by the National Population Policy 2000 (*The Hindu op. cit.*).

### Relevance of Birth Registration

A registered birth and the birth certificate help a child ensure the rights of his or her origins and citizenship. It also helps to safeguard other human rights. A comprehensive birth registration system linked to the co-ordinated issue of birth certificates can help to protect children against illegal changes of their identity, such as changes of name or falsification of family ties. This is in keeping with Article 8 of the CRC (*Innocenti Digest 2002*), and the state's obligation to preserve a child's identity.

Despite the State's commitment to protect children's rights, child exploitation and abuse is on the rise in India. Though child labour is prohibited, there are widespread

violations and many children are reportedly working in even hazardous factories, quarries, gem cutting, production of firecrackers as well as in agriculture and other occupations. A growing trend in child exploitation is child trafficking for sexual abuse. A child who has no official identity regarding age and whereabouts is the most vulnerable.

Birth data provided by effective civil registration system allow the planning and implementation of development policies in social sectors such as health, education, housing, water and sanitation, employment and others. From a health perspective, continuous information on births and deaths is essential for the calculation of crucial development indicators such as statistics on neonatal mortality, infant and child mortality and general mortality. Civil registration also contributes to the functioning of the democratic system. The credibility and transparency of voting lists depends on accurate birth data to establish the age of voters and also data on deaths to prevent false voting in the name of deceased persons.

The lack of birth registration is a violation of the child's inalienable human right to be given an identity at birth and to be regarded as part of society. Article 7 of the CRC gives every child the right to be registered at birth by the State within whose jurisdiction the child is born. This means that states must make birth registration accessible and available to all children [Serrao Arun and Sujatha 2004].

### **Status of Birth Registration**

The registration of births and deaths is carried out under the provision of the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969. In addition to the goal set by NPP 2000 to register all births and deaths by 2010, the Government of India proposes to create and maintain a population register of Indian citizens based on the Civil Registration System. Related to this is the introduction of a multi-purpose National Identity Card, which the Government plans to implement. Issuing a machine-readable citizen enrolment and national identity card would be also linked to the existing system of birth registration.

According to Registrar General of India 56 per cent of the births in India are registered [Registrar General of India 2004]. To put it in absolute numbers, of approximately 26 million births taking place each year, close to 12 million births are not

registered. Birth registration is comparatively lower in rural areas as compared to urban areas [RGI in Plan-International 2005]. Multiple Indicator Survey also shows that only 19% of children less than five years of age possess a birth certificate in India (Multiple Indicator Survey 2000). Table 1 brings out that even after 36 years since the enactment of the legislation, the level of birth registration is not satisfactory, with large interstate variations.

The level of registration varies considerably across the states. Some of the states and UTs such as Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, A&N Islands, Chandigarh, Daman & Diu, Delhi, Lakshadweep and Pondicherry have achieved above 80% registration of births while some other States such as Assam, Bihar, Manipur and Rajasthan are able to register less than 40 per cent of the births. Among the other state/UTs, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Sikkim, West Bengal, Tripura, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli's level of birth registration is in the range of 80 -60 per cent, whereas Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh are in the range of 60 - 40 per cent (Table 1).

**Table 1 States / UTs Classified by levels of Birth Registration**

<b>Level of Birth Registration Percent</b>	<b>States/UTs</b>
Above 80 per cent	Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, A&N Islands, Chandigarh, Daman & Diu, Delhi, Lakshadweep and Pondicherry
80-60 per cent	Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Sikkim, West Bengal, Tripura, and Dadra & Nagar Haveli.
60-40 per cent	Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh
Below 40 per cent	Assam, Bihar, Manipur and Rajasthan

*Source: Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, Year Not Stated  
<http://mospi.nic.in/nscr/ax0902.htm>, downloaded on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2005.*

According to the 2001 data, the percentage of birth registration in AP was 55.8, whereas as per the 2004 provisional data, it was 46.8, which is below the national average of 56. In 2004 out of 1,41,2529 expected births in AP only 66, 1083 were registered. Table 2 shows district-wise data on birth registration in the state.

