

COLONIAL AGENDA OF CENSUS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Indian census have been the basis of partition of India (1947), linguistic reorganization of the states (1956), identification of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes (1935) and later the 'other backward castes' by the Mandal Commission. Indian census has origins in the colonial past originally established with a view to strengthen British control over Indian colony rather than to improve the administration. British used the census to create new identities and divisions in society to counter the emerging nationalism. Their basic purpose of dividing the people on sectarian lines was meant to pursue their policy of divide and rule so that they could perpetuate their colonial rule in India. The British administrators encouraged divisive policies rooted in census data and findings to institutionalize the divisions amongst the people in India

Keywords: British India, caste, census, depressed classes, enumeration, religion, Risely.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian census, decennial in nature and a gigantic nationwide administrative exercise, is not a mere head count but has far-reaching political, economic and social implications which go much beyond demographic data. Census figures have been the basis of partition of India (1947), linguistic reorganization of the states (1956), identification of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes (1935) and later the 'other backward castes' by the Mandal Commission.

Like most of the institutions in modern India, census too has origins in the colonial past originally established with a view to strengthen British control over her colony rather than to improve the administration. British used the innocuous looking census to create new identities and divisions in society to counter the emerging nationalism. Though the tide of nationalism could not be stopped from ousting British from India, still the disintegrating tendencies sowed through instruments like census have and are still taking their toll as shown by the recent clamor for a 'caste census'.

EARLY HISTORY OF CENSUS IN BRITISH INDIA

Census started in Britain in 1801. Soon after, British Parliament expressed their wish to start census operations in their largest colony, India. From 1801 census of Banaras till 1850, about 30 minor censuses were conducted on regional basis with the purpose of collecting information for tax fixation and collection, preparing rolls of males eligible for army recruitment, social and geographical conditions. In 1849, provinces were ordered to forward population figures every five yearly period. Under this scheme censuses were held in North West province (1852-53, 1865), Madras (1851-52, 1855-56, 1861-62, 1865-66), Punjab (1855), Baroda (1855), Mysore (1855), Hyderabad (1855), and Central Provinces (1865).

In 1856, Court of Directors directed the East India Company to hold regular decennial censuses on all-India basis (*Court Despatch*, 1856). But due to the outburst of Revolt of 1857 the scheme was postponed. Decennial

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scheme was revived in 1871. But the censuses conducted were not held simultaneously (Bengal: 1866; Madras: 1871-72; Bombay: 1871, NWP: 1872; Kochin: 1875). Also the classification and categorization was not uniform in different provinces due to which information collected could not be correlated. These lacunae were corrected in 1881, and from then onwards, decennial census is being regularly held in India.

COLONIAL NATURE OF CENSUS IN BRITISH INDIA

Indian census had its precedent in the British Census but the objectives were completely different in the colony. The census in Britain was primarily concerned with demographic and economic issues, while, from its very beginning, the Indian census's perspective was ethnic and racial. Indian census machinery was most concerned about collecting information about caste, race, religion and sects. Information gathered from this perspective helped the British to project Indian society as separable social groups with no unifying principle. Thus the census which had started as a quest for information soon became an instrument of the imperial policy. It reflected the official mind because information from the census became the basis of government policies. Census represented the British approach towards Indian social diversity as well as emerging national consciousness.

After the great rebellion of 1857, great fear of the British was the possibility of various sections of Indian society coming together again. But the fact that they had been able to quell the revolt with the help of Indians motivated them to identify potential divisions in the Indian society. For example, high castes who had supplied the rebellious troops needed to be counterbalanced by patronizing the relatively backward communities. In the following decades, the Empire embarked on large scale information gathering projects to understand the complexities of Indian society through such means as Census surveys, Gazetteers, and Ethnographic Surveys. Moreover 'the census existed not merely as a passive recorder of data but as a catalyst for change as it both described and altered its environment.'

