



The Mahalanobis's Legacy Statistics as the Backbone of Governance

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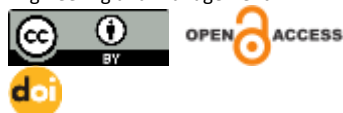
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AN ABSTRACT

National Statistics Day (29 June 2026) reaffirms India's commitment to evidence-based governance, honours P.C. Mahalanobis, and spotlights data quality, disaggregation, transparency, and institutional credibility—reminding stakeholders that trusted, timely statistics are essential for equitable policy, accountability, and democratic resilience. Reliable statistics are foundational to governance in large, diverse democracies because they convert social and economic realities into auditable inputs for planning, allocation, monitoring, and accountability. This paper argues that official statistics are constitutive — not merely supportive — of good governance, while also insisting that their governance value is conditional. Four interdependent conditions determine whether statistics strengthen governance: methodological quality and timeliness; sufficient disaggregation to reveal intra-national inequalities; open accessibility to permit scrutiny and reuse; and institutional credibility grounded in professional independence and transparent procedures. India provides a revealing single-country case. Rooted in the P. C. Mahalanobis tradition of survey-based planning, India's statistical system has long underpinned development strategies. Yet contemporary pressures — a rapidly transforming economy,

expanded services and informal enterprises, and new administrative data streams such as GST filings — create measurement challenges and reform imperatives. The paper synthesises literature on evidence-based policymaking, the institutional economics of statistical capacity, and historical scholarship on India's national statistical system to build an analytical four-dimension framework (availability/quality, disaggregation, accessibility, credibility). Using narrative synthesis of scholarly work, official documentation, and contemporary commentary, it maps recent reform measures (base-year revisions, strengthened informal-sector surveys, expanded labour statistics, and public data platforms) against this framework. Five key insights emerge: (1) statistics are constitutive of democratic governance; (2) disaggregation is essential for equitable targeting; (3) Mahalanobis's legacy links method to policy; (4) modernisation is necessary but must be well governed; and (5) credibility is distinct from technical capacity and decisive for uptake. The paper also highlights the institutional role of recurring rituals such as National Statistics Day (29 June) as moments for

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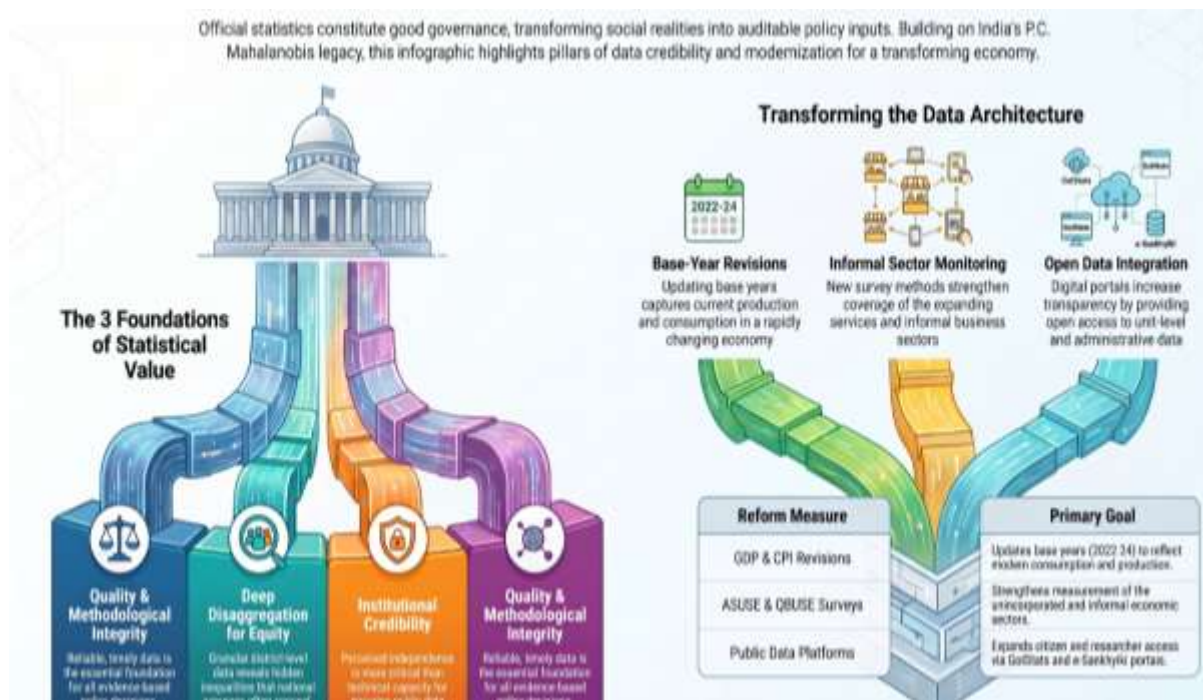
reflection, capacity building, and public engagement that help sustain the enabling conditions for trusted statistics. It concludes that strengthening statistical governance requires investments beyond technology and surveys: protecting professional independence, embedding transparent methodological change, partnering with subnational producers, and raising statistical literacy. In an era of data-intensive policymaking, the credibility and openness of public statistics are central public goods for effective, accountable development. Protect statistical independence and create an empowered oversight body. Ensure predictable, documented releases and methodological transparency with back-series. Scale granular, disaggregated subnational estimates, integrate administrative data, strengthen state capacity, expand microdata access, boost statistical literacy, institutionalise National Statistics Day, and enable grievance redress.

