
THE CENSUS OF INDIA (1871-1931)

Significance and Effects of Ethnographic Surveys

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Abstract

The paper begins by discussing the British fascination with categorizing and quantifying the population in India, which reflects a broader colonial desire for control, as articulated by scholars like Edward Said and Michel Foucault. The British used the census not just as an administrative tool but as an instrument of governance and social control. The process of enumeration was seen as part of a larger effort to define, measure, and manage different groups in society, a practice that can be related to Foucault's concept of biopolitics.

The data collected from the censuses were not simply descriptive but helped in shaping social organization, electoral politics, and group identities. In the context of colonial India, these efforts resulted in a system of rigid social stratification and the creation of fixed identities based on ethnicity, religion, and caste.

The paper also traces the evolution of this classification system, starting from the Mughal era, which focused mainly on land records and revenue collection, to the British era, where the categorization of human populations became central to governance. One notable shift highlighted in the paper is the transformation of caste from a fluid concept into a rigid social category, largely due to the British census methodology. The role of ethnographic surveys, particularly those related to caste and tribe, was instrumental in this shift. These surveys not only categorized but also "exoticized" these identities, which, according to the paper, later contributed to communal politics in India.

The paper concludes by exploring the link between colonial classification and the later rise of communal politics in India. The colonial census not only created boundaries around group identities but also anticipated the communal divisions that would later manifest in political actions, such as the demand for separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims.

Keywords: Census of India, British colonialism, Social control, Social structure, Electoral politics.

The British seemed to have a fixation with numbers which for various purposes they attempted to classify in neat categories. This attempt has been described by historians, anthropologists and sociologists as justificatory, discursive and disciplinary, informational and pedagogic. It is these sentiments and concerns that lie behind most of the colonial documents, maps, agrarian reports, surveys and, most importantly, the Censuses.

This whole process of information gathering and the knowledge that it gave rise to is what has been described by Edward Said in his widely discussed book as Orientalism. To quote Edward Said on this form of creation of knowledge, 'rhetorically speaking, orientalism is absolutely anatomical and enumerative, to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of things Oriental into manageable parts' (1978).

Central to this theme of elaborate enumerative exercise are two crucial issues. One is the form and logic of this classificatory endeavour and the other is the ways in which this knowledge gathering affected social structure and political organisation. The pioneering work in this field is Bernard Cohn's, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia' (1987) wherein he argues that the data thus gathered acquired a dynamism of its own and set in motion new forms of social organisation and mobility and started a new era of electoral politics. This argument was taken forward by several other scholars mention may be made in this context of Nicholas Dirks (1987), David Ludden (1993), Gyan Prakash (1990) and some noted subaltern historians like Ranajit Guha (1983), David Arnold (1988) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (1983). What they effectively argued was that classification added new dimensions to the existing identities and opened new vistas of activities.

It is important to first historically contextualise this preoccupation of the state with knowledge gathering. Enumeration constituted an important aspect of Mughal state imaginary, as well. But in Mughal India it was limited to measurement and mapping of land based on the productivity of the soil. It did not extend to the domain of human counts (Irfan Habib, 1982). This produced a large body of revenue records but shed no light on demography.

In British political imagination numbers played an important part not only in colonised India but even in their own country. It was considered an important input for social and political control. The Census reports made in Britain in the nineteenth century underscore the belief that empiricism based on numerical counts provides a sound grip over society and is a sine qua non for a strong state. The concern, however, which in the British and French Censuses was confined to the people on social margins, the poor, the deviants and the criminals, was extended to the whole of colonised India because in imperial imagination the entire country was

different. In the colonial scheme numbers played a disciplinary role. This is what Foucault has described as biopolitics. The engagement of the colonial state with social practises like sati can be seen in this light (Nicholas Dirks 1989, Mani 1990). With numbers acquiring a significance as an instrument of social control Richard Smith noticed a transformation of the Census as an instrument of tax to an instrument of knowledge' (1985).

