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Data collection to be centralised in new dept

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The government proposes to centralise data collection. A separate department of informatics under the Planning Commission will be created for the purpose. The National Informatics Centre (NIC), currently engaged in the task of bringing the 430-odd districts of the country into a computerised data network, will be merged with the proposed department. So will the statistical divisions in the various ministries.

The Cabinet secretariat has written to the ministries of finance, labour, agriculture and home for the detailed format of the current system of data collection, especially that relating to the compilation of the price indices. The home ministry has been told to consider transferring census data collection to the planned new department.

The objective of bringing data collection under one roof is to make the existing system more efficient. At present, time lag between data collection and its dissemination and interpretation makes the resulting statistics outdated, official sources said.

Merger of the existing plethora of statistical agencies and departments will also result in economy and save duplication of effort. What is more, the responsibility for data collection will be pegged on one department.

Official sources said now, the finance ministry brings out the wholesale price index and the labour ministry the consumer, agricultural and urban labour indices. The involvement of two agencies creates confusion at times. If the entire compilation process is brought under one department

and the effort thus coordinated, the indices would be better indicator of economic trends, sources said.

Also, the thinking at the highest level is that the census is in fact a data collection process. Consequently, it should not be treated separately but taken over by the proposed informatics department from the home ministry.

Though the reaction of these ministries to the proposal is positive, certain reservations have been expressed by NIC. NIC feels that it was created with the specific purpose of facilitating collection of information at the district level for computerisation. While not objecting to the proposed merger, it wants to be assured that the spirit of its constitution will be preserved by retaining the existing system of information collection and dissemination.