

Caste Confusion and Census Enumeration in Colonial India, 1871-1921

KEVIN WALBY AND MICHAEL HAAN*

The colonial censuses of India were colossal attempts to enumerate castes according to a hybrid taxonomy that mixed local knowledges with European preconceptions and misconceptions. From 1871 onward, colonial administrators were determined to categorize and count the castes of India, yet experienced many difficulties in classifying, enumerating, and compiling caste data. The administrative practice of census making and taking in colonial India during the 1890s incorporated anthropometric and ethnological tools from “scientific” anthropology. The introduction of these measures in the census schedule and in enumeration furnished caste with a biological and racial connotation. Yet this biological vision of caste never fully took hold and was contested by colonial administrators and Indian political activists who did not believe in anthropometry. In detailing the complications of colonial census work in India, the authors show that epistemological problems with envisioning and enumerating caste were the rule rather than the exception.

Les recensements coloniaux de l'Inde étaient de colossales tentatives visant à dénombrer les castes en fonction d'une taxonomie hybride amalgamant les connaissances locales aux préconceptions et aux idées fausses venues d'Europe. À partir de 1871, les administrateurs de la colonie résolurent de catégoriser et de compter les castes indiennes, mais ils éprouvèrent de nombreuses difficultés à les classifier, à les dénombrer et à compiler les données à leur sujet. Durant les années 1890, on commença à faire le recensement administratif de l'Inde coloniale en empruntant des outils anthropométriques et ethnologiques à l'anthropologie « scientifique ». L'introduction de ces mesures dans le bulletin de recensement et leur emploi durant le dénombrement donnèrent à la notion de caste une connotation biologique et raciale. Pourtant, cette vision biologique de la caste ne s'est jamais véritablement imposée et fut contestée par les administrateurs coloniaux et les activistes politiques indiens qui ne croyaient pas à l'anthropométrie. En exposant en détail les complications de recenser l'Inde coloniale, les auteurs montrent que les problèmes épistémologiques entourant la façon d'envisager et de dénombrer les castes étaient la règle plutôt que l'exception.

* Kevin Walby is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Victoria. Michael Haan is Associate Professor of Sociology and Canada Research Chair in Population and Social Policy at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton. The authors wish to thank the reviewers and Bettina Bradbury at *Histoire sociale / Social History* for helpful comments on a previous version of this article. They also thank Seantel Anaïs, Chris Hurl and Jeff Monaghan for feedback, as well as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Alberta for their support of the archival research reported here.

WHEN BRITISH colonial censuses were first taken across India between 1871 and 1872, the data on caste were so scattered and regional that there was no national coherence. Yet, by 1921, caste was imagined to represent India's natural national social hierarchy. In examining the attempts to categorize caste nationally, this study focuses in particular on the debates among administrators and colonial officials and their decisions and practices within the census architecture. Here, we argue, is where caste was conceptualized at the national level in India.

Confusion about what caste meant gradually gave way to nationally harmonized caste registers, satiating one of the British Empire's greater epistemological problems around trying to visualize India. As "statistics on caste were collected very early on by precolonial states," the idea of caste that would be assembled in the colonial census no doubt built on religious and occupational antecedents.¹ Yet our primary interest is in showing how the census helped to construct caste and generate reams of data that could be used in the governance of an emerging nation-state. We draw from the work of Michel Foucault to conceptualize the process of naming and visualizing caste through the census taxonomy, and we show how categories were transformed over time. Not only did the census (in India and elsewhere) require countless hours of classification; it was also an important part of a feedback loop, generating the realities it purported to represent.

Visualizing India through the census was part of an effort to rectify an epistemological problem concerning caste in the late nineteenth century. Many colonial officials debated what caste was and how to account for it in the census. A turn to anthropology is evident in the work of H. H. Risley in particular. Risley, president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and Director of Ethnography for India from 1901 to 1909, had an understanding of caste based on anthropometric measures. Under his supervision, caste was implemented in the census in ethnological and anthropometric terms that naturalized and racialized the category. Then at the peak of their influence, anthropometry and ethnology have since been remembered as "the greatest intellectual dead-end of the Victorian age."² Riding on the success of his *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* published in 1891, Risley revised how caste was envisaged in the censuses. He and his associates (such as E. Thurston) in part changed the way in which castes were named and measured. From the late 1890s onwards, so-called "scientific" anthropology thus played a pivotal role in categorizing caste.

The census is often treated as a tool of colonial domination *par excellence*. Yet one limitation of this viewpoint is that, as Norbert Peabody argues, "analysis of colonial ways of knowing" has been carried out as if it were an "entirely European episteme," meaning that the various peoples referred to as "Indians" are conceptualized as passive in meaning-making processes.³ Overlooked is how

1 Norbert Peabody, "Cents, Sense and Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2001), p. 823; Nandini Sundar, "Caste as Census Category: Implications for Sociology," *Current Sociology*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2000), pp. 111-126.

2 Susan Bayly, "Caste and 'Race' in the Colonial Ethnography of India" in Peter Robb, ed., *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 170.

