

The Census of India A Historical Perspective

Census as a subject of study continues to be a virgin field in spite of 100 years of census-taking in India. Very few census reports are read and only a fraction of the massive statistical material has been analysed. Part of the blame lies with the census authorities who developed from the very beginning an encyclopaedic style of writing and preparing omnibus reports. The Census Commissioner of Baroda State observed in his report on the 1931 Census:

My experience has been that a Census Report, although intended for the general benefit of students and officers, is rarely read. Officers and publicists like to get a complimentary copy—for it is the thing to do so—look at its opening pages and then relegate it to their shelves, resorting to it most occasionally as an inducement to sleep when all the 'drowsy syrups' of the doctors have failed.¹

It was only during the 1941 Census that the Census Commissioner revolted against the practice of preparing omnibus reports. He was the Superintendent of the 1931 Census of Madras and even then he had thought of preparing only a brief report. World War II and the consequent economy measures came in the way of full tabulation of census data. But the Census Commissioner was not really influenced by these considerations. To quote him:

It seemed to me as far back as 1932 that the old style of omnibus report was out of date and that something of the nature of synoptic essay which would try to see the country as a whole in respect to some general basic theme was what a census officer could properly attempt to give.²

In 1951 when the first census of independent India was taken, the Census Commissioner made a compromise between the omnibus type of report and the almost bare presentation of tables in 1941. His general report was fairly lengthy but it concentrated on one central theme, namely, the food problem in the context of rapid population growth. Other aspects of the census were briefly discussed. The 1961 Census Commissioner continued this practice and chose "Levels of Regional Development" as the main theme of his report.

The 1971 Census has for the first time used electronic computer facilities and promises to flood us with massive statistical material in a short time but a modern computer technology without a matching printing technology has created a situation which finds a parallel in the aviation world. The journey from the airport to the city centre often takes more time than the

* Based on a lecture delivered by the author at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, August 10, 1972. "

plane journey between two distant cities. The census organisation has a few computers but no printing press at its command and because of the bureaucratic procedures, the census authorities have to depend almost wholly on Government printing presses. Any census report or table which is printed five years after the census enumeration is almost sure to be shelved by the reader in anticipation of the next census. The need for quick publication of "mini" reports was never so great as it is in the computer age today.

We have digressed in to this aspect of the census only to advance a possible explanation for the general apathy towards census reports. But there are other explanations also. The researchers have their limitations too. To be successful, a researcher in this field must have the courage to face massive figures, wade through tables running into thousands of pages, read every footnote no matter how tedious it is, and finally, have the inclination to treat statistical figures as personal friends.

It is quite significant that in spite of the availability of rich material nobody has attempted to write a history of the Indian census. Romesh Dutt's classic study, *The Economic History of India* does not refer to census even casually except to quote a few figures from the 1901 Census. The Office of the Registrar General recently brought out a useful publication, *Indian Census in Perspective* by S.C. Srivastava as the first of the Census Centenary Monograph Series (1972) but even the author of this monograph who is a census official would not claim it to be a history of the census. We hope that some administrator-scholar will undertake this great task in the near future. This reminds us of a comment made by the 1961 Census Commissioner: "The Census Commission of India is an odd kind of institution. Over the decades since 1861, it has turned administrators into scholars and scholars into administrators."³

In this paper we will be primarily concerned with census as a historical phenomenon rather than as a demographic tool. We will take an overall view of census and its role in the life of the country both under foreign domination and after independence. We have attempted elsewhere⁴ a study of census in terms of concepts, definitions, classifications, questionnaires, tabulations and analyses and we do not propose to refer to any of these tedious details here.

II

The Indian census is a fascinating blend of intellectual curiosity, encyclopaedic scholarship, administrative skill, imperial policy and the wit and whim of Indian masses. Today census is taken for granted and very few people would question the need for a census. However, this was not true a hundred years ago when the first systematic census was launched. The people were naturally curious to know why the government wanted to collect all manner of data about each and every person. What they dreaded most was the imposition of taxes. Surprisingly enough, even after 100 years of census-taking in India, it is the experience of field workers in villages that the most common misgiving about any census or sample survey is the fear of imposition of taxes.