Keywords: official statistics; evidence-based policymaking; governance; statistical capacity; institutional credibility; Mahalanobis; India; National Statistics Day.

I-INTRODUCTION

National Statistics Day (29 June 2026) celebrates P.C. Mahalanobis and reaffirms India's pledge to evidence-based governance, emphasising data quality, disaggregation, transparency, and institutional credibility. It underscores that trusted, timely statistics are vital for equitable policy, accountability, and democratic resilience. Governance in a large and diverse democracy depends on reliable information. In the absence of credible statistics, public decisions risk being driven by intuition, anecdote, or political pressure rather than measurable realities. Statistics enables governments to understand population needs, track inequality, evaluate programme performance, and improve the delivery of services. As an instrument of the state, it converts the abstract aspiration of "informed decision-making" into a concrete, auditable practice.

This academic paper explores the critical relationship between official statistics and democratic governance, specifically within the context of India's evolving statistical architecture. It highlights the legacy of P.C. Mahalanobis and emphasizes that reliable data is a foundational public good necessary for equitable policy-making and institutional accountability. The author argues that for statistics to be effective, they must meet high standards of methodological quality, granular disaggregation, and transparent accessibility. Furthermore, the text examines contemporary efforts to modernize economic measurement while warning that technical improvements must be paired with professional independence to maintain public trust. Ultimately, the source advocates for a strengthened governance framework that treats statistical integrity as a core pillar of a resilient and informed democracy.



India offers a particularly instructive setting in which to study the relationship between statistics and governance. The Government of India designated 29 June as Statistics Day in 2007 to recognise the contributions of Professor Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis to economic planning and statistical development, and to create public awareness of the importance of statistics in socio-economic planning and policy formulation. The 2026 observance marks the twentieth such commemoration and coincides with the 133rd birth anniversary of Mahalanobis, who was born on 29 June 1893.

This paper develops three connected arguments. First, that statistics is constitutive of good governance rather than merely supportive of it. Second, that the governance value of statistics is conditional: it depends on data quality, disaggregation, timeliness, accessibility, and the institutional independence of producing agencies. Third, that recurring national observances such as National Statistics Day serve a substantive institutional function by creating space for reflection, capacity-building, and public engagement with data. The remainder of the paper sets out the research objectives, reviews the relevant literature, describes the methodology, presents key insights, and discusses their implications before concluding.

1.1 Research Objectives and Questions

The paper is organised around four objectives:

1. To clarify the conceptual relationship between official statistics and the core functions of democratic governance — planning, allocation, monitoring, and accountability.
2. To examine the historical and institutional legacy of P. C. Mahalanobis as the foundation of India's statistical system.
3. To assess contemporary challenges facing statistical governance, with attention to data quality, disaggregation, autonomy, and statistical literacy.
4. To evaluate the significance of National Statistics Day as a mechanism of institutional reflection and public awareness.



These objectives correspond to two guiding research questions: *(RQ1) Under what conditions does official statistics meaningfully strengthen governance?* and *(RQ2) How do commemorative and institutional practices such as National Statistics Day contribute to the credibility and use of official data?*

II-LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature relevant to this study spans three bodies of work: the theory of evidence-based policymaking; the institutional economics of statistical capacity; and historical and policy scholarship on India's national statistical system. This review synthesises these strands to establish the analytical lens for the paper.