3 Peabody, "Cents, Sense and Census," p. 819; Zaheer Baber, *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization and Colonial Rule in India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

the colonial encounter takes place between groups in a field of struggle for status and authority. Removing the division between “colonized” and “colonizer” opens up methods of conceptualizing knowledge production as a contingent process involving power and resistance.⁴ While colonialism is sometimes viewed as an application of foreign, boilerplate strategies of rule, the British censuses in India demonstrate how colonial administrators incorporated local knowledges, absorbing resistance in an open-ended manner. Hence we also explore how the census and caste categories themselves were contested. There certainly was no “uniform ‘colonial’ consensus on caste.”⁵ Accounting for the role of administrators, but also for local subversions, leads us to argue that the massive census projects in India were marked by contestation, but above all else by confusion and the “haphazardness of history.”⁶

We first draw on Foucault’s arguments about naming and visualizing to characterize the census as part of the administrative capacity of colonial governments.⁷ Based on analysis of census reports and correspondence gathered from the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (previously Oriental and India Office holdings) at the British Library, particularly the correspondence of colonial administrators from 1870 to 1924 and their census reports and other writings, we then offer an analysis of how caste was created through configurations of knowledge, power, identity, and subversion related to the colonial censuses in India. We demonstrate how the administrative practice of census making and taking incorporated tools from anthropology to remedy an epistemological problem concerning the categorization of caste. Our purpose is to enrich social histories of anthropology and the colonial census.

Shaping Caste Categories through Census Enumeration

Foucault provides an analysis of the science of classification in *The Order of Things*. For him, ordering requires the creation of a *taxinomia*, a continuum of things and where they fit in relation to each other. The grid of the table is at the centre of this process of ordering: “the center of knowledge, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is the table.”⁸ The table requires a value to be attributed to whatever is being ordered; everything must be designated. The production of taxonomy also produces knowledge about hierarchy and the position of one thing in relation to the next. The designations that stem from *taxinomia* are a production of “truth.” As this relates to caste in India, both the naming and the designation of individuals to particular castes were necessary, since many people

4 Peter Gose, *Invaders as Ancestors: On the Intercultural Making and Unmaking of Spanish Colonialism in the Andes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Michael Haan, “Numbers in Nirvana: How the 1872-1921 Indian Censuses Helped Operationalize ‘Hindiusm’,” *Religion*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2005), pp. 13-30.

5 Bayly, “Caste and ‘Race’ in the Colonial Ethnography of India,” p. 205.

6 Richard Smith, “Between Local Tax and Global Statistic: The Census as Local Record,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2000), p. 3.

7 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

were reported to not know their caste, to claim they had no caste, or to provide a caste name to enumerators when they should not have had one (as was the case for Christians and Muslims).

The natural and human sciences that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were increasingly reliant on visualizing, designating and naming. The system of names corresponds to discrete sections of the *taxinomia*, and the names are treated as genus. Since the early nineteenth century, this form of ordering and naming has been called biology. The discourse regarding what is natural was central to the emergence of biology, which Foucault argues permeated anthropology and sociology as well. The ordering and naming of biology thus became a core feature of the human sciences. Classifications spread out from the realm of names to the application of categories in the census. Censuses are thus fundamental to the process of creating hierarchies of human subjects.

Enumeration is the process through which information about human subjects is generated and disseminated.⁹ As Ian Hacking puts it, “[E]numeration demands *kinds* of things or people to count. Counting is hungry for categories. Many of the categories we now use to describe people are byproducts of the needs of enumeration.”¹⁰ Hacking describes census making and enumeration within the context of the rise of statistics between 1820 and 1840. London was a hotbed for the development of statistical tools, so much so that Adolphe Quetelet – a Belgian – chose London as the home for developing his ideas on moral statistics.¹¹ The London Statistical Society, founded in 1834 and which Quetelet had a hand in forming, was interested in statistical advances and had a focus on population governance.¹² It was near London, at Haileybury College, where census making officials and those training enumerators were introduced to statistical knowledge for the purpose of colonial state administration in India. Haileybury was home to the East India College, where civilian administrators for India were trained until 1858.

In his work on the early Canadian censuses, Bruce Curtis examines how the administrative capacity of colonial governments relied on the production of knowledge about spaces and people.¹³ Those who trudged around to get hold of household information for early censuses, and those who translated and compiled the data, had a great impact on the production of the census categories, not through statistical intentionality but often through fudging the process. Enumerators rework census schedules in the process of gathering information. Commissioners compile information to give the appearance of factuality. We

9 This lesser-studied aspect of enumeration is vital, as it entails the deployment of census categories upon people in an effort to categorize and sort.

10 Ian Hacking, “Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers,” *Humanities in Society*, vol. 5 (1983), p. 280.

11 Ian Hacking, “How Should we do the History of Statistics?” in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), pp. 181-196.

12 Bruce Curtis, “Surveying the Social: Techniques, Practices, Power,” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 65, no. 39 (May 2002), pp. 83-108.

13 Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

thus follow Curtis's note on census information as "made, not taken, fabricated through processes that select, and do not simply reflect dimensions of social organization."¹⁴

There is extensive evidence of caste being made in the censuses of India. Although we only document a few examples below, instances of caste confusion abound. How caste was differentiated from sub-caste, what caste included and what it did not, was disputed, evinced by debates among colonial officials, local caste associations, and administrators working in Britain who had never been to India.¹⁵ Hacking describes the history of statistics as failing to achieve its goal of perfect categorization – the efforts to classify caste in colonial India support this claim.¹⁶

Making Up Homo Hierarchicus: Caste and the Indian Colonial Censuses¹⁷

Almost every statement of a general nature made by anyone about Indian castes may be contradicted.¹⁸

Pre-1871 Indian Censuses

The East India Company had long been interested in taking a statistical survey of India. As early as 1687, the Company was taking formal inventories of the regions under its control. In 1806, the Court of Directors of the East India Company wrote to their servants in Bengal: "We are of opinion that a statistical survey of the country would be attended with much utility; we therefore recommend proper steps to be taken for the execution of the same."¹⁹ The East India Company periodically urged systematic inquiries into its territories. Numerous British colonial administrators and civil servants singled out knowledge of caste as important. For instance, in his 1853 publication *The Theory and Practice of Caste*, Benjamin Irving argued, "[O]n no subject, perhaps, have greater misconceptions prevailed than on that of caste." He also stated that the effects of caste "on the institutions and probable destinies of our Indian Empire" would likely be significant.²⁰

14 Bruce Curtis, "On the Local Construction of Statistical Knowledge: Making up the 1861 Census of the Canadas," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1994), p. 418.

