Unit 8

Census Perspective

Contents

Learning objectives

After going through this unit. you will be able to

▫ understand the importance of census in constituting caste identity

▫ explain the articulation of caste in census operations from a sociological perspective

▫ discuss the view points regarding inclusion of caste as an essential component in the census.

8.1 Introduction

The decennial census is an important source of information for certain aspects of India's society and economy. The census contains information about the number of people, their age, sex, occupation, educational level and the like. While pre-colonial states also conducted censuses, this was usually for the limited purposes of taxation and conscription to the army (see Anderson 1991: 169 for the Malayo-Javanese context; Smith 2000: fn1, on the Ottoman empire).. The enumeration of caste too was not entirely a new practice introduced by the British colonial government : the Manusmriti, Kalhana's Rajatarangini and the Ain-i-Akbari, all have lists of castes. However, the census, as we know it today, in terms of scale, the kind of information collected, and the variety of administrative uses to which it is put, can be traced to the modern bureaucratic state. For the British colonists in particular, the census was seen as an essential tool to understand, and thereby control, the large and diverse Indian population.

Caste and religion were viewed as important sociological categories which would explain a variety of other issues — including what we now clearly recognise as unrelated factors like insanity, intelligence, desire and ability to fight in the army etc. While religion continues to be enumerated in the census, caste (for categories other than scheduled caste and scheduled tribe) has disappeared from it.

Caste was a key census variable from 1871 to 1931. The census of 1931 was the last census to provide tables of the distribution of population on the basis of caste. Although caste returns were collected in 1941 they were not tabulated owing to war time economy measures. In 1951, apart from data on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, limited caste returns were collected from other 'backward castes'. However, the results were not published and were only made available to the First Backward Classes Commission (Roy

Burman 1998; Galanter, 1984: 164)). The constituent legislative assembly framing the Census Act of 1948 decided not to include the component of caste on the grounds that the portrayal of India as a land of many castes, languages and religions had been used by the British colonial authorities to claim that Indians would never be able to unite and govern themselves and therefore needed the British to rule them. However, the government continued to record information on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, in order to monitor the success of various government programs to improve their situation. In the run up to the 2001 census, there was a fresh debate over whether a person's caste should be recorded in the census. One view was that it was necessary to include caste so that the economic and social status of each caste could be measured, while the other view was that it would be difficult to identify castes and such enumeration would unnecessarily enhance 'casteism'. Eventually, it was decided not to include caste in the census.

This unit will deal with the manner in which the census in India has dealt with caste; the effect of caste enumeration in the census on caste identity; the influence of the census on the conceptualisation of caste in sociology; and the debate which arose in the late 1990s over whether caste should be included in the 2001 census.

8.2 Caste in the Census

The term caste is commonly accepted as having originated from the Portuguese term *castas* to describe breeds, species, tribes etc., and refers both to the four classical *varna* categories and to the jatis or the specific local units in which people identified themselves.. In the 17th and 18th centuries, there was considerable fluidity both at the level of *jatis* and *varnas*. Economic differentiation, migration and ecological difference all played a role in creating new castes or enabling people to change their caste identities, through fission and fusion of jatis. In the unsettled conditions following the break-up of the Mughal empire, many chiefs of *adivasi* ('Scheduled Tribe') or low caste background became kings in their own areas. They claimed Rajput or Kshatriya (warrior) status and employed Brahman priests to invent suitable genealogies for themselves (Sinha,1962). There was no all-India ranking of castes, and caste ranking changed over time. Dirks(1993), for instance, has argued that the separation of religion and politics and the ritual exaltation of the Brahman over the Kshatriya in south India is a product of the colonial period.

As colonial rule became more entrenched, the colonial administrators needed to know and understand their native populations in order to govern them. In the 19th century, 'race' became a scientific pre-occupation with many studies carried out to classify races. (Of course, contemporary science and genetics has shown us that there is no such thing as biological race). The decennial census, along with the series of Imperial Gazetteers, Ethnographic Surveys, Settlement Records etc. played an important role in promoting certain ideas of caste and race. Caste and religion were seen as key categories with which to explain 'native' behaviour:

> It is unnecessary to dwell at length upon the obvious advantage to many branches of the administration in this country of an accurate and well arranged record of the customs and domestic and social relations of the various castes and tribes. The entire framework of

native conduct of individuals are largely determined by the rules of the group to which they belong. 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, and a record of the customs of the people is as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants(Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India in the Home Department (Public), Simla, 25 May 1901).