**Table 2 District wise Registration levels during the year 2004 (Provisional)**

S. No.	States	Expected Births	Reported Births	% of Births Registered
1	Adilabad	46487	18162	39.1
2	Nizamabad	43516	30745	70.7
3	Karimnagar	64761	18290	28.2
4	Medak	49743	13399	26.9
5	Hyderabad (a) MCH 1 <sup>st</sup> Unit	68098	119961	176.2
6	Hyderabad (b) Cantonment 2 <sup>nd</sup> Unit	3710	0	0
7	Rangareddy	68648	20341	29.6
8	Mahaboobnagar	65086	9979	15.3
9	Nalgonda	60126	5728	9.5
10	Warangal	60222	23581	39.2
11	Khamam	47946	23456	48.9
12	Srikakulam	46586	23863	51.2
13	Vizianagaram	41067	21691	52.8
14	Visakhapatnam	71280	17712	24.8
15	East Godavari	89738	37493	41.8
16	West Godavari	69664	37848	54.3
17	Krishna	77435	44213	57.1
18	Guntur	81877	52506	64.1
19	Prakasham	56331	30347	53.9
20	Nellore	49195	21280	43.3
21	Cuddapah	48235	24830	51.5
22	Kurnool	65868	34632	52.6
23	Ananthapur	67447	30608	45.4
24	Chittoor	69462	34373	49.5
	<b>State Total</b>	<b>1412529</b>	<b>661083</b>	<b>46.8</b>

Source: Chief Registrar, Government of Andhra Pradesh.

### **Readiness Assessment for Universal Birth Registration**

According to the 2004 provisional data on birth registration, the percentage of births registered in Nalgonda district was 9.5, which is the lowest compared to other districts in AP. In this context Nalgonda district was selected for conducting a Readiness Assessment study on Universal Birth Registration in AP. This study forms the basis of this paper. The study aimed at assessing and documenting the existing civil registration

system as well as identifying the strengths and weaknesses with regard to reporting births and issue of birth certificates.

Nalgonda district, in Andhra Pradesh (AP) consists of 59 Mandals.<sup>1</sup> Ten percent of the mandals of Nalgonda district were systematically to represent the different castes, tribes and communities in the study. In the six mandals selected accordingly, 10 per cent of village panchayats were chosen in each to carry out the study. Thus a total of 12 villages were selected.

Methods mainly used for the assessment were Key Informant interviews of related functionaries and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) among the parents of children. Non-participant observation and secondary data review were also used as supportive methods. Key Informant interviews were conducted with DM&HO Nalgonda, Mandal Revenue Officers and/or Assistant Statistical Officers of all the six selected mandals. Village secretaries of 12 villages, seven ANMs from seven villages and five AWWs were also interviewed, each from different villages. In order to collect people's perception, understanding and expectations about birth registration, 12 Focus Group Discussions were conducted among parents of children below 18 years, one each in the selected 12 villages.

### **Inter-departmental Co-ordination to Ensure Data Flow**

Officials of different ranks from several departments are involved in birth registration in A.P (See Figure 1). The Chief (state) registrar and the district registrars who are Director of Health, Andhra Pradesh and the DM&HOs respectively belong to Department of Health. The Mandal Registrar, who is the Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO), belongs to Department of Revenue, while the Assistant Statistical Officer (ASO) at the Mandal level who does all the paper work on birth registration is from the Department of Planning.

At the village level the village secretary who is in charge of birth registration is assisted by the Village Assistant<sup>2</sup>. The former belongs to Department of Panchayat Raj while

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<sup>1</sup> Mandal is an administrative unit in AP which is smaller than the Block and Taluka and has a population of around 30,000 to 50,000.

<sup>2</sup> Since we found the nomenclature of Village Servant followed in AP, too feudal we have redesignated it as Village Assistant in this article.