15 Lucy Carroll, "Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste Associations," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1978), pp. 233-250.

16 Hacking, "Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers."

17 This is a reference to Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), which argued that caste is marked by a primordial drive towards hierarchy based on separation of pollution from purity. Brian Morris argues that Dumont fails to understand that caste ideology never has swallowed up Indian social life and that he fails to recognize the arbitrariness of caste's construction with respect to census practices. See Brian Morris, "Are There Any Individuals in India? A Critique of Dumont's Theory of the Individual," *The Eastern Anthropologist*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1978), pp. 365-377.

18 D. D. Kosambi, "Caste and Class in India," *Science and Society*, vol. 8 (1944), p. 245.

19 Cited in W. W. Hunter, *The Indian Empire: Its History, People and Products* (London: Trubner, 1882), p. 1.

20 Benjamin Irving, *The Theory and Practice of Caste: Being an Inquiry into the Effects of Caste on the Institutions and Probable Destinies of the Anglo-Indian Empire* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1853), p. 3.

Attempts to know and visualize India continued throughout the 1700s and 1800s, increasing in frequency over time. Between 1800 and 1872, India was faced with attempted censuses more than once per decade, though they were isolated and regional, lacking a unified purpose.²¹ They also lacked any continuous plans for periodic execution and tended to focus more on generating lists of directly useful “facts” about India, usually conducted for some pragmatic purpose like taxation or defence. These partial censuses carried “small value” beyond fiscal and security uses.²² They seemed to be intended for assessing the Company’s net worth.

The East India Company lost its trade monopoly in 1813 and ceased operation in 1858. Following the Company’s demise, a “national” census was one of the first proposed activities of the Indian colonial government upon gaining control of India in 1857. Even the Company directors, while still in power, desired a national census at the dusk of their reign of India, as a Statistical Dispatch from the Home Office indicates:

The practice of taking a census of the population every ten years prevails not only in Great Britain but also in the United States, and in some of the countries on the continent of Europe . . . [we] are very desirous that the Indian census should be made upon a system and at the same period for the entire country under our administration. The next general census of our Indian territories may be taken in 1861 to correspond with the next census of Great Britain, and thence forward at intervals of ten years.²³

Due to the uprisings of 1857 and the dissolution of the company, however, the national census initiative of 1861 was suspended in 1859. Plans for a general census were postponed.²⁴ Not long after the uprisings, discussions about a national census resumed. Several Indian provinces petitioned the government of India, in what became known as the 1863 Bombay Census Bill, for permission to carry out a census.²⁵ Convinced of the utility of the census, the central government remained hesitant about causing a disruption among the people of India (it had only been six years since the uprisings) and disallowed the Bombay Census Bill.

The provincial governments persisted, speculating that the circumstances postponing the 1861 census would no longer exist in most of the country by 1871. India’s first census was prefaced by several provincial pilot tests. A few scattered attempts had already been made to enumerate regional populations in the 1820s

21 Shriram Maheshwari, *The Census Administration under the Raj and After* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1996), p. 26.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

23 Statistical Dispatch No. 2, July 23, 1856, cited in Maheshwari, *The Census Administration under the Raj and After*, p. 26.

24 Richard Martin, “Bibliographic Notes on the Indian Census” in Gerald Barricr, ed., *The Census in British India: New Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1982), p. 62.

25 Maheshwari, *The Census Administration under the Raj and After*, p. 27.

and 1840s.²⁶ Several administrative decisions hinged on the need for basic knowledge about the people of India, and the want of a knowledge of the population was felt in every government department. Yet there was no consistency across the provinces concerning the enumeration of caste. Categories were often borrowed from smaller, regional census efforts or from other sources. For instance, in the 1864 *Census of Bombay*, “the castes and races have been grouped in the way followed in the Mortuary Registration.”²⁷ Administrators appeared to recognize the lack of consistent categories, yet the records indicate no concerted effort to consolidate these groups, leaving enumerators to improvise during their rounds, which led to variation in caste measure and irreconcilable schedules.

Nor were local peoples receptive to the early provincial census efforts. For instance, during the 1866 census of Calcutta, “the general impression that prevailed amongst the lower classes of Natives [was] that the object of the census was the imposition of some new tax.”²⁸ As a result of this impression, “the enumerators having reported that they found 149 houses quite deserted and locked up on the night of the Census, were directed to revisit the same a week after and report the result of the enquiries ... inmates of 98 houses had actually left town on that day to avoid the Census, but had returned the following morning.”²⁹ Early numbers regarding the population were questionable due to these subversions.

Eventually the government of India conceded to provincial requests and, reluctantly, consented to a general enumeration to be taken in 1871.³⁰ Government support did not instantly crystallize into a national census, as the Indian government needed the permission of the Crown for such a major national undertaking. Britain had long been taking censuses on its own people and was apparently sold on the administrative merits of a national census (evidenced by its continuance). When the Indian government petitioned for final approval, its request was unconditionally granted. The Home Office replied on November 26, 1870, with the following statement: “That a census of the whole people is most desirable, or rather we may say is absolutely necessary, as a sound basis of almost every economical reform, has long since been admitted as a simple truism . . . thus the census should proceed with a view to secure uniformity and thus facilitate comparison.”³¹

The Census Schedule Debate

The London Statistical Society was called upon to help design the first Indian national census. The Society was an obvious source for advice; it had been helping the British government with its own censuses since 1841 and also had a long

26 Sumit Guha, “The Politics of Identity and Enumeration in India c. 1600-1990,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2003), pp. 148-167.