Thus colonial authorities used caste to explain insanity, the latter "being a disease associated with the socially higher and economically more provident classes" (Census of India, 1921, Vol. I, Part I: 209); to help in the recruitment of 'martial races' to the army; or to determine which groups had a propensity to crime (thus creating the category of 'criminal tribes').

However, recording caste in the census was not an easy task. Successive Census Commissioners described the caste tables as the most troublesome and expensive part of the census, pointing to the vague and contextual nature of responses (Census of India, Risley, 1903:537; Census of India, Yeatts, 1941:20). Yet, upto 1931, it was seen as a necessary part of the demographic record and essential for governance. The consequence was a form of systematisation that slotted people into arbitrary, often untrue to their experience, but separate, mutually exclusive and thereby *enumerable* categories. In 1881, in Madras presidency alone, the inhabitants returned 3208 different castes, which through grouping were reduced to 309 (Report by the Officers appointed to Consider the Suggestions for a General Census in India in 1881, National Archives Library).

Box 8.1: Collection of information for the Census

"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 his 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 government 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 house-hold. The information to be collected was name, religion (e.g. Hindu, Muslim), sect, caste, subdivision of caste, sex, age, 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 the day of the census he was to check the information with the head of the household.

As an aid to achieving standardisation in the recording of information on caste and subcaste, 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 castes were alphabetically arranged giving information giving information on where they were to be found and containing very brief notes" (Cohn, 1987 : 243-44).

The process was described by Risley thus:

> **"**If the person enumerated gives the name of a well known tribe or caste…all is well. But he may belong to an obscure caste from the other end of India; he may give the name of a sect, of a sub-caste, of an exogamous sept or section….his occupation or the province from which he comes. These various alternatives…undergo a series of transformations at the hands of the more or less illiterate enumerator who writes them down in his own vernacular and the abstractor in the Central Office who transliterates them into English. There begins a laborious and most difficult process of sorting, referencing, cross-referencing and corresponding with local authorities, which ultimately results in the compilation of Table XIII showing the distribution of the inhabitants of India by Caste, Tribe, Race or Nationality**"**(Risley, 1903:537).

Hutton also remarked on the fact that the number of castes enumerated had gone down from 1881 to 1931, and that 'the methods employed must have been arbitrary' but noted the inevitability of the selective system of classification, where individuals were asked not just what their sub-caste was but which of the *listed* sub-castes they fitted into (Home Public F. No. 45/17/30, NAI). As Peter Ratcliffe notes, a pre-coded approach, even with room for 'other-please specify' options, tends to structure responses and introduce distortions (Ratcliffe, 1996:8).

Further, a census systematisation could not allow a person to have two castes or two religions. Even when religious syncretism was recognised, it was dismissed as **"**the essentially primitive character of the religion of the illiterate and uncultured masses**"**. Where the 1911 census had recognised several sects as Hindu-Muhammadans, in 1921 they were reclassified as either one or the other, except for the Sindh Sanjogis who completely refused and were therefore relegated to 'other' (Census of India, Marten, 1921: 115). At the same time as the census authorities standardised and reduced the number of castes, they also insisted on recording all sorts of sub-castes in an effort to appear fully scientific and to cover the entire social space.

8.3   Census and Identity Politics

Much of the recent social science literature on caste and the Indian census has followed Michel Foucault's theoretical perspective which emphasises the role of 'technologies' of government (i.e. administrative procedures) in creating identities. They argue, therefore, that caste and religion censuses hardened caste and religious identities (Cohn, 1990; Pant, 1987; Appadurai, 1993; Kaviraj, 1992). In his early and influential essay, Cohn noted that by asking questions about religion, language, literacy, caste, occupation etc., the census 'objectified' culture and took it out of context, 'it provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about themselves,' and the questions which they asked or the definitions they used were those which the British used to govern them with (Cohn, 1990: 230). Appadurai has gone further in arguing that the **"**deadly politics of community…would not burn with the intensity we now see, but for contact with the techniques of the modern nation-state, especially those having to do with number **"** (Appadurai, 1993: 336). Statistics on identities became important as communities demanded guarantees and benefits from the government on the basis of numbers. Representation which means, 'standing on behalf of ' came to be confused with representativeness which means, 'coming from a particular community'

(see Appadurai, 1993: 332; see also Kaviraj, 1992). Thus, for example, the idea came to gain ground that Rajputs should and would vote only for a Rajput candidate, Hindus for a Hindu candidate and so on. This perspective continues to govern the way political parties distribute tickets.