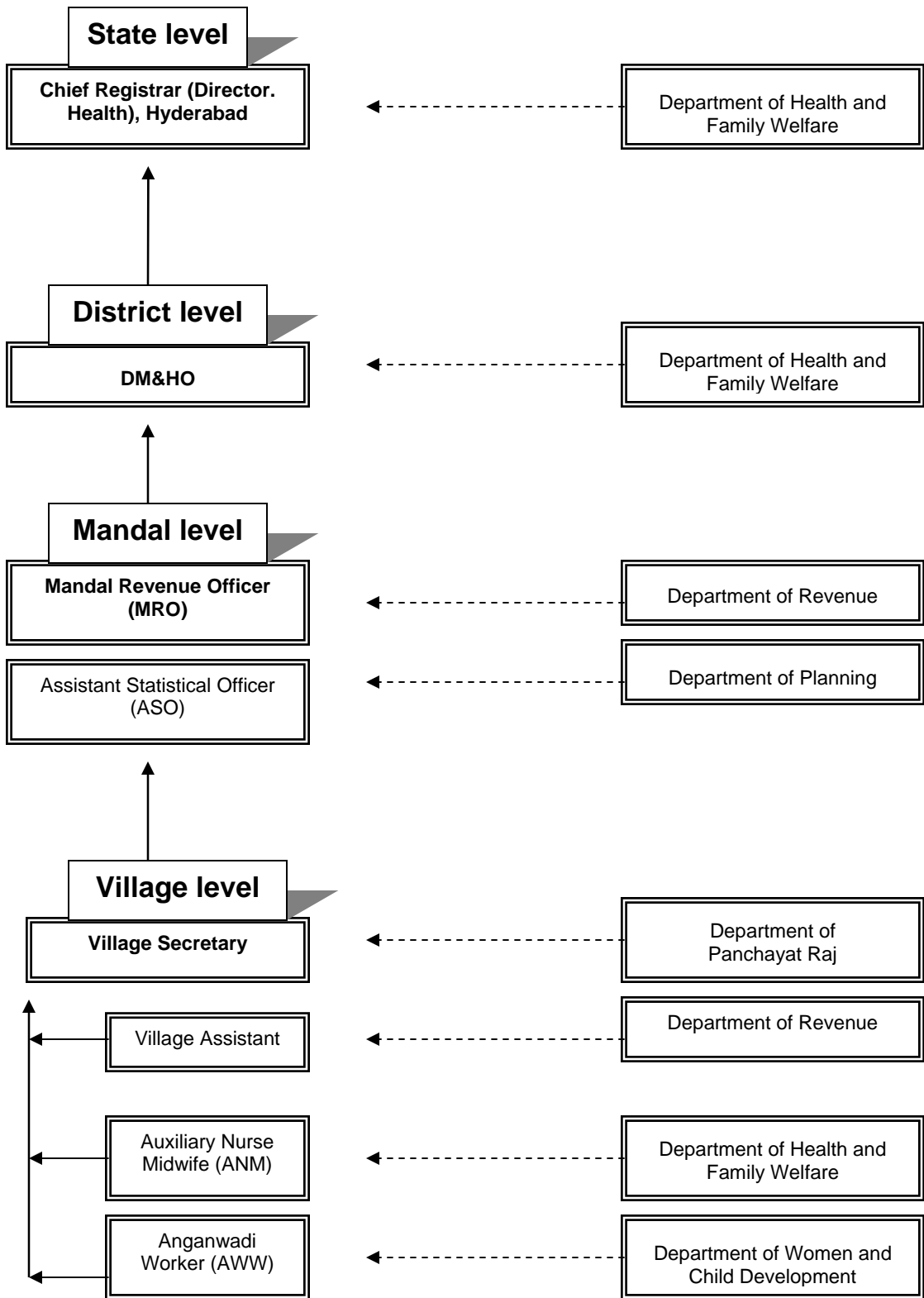
latter to the Revenue Department. The list of birth registration related officials and corresponding departments do not end there. The ANMs and Anganwadi Workers also collect/ maintain substantial amount of birth information. The ANM belongs to the Department of Health and Family Welfare, while the Anganwadi Worker to the Department of Women and Child Development.