From this point of view, it would appear that a span of 100 years has not made much difference in the attitude of the people towards statistical enquiries imposed on them by the government or any other agency. Perhaps it is a manifestation of the stagnation of our economy and the poverty of the rural masses who live in constant fear of a further deterioration in their depressed level of living. Besides a deep distrust of the 'outsider' is a persistent phenomenon of rural social life.

A study of early census reports, especially those of 1872, 1881 and 1891 gives one a very good insight into the problems of census-taking in a country like India. Most of these reports contained a chapter or a section on the "attitudes of people", "rumours and superstitions in connection with the Census", "general notion of the people regarding the census", "temper of the inhabitants", "the demeanour of the people during the census", etc. A large number of wild rumours were spread about the objectives of census. Interestingly enough sometimes the rumours were spread by the enumerators and their helpers in order to pressurise people to give the required information.

Some of the rumours were so wild that they cannot be taken seriously. The only explanation we can think of is that the native wit of many of the villagers must have led to this strategy of counteracting the census thrust upon them by the Government.

We give a few examples of these rumours drawn from several census reports in the last decades of the 19th century. These rumours can be broadly classified into five categories:

- (1) rumours concerning taxation, (2) rumours concerning recruitment to the army, forced emigration, etc., (3) rumours specific to women only, (4) rumours concerning the British Government, and (5) rumours concerning monsters, human sacrifices and other superstitions.

It must be mentioned, however, that most of the census reports observed that in general, the people were submissive and the census posed no special problems except in some areas.

We will now give examples of the different types of rumours. According to the report of the 1872 Census of Travancore, some people said that it was the intention of the Sirkar to levy tax on every head, as well as on cattle, fowl, sheep and swine.⁵ Most census reports of 1872 mention that there was a widespread feeling that census was a preliminary step to further taxation. For example in Madras, it was feared that houses were numbered in order to introduce house tax. The Report on Bengal says "that census was only the forerunner of some new tax or other, was the universal opinion which no amount of reasoning could eradicate. Why the Government should go to such an expensa merely to ascertain the numbers of people, without even seeking to recoup itself the cost, was the problem which defied argument. This view of the census pervaded all classes. The census form went by the name of *tax ticket*."⁶ In Orissa It was rumoured that "the Government intended to reimburse the cost of the famine."⁷

It may be recalled that in 1872 only the names of men were recorded in the census. In some places this was regarded as a sure sign that census was being conducted with a view to imposing tax on males. The Deputy Commissioner of Puri District pointed out in 1872 that "some strange rumours had gone about, such as the Government was making arrangements to tax everyone who should tread on a village path, everyone who should swing an arm, everyone who should carry an umbrella. In one place, it was believed that everyone who fed Brahmins was to be taxed upon the number whom he might entertain."⁸

Next to the fear taxation, was the fear of forced emigration. The 1872 report on Bengal points out that "the idea which next to that of taxation took the strongest hold of the population was that of compulsory emigration. Tea estates of Assam and countries like Mauritius were supposed to be places where the excess population was to be deported."⁹ In many parts of India

there were rumours that soldiers were to be recruited to fight Russians.¹⁰ There were other rumours concerning the demand of the Government for soldiers to fight in the Afghan war, " to take part in the Lushai expedition, ¹² etc.