However, not all caste mobilisation can be blamed on the census alone, and the mobilisation around the census was only one of the forms which public activity took. Often, census figures themselves were products of caste mobilisation rather than creating it. For example the number of Maithili speakers varied quite dramatically between 1901, 1951 and 1961, depending on the strength of the Maithili language movement, and the extent to which people identified themselves as Maithili, rather than any changes in population per se (Burghart, 1993: 787). Conlon notes that his attempt to trace changes in educational and occupational status for Chitrapur Saraswats between 1901 and 1931 floundered on the fact that this was a period of a caste unification movement between Chitrapur Saraswats and Gaud Saraswats. Using figures for Gaud Saraswat Brahmans as well created a different problem in that participation in the unification movement had itself been an object of controversy within the caste, and therefore the unified category did not include all Saraswats. (Conlon, 1981: 115-116). In the recent past, Sharad Kulkarni has pointed out that the context of reservations had created problems of reliability in the 1981 census data when several non-tribes with similar sounding names to tribes returned themselves as tribals. This made it difficult to get a true picture of the changing position of certain tribes — levels of population, urbanisation and literacy appeared to have risen, whereas in fact this was due to fraudulent returns (Kulkarni, 1991).

It is not just perceptions about the advantages of being seen to have larger numbers (e.g. the Maithili example) but also individuals' perceptions about the advantages of returning a particular status that influence figures. Although census returns are confidential and cannot be used for any other purpose, the conditions under which census enumeration gets done and the fact that the enumerator is usually a local schoolteacher or someone similar (even if not someone personally known to the respondent) could make it an occasion for negotiating status. This is not obviously an argument against having such figures, but an argument for the need to carefully contextualise quantitative data in a historical, political and cultural framework. While demanding census data to study the changing condition of certain groups, or even to get a one-shot map of groups, one should be careful in assuming the degree to which they will be practically useful, as well as wary of the politics which unthinking use of the data as 'objective' facts implies.

The object of mobilisation changed over time, as the purposes of the census changed. in the service of the state.Wider political events determined both the use to which census data would be put, and public reaction to it. Thus, the comparative numbers of Hindus and Muslims became an issue in the 1931 and 1941 census due to the communal award (in legislatures) and the prospect of partition; the need to disaggregate speakers of different languages in multi-lingual talukas became necessary in the 1951 census as the basis for a linguistic reorganisation of states. Finally, from 1921 onwards, economic issues achieved greater importance. As the nation developed, what mattered as much as the differentiation between castes was comparative statistics between countries, which ranged the population figures of one country against that of another, with its accompanying indices of literacy, occupations, degree of urbanisation, etc. Much depends on how 'the nation'

(or rather dominant groups within the nation), defines itself at any given point of time, and as this changes, so do identities, and indices of progress. There has, for instance, been a struggle to have more gender sensitive indexes in terms of sex ratios, female workforce participation or property rights (see Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1998).

Broadly speaking, there were three avenues in which mobilisation around ascriptive identity in the census expressed itself during the colonial period: petitions to have names of castes changed with a view to achieving a higher social status; complaints about the form of questions, including questioning the need for a caste return itself; and thirdly, complaints about the biases of enumerators. The reactions of the Census Commissioners were generally negative to the latter two forms, while the first was admitted as further evidence of the control that categories like religion and caste had over Indians. We shall go through each of these in turn looking at the manner in which the framing of census questions and tabulations generated political arguments, the form which responses took, and the reactions by census authorities.

A) **Petitions regarding changes in caste names or classification:** This was by far the most common reaction set in motion by census questionnaires, and continues even today at the level of representations to Backward Class Commissions (Dahiwale, 1998; Reddy, 1990: 32). Although castes had been enumerated since 1871, it was really only after Risley's 1901 ranking of castes in order of 'native opinion on social precedence' that these demands became numerous and strident. Risley took this as evidence of the soundness of his own principles: "If the principle on which the classification was based had not appealed to the usages and traditions of the great mass of Hindus, it is inconceivable that so many people should have taken so much trouble and incurred substantial expenditure with the object of securing its application in a particular way." (Risley, 1903: 539). But the problem is that castes soon adapted themselves to the new arena offered by the colonial government for advancement. Since Risley had concluded that absence of widow remarriage and the practice of female infanticide were evidence of high status, many castes claimed to be following these practices in order to raise their status in official circles.

