

Census and Caste Dilemma: With reference to Bihar

Dr. Neha Ranjan

Guest Faculty, Department of History, Purnea University Purnea

Abstract

The Unique institution caste did not fail to arouse intellectual curiosity among the more efficient of the Britishers in India, officials as well as non-officials, and our understanding of the institution is largely helped by this work

A full census of India was to have been attempted in 1861 but because of the dislocations caused by the suppression of the rebellion of 1857-9 and of the sensitivity which the British had developed to the what, at least in north India, might be construed as undue interference in the life of the people, the census was postponed until 1871-2. A census of most of the province and princely states was carried out in 1871 and 1872. But imperfection, both in administration and in conception, developed that not much reliance was put in the provincial censuses. The rules for recording the heads of households differed from province to province, certain categories of information, for example on education and literacy, were not collected in all provinces, and there was much evidence of little cooperation from the population because of the fears that the carrying out of the census was for tax purposes.

British census officials always included in their reports accounts of rumours which were purported to circulate among the Indian population. It was rumoured that one from each family or every fourth man was to be taken as a recruit for the army, or as a labourer on the roads, or as an emigrant. It was also rumoured that the women were wanted for the European soldiers. One report circulated that England had become so hot the Queen desired that two virgins might be sent from each village carrying out of the Queen's orders.

In each of the provinces there were individual difficulties, often because of the way in which records were kept or in the staffing of the census operations. For example, for 20 years starting with the census of 1871-2, there were difficulties in Bengal in getting an accurate list of villages or, for that matter, even defining what a village was. As Bengal was permanently settled, village lists, maps, and settlements records were not available and there was not the large staff at the district and tahsil or taluk level which characterized non-permanently settled areas.

In Bengal the first step was to try to draw up an accurate

list of survey mauzas which would provide the basic geographic unit on which the census would be carried out. It was found that the list which the police kept of villages on which the police circles (thanas) were based was totally inaccurate for census purposes because the boundaries of the villages were vague and the list was not up-to-date.

H. Beverly, who was census commissioner for Bengal, the only way an accurate list of villages could be obtained was by sending a representative to each revenue village to check the boundaries and particulars of that village. His instructions which were duly forwarded to the Revenue commissioners throughout Bengal. It was estimated that 350 officials would have to be appointed for a period of four months at a cost of Rs. 70,000 to visit every village in Bengal, exclusive of Bihar.

In the 1881 census of Bengal, it was decided to use a list which was in the process of being prepared by the Boundary commissioner. His work was finished in time for the 1881 census and provided the basis for drawing of village lists for the census. In Bihar it turned out that the mauza designation was not known widely enough that the residential village and revenue village coincided.

Also related to the problem of the location of a village was the problem that arose of trying to distinguish villages from towns. In the 1881 census a town was distinguished from a village arbitrarily by defining any place with more than 5000 people in it as a town. The purpose of making distinct lines, according to J.A. Bourdillon, Deputy superintendent of census operations of Bengal in 1881, was to contrast the occupational structure of rural and urban people and to show how their separated models of life affect their ages and civil conditions, and to display the sources from which our urban population is drawn. Bourdillon did not feel that a simple size criterion was sufficient because places smaller than 5000 people could have the social characteristics of a town and places over 5000 people could be based entirely on agriculture and not have any characteristics of towns. The decision was to use an administrative definition of a town as those places notified under the Municipalities Act. of 1876 as well as any place with more than 5000 people.

Perhaps the most complex questions for the census arose over the question of caste. Questions about caste also hold the most interest today for anthropologists and many other

social scientists' G.S. Ghurye as well as succeeding students of Indian society. Saw the census itself as having effects on the caste system.

Srinivas and Ghurye raise two very important questions, why did the British officials record the caste of individuals? was it curiosity or was it part of the design on the part of the British, as some nationalist Indians believed. The second order of questions relates to the effects of census operations on the consciousness of caste and the use of the census for validation of claims to new status within the caste system. To these two complicated and important questions a third may be added - what influence did the census operations have on theoretical views which both administrators and social scientist developed about the Indian social system? It is an interesting fact that most of the basic treatises on the Indian caste system written during the period 1870-1950 were written by men who had important positions either as census commissioners for all of India or for a province.

It was felt by many British officials in the middle of the nineteenth century that caste and religion were the sociological keys to understanding the Indian people. If they were to be governed well, then it was natural that information should be systematically collected about caste and religion. At the same time as the census operations were beginning to collect information about caste, the army was beginning to be reorganized on assumptions about the nature of 'martial races'. Questions were being raised about the balance between Hindus and Muslims in the public services, about whether certain caste or races, were monopolizing access to new educational opportunities, and a political theory was beginning to emerge about the conspiracy which certain caste were organizing to supplant British rule.

The impetus to collect information on caste went beyond the 'intellectual curiosity' of a few officials and was based in 'widespread and deeply held beliefs about Indians by the British' ideas about caste - its origins and functions - played much the same role in shaping policy in the latter half of the nineteenth century that ideas about the village community and the nature of property played in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Attempts were made in the first census of 1871-2 to collect information on caste. The principle of organization was to try to place caste (jatis) in the four varnas or in categories of outcastes and Aborigines. The writers of the individual provincial census reports tried to classify the castes in these blocks. This effort failed owing to what Waterfield called "intrinsic difficulties and the absence of a

uniform system of classification,,

In the development of a classification system for castes, there were two interlocked but operationally separable problems: the actual question which an enumerator asked an individual; then how this answer was interpreted by a clerk and eventually by a supervisor of the census of a district or of a larger unit.

The actual taking of the census was a two-step affair. Enumerators were appointed by circle supervisors, who were usually Govt. Officials. Supervisors were patwaris, Zamindars, school teachers, or anyone who was literate. They were given a form with columns on which was to be entered information about every member of a household. The information to be collected was name, religion (for example - Hindu, Muslim), sects, caste, subdivision of caste, sex, marital status, language, birthplace, means of subsistence, education, language in which literate, and infirmities. There was a one month period before the actual date of the census in which the enumerator was to fill in the forms, and then on day of the census he was to check the information with the head of the household.

As an aid to achieving standardization in the recording of information on caste and sub-caste, lists were prepared as early as the 1881 census which gave standard names with variations for the castes. The supervisors were supposed to instruct the enumerators in how to classify responses. The lists of caste were alphabetically arranged giving information and brief notes.

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