27 *Report of Census of the Island of Bombay 1864* (Bombay: Education Society’s Press, 1864), p. ix.

28 *Report on the Census of Calcutta in 1866* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co. Press, 1866), p. 1.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

30 Although the census was originally supposed to be taken in 1871, substantial portions of India were not enumerated until 1872, due to several unforeseen hurdles.

31 Cited in Swaminath Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1872), pp. 3-4.

history in India.³² The Society immediately set up an Indian census subcommittee to design a usable template. On April 26, 1869, the subcommittee sent its census schedule recommendations to the Indian Secretary of State, who in turn forwarded them to all of the provincial census committees. Appended to the memorandum were four suggested census schedule designs, as well as a recommended form for a cattle census that might be taken at the same time.³³ The forms were limited to “the minimum of information that will give useful statistics, and this it is thought, may fairly be required from all parts of India.”³⁴

In the following months, debate ensued among the various provinces about what the census schedule should contain. W. C. Plowden, who served as the 1871 census commissioner for the Northwestern Provinces, further refined the schedule recommended by the Statistical Society. The Plowden schedule was based on

the principle that the population should be determined by an actual house to house enumeration to be made on the same day throughout the province, distinguishing the sexes, the two great creeds [Hinduism and Muslim] and classifying the people according as they [*sic*] followed agricultural or non-agricultural occupations, the different occupations and trades of the people, and their various castes.³⁵

Several of the 1871 census questions were “open-ended” in that many items on the schedules had no fixed response categories. Some of the items, including caste, race or nationality, age, and name, therefore had no “unacceptable” responses. Enumerators were instructed to write down the responses of the enumerated, regardless of any apparent absurdities. If the person did not know his or her age (and most did not), the enumerator was told to make an estimate.

The remaining census questions (religion, occupation, type of enclosure, infirmities, ability to read and write, and remarks) had predefined response categories. Religion was to be entered as Hindoos, Mahomedans, Buddhists, Christians, and Others; occupation was arranged according to the English schedule, following the categorical classifications of the English census; type of enclosure was divided into houses “of the better sort” and “of the inferior sort”; and infirmities (the “remarks” column) were to be divided into the number of “deaf, dumb, idiots, insanes and lepers” in each enclosure.³⁶

32 John McGuire, “Quantification and South Asian History: Counting What?” *South Asia*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1992), p. 4.

33 The cattle census, though considered a potentially rewarding line of inquiry, was rejected on the grounds that it would place an undue burden on the enumerators. In the words of the Census Commissioner of East Berar in a dispatch to the Secretary of State on July 19, 1869: “We shall have reason for congratulation if we obtain a tolerably correct census of human beings” (cited in Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India*, p. 190).

34 British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, Correspondence of colonial administrators, 1870-1924 [hereafter Correspondence of colonial administrators], letter from Secretary of the Statistical Committee to the Secretary of the Government of India, April 26, 1869, cited in Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of Bombay, in the General Department, dated June 14, 1869, Census of the Bombay Presidency, taken on February 21, 1872 (Bombay: Central Government Press, 1872).

35 Cited in Asok Mitra, *India Language Tables* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, Census of India, 1966), p. vii.

36 Department of Revenue, September 30, 1871, cited in Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India*, p. 17.

Although generally uniform in the information sought (all provinces used the same schedules to varying degrees of completeness), the 1871 census was nowhere near nationally synchronous. Enumerators were so erratic in entering information that local police often monitored their filling out of the census forms. Some provinces adapted the census procedures to suit local conditions. Many provinces only asked a portion of Plowden's recommended items.³⁷ The 1872 census also did not cover all of the British territories ruled directly or any of the indirectly ruled princely states. It was not centrally administered, supervised, or compiled (there was no Imperial Census Commissioner in 1871-1872), and the product was a discontinuous mass of non-comparable data. Not surprisingly, it was "scattered and fragmentary, and needed to be collected, compared and consolidated."³⁸ Later commentators said that the only consistency in the 1871-1872 Indian census was the "uniform absence of uniformity."³⁹

The only "national" report to come out of the 1871 census was the recorded proceedings of a presentation of census results that Henry Waterfield of the Statistics and Commerce Department of the India Office gave to both houses of Parliament in 1875. Waterfield acknowledged that, in almost every area of inquiry pursued in the census, the results were disappointing. Nobody seemed to "know" his or her age, and several occupational categories remained blank. In all of India, only three dentists, five eyeglass makers, and seven veterinarians were listed. Children were given the same vocation as the household head (this happened even for the Viceroy). Enumerators in Assam, Ajmere, Oude, Berar, Bengal, and Punjab did not ask about ability to read and write, and those in the Northwestern Provinces asked this question only of males.⁴⁰

Caste in 1871

Caste data also failed to meet the goals of uniformity and comparability. Most Muslims listed their caste even though they were assumed not to have one. Part of this confusion was due to enumerators not following instructions: "the enumerators must understand that they have nothing whatsoever to do with Caste Classification, this will be done afterwards by the Compilers, and, in this column, they are to enter the Caste or Class as it is given to them by, or for, each individual."⁴¹ Another problem with knowledge of India that emerged

37 In the province of Oude (now Awadh), for example, enumerators asked for caste, occupation, name of household head, and number of male and female adults and children (Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India*, p. 53), whereas those in the province of Punjab asked the head of the household only the number of children, youths, and adults of each sex and whether they were family or visitors (Maheshwari, *The Census Administration under the Raj and After*, p. 30).