In some places it was feared that people would be deported to Burma for sacrifice at the laying of the foundation of some Government fort there.¹³ About rumours concerning women, mention may be made of a rumour in some parts that the British Government was looking for wives for the British soldiers,¹⁴ that "General Saheb" wanted to see all the women of a certain age and they were to be sent to Calcutta for the purpose.¹⁵ However, it was not clear who the General Saheb was! As a result of another rumour the husbands recalled their wives from the houses of their fathers-in-law lest they should lose their marital rights on account of their absence on the census night.¹⁶

Perhaps the most absurd rumour recorded on the night of February 17, 1881, was that "a brass measure would be applied to the breast of women and those who are liberally endowed by nature were to be deprived by an operation of the excess."¹⁷ Interestingly enough, the Census Superintendent of C. P. where the rumour originated records in his report: "I found however that some foundation could be traced in the people's fear, as it happened, that when vaccination was first introduced, threats of the kind were made by some of the earlier vaccinators with a view to extort money."¹⁸

Now about rumours concerning the British Government. A rumour in C. P. in 1872 was that "the Emperor of Russia had lately numbered his people and was now boasting that he had more subjects than any other king or prince in the whole world. The Queen of England, hearing this was determined to show that she was in no way inferior to the Russian Czar ; and to prove the superiority, had ordered the present census."¹⁹ The C. P. report for 1872, however, informs the readers that this rumour was spread by one of the census officials in order to make the census a success."²⁰

Now we come to the last category of rumours. The Travancore report on the 1872 Census says it was rumoured that "a certain percentage of population was to be sacrificed to some dreaded monster honoured and feared by the British power in India who lived upon flesh and blood, but who in return, evacuated gold bullion in large quantities."²¹

The Punjab census report of 1891 records a rumour which said that the census was being conducted in order to search for a lost child of Her Majesty.²² In Chittagong District it was rumoured in 1872 that "a number of heads would be required for the purpose of pacifying the Lushai chief."²³ There were also cases of violent opposition to the census enumeration. For example, Santhals in Bengal opposed the census enumeration in 1881. It was reported that "the fact that the final enumeration was to be carried out at night lent colour to representations that a widespread policy of violence was meditated by the Government ²⁴. The Santhals were in a highly excited condition and ultimately the Government had to march a detachment of troops through the villages.

There were also riots during the census enumeration in Noakhali District of East Bengal. The census records that in a village of 2,000 inhabitants, the people refused to permit census enumeration. They beat up the census supervisor and threw him into a tank and also assaulted

the police official who went there to investigate. "Even the police official was mobbed, beaten and severely injured, being pursued for about two miles before he could find his horse and make good his escape"²⁵

As already mentioned, in general the people were submissive. But as the 1881 census report of C.P. points out, "the attitude of the people was quiet and submissive but they complained lately of the irksomeness of the frequent visits and counting and recounting of the people. Once appeared the enumerator, then the supervisor, and then the superintendent and so on, each official at least putting two visits at each stage of the census operation. It was then that they became apprehensive that something was going to happen."²⁶

We have so far considered the types of rumours which were spread during, census enumeration in the early decades. It will be interesting to study also the response of the Government and the sort of explanation which the Government gave to the people about the objectives of the census. Here again we will quote from early census reports.

In the 1872 report on Bengal, the need for census is justified as follows :

Without precise information regarding the number of people, there was felt to be a sense of inconvenience in the administration of Bengal. Without information on this head, the basis is wanting on which to found accurate opinions on such important matters as the growth and rate of increase of the population, sufficiency of food supplies, the incidence of local and imperial taxes, the organisation of adequate judicial and police arrangements, the spread of education and public health measures.²⁷

The 1891 report on Baroda State refers to the proclamation which had said :

It is well-known to all that the results of the census enable the Sirkar to know the increase or decrease of population.

In taking the census the Sirkar is not actuated by any motive of levying new taxes or increasing those that exist.

Mischievous persons are prone to circulate rumours of various kinds as to the intention of the Sirkar in taking the census, such as levy of a tax, etc., but no one should believe in such rumours.²⁸

The Deputy Commissioner of Ambala held a Darbar in 1891 at which certificates were distributed to census workers. Extracts from the speech of the Extra Assistant Commissioner give an interesting insight into the objectives of the census. We quote at length because this exposition shows the intensity of loyalty to the British Government on the part of the official concerned.