Some of the claims to higher status names rested upon similarities of names, which were supported by affidavits of leading persons on caste customs, as for example the claim of the Khatris that their name was really a corruption of Kshatriya(Home Dept. Census A, June 1901, Pro. No. 12-13, NAI). Several caste petitions, like that of the Vishwabrahmans and Namobrahmas, blamed jealous Brahmins of other sub-castes for keeping them down, and several, like the Lodhi Rajputs and Vishwabrahmans cited earlier colonial ethnographies, like Enthoven's *Tribes and Castes of Bombay* or Tod's *Annals* as proof of their Brahminical or Kshatriya customs(Home-Census Part B, July 1901, pro. 1/2 on Khatris; Home Public, File No. 45/75/30-Public on Namobrahmas; Home Public F. No. 45/52/30 on Lodhi Rajputs; Home Public F. No. 45/58/1930 on Vishwa-Brahmas; Home Public F. No. 45/44/30 on Saini Kshatris, all in NAI).

There were also some petitions which did not directly have to do with status, but merely demanded separate enumeration from a larger group or asked for the merger of several sub-castes into a generic caste name, such as that from the All India Yadav Sabha, resolving that all sections of the

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Yadavs should be recorded as Yadavs. One file lists sixty five such petitions. (Home Public F. No. 45/11/41, Part I & II, Complaints or representations from organisations representing different communities about matters of communal interest arising in regard to the Census enumeration, NAI).

At the census level perhaps it involved nothing more serious than a change in name, but more important was the wider processes that it set in motion. Previously dispersed sub-castes or castes 'recognised' themselves by forming caste sabhas. While the demand for increased material benefits in the form of scholarships or recruitment to the army were often an essential part of their demands (see Cohn, 1990: 249), internal social reform, providing scholarships to their own community etc. were also common. A pamphlet "*Nayee: A Brahman*" by Pandit Revati Prasad Sharma, while part of the claims of the Nais' to Brahmin status, calls upon fellow caste men: "Comrades! all the educated members of the community all over India! Let us join and gather ourselves under the flag of the Akhil Bharatiya Nayee-Brahman Mahasabha to consider upon the ways of amelioration of the society, collecting funds, awarding scholarships and imparting education and strength to the community" (Pandit Revati Prasad Sharma, *Nayee: A Brahman*, Nayee Brahman Prakashan Samiti, Benaras, Jan 1931, p. 71 in Home Public F. No. 45/39/31, NAI).

The Census Commissioners' reactions to this outpour of caste petitions were generally one of amused irritation. Usually, commissioners ruled in favour of or against the change even when clearly they had no competency to do so in terms of religious or social knowledge. , At certain times, the reaction was one of indifference. J.H. Hutton, Census Commissioner in 1931, for example, noted on the Namobrahma case that it didn't matter 'in the least' what they were called so long as the community was identifiable from one census to the next (F.No. 45/75/30-Public, NAI).

B) **Complaints about the form of questions or tabulations**: In the 1930s and 1940s, there were two prominent contexts in which complaints about the formats in which respondents were asked to return themselves surfaced. In some way both were connected with growing Hindu communal assertion, even though ostensibly they were about recording castes (see Jones, 1981 for a fuller description of religious identity in the census). At the same time, the answers bring out very clearly a firm commitment to a colonial view of Indian society as irreparably characterised by divisive caste and religious categories.

The first was the petition by various Hindu sabhas as well as the Jat Pat Torak Mandal, an organisation connected to the Arya Samaj in Lahore, asking not to have caste returns in the census (Home Public F. No. 45/46/30; Resolution No. 4, passed at the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Bengal Hindu Sabha on 15.9.1930 inHome Public F. No. 45/67/1930; F. No. 45/65/30, all in NAI). The Jat Pat Torak Mandal was a society made up of adult Hindus who pledged to enter into intercaste marriages either themselves or for their children. In their petition to have caste returns in the census waived for those who did not believe in it, they argued that since the caste system was not an essential part of Hinduism, had impeded the progress of the community, and many of the educated sections had been greatly changed by Western education and culture, "there is an overwhelming majority…who have lost faith in the utility of caste." They emphasised that "to record caste against the name of an individual when he does not believe in it would be forcing caste upon him" and further that "the census clerks are not

expected and should not import their personal knowledge into the census operations." (Petition from the Jat Pat Torak Mandal, Lahore, August 18, 1930, Home Public F. No. 45/46/30, NAI). The Hindu Mahasabha did not want a caste census so that they could show that the Hindus were numerous and united in order to counter Muslim demands for representation (see Jones, 1981: 89). The Muslim league was similarly resistant to the idea of recording castes among Muslims. The government made it clear that while it was prepared to allow "conscientious objectors" like the various reform sects to return themselves as having no caste, it objected to orthodox Hindus refusing to answer the question, when socially they followed caste rules.