38 Government of the Panjab, *1881 Census of the Panjab, Vols. 1-3* (Lahore: Government of Panjab Press, 1883), vol. 1, p. 2.

39 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 10.

40 Henry Waterfield, *Memorandum of the India Office on the Census of British India 1871-72* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1875), p. 64.

41 "General Report on the Organization, Method and Agency Employed for Enumeration and Compilation", *Census of the Bombay Presidency, taken on the 21st of February 1872* (Bombay: Central Government Press, 1872), p. 97.

through this process was that local colonial officials patterned their own categorization on pre-existing understandings of caste, which were not nationally consistent. From these data, Waterfield could only conclude that the "caste system is perhaps as prevalent among the Mahomedans as among those professing the Hindoo religion."⁴² Even Christians listed their caste, Waterfield lamented, which led him to explain that those who did list their caste must be Hindoo converts.

In addition to people's skill at manipulating the caste lists were the highly disparate details recorded for the provinces.⁴³ In Bengal, 1,000 castes were enumerated; in the Northwestern Provinces, 291; in Bombay, 140; in Oude, 77; in the Punjab, 19; in the Central Provinces, 48. In total, across India, 3,208 castes were identified. In Southern India, there was a binary division; castes were separated into right hand and left hand factions.⁴⁴ The separation, Waterfield acknowledged, was somewhat arbitrary, although there were castes within the division as well. He noticed that some weavers were found in the right hand faction while others were in the left hand faction. Fishers were on the right hand, while hunters sided with the left. In agriculture, wives were of the left hand division while their husbands embraced the right. Other groups occupied a neutral position and took no sides in these feuds.⁴⁵

Waterfield concluded that the main problems with caste calculations were "due partly to the intrinsic difficulties on the subject, and partly to the absence of a uniform plan of classification."⁴⁶ Commenting on the 1871 census effort, C. Elliot, Secretary to Government for the Northwestern Provinces, wrote:

[T]he caste statistics are the most unsatisfactory part of the return. Greater accuracy than before has been aimed at, and probably obtained, but still there is much error and confusion in the figures. A really scientific and sound classification is hardly possible in the face of the general ignorance of this subject which prevails among the people themselves, the frequency with which the same caste is called by different names in different places, and the tendency to confuse caste with occupation in the lower classes.⁴⁷

Frustrations in the first set of censuses stemmed from procedural problems compounded by the lack of suitable conceptualization. The grand expectation that colonial census commissioners would need only to collate caste data was thwarted by widespread uncertainty in India about what caste was.

42 Waterfield, *Memorandum of the India Office*, p. 27.

43 Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

45 Waterfield, *Memorandum of the India Office*, pp. 20-27.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

47 William Chichele Plowden, *Census of the Northwest Provinces 1871-1872, General Report* (Allahabad: North-Western Provinces Government Press, 1873), p. 4.

Recommendations for Post-1871 Censuses: The Plowden Report

The shortcomings of India's first "national" census led to a flurry of recommendations from British colonial administrators and statistical experts. Between 1871 and 1881, at least four reports were issued to the government of India by the 1871 census commissioners and other British officials of statistical savvy, including the commissioner for the Northwestern Provinces (Plowden Report), the statistics and commerce department of the India Office (Waterfield Report), the Register General of England in 1877 (Graham Report), and the reports of the London Statistical Society. All were in agreement that there was a greater need for uniformity in taxonomy. The question also arose as to whether the census should continue to enumerate caste. As Plowden put it, "the whole question of caste is so confused, and the difficulty of securing correct returns on this subject is not so great, that I hope on another occasion no attempt will be made to attempt to obtain information as to the castes and tribes of the population."⁴⁸ Several subversions also had an impact on the collection of census data:

[T]he most serious case occurred at Sonadeah, a village with about 2,000 inhabitants . . . Mr. Monro attempted to commence the enumeration, but a large party of the villagers assembled with sticks, assaulted the supervisor and threw him in a tank . . . Monro was also mobbed, beaten and severely injured, being pursued for about two miles before he could find his horse and make good his escape.⁴⁹

In census reports and correspondence, these instances of subversion were characterized as tribal ignorance rather than organized counter-conduct, although they became more prevalent as the national census project continued. Despite these subversions and the difficulties with census administration, in the British *colonial imaginaire* India was coming to be thought of as a "sum of castes."⁵⁰

Caste in Post-1872 Censuses

Administrators considered caste important and wanted to prevent a repeat of the 1871 misfortunes. The compilation of caste lists lagged so far behind the other information that a national list, though completed for the 1881 census, was not distributed to enumerators until the 1891 headcount. Seeking national statistics was of little use as long as many categories remained local. The administrative solution was to abstract caste from its locality and project it to aggregate India. The Indian census officials thus detached caste from any indigenous meaning and used it to reinforce their ideas about India. Denzil Ibbetson, the 1881 census commissioner for the Panjab, whose account of caste took 169 pages (35 per cent) of his report, noted that "we see that in India, as in all countries, society is arranged in strata which are based upon differences of social or political importance, or of

48 *Ibid.*, p. lxxviii.

49 Henry Beverley, *Bengal Census of 1872* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872), p. 58.

50 Smith, "Between Local Tax and Global Statistic," p. 4.

occupation.”⁵¹ Ibbetson had a complex cultural understanding of caste that was the base of his attempts at aggregation.⁵² Yet Ibbetson also doubted the caste measures in the census and thought of these as caricatures. He wrote,

[A]s for caste, opinions will probably differ as to the correctness of the results . . . the entries in that record had to undergo an elaborate process of classification and assortment before they were finally reduced to the form they assume in the tables; and in our present state of ignorance as to the tribal distribution and divisions of the people, it is certain that I must have erred over and over again in my attempts to marshal the facts and figures.⁵³

Even after extensive re-classification, the 1881 census caste index (which was never distributed to enumerators) had approximately 2,000 different castes abstracted at a national level.⁵⁴ The *taxinomia* was congealing. A new table for visualizing India was emerging.