Illiterate people are afraid that the object of the Government in instituting this census is to levy taxes, to entertain young men as volunteers, or to equalise the number of men and women. They are wrong to think so. To count the people or to know about their professions is of no use for imposing taxes, which would on the other hand require to know the amount of their incomes. There should be strong and active men to be entertained as volunteers. The census would therefore be of no avail for this purpose ; and in like manner the idea of equalising the men and

women is entirely groundless. The main object of the Government is to know the number of various sects and creeds, also the' increase or decrease in number, with a view to ascertain whether this increment or decrement is due to some tyranny, diseases or poverty etc. If the decrement is on account of certain diseases, it can be put a stop to by establishing dispensaries ; if of tyranny, it can be remedied by adopting proper measures ; if there is an increase in population, there is reason to believe that her Majesty's subjects are prosperous.

It is necessary that each Government should take a census of its subjects at proper intervals of time. In India a census is now usually taken after every 10 years. It is provided by law that officials and non-officials should work in census operations. Some people object that census work is done for nothing, and it should not therefore be taken by the Government of India. The reply to this is that if this work were done by paid labour, the Government would be put to expense. The money which would have been spent on paid labour would be realized from the subjects.

It is the duty of the loyal subjects to help the Government when required. In the time of yore the help of the subjects was required only in time of war, but as under our civilised Government, war is infrequent, the loyalty and faithfulness of non-officials is well tested in census. It is owing to this reason that Mr. C. E. Gladstone, our kind and generous Deputy Commissioner has in this district employed the services of non-officials, and has thus given them an opportunity of showing their zeal. The certificates and rewards which have so generously been distributed among you are a proof of the fact that your diligence and care have been known to the higher authorities.²⁹

In the census reports there are interesting digs at the oriental mind. For example, the English Collector of Nadia District in Bengal wrote in connection with the 1872 Census enumeration. "The fact is that to the ordinary uneducated native mind, the collection of statistics, as Europeans collect them, is mystery. They do not think it possible that the Government could incur the labour and expense of taking a census without having some very definite object in view."³⁰

His comments on the Bengali mind are amusing : "Perhaps one of the best illustrations of the inability of the Bengali mind to appreciate the vague objects of a census has to be found in the case of a zamindar of some position who had been asked to assist us with his influence. He assured Mr. Oldham that he would find the enumerator's enquiries most readily answered in his estates as he had told the people that owing to the Prince of Wales' recovery a distribution of sweetmeats was to be made amongst them and consequently their number was required to be known."³¹

To sum up, there is no doubt that the British introduced the census in India in order to govern the country more effectively. Having regard to the fact that the first census of England was conducted as far back as 1801, it was but natural that the British rulers would introduce the census sooner or later. It took them some time to plan these censuses. Mention must be made of a series of sporadic censuses conducted during 1820-1830,³² apart from various estimates of population of cities and local areas attempted as early as 1639.³³

In fact, the British Government had planned to undertake a census of India in 1861 but had postponed it in 1859 in view of the revolt in 1857. The need for a census was considered even greater after the 1857 revolt. As pointed out by Asok Mitra, W.W. Hunter who laid the foundations of statistical collection in the newly proclaimed Indian Empire observed "that more intimate knowledge and appreciation of every aspect of the mosaic of the life of the Indian people was essential if her Majesty's Government wished not to repeat the mistakes of the East India Company which resulted in the upheaval of 1857."³¹ Hunter pleaded not only for the establishment of a machinery for the collection of various kinds of statistical data designed to reflect the economic condition of the people but the systematic collection of sociological and ethnographic data of every significant kind to give the Government a continuing and confident feel of what was happening in every corner of the country.³⁵

III

A researcher in this field may, however, legitimately ask : Why did the British overemphasise caste, tribe, religion and language in all censuses ? Mother tongue and religion would feature in any census anywhere in the world and caste being a peculiar fact of Indian life, it is but natural that a question on caste was included in the census questionnaire. But when one goes through the census reports of the last 100 years, one cannot but conclude that it was a deliberate British policy to play up caste, tribe, religion and language, at least in the early decades of the census. In fact, the British also succeeded in giving an excessive slant to caste-oriented sociology to such an extent that Indian sociology often gets identified with the sociology of caste. Many of our present day scholars have not yet succeeded in getting out of the morass of caste studies.