2.1 Evidence-Based Policymaking

A substantial body of public-policy scholarship has examined the proposition that policy decisions are more likely to succeed when informed by reliable evidence. Reviews of the evidence-based policy (EBP) debate note a broad consensus on the benefits of using evidence in policymaking, while cautioning that the policymaking process is inherently political and rarely conforms to the tidy “policy cycle” of problem definition, decision, implementation, and evaluation. The dominant rational model is frequently criticised as too simplistic, yet it persists as the framework guiding efforts to bridge the gap between researchers and decision-makers (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005; Young et al., 2002).

Scholars distinguish “evidence-based” from the more modest “evidence-informed” policymaking, the latter acknowledging that research evidence is one of many inputs — alongside values, interests, and political constraints — that shape decisions (Parkhurst, 2017). Comparative studies of low- and middle-income countries find that the binding constraints on evidence use are often organisational and systemic rather than technical: weak channels between producers and users, limited capacity, and unstable institutional environments (El-Jardali et al., 2014; Majdzadeh et al., 2012). A recurring theme is that the generation of high-quality evidence is necessary but not sufficient for better policy; institutions must also be designed to demand, interpret, and act on that evidence.

International organisations have operationalised these insights. The OECD's work on policy evaluation documents how member states have institutionalised evaluation functions to improve public-sector effectiveness, emphasising that the credibility and use of evidence depend on the institutional frameworks surrounding it (OECD, 2020). This literature directly informs the present paper's argument that the governance value of statistics is conditional on institutional design.

2.2 Statistical Capacity and Institutional Credibility

A parallel literature treats official statistics as a public good whose value depends on trust. Where statistics are politicised, withheld, or poorly explained, confidence in public institutions can erode, undermining the very accountability that data is meant to enable. This insight is captured in the metaphor, common in policy commentary, that a country's statistical system functions as its “mirror” — generating the indicators through which citizens observe national performance on income, inflation, poverty, and human development (Carnegie Endowment, 2023). The professional independence, methodological transparency, and timeliness of statistical agencies are therefore not technical niceties but determinants of governance quality.

2.3 Mahalanobis and the Indian Statistical Tradition

Historical scholarship positions Mahalanobis as the architect of a statistical system explicitly designed for development planning. He founded the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) in 1931, launched the journal *Sankhya* modelled on *Biometrika*, and introduced the National Sample Survey (NSS) in 1950 on the basis of large-scale random sampling and pilot surveys. His methodological contributions — including the Mahalanobis distance



(1936) and survey-based crop-yield estimation — made statistical reasoning practical for administration. Through the Feldman–Mahalanobis model, he shaped the Second Five-Year Plan's emphasis on heavy industry. The ISI was declared an Institution of National Importance by an Act of Parliament in 1959. This tradition established a durable principle: that development should be planned through reliable evidence rather than generalisation.

2.4 Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature establishes that (i) evidence improves policy only under enabling institutional conditions; (ii) the credibility of official statistics rests on professional independence and transparency; and (iii) India's statistical system embodies a historically strong, planning-oriented tradition now operating in a transformed economy. What remains comparatively under-examined is how recurring institutional rituals — such as National Statistics Day — relate to the maintenance of statistical credibility and public engagement. This paper addresses that gap by treating the observance not as ceremony alone but as an instrument of institutional reflection.

III-METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design appropriate to its conceptual and policy-analytic aims. It does not generate new primary data; rather, it synthesises existing scholarship, institutional documentation, and contemporary reporting to develop an integrated argument about statistics and governance.

3.1 Research Design

The study is structured as a narrative synthesis combined with a single-country illustrative case (India). Narrative synthesis is suited to questions that are conceptual and contextual rather than strictly causal, allowing evidence from heterogeneous sources to be integrated around a coherent analytical framework. India is selected as the case for three reasons: its scale and heterogeneity make the governance stakes of statistics especially salient; it possesses a historically distinguished statistical tradition; and it is undergoing a significant, well-documented reform of its statistical architecture, providing a rich contemporary record.

3.2 Data Sources

Three categories of source material were consulted:

- Peer-reviewed and scholarly literature on evidence-based policymaking, statistical capacity, and institutional credibility, used to construct the analytical framework.
- Official and institutional documentation from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), the National Statistical Office (NSO), and the Press Information Bureau (PIB), used to establish facts about the Indian statistical system and the basis of National Statistics Day.
- Contemporary policy commentary and reporting from research institutions and the press, used to characterise current reforms and debates surrounding data quality and autonomy.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Sources were analysed against a four-dimension framework derived from the literature review, against which the governance value of any statistical system can be assessed:

- Availability and quality — whether data exists and is methodologically sound, timely, and free of significant error.
- Disaggregation — whether data is granular enough (by district, gender, social group, sector) to support fair and precise intervention.