The fact that a mere 1.8 million out of 238 million Hindus returned 'no-caste' in 1931, i.e. less than one percent was later cited as evidence that Indians were very caste conscious (Home Public F. No. 1/1/39, NAI). While it is true that this is a very small figure, it is equally clear that the majority were not given the choice of returning 'no-caste'. Even had respondents not returned their own caste, the enumerators would have done it for them. In fact, in 1941, the number of people returning no-caste, especially in Bengal, was large enough to prompt the Census Commissioner to note that in time the caste question could be easily set aside in favour of a 'community' question (Census of India 1941, Vol.1, part 1, by M.W.M. Yeatts. Government of India (GOI): GOI Press, Simla).

Another major demand of the Hindu Mahasabha was that adivasis should be returned as Hindus (Home Public F. No. 45/57/31 on the resolution of a local Hindu sabha in Assam, NAI). During this period the Hindu Sabhas were also active in proselytising among tribals, highlighting the similarities between their religion and that of the Hindus. The demand for adivasis to be termed Hindus became quite strident in Chota Nagpur. Village meetings of 'Sanatani Adivasis' were held from October to December 1940, resolutions were passed and reported in newspapers (*Indian Nation, Amrit Bazaar Patrika, Searchlight*) accusing the Catholic Sabha of asking enumerators (the majority of whom they claimed were Christian) to record tribal names for non-Christian adivasis. Most of those presiding over the meetings or going in deputation to the Census Commissioner, however, appear to be Hindu townspeople who looked down on adivasis. Their views were reflected in the *Amrit Bazaar Patrika* editorial: "By the bye, what is this tribal religion? What are its tenets? Does any such thing really exist in this country?" (Home Public F.No. 45/39/40,NAI).

As against this, the Bihar government also received a large number of petitions from individual adivasis and associations representing them claiming that they had not been given a hearing before the census instructiosn were issued (Home Public F. No. 45/39/40, NAI). On 9 March, 1940 a large meeting of Muslims, attended by various SC and adivasi representatives was held to counter a Hindu meeting on the 6th. There were complaints that Hindu enumerators had circulated Congress and Mahasabha leaflets containing the misinformation that government had ordered that adivasis should be recorded as Hindus (Home Public F. No. 45/11/41, NAI).

Similar problems were seen in terms of how to return Sikhs and Jains, with the Hindu Mahasabha and some Sikh and Jain organisations asking for them to be classified as Hindus (Home Public F. No. 45/4/31; Home Public F. No. 45/47/30, petition of Udasi Sadhus, NAI) and several complaints by representatives of scheduled caste associations, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists against being recorded as Hindus, and pointing to Hindu Mahasabha pressure

through 'innumerable volunteers, enumerators and supervisors'(Home Public F. No. 3/1/41; Home Public F. No. 45/55/31 on Sikhs protesting against the refusal of enumerators to record them as Sikhs, NAI). Petitions signed by Jain associations all over the country noted that the community was in danger of being assimilated by Hindus owing to their illiteracy, and the fact that they were scattered. "The column is quite necessary to study the problems of the community and also to keep alive the consciousness of its being an independent community." (File No. 45/13/1930 on Jains protesting Hindu Mahasabha, NAI). There could be similar reasons why an oppressed caste which has developed its own counter culture would want to maintain the consciousness of itself as separate (see Omvedt, 1998).

In Punjab, Dalit castes like the Chuhras complained of pressure to be recorded as Sikhs or Hindus by Sikh and Hindu enumerators and demanded that their religion be entered as Adh Dharm. The proposal was initially opposed by Hutton on the grounds that since they owed their disability precisely to the fact that they were Hindus, they should be returned as Hindus, thus revealing a view of caste as intrinsically bound up with purity and pollution rather than economic standing (Home Public 45/56/30, NA). The same concept of caste appears to be operative in the current policy denying reservations to Dalits of other religions, e.g. Dalit Christians.

In short, the census of 1931 and 1941, in the years before partition and independence had been dragged into disputes between communal forces who wanted to expand their own numbers at the expense of others. In the process, the distinct religion and culture of adivasis and other groups like the Jains and Sikhs was under threat.

C) **Complaints against Enumerators:** In the run up to both the 1931 and 1941 census and immediately after, there were several complaints against enumerator bias in inflating the numbers of one or the other community. This was, by far, the largest and potentially most violent issue around which mobilisation took place.