We do not contend that the emphasis on sociological data in the Indian census was at the cost of economic data. As Asok Mitra points out :

Much has been made of the Indian census's preoccupation with castes and tribes and cognate anthropological inquiries over the decades. While indeed a very large and valuable body of anthropological literature has grown round the Indian census, it needs to be emphasised that the Indian census has always been primarily concerned- with its legitimate tasks of demographic analysis and economic classification, of 'mathematical manipulation' and even 'statistical ingenuity', the apparent lack of which was the subject of a regret expressed by Kingsley Davis, a modern demographic scholar of India and Pakistan.³⁶

However, it is our contention that it was British policy to concentrate on caste,, religion and language and not on economic issues like land holdings, household data, etc. As a matter of fact, questions of this type were introduced only in the Census of India, 1961 which was really the first comprehensive census of India from the economic point of view, both in terms of the questionnaire and tabulations. Mr. Asok Mitra's handsome tribute to the galaxy of the census administrators in the past for their performance in technical demography is understandable but he was perhaps the first Census Commissioner who realised the inadequacies of the Indian census.

We are aware that the 1872 Census of Bombay Presidency made an alphabetical classification of 376 occupations, the 1881 All-India Census adopted three classes, 18 orders, 78

sub-orders and 480 groups of occupations, while the 1891 Census adopted 478 occupations divided into G classes, XXIV orders and 77 groups. Even this was improved upon in 1901 by 520 occupations divided into H Classes, XXIV orders and 79 sub-orders.

We are also aware of the ridiculous classification scheme of the 1872 Census where snake charmers were classified under fine arts. "Labourers" were classified in the category of "indefinite and non-productive", along with travellers and guests, gamblers and spies, professional thieves and "budmashes", etc.³⁷

So we come back to our question: Why did the British overemphasise castes tribes religion and language? This aspect of the census has raised some controversy in sociolo' g.cal circles. One of our leading sociologists, G.S. Ghurye, observed that the British did this out of intellectual curocity. This view has been challenged by Kingsley Davis and very recently by Bernard S. Cohn. We shall give their arguments briefly. Ghurye points out :

It is difficult to see any valid public reasons for this elaborate treatment of caste in the Cenaus Report. The Government have never avowed their intention of helping every caste to retain its numbers and prosperity. Nor have they at any time helped a particular caste because it registered numerical decline or economic dislocation Nor even the declared policy of the provincial Governments to provide special representation either by election or nomination to a certain class of people necessitates an enumeration of the people by their castes. For this representation is not dependent on numbers. It is not proportional. All that the particular officers of the Government have to do is to determine in the light of their experience whether a particular person is one who can legitimately claim to belong to one of the three large groups of the population, devised for political purposes. And a Court of Law in any disputed case will settle the point by reference to the usual practice of the people. The conclusion is unavoidable that the intellectual curiosity of some of the earlp officials is mostly responsible for the treatment of caste given to it in the Census, which has become progressively elaborate in each successive Ce-nsus since 1872. The total result has been a livening up of the caste spirit.⁸⁸

Kingsley Davis opposes this viewpoint. According to him :

The census has been criticised for enquiring into caste, on the ground that the infor mation is useless and that it tends to perpetuate caste consciousness. The first allega- tionis not true, though it may become so; the second is absurd.³⁹

Davis, however, does not give any argument for rejecting the second ground as "absurd"

In a recent paper on "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South A.,V> Bernard S. Cohn disagrees with Ghurye. He says :

The impetus to collect information on caste went way beyond the "international curiostly" of a few officials and was based on widespread and deeply held belief about Indians held by the British. Ideas about caste, its origins and functions played much the same role in shaping policy in the latter half of the 19th century as d about the village cummunity and the nature of property in the first half of the] 9th

century. Attempts were made in the first census of 1871-72 to collect information on caste.⁴⁰