The process of categorization and classification of social categories into religions, sects, castes, and tribes led to the beginning of formation of new identities resulting in far-reaching consequences. Census became the medium of introducing new groups like Sikhs, depressed classes, anti-Brahmanism, and tribes. By giving a numerical attribute to the relative size, material conditions, literacy, occupation etc, the census projected different social and religious categories in a competitive and comparative light. As a result, communal feelings flared up. Caste consciousness, which should have mitigated due to the growth of education and the introduction of new means of transport and communication, was heightened. Census sought to transform the caste from a collaborative and complementary phenomenon into a competitive phenomenon. Also the census stereotyped the perceptions of colonial administrator-scholars like W.W. Hunter, Alfred Lyall, H.H. Risely, about the Indian society by accepting them as gospel truths and by imparting them an empirical shape.

Census categorization and enumeration played a key role when representational politics of a selective kind was introduced through constitutional reforms, culminating in separate communal electorates in 1909. Census identified new categories and interests. Constitutional reforms provided them political identity. Thus within the framework of representative politics, British were able to institutionalize divisive forces which were later incorporated into body politic of the political system of independent India.

CASTE-BASED ENUMERATION

Pre-1857 British understanding about the caste was derived from Missionaries and Orientalist scholars. While the former saw it as barbaric and later regarded it in appreciative terms, the sources of knowledge of both groups were ancient scriptures. Castes were seen as static, following separate social rules and enjoying fixed categories. 1857 revolt showed that British had not understood Indian society properly. Hence in place of scriptural, empirical approach was adopted.

Caste enumeration started in 1871 census but was found to be very confusing. W.C. Plowden, Census Commissioner of N.W.P. (1872) remarked: "The whole question of caste is so confused, and the difficulty of securing correct returns on this subject is so great, that I hope on another occasion no attempt will be made to obtain information as to the castes and tribe of the population." But in 1881, in spite of the practical problems involved,

Plowden, now the Census Commissioner of India, laid down a plan for further research into the large caste units (with population more than 100000). An attempt was also made initially to classify the castes on the basis of social position but was later abandoned on account of great difficulty of the criteria to be adopted. But still many petitions were received from representatives of different castes and we see for the first time the phenomenon of caste associations emerged.

Census 1891 is significant as race (Aryan and non-Aryan) was regarded as the basis of the caste system. This census hence signaled the adoption of 19th century race theories. J.A. Baines, the Census Commissioner, explicitly declared that social system of India was antipathetic to the formation of an idea of nationality: "It is well to begin by clearing out of the way the nation that in the Indian population there is any of the cohesive elements that is implied in the term nationality. There is, indeed, an influence peculiar to the country, but it is averse to nationality, and tends rather towards detachment without independence." It is hardly accidental that Baines was writing these words a few years after the formation of Indian National Congress.

Assumption of racial basis of the diversity of Indian social life and caste as antidote to nationalism found its full fledged expression under H.H. Risely, the Census Commissioner of 1901 Census. Risely had been conducting ethnographical studies since 1886. Using anthropometrical methods, he attempted to prove the biracial theory of Indian castes. His objective was to separate the lower castes (non-Aryan origins) from the upper castes (of Aryan origins), in another sense, to arbitrarily detach the lower castes from the general body of the Hindu society. Risely was a vigorous proponent of the notion that castes can perpetuate the colonial rule in India: "So long as a regime of caste persists, it is difficult to see how the sentiment of unity and solidarity can perpetuate and inspire all classes of the community." In the 1901 Census, Risely classified the castes on the basis of social precedence, leading to intense social tensions among various castes. Numerous caste Associations were formed; each asking for a higher place in the caste hierarchy published in the Census reports. Census was thus stereotyping a social structure in which actually, continuous positional changes were taking place and which were in a state of dynamic equilibrium.

Risely justified despotic rule in a caste- based society. He wrote, "Anarchy is the peculiar peril of a society that is organized on the basis of caste, and the dread of anarchy lead to monarchy as the strongest defense against it." Regarding the future of Indian democracy, he prophesied, "Caste would provide the party in power, the party that had spoils to divide."