Interview with MROs revealed that even though they were the *de jure* registrars all the work related to birth registration including the sending of reports in this connection was delegated to the ASO. The ASOs are expected to send the reports to the Director of Health (DH), in Hyderabad. It is not mandated to send a copy of the report sent to the DH to the DM&HO also. This anomalous situation is used by some MROs to mislead both the DH and the DM&HO by sending just a covering letter to both of them mentioning that the statistical part is enclosed, without actually enclosing or sending it to either.

The MROs who were interviewed, mentioned that village secretaries met them every Monday, but birth registration was not normally an item of discussion in such meetings. Some MROs reported that many a time village secretaries did not submit proper data, which they attributed as the reason for not submitting reports for last 3-5 months to the DM&HO's office, prior to March 2005, when the fieldwork for this study was conducted. Out of 6 MROs, the reports of 4 MROs fell within the range of 2003 December to 2004 June. One of the main reasons for poor reporting was lack of adequate monitoring from higher officials.

Among the 12 village secretaries only one mentioned that he met the ANM once in a week regarding birth registration. Three (25 per cent) village secretaries mentioned that they collected the required data from both AWWs/ANMs, but did not meet them on a weekly basis. The other eight (66.7 per cent) village secretaries reported that AWWs/ANMs did not inform them of births, or met them to provide birth information. Village secretaries said that they reported on birth registration to MROs once a month.

**Figure 1: Government Officials and Departments Involved in Birth Registration**



ANMs submitted their monthly reports on births along with information on; Ante Natal and Post Natal cases attended, number of eligible couples for family planning, sterilisations conducted/ promoted, immunisations given, IUDs inserted, Oral pills & condom distributed, deaths occurred, and minor ailments attended - to the medical officers of PHCs. AWW mentioned that they reported births and related matters to the ICDS supervisors once in a month. Both ANMs & AWWs made their monthly reporting to their superiors in the respective departments, without giving a copy of it to the Village Secretary. All the 7 ANMs mentioned that they didn't report births to village secretary. They particularly said that they never met the village secretaries either, regarding birth registration. The same applied to AWWs.

Figure 1 illustrates the above-mentioned scenario of multi-departmental involvement in birth registration. Government functionaries normally respect channels of reporting and authority of their own departments only. With so many departments involved in various aspects of birth registration, it becomes easy to shift responsibility. This calls for inter-departmental co-ordination with officials such as the collector at the district paying a crucial role, and also to bring down the number of players.

### **Sensitisation/ Orientation Required at Various Levels**

The main obstacle to the birth registration is that it is not perceived as a civic right of the child and is therefore given low priority. It is seen as having little relevance for the child and the society. None of the six MROs, in the sample, gave it high priority. They knew little about the status of birth registration in their respective mandals. This subject was delegated to the assistant Statistical Officers, in all the mandals, though the MROs were the Mandal registrars. Some Village Secretaries felt that since they belonged to the Panchayat Raj Department and Village Assistants to the Revenue department, there was inadequate co-ordination between the two. Almost all the ANMs mentioned that they didn't meet village secretaries regularly and even if they did, birth registration was not an item of discussion in such meetings.



## **Support Systems**

The MROs and Village Secretaries pointed out that the supply of birth registration stationery was inadequate at MRO and Village/ Panchayat Offices. Even though 5 MR offices had computers and printers, they were not used for birth registration. Out of 6 MR offices 4 (67 per cent) had no IEC material on Birth Registration, while 5 (83.3 per cent) offices were not even having a signboard indicating the office of the mandal level registrar of births and deaths.

Among 12 village offices seven (58 per cent) had no registers and forms for registering births. Eleven (91.7 per cent) panchayat offices mentioned non-availability of any IEC material. None of these offices also had signboards mentioning that births could be registered with the village secretary who is the village registrar of births and deaths. Higher officials at the state level pointed out that the shortage of relevant stationery at the mandal and village level has been addressed.

## **Issuance of Birth Certificates**

Among 12 village secretaries interviewed 4 (33 per cent) mentioned that they did not issue any birth certificates as they felt that only MRO was supposed to issue certificates, whereas they themselves had the right to issue certificates as per the changed rules in this regard. This points to their lack of awareness of their present powers. Some secretaries did not issue certificates due to non-availability of certificate forms also. One village secretary mentioned that he issued only three birth certificates in as many as three years in his panchayat. It is also an indication of how poor the demand from the people is! We go into this aspect in little more detail in the latter part of this article.