Cohn also observes :

It was felt by many British officials in the middle of the 19th 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 castes or "races" were monopolizing access to new educational opportunities and a political theory was beginning to emerge about the conspiracy which certain castes were organizing to supplant British Rule.⁴¹

M.N. Srinivas makes an interesting observation on census as a generator of social mobility. He says :

The decennial census, introduced by the British, recorded caste, and it unwittingly came to the aid of social mobility. Prosperous low castes, and even those which were not prosperous, sought to call themselves by new and high-sounding Sanskrit names. Getting the names recorded in the census was part of the struggle to achieve a higher status than before.⁴²

On this issue our own assessment based on the study of census reports is as follows: The early British rulers in India were fascinated by the phenomenon of castes, sub-castes and tribes in India. The situation was totally new to them and the time and energy they spent in collecting and analysing census data on races, religions, castes, tribes and languages no doubt reflected the intellectual curiosity of the British. However, as empire builders, they were certainly conscious of the use to which these data could be put for tightening the grip over the Indian masses.

The British fully exploited the divisive tendencies in the country and, in fact, much more than the people of India, the British rulers were caste-conscious. It is argued that the impact of census enumeration on making people caste-conscious could only be marginal as the real impact was on the enumerators rather than the persons enumerated. This could be so but the fact remains that having collected data on castes, sub-castes, religions, sub-religions, languages, sub-languages, tribes and so on, the British realised how powerful a tool these data provided for their colonial administration.

Many census reports reveal the irritation of the Census Superintendents in regard to the classification of persons by religion. The all pervasive character of Hinduism perplexed many British officials. The census report of 1881 contains very interesting material on this subject. The following extract is illustrative :

What is a Hindu ? asks Mr. Beverley, in his report on the Census of 1872, and the question has often been asked before and since without eliciting any satisfactory reply. No answer in fact exists, for the term in its modern acceptance denotes neither a

creed nor a race, neither a church nor a people, but is a general expression devoid of precision, and embracing alike the most punctilious disciple of pure vedantism, the agnostic youth who is the product of Western education, and the semi-barbarous hillman, who eats, without scruple, anything that he can procure, and is as ignorant of the Hindu theology as the stone which he worships in times of danger or sickness.⁴³

The British officials went out of their way to bring about a split between Hindu tribals, animists and others, and the missionary activity in the tribal areas testifies to this. In 1881, it was found that in Berar 37,387 persons were shown as aboriginal under religion but in the tribal statement 164,991 persons were recorded as aboriginal. The Census Commissioner asked : The question arises whether the provincial authorities had rightly acted in showing so large a proportion of these aboriginals as Hindus. On the whole, it seems apparent that aboriginal by religion were not fully shown in the religion tables.⁴⁴ Mr. Kitts writes in the 1881 Berar Census report:

The vagueness of the term Hindu, as the name of a religion, is apparent, from the fact that all the Deputy Commissioners considered that it should rightly be extended to the form of worship practised by the Gonds and other aboriginal castes. In one or two taluks some of the enumerators drew a distinction between such of the higher caste Hindus as worshipped carved images, and those lower castes who worshipped daubed stones, and are not allowed to pollute a temple by their presence. In one case the Mahars, Mangs and others were entered each as practising a special form of worship, known in each case by the caste name".⁴⁵

The difficulty in classifying Hindus is lucidly discussed in the 1872 report of Bengal:

Concerning some of the faiths exhibited in Bengal, there could be no doubt. They stand distinctly apart. Their creeds are capable of definite formulation and their followers are an acknowledged people, and an appreciable body in the commonwealth. The Sikhs and Mohammedans, the Jews and the Parsees, have an individuality which it is impossible to mistake. The Christians profess a faith which separates them from all other classes of the community and the Buddhists and Jains, though they have been said to possess much in common, differ from each other and from the people who surround them, in dogma, ritual and manners. Here, however, definitions cease, and the remaining religions shade into each other by such imperceptible relations, and are separated by such impalpable partitions, that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other commences ; so that the border land between each one and the next is a misty valley, now widening, always thick with the exhalations of ignorance and the fog of doubt.⁴⁶