- Accessibility — whether data is openly published and usable by citizens, researchers, legislatures, and media.
- Institutional credibility — whether producing agencies are professionally independent, transparent, and trusted.

This framework provides the structure for the key insights and discussion that follow.

3.4 Scope and Limitations

Three limitations should be noted. First, as a synthesis of secondary material, the paper inherits the limitations of its sources and does not independently verify statistical estimates. Second, the single-country focus enhances depth at the expense of generalisability; conclusions drawn from India may not transfer directly to states with different administrative or political configurations. Third, the statistical reform landscape is evolving rapidly, and some contemporary figures — such as revised national-accounts series scheduled for release in early 2026 — may be superseded. These limitations are mitigated by triangulating across source types and by foregrounding durable conceptual claims over time-sensitive numbers.

IV-KEY INSIGHTS

Applying the four-dimension framework to the Indian case yields five principal insights.

4.1 Statistics is Constitutive of Good Governance

Statistics strengthens governance by making public action evidence-based. It enables administrators to identify where poverty is concentrated, which districts lack schools or health facilities, how agricultural production is changing, and whether an intervention is working. In operational terms, it underpins census design, household and sample surveys, budget allocation, scheme monitoring, and outcome evaluation. Governance functions of transparency and accountability are inseparable from data: when governments publish credible figures, citizens, researchers, legislatures, and the media can assess whether public resources are being used effectively. Statistics is therefore not merely a technical tool but an instrument of democratic governance.

4.2 Disaggregation is Essential to Equitable Policy

In a polity as heterogeneous as India, averages are frequently misleading. National means can conceal acute deprivation among specific districts, castes, genders, income groups, or occupations. The policy relevance of statistics consequently rises with its granularity. This insight is reflected in the contemporary reform agenda's emphasis on sub-state and district-level estimation as a core design feature across the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE), and the National Sample Survey. Disaggregation transforms governance from broad generalisation into precise, targeted intervention.

4.3 The Mahalanobis Legacy Connects Method to Policy

Mahalanobis's enduring significance lies in his demonstration that scientific method could help a newly independent nation allocate scarce resources rationally. By linking mathematics, statistics, and policy — through random sampling, pilot surveys, crop-yield estimation, and the institutional vehicle of the ISI and the NSS — he embedded an evidentiary discipline at the centre of Indian planning. National Statistics Day commemorates not only an individual but this principle: that development must be planned through reliable evidence.



4.4 Modernisation is Reshaping the Statistical System

India's statistical architecture is undergoing substantial modernisation intended to align official data with a transformed economy in which services have expanded, formalisation has increased under the Goods and Services Tax (GST), and digital platforms have reshaped business activity. Key elements of the current reform are summarised below.

Reform Measure	Stated Purpose
GDP base-year revision to 2022-23	Capture current production, consumption, and price structures; integrate new sources such as GST filings and the Public Financial Management System.
CPI base-year revision to 2024	Update the consumption basket and weights using the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023-24; expand the monitored basket and include items such as streaming services and PNG/CNG.
Informal-sector measurement	Strengthen coverage through ASUSE and new Quarterly Bulletins on Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (QBUSE).
Labour statistics	Generate monthly national PLFS indicators and quarterly rural and urban estimates, with state-level data for selected states.
Public data platforms	Expand access via GoIStats, the e-Sankhyiki portal, and an upgraded Microdata Portal supporting unit-level data.

These measures illustrate the system's responsiveness to structural economic change and its movement toward greater timeliness, granularity, and openness.

4.5 Credibility, Not Just Capacity, Determines Value

The fifth insight qualifies the fourth. Technical modernisation does not, by itself, guarantee the governance value of statistics; that value also depends on institutional credibility. Episodes in which survey findings were delayed or withheld, debates over the comparability of revised GDP and labour series, and concerns over the autonomy of statistical bodies all demonstrate that trust is a distinct and necessary dimension. A statistical system is only as valuable as its perceived independence. This insight directly motivates the discussion that follows.

V-DISCUSSION

The insights above can be organised into a set of discussion points that connect the Indian case to the broader literature on evidence-based governance.