The enumerative strategy that the British had developed in the preparation of Censuses at home in the nineteenth century went through further shifts in the colonial context and progressed from land reports to enumeration and classification of communities and groups. Allied to this process of categorisation was of assigning a quantitative value to them (Barjly, 1988). This process which Ian Hacking describes as 'dynamic nominalism' (1986) was responsible for giving rise to new identities.

Even in the predominant concern with the land records and revenue settlements that we witness before 1870 a trend towards new social redefining is visible. Through this trend lords became landlords and peasants became tenants (Gyan Prakash, 1990) and honours and gifts were made into saleable titles. The traditional group identities of castes, sects and tribes in the old agrarian setting underwent change. This change is noticeable in two stages: one, before 1870, when the making of land settlements was the prime concern and between 1870 and 1931 when the grand project of Censuses was carried out.

In the growing ethnographic sensibility as reflected in the Census reports caste is considered an important site for taxonomising and textualising social identity. Apart from the Censuses other works like Hindu Tribes and Castes by Rev. M A Sherring published in 1872 helped in the compilation of material on caste. The importance of caste was thus explained in an ethnographic survey published in 1901: 'It is unnecessary to dwell at length upon the obvious advantages to many branches of the administration in this country of an accurate and well-arranged record of the customs and the domestic and social relations of the various castes and tribes ... For the purposes of legislation, of judicial procedure, of famine relief, of sanitation and dealings with epidemic disease, and of almost every form of executive action, an ethnographic survey of India ... is as necessary ... as a cadastral survey of the land. Under Census Commissioner H H Risley caste acquired pre-eminent position as the basic unit of society.

After arriving at a unanimity of treating caste as a fundamental social category the question arose of deciding on the numerical criteria for defining group identify. Can a caste group consisting of less than 100,000 persons qualify as a group. Numerical strength thus

became important in defining group identity. The principle of assigning primacy to a group in the Census reports based on its size anticipated the politics of communal representation in the twentieth century. The immediate effect of this classification was on the matrix social precedence and group identify as done by H H Risley was the mushrooming of caste associations to contest the social position officially assigned to them. In course of time this mobilisation took larger political forms.

An eminent sociologist G P Ghurye attributed the growth of caste associations to their attempts to claim a higher ritualistic status. He approvingly quotes Mr. Middleton, a Census Superintendent in 1921, that many occupational castes 'have been largely manufactured and almost entirely preserved as separate castes by the British Government' and that 'Governments passion for labels and pigeon-holes has led to a crystallization of the caste system, which, except amongst the aristocratic castes, was really very fluid under indigenous rule'.

The classificatory endeavours of the Censuses resulted in the essentialising and exoticising of group identities and created boundaries around them. Many scholars see a link between colonial classificatory politics and the later day communal politics. In this communitarian approach one notices an anticipation of separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims (Mushirul Hasan 1979, Gyan Pandey 1990, Francis Robinson, 1974) and defining of majority and minority in South India (Frykenbeng 1987, Washbook 1976)

Conclusion

The British colonial census in India was not merely an administrative tool for data collection but a significant mechanism for shaping social structures, identities, and political landscapes. The categorization and enumeration of the Indian population, particularly through the lens of caste and ethnicity, resulted in the construction of fixed group identities that were instrumental in colonial governance. The process of classification, which was grounded in ethnographic surveys, not only essentialized these identities but also played a crucial role in the development of political mobilization and the rise of caste associations.

The paper emphasizes that this system of classification had far-reaching consequences, transforming fluid social identities into rigid categories that reflected the colonial state's need for control and regulation. Furthermore, the effects of these classifications laid the foundation for later political developments, including the emergence of communal politics and the demand for separate electorates. The work of Census Commissioner H.H. Risley in particular, with his focus on caste as a fundamental social category, had a lasting impact on the social hierarchy and political discourse of India.

By drawing connections between colonial classification and later communal tensions, the paper underscores the lasting influence of these colonial practices on the shaping of modern Indian society. Ultimately, the British census became a tool that not only measured but also defined the contours of social and political life in colonial India, with consequences that continue to resonate in the country's political and social structures today.

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