## **Reasons for Low Birth Registration**

According to DM&HO also there was no proper co-ordination between departments like Panchayat Raj, Revenue, Directorate of Health and Women and Child Health. Almost all the MROs mentioned lack of demand from the public, absence of insistence by Government for birth registration, proper co-ordination between concerned departments and inadequate monitoring as the major reasons for low birth registration.

Many village secretaries mentioned that they had other responsibilities, due to which they couldn't give much importance to birth registration. Village secretaries also pointed out poor demand for birth registration from people and absence of insistence by the Government. ANMs/AWWs pointed out that people needed awareness on birth registration. They were of the view that people should come on their own for birth registration and the certificates.

There is very little demand for birth registration from the people, which is brought out by the focus group discussions. Of the 12 FGDs conducted five (41.7 per cent) groups did not know at all about birth registration, while 80 per cent-9 per cent members did not know about it in three (25 per cent) other groups also. People did not see birth registration as an activity in which they had a role. They viewed it rather as something, which the ANMs and the Village Assistants did. Eight FGD groups (66.67) however, knew who were the Govt. functionaries involved in birth registration, though some groups had confusion about their roles. Eight (66.67 per cent) out of 12 FGD groups were unaware of the process of birth registration. They just did not know how to go about it.

Seven (58 per cent) groups mentioned that nobody had motivated them to register births in their families. Except in one group, large majority of respondents in as many as 10 groups had not tried to register births. As many as seven (58 per cent) groups did not see any advantage in having births registered. However five other groups mentioned that it would be useful for school admissions.

People had various developmental expectations generally and pertaining to children in particular for registering births in their families. Two groups made it very clear that schooling, food and shelter of children whose births are registered, should be taken care of by the Government. Another group also sought facilities for schooling of the registered children, while one group was seeking one sub centre per village to take care of children. A group was expecting some gifts as incentive for registering births, while another was expecting welfare schemes for those who registered. One group expected an increase in the quantity of rice given through the PDS.

## **Observations**

Better co-ordination between the various departments involved in Birth Registration with Mandatory Review Meetings of concerned officials at the District, Mandal and Village levels periodically is necessary to improve birth registration. These meetings should be conducted at the three levels mentioned above, by officials who command the respect of all the departments.

More than training in birth registration the MROs, ASOs, Village Secretaries, Village Assistants, ANMs/AWWs need to be sensitised about the importance of BR, so that they took it more seriously and shared the information, which they had on BR with the relevant functionaries at various levels.

ANMs and AWWs are crucial custodians of birth information and they should be brought into better co-ordination with the village secretaries regarding birth registration through formal channels with mandatory periodic meetings.

Monitoring and field visits by higher officials at each level will help in improving the reporting of births at mandal and village levels. It is suggested to make it mandatory that a copy of the statistical report that is sent by the ASO to the Director of Health is also sent to the DM&HO. If it is mandated to be sent to the DM&HO, who is in the district only, it will be possible for him to ensure better monitoring. In the present system, the DM&HO cannot monitor the ASO effectively, as he is not mandated to get a copy of the statistical report.

Adequate supply of Birth Certificate forms, birth registration stationery, necessary IEC material is necessary at MR offices and Village/ Panchayat offices.

As people knew little about birth registration, it is recommended to build awareness among them on the importance of it, through various communication programmes using modern as well as folk media. Given the poor demand for birth registration this measure can significantly improve the level of registration, and also ensure the quality of birth registration services. The campaign to improve birth

registration in AP, which is being co-ordinated by the State Govt., UNICEF and Plan-International, is aimed at increasing people's awareness about birth registration.

People have several developmental expectations pertaining to children in particular from registering births. Therefore it is suggested that Government should make efforts to constitutionally ensure certain basic social rights like primary education, health care, food and shelter of children, whose births are registered. It is only in this way that birth registration can be considered as a beginning of meaningful citizenship.

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