A report in the *Inquilab*, Lahore of 8th March, 1931 stated that many Muslims were left out of the census enumeration and even for those enumerated, returns had been destroyed. In Moga, many Muslim streets were left out, especially surrounding the Jama Masjid, despite the fact that people stayed up till midnight waiting for the enumerator. (Till 1941, the census enumeration took place on a single night, one specially chosen for its full moon and of any major fairs or festivals that might take people out of their homes). Sweepers and Chamars had also been returned as Hindus and Sikhs while those who called themselves Adh Dharmis had been mistreated. A letter from the Hindu Census Committee, Ludhiana protested against the 'irregular' conduct of the census by a census operation overwhelmingly packed with Muslims, which resulted in decreasing the number of Hindus and offered to pay for a fresh census (ibid).

Intelligence Bureau reports for February and March 1941 show increasing agitation over the issue. Apparently, in Bengal at a secret meeting of the Muslim Central Census Board on February 8th, it was decided to hold a Census week for propaganda purposes. In the Punjab, there was a report on the attempt to burn down a gurudwara in a village in Gujranwala, "inspired by revenge on the part of Muslims against the Hindus and Sikhs who accused the Muslim patwari of bias in enumeration." In several parts of Lahore, there

was no enumeration at all. (Extract from the Intelligence Bureau's Daily Summary of Information, February 3, 1941; Report on the situation in Punjab for the first half of March 1941; CIO Lahore's Daily Report, 3 March 1941, all in Home Public F. No. 45/11/41, NAI.) The Muslim League complained that the Hindu Mahasabha had been successful in influencing the census at least to some degree in Bengal, as shown by a statement issued by the All Bengal Hindu Mahasabha Census Board on 5th March 1941 which thanked "the thousands of Enumerators, Supervisors and Voluntary Census Workers who ungrudgingly offered their services and worked hard day and night for the enumeration of the Hindu strength" (Home Public F. No. 45/11/41, NAI).

One of the demands made in deputation to the Home Member, Reginald Maxwell, by M.S. Aney and Bhai Parmanand was that Hindu and Muslim enumerators have their work checked by supervisors of the opposite religion (Home Public F. No. 45/39/40, NAI). In Bengal, a public meeting of the Bengal Congress Parliamentary Party resolved that only joint enumerators would inspire confidence in the public, a demand with which the government of Bengal under the Muslim League also concurred (Home Public F. No. 45/40/ 40, NAI).

The proposal for outside checking and joint enumerators was shot down by Yeatts on both administrative grounds (there were not enough enumerators of both religions, there was no machinery for settling disputes between them etc.) and grounds of principle. (Home Public F. No. 45/40/40, Note by Yeatts on Bengal letter, 21.12.1940). Defending the impartiality of the enumerators and pointing out that the success of the census depended on the respondents, he added "the alternative to distrusting the citizens of Bengal as their government do, is not to make a farce of the whole thing, but to abandon it altogether, to say to the world `Bengal citizens cannot be trusted therefore we are having no census.'" In both 1931 and 1941, without giving in to demands for outside interference in the census, the Census authorities did try to ensure that as far as possible the enumerators were from the same community as the bulk of those they enumerated, while for special cases, e.g. Assam, Bengal and Punjab, independent enumerators and Census Superintendents were preferred. Europeans were inevitably seen as the best choice for the latter.

Language was yet another issue, for example in Ganjam in 1931, where tension over the percentages of Oriya and Telugu speakers was high. There were petitions by different groups asking to be recognised either as Oriyas or Telugus(Home Public F. No. 45/56/31; F. No. 171/31; F. No. 328/31; F. 45/ 66/31, NAI). One Rao Sahib N. Ramamurthi, President of the Ganjam Defence League pointed out that the 1901 census had yielded an exceptionally high percentage of Oriya speakers, possibly because the enumerators were mostly Oriya and had entered as Oriya speakers all those who answered questions in Oriya, coupled with the fact that school fees for Oriyas were about half what they were for Telugus and others. But here too, a request for inspection of returns by outsiders was refused, while that of appointing a neutral officer acceded to(Home Public F. No. 1/12/31, NAI).

To summarise, the use of cultural classifications by which to measure the population has been subtly dangerous and consequently the census has been a source of intense politicking, often with negative effects. Although only caste has been singled out as having negative consequences for democracy and therefore not counted, as we have seen above, religious returns have

been equally controversial. In the 2001 census, once again there was controversy in Jharkhand, with the RSS demanding that adivasis be counted as Hindus and adivasi leaders asking for their own religion to be recognised (sarna dharm). The 2001 census data on religion, showing high Muslim growth rates compared to Hindu ones, was picked up by the RSS to claim that Muslims were growing at the expense of Hindus. The figures were eventually found to be wrong, not having taken into account the lack of earlier censuses in Jammu and Kashmir and Assam.