Already in 1881, many caste names had disappeared in the abstraction process. Of the nearly 2,000 castes listed in the 1881 register, the national census report for that year identified only 207.⁵⁵ The disparity, it was argued, was often due to people not being aware of the official name for their caste until enumerators told them. Census administrators flagged the work of enumerators as the source of methodological problems. There were also shortcomings with the men who compiled and abstracted the enumerators’ results. Of census operations in Bengal during 1881, J. A. Bourdillon wrote:

As to the badness of the clerks, I can only repeat that in the large numbers I was compelled to take on very many men who proved inefficient, and very many bad characters; all the discharged rogues in Calcutta and its vicinity found an asylum in the Census office, for I wanted men so much that I was obliged to accept any one who are fairly well educated without any inquiry into his previous history. Many of the men were clever enough, and they not only became masters of fudging themselves, but contaminated other, honester men, being emboldened thereto by the unavoidable delay which occurred in checking their work . . . there was a constant stream of trained hands going away and new men coming in who had to be trained and whose work was worthless for the first ten days or so.⁵⁶

51 Denzil Charles Jelf Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab, taken on the 17th of February 1881*, vol. 1, text and appendices C and D (tables and instructions). Ibbetson’s description of caste was reproduced in volume 3 of the 1881 Imperial Report, although the quotes taken here appear in volume 1 of the Panjab report. Ibbetson, in the same report, notes that it was he who “lay the very foundations as well as buil[t] the superstructure” of caste classification (p. 470).

52 Bayly, “Caste and ‘Race’ in the Colonial Ethnography of India,” pp. 165-218.

53 Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab*, vol. 1, p. 13.

54 Government of India, *1881 Census of the Indian Empire, Vols. 1-3* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1883), pp. 59-70.

55 Maheshwari, *The Census Administration under the Raj and After*, p. 106.

56 Correspondence of colonial administrators, J. A. Bourdillon, “Deputy Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, to the Census Commissioner for India,” November 15, 1881, cited in J. A. Bourdillon, *Report on the Census of Bengal*, 1881, vol. III, appendix C (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1883), n.p.

Such conditions did not necessarily lend themselves to careful counting or compiling. Working conditions challenged the standards of administrative practice: "I should explain that the greater part of the census office was housed in the elephant shed," continued Bourdillon. A fire destroyed many Bengal census documents. As Plowden wrote in a memorandum on January 24, 1882, fire at the Cuttack office "necessitated reworking census tables and abstracts for nearly a million-and-a-half of the population."

Difficult conditions and arbitrary caste designations characterized the work of enumeration, compilation, and counting. H. H. Risley, the 1891 census commissioner, who would soon introduce changes to the census schedule and furnish caste with a biological connotation, admitted that "many of the Brahmans of the more remote tracts have been manufactured on the spot by the simple process of conferring the title of Brahman on the tribal priests."⁵⁷ Not only among the remotest tribes did enumerators introduce new nomenclature. Prior to the census Southern India was relatively free of Brahmans;⁵⁸ yet, by 1911, 1,779,685 were listed in Mysore and Madras, India's two southernmost provinces (present-day Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala).⁵⁹

Assigning new caste categories to parts of India where these had no previous footing occurred throughout the colonial censuses of 1881 and 1891. The *1881 Census of the Panjab* discussed the perils of determining the "degree of discretion to be allowed to the enumerators and supervising staff in rejecting answers given by the people and recording what they believe to be the truth."⁶⁰ Caste names were, at times, introduced to people by their enumerators. In Panjab, members of an indigenous tribe known as the Syals were labelled as Rajputs, even though "not one man in a hundred of the Syals is aware that he is a Rajput."⁶¹ This confusion, which itself was an offshoot of the attempts to categorize caste, led Plowden to send a letter to the Under Secretary of State for India in 1888, calling for caste to be removed from the next census:

I do not think that there will be any advantage in an Indian enumeration in attempting to collect any further information than was collected at the Census of 1881 . . . I myself have never been in favour of collecting the information in regard to caste by means of the Census enumeration . . . the Government of India overruled our suggestions in this direction . . . the great defect in the Census of 1881 was not in the manner of enumeration but in the method of abstracting and compiling the statistics then collected. The information then collected was fairly accurate, but the method of abstracting the information was specially faulty.⁶²

57 Government of India, *1891 Census of India*, vol. 1-2 (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1893), vol. 1, p. 540.

58 Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 168.

59 Government of India, *1911 Census of India*, vol. 1-2 (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1913), pp. 162-164.

60 Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab*, vol. 1, p. 485.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

62 Correspondence of colonial administrators, William Plowden, "To the Under Secretary of State for India," December 24, 1888, *Census of India, 1891*, Volumes 1-2, vol. 1, appendix enclosure B, no. 1, p. 2.