5.1 The Conditionality of Evidence

Consistent with the EBP literature, the Indian experience confirms that the availability of data is necessary but not sufficient for better governance. The decisive variables are institutional: whether agencies are independent, whether evidence is demanded and interpreted competently by decision-makers, and whether channels exist to translate data into action. This reframes investment priorities. Beyond surveys and platforms, governance returns also depend on protecting professional independence, strengthening statistical literacy among officials and the public, and embedding evaluation into the policy process.



5.2 The Politics of Numbers

Because statistics adjudicate contested questions — the true rate of growth, the level of unemployment, the extent of poverty — they are inherently political. Disputes over methodology and the timing of releases are not merely technical disagreements; they are contests over legitimacy. The literature's warning that politicised or opaque statistics erode institutional trust is borne out by the Indian debates. The governance implication is that methodological transparency and predictable, rules-based release schedules are themselves accountability mechanisms.

5.3 Measuring a Transforming Economy

A recurring theme is the difficulty of measuring an economy whose structure is changing faster than the instruments designed to observe it. Survey frameworks calibrated to an earlier economy can misrepresent consumption, employment, and output once consumer markets and production patterns shift. Base-year revisions, expanded item baskets, and the integration of administrative data (GST, vehicle registration, financial-management systems) are responses to this measurement lag. The discussion point is general: statistical systems require continuous, well-governed updating to remain “fit for purpose,” and the manner in which changes are introduced materially affects the credibility of the resulting series.

5.4 Federalism and the Production of Data

In a federal system, much statistical raw material is generated at the sub-national level, with state Directorates of Economics and Statistics coordinating collection. Improving the quality and granularity of national statistics therefore depends on positioning states as partners rather than passive data providers, and on harmonising standards across jurisdictions. This cooperative dimension is an under-appreciated determinant of the disaggregation that equitable policy requires.

5.5 The Institutional Function of National Statistics Day

Returning to the paper's second research question, the analysis suggests that National Statistics Day performs a substantive institutional role. By convening seminars, competitions, and public discussion, and by foregrounding the Mahalanobis legacy of evidence-based planning, the observance creates a recurring occasion for reflection on precisely the conditions — quality, disaggregation, accessibility, and credibility — that determine whether data can inform governance. In an era of data-intensive governance spanning social protection, climate adaptation, agricultural planning, and urban management, such reflection is not ceremonial surplus but a mechanism for institutional renewal and public engagement.

5.6 Implications and Recommendations

Synthesising the discussion, four implications follow for strengthening statistical governance:

- Protect professional independence. Insulate release decisions and methodology from political interference through transparent, rules-based procedures and an empowered oversight body.
- Invest in disaggregation. Sustain the shift toward district- and group-level estimation so that vulnerable populations are not hidden within national averages.
- Build statistical literacy. Strengthen the capacity of officials, legislators, journalists, and citizens to interpret and use data, closing the demand-side gap identified in the literature.
- Govern modernisation transparently. Introduce base-year revisions and methodological changes with clear documentation and back-series continuity to preserve comparability and trust.



VI-CONCLUSION

Statistics is not a technocratic luxury; it is the backbone of responsible governance. By turning social and economic realities into intelligible, actionable information, statistics allow governments to plan with foresight, allocate scarce resources with fairness, and evaluate policies with intellectual honesty. But the governance value of statistics is conditional: it depends not merely on the existence of data, but on the integrity of those data — their quality, timely disaggregation, transparent accessibility, and the institutional credibility of the agencies that produce them. Absent these attributes, numbers can mislead as readily as they can illuminate.

The Indian experience captures both the promise and the peril of statistical systems. Founded on a distinguished, planning-oriented tradition shaped by P. C. Mahalanobis, India's statistical architecture has provided crucial foundations for development policy. At the same time, the contemporary task is formidable: modernising measurement to reflect the changing structure of the economy, expanding granular data to reveal disparities, and preserving public trust while integrating new data sources and methods. These tasks require technical rigor, clear institutional safeguards, and sustained public engagement.

National Statistics Day, observed each 29 June, should be read not as mere ceremony but as a collective recommitment to evidence-based governance — an institutional reminder that sound policy begins with sound data. In 2026, as policy-making becomes ever more data-intensive and the stakes of mismeasurement grow larger, the day's relevance is heightened: trusted statistics are both a public good and a prerequisite for accountable democracy. The enduring lesson is simple and urgent — progress must be measurable, and measurement must be trustworthy. Strengthening the quality, transparency, and credibility of public statistics is therefore not a technical side project but a central investment in democratic governance and effective development.