Reflection and Action 8.1

Inclusion of caste as a category in the census fostered casteist identity among the people. Discuss

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8.4 The Impact of the Census on a Sociological Understanding of Caste

Historically, anthropology and demography have been closely intertwined. As Cohn noted, "It would not be an exaggeration to say that down until 1950 scholars' and scientists views' on the nature, structure and functioning of the Indian caste system were shaped mainly by the data and conceptions growing out of the census operations." In large part, this was due to the fact that most of the works on the caste system from 1880 to 1950 were written by officials who had at some point been census superintendents, either for India or for a province (Cohn, 1990: 242). The census itself provided an opportunity for state funded research on ethnological data, at a time when there were few opportunities for professional anthropologists (see Padmanabha, 1978 for a list of anthropological studies conducted as part of the census, including monographs on particular castes and tribes, surveys of fairs and festivals, linguistics studies, and socio-economic surveys of vilages and urban areas). Yet, by 1941, the Census Commissioner was advocating the separation of anthropology from the census, to the mutual advantage of both: "there exists a widespread impression that the main object of the Indian census is anthropological….One unfortunate result of this excessive association of the Census with anthropology was to obscure the basic importance of the country-wide determination which so far the census was the only means of securing……It must also have affected adversely the proper consideration and financing of anthropological work in India. Such work should be carried out year in and year out and not forced into the constructed periods of a ten year convulsion" (Census of India, Yeatts, 1941, Vol I, Part I: 2).

One outcome of the census need for identifiable criteria, at both the basic level and larger aggregations was, as Pant puts it, a 'substantialisation of caste': a caste became a unit "made up of a name, a number of members, physical characteristics, cultural practices, territory occupied, in short, by the sum of all the information about a social group that had been collected over a number of surveys, and from a variety of respondents, whose social points of view were not necessarily common" (Pant, 1987: 161). The effect of this on the bulk of studies of caste has been unmistakable, with considerable debate on the origins of the caste system (race, occupation, cultural ecological explanations); the defining characteristics of castes (e.g. endogamy, restrictions on commensality); the effective unit of caste (sub-caste, caste-cluster, varna); the principles underlying caste ranking (purity-pollution, interactional); mobility within and against the caste system (the

concepts of Sanskritisation, dominant caste emulation, Westernisation, affirming Indic values etc.); whether caste is specific to India or whether it is a limited form of stratification; and whether resistance to caste can only take place within its own categories or can take place against the caste system as a whole. In all these, existing castes are taken as given units. What we need instead are studies that examine the way caste as a system (and the composition of individual castes) changes in response to wider political, economic and historical developments.

Reflection and Action 8.2

Is caste a relevant sociological category in the census operations? Discuss

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8.5   The Debate over Inclusion of Caste in the Census

Like all administrative measures, a caste enumeration is seen as having advantages and disadvantages for different groups of people. Opponents of caste enumeration point to the past experience of mobilisation over caste in the census and the current context of caste antagonisms, to argue that a fresh enumeration would lead to fresh mobilisation and a further hardening of caste identities (Srinivas, 1998, Beteille, 1998). Such mobilisation, it is also argued, would spoil the quality of data. Indeed, the data on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes which the census collects is already subject to political interference. Singh (1992: 25) notes that there are about a thousand cases pending in courts filed by communities keen to get SC or ST status to avail of reservations. In other arenas, however, they lay claim to higher ritual status (see also Kulkarni, 1991; Roy Burman, 1998 on fraudulent returns in the context of reservations). Some sociologists have also argued that caste data is particularly difficult to collect given the multiplicity of names and the contextual manner in which terms are used, and that this problem has been exacerbated with all the changes that have taken place due to migration, modern employment practices, inter-caste marriages etc. (A.M. Shah, 1998; G. Shah, 1998). The nation as a whole would thus lose out in terms of cost incurred, the rise in social conflict and the availability of seeming scientific but in fact unreliable data.

Supporters of caste enumeration argue that the refusal to measure caste is a classic case of upper-caste interests masquerading as the national or universal interest. Even in 1948 when a comprehensive caste return were abandoned, there were some dissenting voices. For instance, P. S. Deshmukh argued, **"it is too early to expect that people will agree to the abolition of caste. These very people now wish to continue their exploitation in the name of no-caste. Census operations are very important and for all people they serve as an excellent index to ascertain the progress they have made from time to time"** (quoted in Maheshwari, 1986: 142).