There was also growing unrest concerning caste categories among India scholars and activists. By the time of India's third national census in 1891, "many Indian political activists had become extremely census-savvy and were beginning to debate the definitions of the terms being used to describe them."⁶³

The fact that the census introduced new labels for various groups did not automatically transform Indian reality. There is evidence, however, to suggest that people were subscribing to census definitions and that they attached importance to how they were classified. Quite often, to the irritation of enumerators, respondents would "describe themselves as anything but what they are."⁶⁴ This was the opposite of the sort of self-identification for which census planners had hoped. On this note, J. A. Baines argued in 1899 census correspondence that "I am inclined to advise the omission of caste from the Imperial schedule, and to make use of the returns of 1891 as a standard until 1911."⁶⁵ There still remained a great deal of confusion among all involved in the census project about how to classify caste. In his report on the 1891 census of India, E. Maclagan wrote, "The instructions I issued are in many parts word for word the same as those issued in 1881 . . . they were not, however, free from faults . . . the terminology was in many cases different from that of the translation issued to enumerators, and many of the superior officials were much puzzled at the inconsistencies of the two sets of orders."⁶⁶ Inefficient enumeration and lack of consensus on a definition of caste fostered more confusion. The tension between the pragmatics of administration on the ground and the imperial objectives of accumulating knowledge for the governance of populations led commissioners Plowden and Baines to suggest removing caste from the census.

With his anthropometric measures and application of a seven-part racial typology to caste, H. H. Risley would make significant changes to the Indian census. Risley's 1891 publication *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* brought him renown in administrative circles, and he was "the Empire's leading proponent of ethnology from the 1890s until his death in 1911."⁶⁷ This made Risley a likely candidate to revise the caste tables as well as the enumeration process. Critical of the 1891 national census, Risley argued that the "non-scientific" theories of caste being used were insufficient.⁶⁸ He felt that an ethnological understanding of caste, with an attendant set of anthropometric measures, was required. As an example of Risley's shifting discourse concerning caste, he argued that "the Aryan type, as we find it in India at the present day, is marked by a relatively long (dolichocephalic) head,

63 Haan, "Numbers in Nirvana," p. 23.

64 Government of India, *Census of India, 1911 Census of Bombay* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1913), p. 195.

65 Correspondence of colonial administrators, Jervoise Baines, "Correspondence concerning arrangement for the Census of 1901, to the Under Secretary of State for India," July 1899. Cited in Natarajan, Dandapani, *Indian Census Through a Hundred Years*, volume 1. (India: Office of the Register General, 1972), p. 279.

66 Edward MacLagan, "The Punjab and its Feudatories: Report on the Census," *Census of India 1891* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1892), p. 22.

67 Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, p. 129.

68 Herbert Hope Risley, "The Race Basis of Indian Political Movements," *Contemporary Review*, vol. LVII (1890), pp. 743-767.

a straight, finely cut (lepto-rhine) nose, a long symmetrically narrow face, a well-developed forehead, regular features and a high facial angle . . . a larger series of measurement would probably add several more castes to the list.”⁶⁹ Risley saw what he called the “remarkable vitality of caste” in the bodies of Indians themselves.⁷⁰

When Risley took office as Director of Ethnography for India, he hired E. Thurston, whose enthusiasm for anthropometry as a means of collecting data about Indian peoples and their bodies pleased Risley greatly.⁷¹ Risley’s interest in caste and bodies would seem to substantiate Foucault’s claim about the impact of biology on administrative practices, insofar as classification “will no longer mean to refer the visible back to itself.”⁷² Instead, classification means “to relate the visible to the invisible, to its deeper causes . . . then to rise upwards once more from that hidden architecture towards the more obvious signs displayed on the surfaces of bodies.” For Risley, the bodies of classified groups come to speak some “truth” about who those groups are.

We do not want to overstate the importance of Risley, as racial discourses of caste had been present in India since the 1830s, most especially in the works of W. W. Hunter.⁷³ Risley did, however, introduce a deeper connection between race and caste than had existed in previous census schedules. No doubt influenced by anthropological thinking concerning organs and organisms on the European continent, Risley was interested in India as a sort of social organism: “nowhere else in the world do we find the population of a large continent broken up into an infinite number of mutually exclusive aggregates. . . .”⁷⁴ As Padmanabh Samarendra notes, “Risley’s new role as census commissioner was perfectly adapted to the task of compiling a scientific survey of the subject populations of the subcontinent.”⁷⁵ This was a matter of science for Risley, but politics as well. Colonial administrators and anthropologists in colonial India rarely addressed the political implications of their work concerning caste, although Risley made his political intentions well known. He argued that knowing India was ultimately a question of governance and of whom to include in the polity.⁷⁶ The danger of extending representative political institutions in India was that “the adoption of a wider franchise may give undue leverage to the caste organization.” In this sense, “Risley’s liberalism is complicit in the general project of British colonialism.”⁷⁷ In addition, Risley wanted a hand in shaping the categories for the 1901 census because he was planning to use the tabulated data to publish *The People of India*, which appeared in 1908.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 747.

70 Herbert Hope Risley, *The People of India* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1908), p. 110.

71 Crispin Bates, “Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry” in Peter Robb, ed., *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 219-259.

72 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 229.

73 Christopher Alan Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

74 Risley, “The Race Basis of Indian Political Movements,” p. 744.

75 Padmanabh Samarendra, “Classifying Caste: Census Surveys in India in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *South Asia*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2003), p. 152.

76 Risley, “The Race Basis of Indian Political Movements,” p. 757.

77 Nicholas Dirks, “Castes of Mind,” *Representations*, vol. 37, no. 1 (1992), p. 71.

What Risley provided was the methodology for developing an overarching theory of caste. Under Risley, caste categories were overhauled using the ethnological and anthropometric classifications he had proposed in *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*.⁷⁸ In his report on the 1901 census of India, Risley responded to the comments of Baines concerning caste.