From caste and religion, we may turn to language. The census authorities had from the beginning a profound interest in language. George Grierson wrote his monumental chapter on 'Mother Tongues' in the 1901 Census Report of India which really was the framework of his great Linguistic Survey which lasted from 1886 to 1928. While we admire these profound scholars, it must be said that language was also used by the British as a convenient handle for their imperial ends. As the States Reorganisation Commission says in its report in 1955 :

During the British period, territorial changes were governed mainly by imperial interest. However, as an ostensible factor the linguistic principle figured, for the

first time, in a letter from Sir Herbert Risley, Home Secretary, Government of India, to the Government of Bengal, dated 3rd December, 1903, in which the proposal for the partition Resolution of 1905, and in the despatch of Lord Hardinge's Government to the Secretary of State, dated 25th August, 1911 proposing the annulment of partition, language was again prominently mentioned. The linguistic principle was, however, pressed into service on these occasions only as a measure of administrative convenience, and to the extent it flitted into a general pattern which was determined by political exigencies. In actual effect, the partition of Bengal involved a flagrant violation of linguistic affinities. The settlement of 1912 also showed little respect for the linguistic principle in that it drew a clear line of distinction between the Bengali Muslims and Bengali Hindus. Both these partitions thus ran counter to the assumption that different linguistic groups constituted distinct units of social feeling with common political and economic interests.⁴⁷

VI

We will now turn to the censuses conducted after India attained independence—the Censuses of 1951, 1961 and 1971, confining our comments to caste, religion and language. The 1951 Census removed the question on caste from the census questionnaire and limited it to scheduled caste and scheduled tribes because of constitutional requirements. The Government took this decision not to collect data because it was feared that collection of such data tended to make people more and more caste conscious. This annoyed many anthropologists and sociologists who argued that by merely removing the item on caste from the census questionnaire, one could not do away with caste. But in our view the Government decision did help in the discontinuance of numerous representations on matters of caste and needless controversy about the ranking of castes. If the collection of census data on caste were not abolished in 1951, we would have still continued the endless controversies on caste. We do not deny the relevance of caste in Indian society and the unfortunate role of caste in politics in spite of our being a democracy. But fact remains that in the absence of data on caste, the crusaders for caste have been disarmed and this is indeed a happy development.

Let us now turn to religion. The 1951 Census took an important decision not to cross tabulate all important tables by religion as was the practice in the British days. The emphasis shifted to economic categories—the eight livelihood classes. There was only one table on religion and it gave just the distribution of population by different religions in India. This practice was continued in the Censuses of 1961 and 1971 also. One may question the need for data on religion on grounds which are applicable to caste data. In the absence of any cross classification, these data cannot be used for a detailed analysis of the role of religion.

The question on religion has only heightened religious animosities and has helped certain political parties which keep on harping on the increasing proportion of certain minorities in the total population. Since our elections are not based on religion, there is no need to collect such data on religion and in a secular State there is no need to collect data on religion of every individual throughout the country. One must, however, concede that these are special problems in some areas. These should be investigated through detailed sample surveys and case studies. We feel that it is more important for the Indian census to collect data on income levels, unemployment, etc. than on religion.

Finally, we come to language. The language data in the census have of course been put to use by the Government in the reorganisation of States. As the report of the States Reorganisation Commission points out:

In our examination of the various proposals for reorganisation we have mainly relied on statistical figures as given in Census of various years. The census figures for 1951 have been compiled according to what are known as "Census tracts". It has, therefore, been difficult to estimate the mother tongue figures on a taluk or tehsil-wise basis. We were given to understand that it might be possible to make estimates of taluk or tehsil-wise figures on the basis of certain statistical assumptions. Having regard, however, to the controversies which surround such assumptions, we took into consideration only the figures as printed in different census reports in reaching our conclusions.