VII-RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Enshrine professional independence*

- Draft and enact legislation or statutory provisions that protect technical decisions (definitions, classifications, methods, and release timing) from political interference.
- Specify penalties for undue intervention and create clear lines of accountability for any exceptions (e.g., national emergency), with mandatory public justification.

2. *Establish an empowered, independent oversight body*

- Constitute a multidisciplinary council (statisticians, economists, legal experts, civil-society representatives) with a statutory mandate to review major methodological changes, arbitrate disputes, and publish independent assessments.
- Ensure secure funding, fixed-term appointments, and transparent appointment procedures to safeguard autonomy.

3. *Mandate rules-based, predictable release calendars*

- Adopt legally or administratively binding publication schedules for all major series (GDP, CPI, labour, surveys) with automated pipelines for pre-specified releases.
- Publicise calendars widely and build technical systems that minimise discretionary delays; exceptions must be time-limited and publicly explained.

4. *Require full methodological documentation and back-series reconstruction*

- For every base-year revision or methodological change, publish comprehensive technical notes, code, weighting schemes, and reconstructed historical series to preserve comparability.
- Provide user-friendly summaries and machine-readable metadata to aid secondary analysts and policymakers.



5. *Scale district- and sub-district estimation*

- Design national surveys and sample frames to deliver reliable district-level estimates, using sample-size scaling, small-area estimation techniques, and model-based approaches where needed.

- Regularly publish subnational indicators to inform local planning and equitable resource allocation.

6. *Prioritise disaggregated modules for vulnerable groups and informal enterprises*

- Embed modules that capture gender, caste/ethnicity, occupation, informal enterprise activity, and other relevant stratifiers in core household and enterprise surveys.

- Design samples and questionnaires to yield statistically robust estimates for marginalised groups and informal-sector segments.

7. *Integrate administrative sources with clear metadata and error-bounds*

- Create interoperable frameworks to link GST, tax, public financial management, and other administrative records with survey data, accompanied by exhaustive metadata, data-provenance logs, and quantified uncertainty estimates.

- Standardise APIs and data schemas to enable reproducible analyses.

8. *Invest in state statistical capacity and harmonised standards*

- Fund state directorates for better staffing, training, digital data-collection tools, and quality assurance.

- Develop national protocols and technical standards (sampling, coding, geolocation) to harmonise subnational data while allowing contextual flexibility.

9. *Build a public microdata access regime*

- Establish a tiered microdata access policy: open summary statistics, controlled access to anonymised unit-level data for accredited researchers, and secure data-lab environments for sensitive datasets.

- Implement robust anonymisation, differential-privacy where appropriate, and clear licensing to protect privacy while maximising usability.

10. *Launch sustained statistical-literacy programs*

- Create ongoing training modules and certification for public officials, legislators, journalists, and civil-society actors on interpreting indicators, margins of error, and methodological caveats.

- Pair training with public explainer tools (visualisations, FAQs) to raise broader civic numeracy.

11. *Institutionalise National Statistics Day activities*

- Expand the observance into an annual programme of capacity-building workshops, public lectures, survey-design hackathons, and citizen engagement campaigns with measurable targets (attendance, uptake, follow-on actions).

- Publish an annual “state of statistical governance” report on or around the day.

12. *Create transparent grievance and review mechanisms*

- Set up an accessible complaints and review process for disputed data releases, managed independently, with fixed timelines, evidence standards, and public dispositions.

- Publish case summaries and corrective actions to enhance accountability and restore trust.

VIII-ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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IX-ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research uses publicly available secondary data with ethical adherence to proper citations and avoiding confidentiality breaches and use of AI tools wherever applicable is duly acknowledged

X- LIST OF ACRONYMS

1. NSD National Statistics Day.
2. P.C. Prasanta Chandra.
3. MoSPI Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
4. NSO National Statistical Office.
5. PIB Press Information Bureau.
6. EBP Evidence-Based Policymaking.
7. ISI Indian Statistical Institute.
8. NSS National Sample Survey.
9. PLFS Periodic Labour Force Survey.
10. ASUSE Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises.
11. QBUSE Quarterly Bulletins on Unincorporated Sector Enterprises.
12. CPI Consumer Price Index.
13. GDP Gross Domestic Product.
14. GST Goods and Services Tax.
15. PFMS Public Financial Management System.

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