[Baines] has evidently been much influenced, as have all census officers who have written on the subject at any time, by the extreme difficulty and toilsomeness of abstracting the caste figures . . . [but] the Government of Madras holds that castes are constantly arising and that it is important for administrative purposes to have statistics of the variations in the strength of different castes from time to time. Bengal wishes to retain caste, and makes suggestions for reducing the labour and expense of compilation by restricting the range of tables . . . the Lieutenant-Governor refers to the administrative advantages of having detailed information under this head, and mentions by way of example that "the census tables are frequently made use of by the military authorities in connection with recruitment for the army."⁷⁹

Dismissive of cultural understandings of caste, Risley further argued that "the balance of opinion is strongly in favour of retaining that heading, and the Governor General in Council accepts this view," because, after all, caste was, according to Sir Iyer from Mysore, "the social fabric of India."⁸⁰ The opinions of Risley held sway due to his service record with census operations as well as his academic work, an influence that he used to submerge the objections of Plowden and Baines for abandoning caste counts in the census. The racializing approach of Risley also had a "causal weight" that more cultural definitions of caste (such as Ibbetson's) did not.⁸¹

With the application of Risley's techniques, caste was abstracted from its locality and nationalized. The credibility of Risley's census schedule was established through reference to his own fieldwork and knowledge of local traditions. His approach stripped away the heterogeneities that had previously marked regions of India, replacing them with universal categories. As Gloria Raheja has argued regarding lingual diversity, the languages of those indigenous to India had to be further appropriated "to foster the illusion that native opinion on caste and caste identities was unambiguously congruent" with colonial representations.⁸² Caste was used to provide a "working model" of Indian society.⁸³

78 Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891).

79 Herbert Hope Risley, *1901 Census of India, Ethnographic Appendices which the Caste Chapter of the Report is Based* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903), pp. 26-27.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

81 Melissa Nobles, "Racial Categorization and Censuses" in David Kertzer and Dominique Arel, eds., *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 43.

82 Gloria Raheja, "Caste, Colonialism and the Speech of the Colonized: Entextualization and Disciplinary Control in India," *American Ethnologist*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1996), p. 496.

83 U. Kalpagam, "The Colonial State and Statistical Knowledge," *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2000), pp. 37-55.

This is not to say that Risley and his methods settled the confusion around caste. Not least among the difficulties of caste enumeration were “the somewhat vague ideas of the subject on the part of the people themselves.”⁸⁴ The commissioner in charge of the 1921 census of India wrote in his report: “A much more serious source of error arises from intentionally false entries and misrepresentations of caste . . . the opportunity of the census was therefore seized by all but the highest caste to press for recognition of social claims and to secure, if possible, a step upwards in the social ladder.”⁸⁵ At the same time, the re-categorization of caste, and the census project at large, were never accepted in many regions. Various subversions of the census project continued, such as in 1921, when “definite obstacles in the form of strikes and direct refusal to co-operate occurred chiefly in the west of India (the Bombay presidency), in Calcutta and in some of the cities, towns and larger villages of the Punjab.”⁸⁶ Although Gandhi encouraged Indians to participate in the census, administrators considered the non-cooperation movement as threatening to census operations. Marten wrote that “one enumerator in Gaya burnt his enumeration book . . . the danger of the non-co-operation movement therefore lay not in active attempts to wreck the census, but in the indifference it encouraged in the staff.”⁸⁷ Despite Risley’s championing of putatively scientific categories and measurements of caste, a consensus never emerged. Marten could only conclude that “the enormous complexity of the caste system makes it impossible to combine large groups of the population on the basis of caste. No satisfactory method of classifying castes for the purposes of demographic statistics has been discovered.”⁸⁸ Yet, by 1921, caste had become the lens through which social sciences would visualize India, enabling later essentialist works such as Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus* published in 1970.

Conclusion

Informed by a Foucaultian understanding of the importance of naming and designation in colonial administration, we have examined the limitations of enumerative practices as well as subversions that marred the categorization of caste in India. Plowden, Ibbetson, and others were dubious of naturalizing caste through statistical and social science. They were also against enumeration of caste on the pragmatic grounds of cost and time. Those who argued in favour of retaining and augmenting the enumeration of caste, such as Risley, did so by implicating anthropology. Due to the efforts of Risley and others invested in anthropometry, caste was furnished with a biological and racial connotation in the census and beyond. Local subversions continued into the 1930s, despite continual refinement of the census schedule. Yet caste continued to elude the counting and

84 Government of India, *1911 Census of India*, vol. 1, p. 365.

85 John Marten, *1921 Census of India – Report* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1924), p. 223.

86 *Ibid.*, p. x.

87 *Ibid.*, p. iv.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

measuring techniques of colonial administrators. Because of all these confusions and contestations, caste was abandoned in census enumeration after 1951.

Kalpagam argues that administrative and scientific discourses operate alongside one another in processes of trying to enumerate and govern social groups.⁸⁹ Counting and measuring was a way of channelling Indian social reorganization under British rule. Inventing a taxonomy for making sense of Indian multiplicity and breaking it down into classifications produced novel ways of visualizing the colonial territory. The techniques of census taking and statistical representation created new forms of visibility and colonial intervention. Over time, the census helped to naturalize racialized understandings of caste and identity in India.⁹⁰ Yet there was also further “indigenous reworking of Western ethnological categories” and heated debate between caste associations and Indian political activists critical of colonial rule.⁹¹ Certainly the knowledge of India produced through the census was not a matter of mere representation – it fed back into the governance of Indian land and peoples. The colonial state in India produced an administrative space that was neither statistically sound nor foolproof. Problems with envisioning and enumerating caste were the rule, not the exception. Despite this, the census helped caste become a national classificatory scheme.

89 Kalpagam, “The Colonial State and Statistical Knowledge.”

90 Nobles, “Racial Categorization and Censuses”; Bernard Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure, and Objectification in South Asia,” *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), chap. 10.

91 Bayly, “Caste and ‘Race’ in the Colonial Ethnography of India,” p. 184.