During the official discussions leading to Minto-Morely Reforms of 1909, Risely (now Home Secretary) was arguing against territorial representation and parliamentary form of government for India. He insisted on a representation of communities and interests in place of territorial representation in keeping with the structure of Indian society as he saw it. He took up the side of Muslim League which was formed with the express purpose of preventing the Hindu majority in future legislature. Risely successfully opposed Secretary of State Morley's proposal of 'territorial representation by means of electoral colleges' and was able to convince the decisions makers that 'separate electorate' would serve the imperial purpose.

Census introduced a central polarization into higher caste and lower caste. By 1911, lowest castes were termed as 'depressed classes'. An attempt was made in 1910 to enumerate them separately from Hindus but was withdrawn due to stiff protest by nationalists. Two-fold objective behind this move was to reduce the number of Hindus and to politicize a dichotomy between caste Hindus and untouchables. British achieved their objectives in the later censuses and caused further fragmentation of Indian society. 'Depressed classes' included 'untouchable castes', 'animist castes or tribes', 'aboriginal and hill tribes' and 'criminal castes'. Since 1936, they are called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Question of including or excluding untouchables in Hindu category originated in 1868 Punjab Census report. In 1872, Bengal Census Commissioner Mr. Braverly remarked: "It is difficult to say where the line should be drawn which is to separate up pure Hindoos from the low castes which have adopted some or other form of Hindooism..."

RELIGION

Census reports provided a new conceptualization of religion as a community, an aggregate of individuals united by a formal definition and given characteristics based on collected data. Religion as fundamental category provided

ample opportunity on further classification along economic and demographic lines which led to competition among followers of different religions for jobs and opportunities. The act of defining and categorizing, though necessary for the purpose of census administration, was designed in such a way as to hurt and divide the Hinduism which was emerging as the bulwark of nationalism. Hinduism with its immense inbuilt diversity could not be treated at par with book-based religions such as Islam and Christianity.

J.A. Bains, Census Commissioner for 1891 census defined Hinduism as “the large residuum that is not Sikh, or Jain or Buddhist, or professionally Animist, or included in any of the foreign religions such as Islam, Mazdaism, Christianity, or Herbruism”. Bains further concluded that “Thus limited, a more applicable title for it would be Brahmanism” A decade earlier Ibbetson in Punjab Census report had declared: “All natives who are not Musalmans, Christian, Jains, Sikhs, or Buddhists, are Hindus.” Gradually, different belief systems in the Hinduism were given separate identities.

Sikhs were given separate religious identity in 1868 Census. In 1855 Census, they were enumerated as Hindus. Jains and Buddhists were separated in 1871. In 1869 NWP Census, they were placed in the Hindu category. Sects were projected as different from the mother religion. Arya Samaj in 1881 was treated as sect but treated as separate religious category in 1891. Brahmons and Kabir Panthis in 1871 as Hindus, but in 1881 as separate religions. Subsequently, in the various censuses, the number of religions was as follows: 1871 Census: 5 religious categories, 1881 Census: 15 religious categories, 1891: 9 religious categories, 1901: 10 religious categories. A new category, ‘animist’, introduced in 1891, was derived from Dr. Tiller’s research in America on Hawaiian tribes published in 1889. This category was continuously expanded to include forest and hill tribes to be counted outside the definition of Hinduism. Thus, religious enumeration of people eventually paved the way for the colonial government to introduce various sets of divisions and cleavages in the Hindu society.

CONCLUSION

The colonial census policy in India has truly been a policy of enumeration of natives more for their discomfiture than good. In the form of census operations, the British thought of digging deeper into the realms of Indian social system in order to find newer and unconventional methods of driving cleavages among the people in such a way that they remain a fragmented force. Thus, their basic purpose of dividing the people on sectarian lines may prove to be the best support for their policy of divide and rule so that they could perpetuate their rule in India without any obstacles or problem. In this regard, as and when the thrust of national movement gained strength, the colonial masters started taking more and more recourse to divisive policies rooted in census data and findings to institutionalize the divisions amongst the people in India.

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