The major demand for a caste census has come from Backward Classes Commissions, troubled by the lack of data with which to carry out their tasks. Post independence, the term **'Other Backward Classes (OBCs)'** has become popular and is taken to refer to those groups which are not scheduled castes or tribes, but which are still seen to suffer from **'social and educational backwardness'**. Although the Constitution uses the term **'classes'**, this has generally been understood to mean certain castes (Galanter 1984: 166). In many ways the dilemma over whether or not to have caste returns in the census is reflected in parallel debates on how to define backwardness - solely in terms of caste or on some economic criteria (see Galanter, 1984: 172 - 177)

For instance, the chairman of the 1st Backward Classes Commission which identified backward classes by caste later rejected its recommendations, arguing that the caste test of backwardness was inimical to the creation of a casteless society, and recommending in its place residential, economic, education and cultural criteria of backwardness (Galanter, 1984: 172).

The Backward Classes Commissions are required to identify lists of backward classes for their states, in order to implement reservation in jobs and educational institutions and welfare schemes (scholarships etc.). In the absence of census data, the Commissions have extrapolated from 1931 census data. Several of them have also conducted their own sample surveys, collected data from educational institutions and government offices, and invited submissions by individuals and groups (see the range of data used by the Third Backward Classes Commission in Karnataka, cited in Sundar 1999: 123, fn 55). While much of this secondary data would continue to be needed, the task would be made much easier with updated census data. Census data, it is argued, would be useful in drawing up fresh lists of OBCs, for admitting new castes into the list and graduating others out. Further, it might enable proportional representation for disadvantaged castes within the reservation quota (discussion quoted in Deshpande and Sundar 1998: 2158). Graduation out of a beneficiary list, however, is politically very difficult and almost no state government has been successful in practice. The losers in this process tend to be the smaller castes without much political clout (see Bayly, 1999: 293).

Supporters of caste enumeration also claim that it would be useful in planning. To target concentrations of backward groups, one would need block level or district level data, since this is the level at which decisions about locating schools or primary health centres is made. However, again there is a doubtful link between the existence of such data and the actual services provided. While there are few studies of how   local governments work, the studies available suggest that the placing of schools is decided by local powerful groups and not need. P. Sainath, for example, has shown how upper castes always make sure the village school is situated in one of their hamlets, since that ensures their control over polling (Sainath, 1998). Similarly, the absence of facilities in tribal areas despite the data on Scheduled Tribes being available suggests that it is not lack of data which must be blamed, but other factors.

On the other hand, caste census data can play a useful role in creating public awareness and opinion about the systematic lack of facilities for certain groups. While one doesn't need to know the caste of a citizen, or the caste layout of a village in order to make sure that everyone is provided with basic services,   in a situation where the government has claimed to have made universal provision, this data can be useful. If, despite the presence of primary schools in every village, census data show that certain castes are getting no education, this is cause for concern, and possible mobilisation.

While opponents of caste enumeration emphasise its role in fomenting mobilisation and hardening identities, supporters of caste enumeration portray it as a move to challenge the status quo by highlighting inequality and eventually eliminating caste (see Deshpande, 1998; Vijayanunni, 1999; see also the very similar arguments in the US and UK contexts over counting race and ethnicity in the census, cited in Sundar 1999: 100-102). While opponents of caste enumeration show   unease with unmanageable public action, supportes   display a rosy and naive view of the government and the use it

makes of data. If census enumeration is to help at all in overturning caste, it will be because of public mobilisation using the data thrown up, and not because of the state. Rather than fearing mobilisation per se, one's concern should be over what forms it takes. The challenge is really to ensure that such data are not manipulated by purely casteist parties or used to ghettoise the polity.

Larger version of the material contained in this unit is presented in the article, 'The Indian Census: Identity and Inequality' by Nandini Sundar, 1999.

Reflection and Action 8.3

Do you think caste should be included in the census? If so, why? If not, why?

8.6 Conclusion

There is no denying that the apparently simple enterprise of counting the characteristics of the Indian population undertaken by the British officials for convenience in administration emerged as a powerful tool in political, cultural and religious battles.. Conducting a census is a political act in which sensitive information that has political repercussions is taken down. The census data have been put to many uses. The data have been used for drawing comparisons between different communities and religious groups. The census data on caste has immense potential to be analysed in order to understandand address socio-economic problems, as well as to create divisiveness between communities. The task before social scientists is to make use of data appropriately.

8.7 Further Reading

Appadurai, Arjun, 1993, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination,' in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*,ed,C. A. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia

Bayly, Susan, 1999, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the 18th Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

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Dirks, Nicholas, 1993, *The Hollow Crown*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor Sundar, Nandini,1999, 'The Indian Census,Identity and Inequality,' in *Institutions and Inequality: Essays in Honour of Andre Beteille.* Oxford University Press: Delhi