However, the alphabetical presentation of the 1951 Census data on languages was unsatisfactory. The 1961 Census Commissioner made a bold attempt to present language data in a scientific and comprehensive manner. But even then the language data were not cross-tabulated with any other data and experts in the field of linguistics feel that this simple distribution of people by language is of very limited relevance for any depth study. In order to get the full benefit out of the language data, either the tabulation schemes should be so devised as to get detailed distribution by language which throw light on the problems of the linguistic reorganisation of States and national integration, or the Government should launch a new survey like Grierson's Linguistic Survey and collect comprehensive data on the subject which will lead to the formulation of a proper language policy.

We have not touched on the economic data in the censuses. The data on working force are highly complicated and in view of frequent definitional changes, comparability has been vitiated. This is specially true of the 1951, 1961 and 1971 Censuses. The 1961 Census adopted a rather unsatisfactory method of classification of the entire population by livelihood classes.

The 1961 Census adopted the international practice of collecting data on workers and giving distribution of workers by industrial categories. This practice was more or less followed in the 1971 Census but there were definitional changes which are reflected in the number of workers in 1971 which in absolute terms has gone down compared to 1961. The data on working force, therefore, are in a highly unsatisfactory state. But credit must be given to the 1961 Census for making it more comprehensive and realistic. For the first time a household schedule was canvassed and data for the household as units were collected. Further, the diverse types of land tenure systems in India were reflected in the data collected in the household schedule. However, in view of the agricultural census, the household schedule was discontinued in the 1971 census and this again raises the problem of comparability.

v

The major contribution of the three censuses in free India is really in the field of internal migration and urbanization. For the first time in the history of census, the 1951 Census gave the rural-urban breakdown in all tables. In earlier censuses, there were some detailed tables for a few selected cities in India but there was no way of getting a complete rural-urban breakdown. The 1961 Census introduced a new sub-question on the place of birth, namely, "whether rural or urban". This brought about a tremendous improvement in the analysis of data on internal

migration based on the place of birth. For the first time in the history of census, it was possible to identify the different migration streams : rural to rural, rural to urban, urban to urban, and urban to rural. The 1971 Census has introduced a new question which will, for the first time, give direct evidence on migration without referring to the place of birth. The question asked was "place of last residence". There was also a new sub-question on the place of work which will throw light on commutation, especially to the big cities.

To sum up, in the post-independence period, the censuses have emphasised economic data and today the census is regarded as an essential tool for planning and policy-making. But during the British period, the census emphasised caste, tribe, religion and language and the census data, in combination with British diplomacy and imperial strategy, were used in fostering disharmony through the policy of "divide and rule". We do not want to stretch this point too far but there is enough evidence in the voluminous census reports ever since the census of 1872 to lead to the conclusion that the census served both science and imperialism.

The census has contributed in no small measure in fanning the fire of communalism culminating in the partition of India based wholly on religion. It would be illogical to blame census data for the disruptive elements in the country but our contention is that the data were used to encourage the disruptive elements, and thus the census became a powerful tool in the hands of the rulers. We should be certainly proud of the achievements of the Indian census, the total dedication to census work on the part of a galaxy of administrators and the improvements which have been brought about in the censuses in the post-independence period. But the fact that we have an unbroken history of 100 years of census-taking is both an asset and a liability. There is need for innovation and modernisation of the Indian census. The census must serve the demands of national integration, economic growth and social transformation and not serve as a tool for disruption.

Jawaharlal Nehru while discussing the record of British rule in his autobiography observes : "To the British we must be grateful for one splendid gift of which they were the bearers, the gift of science and its rich offspring. It is difficult, however, to forget or view with equanimity the efforts of the British Government in India to encourage the disruptive, obscurantist, reactionary, sectarian, and opportunist elements in the country."⁴⁹

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