Early Colonial Census Classification in India: The Role of Indigenous Informants, Knowledge and Methodology

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Introduction

An enduring, yet unresolved debate informs much of the scholarship of colonial Indian official information gathering: the extent to which socially divisive religion and caste categories were a) consciously devised and/or exploited by the British to subdue and rule the native population (Appadurai, Bhagat, Cohn); b) widely employed existing categories adapted by the British to facilitate administrative rule (Guha, Peabody); c) socially obscure categories, promoted by educated native informants, to bolster their social status (Smith; Viswanathan); and d) some combination of the above (Dirks, Ludden, Waggoner). In this paper, we attempt to shed light on these debates by examining official information gathering in pre-colonial South Asia. Given that this is a vast historical period, coupled with space constraints, we limit our focus primarily to the earliest references in the Vedas and other early works, the Medieval Period (10th through 15th centuries), Mughal period (16th century and 17th centuries), leading up to the British occupation to gauge to what extent early colonial information gathering was an extension of these earlier efforts.

The paper will proceed as follows. First we review the sides to the debate cited above. Next we analyze pre-colonial information gathering within the aforementioned time frame, using whenever possible original reports, data, as well as quality secondary sources. The former include Vedic texts (to trace how understandings of caste/official information gathering evolved over time), official reports authored by key functionaries in the Medieval (with an emphasis on the Delhi and Bengal Sultanates) and Mughal Periods. Ultimately, we compare/contrast official social categories, data collection techniques, and key informants used in these earlier periods with those implemented by the officials of the East India Company (the first British administrators of India). In doing thus, we will provide insight into the extent to which local

categories, techniques, and informants contributed to early colonial information gathering, and ultimately, the use of the caste and religious categories at the center of these current debates.

Literature Review: Contentious Social Categories and British Colonization

Bernard Cohn (1987) was among the first to advance the argument that the colonial census played an important role in identity formation in South Asia. The census made communities view themselves in relation to others in definite terms, and sparked the realization demographic strength translated into self-interested collective action (Cohn 1987; see also review in Bhagat 2001). Other scholars echo this position, linking modern politicized religious (especially Hindu versus Muslim) and caste identities in India to census enumeration initiated during British rule (See for example Appadurai 1993; Kaviraj 1993). Samarendra (2011:51), for example, asserts that the word "caste" is foreign in origin, having been derived from the Portuguese word "casta." Therefore, he argues, that "caste" is a relatively new idea, with its origins in British census enumeration (Samarendra 2011:51). These assertions, in turn, spawn critical theoretical positions, informed by the works of Michel Foucault and Edward Said.

The former inspires scholarship rooted in Foucault's (1977; 1984) conception of "governmentality." It suggests that the modalities of rule instituted by the colonial state differed greatly from pre-colonial states in India both in the nature of accountability procedures and in the recording of information. Colonial power necessitated disabling old forms of life by systematically breaking down their conditions, and in their place, establishing new institutions, procedures, calculations, reflections and tactics giving rise both to a modern state form and to a modern regime of power/knowledge (Foucault 1984, see also review in Kapalgam 2010:39-40; Scott 1995:193). These "political rationalities," as Scott (1995:193) frames them, shape colonial ambitions of political sovereignty. This view stresses early attempts by the East India Company

(EIC) to establish systems of accountability that gathered and consolidated knowledge. Once the Company acquired the administration of police, justice and revenue, first in Bengal and then in most other regions, the techniques of government were progressively instituted (Kapalagam 2010).

Thus, in this approach, enumeration of castes/religious groups, served the administrative interests of colonialism (Bhagat 2003; Walby and Haan 2012:302). Colonial administrators focused on caste, as it appeared to be a key indicators of Indian uniqueness, diversity and mentality (Jassal 2001:322). Thus, categorization was a means to establish and maintain order for colonial administrators (Kumar 2004:1087; Pant 1987:148). Once the population was enumerated, classified and territorially delineated, it could be targeted for interventions by way of laws and regulations (Smith 2004). For example, only certain castes could serve in the army; others castes and tribes identified as inherently criminal (Kumar 2004:1087).

Unfortunately, officials introduced religion and castes categories without any concern of their effects on the Indian people (Bhagat 2003), this creating and/or widening social cleavages (Das 1994:121; Bhagat 2001:453-55; Bhagat 2003:687; Bose 2005:371). According to this view, the colonial rulers wanted to highlight various seams along which different population groups of the country could be easily split apart or pitted against one another (Smith 2004). Thus, colonial governmentality and its disciplinarity of counting and classification delinked what were once fluid loyalties based on kinship, lineage and territorial groupings in a pre-modern sovereignty that was linked to territoriality (Fox 1971; Smith 2004).

Another strand of the critical literature draws from Said's (1978) notion of "orientalism." Said (1978:72, 123) frames orientalism in terms of an anatomical and enumerative exercise, involving particularization and division of information, which is then reconstructed scientifically into

official knowledge. Said (1978: 123, original emphasis) likens this to a "systematic discipline in *accumulation,"* which "fatally tends towards the accumulation of human beings and territories." In doing thus, colonial states paved the way for what armies, administrations and bureaucracies would do on the ground (Said 1978:123). Thus, gazetteers, anthropological studies, censuses and other forms of official information gathering broke colonial populations down into manageable parts that could be readily reconstituted into official knowledge, readily exploited by colonial powers.

There are two common threads in the Orientalist literature. First, the information gathered and disseminated did not always reflect social reality, particularly with respect to markers of social division such as caste. This perspective holds that colonial administrators – misled by 19th-century orientalist discourse and their upper-caste informants – wrongly viewed caste and caste hierarchy as basic social facts of Hindu everyday life (see review in DeSwart 2000). Despite this questionable basis, caste became the authoritative basis of most social science and historiography from the EIC period forward (DeSwart 2000). Unfortunately, however this was based in their imperial expediency as opposed to their truth (Ludden 1993:261). Ludden (1993) argues that almost every scholar who wrote about caste since the 19th century merely helped to "factualize imperial fiction. Inden (1992: 1, 9) similarly contends that colonial administrators denied Indians agency by presenting select Vedic "distorted portrayals of reality" (i.e., the four Varna caste system) and "manifestations of an 'alien' mentality." However, although this categorization met with the approval of Vedic scholars (and more importantly, the EIC's high caste informants), this simple four-fold categorization did not mesh well with practical everyday experience practically; nor did it serve any specific administrative purpose (prior to the British Raj) (Bandyopadhyay

1992; Bates 1995; Bhagat 2001). Hence it presented a distorted view of caste-based on the perception of outsiders and the local elites (Bandyopadhyay 1992; Bhagat 2003).

A second thread, perhaps best articulated by Appadurai (1993:318-319) holds that while caste, as marker of difference, existed in pre-colonial times, it was the particularlizing exercises of the official colonial *quantification* of caste, which linked individuals of certain groups to specific social statuses and moral differences, and served in both justificatory and disciplinary capacities with respect to British colonial rule. Anderson (1991:168-169) similarly asserts that while colonial powers did not construct new ethnic-racial categories, the occupying state's systematic quantification of these identities gradually crystallized, previously fluid markers of social difference. Dirks (2001) analogously suggests that the way British officials understood caste, as reflected in categorization and official enumeration, affected the way caste was practiced.

Other literature, reminiscent of Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and the role of traditional intellectuals, in contrast, suggests that the selection of particular categories to facilitate rule was strongly influenced by the class/social positions of native intellectuals (Viswanathan 2005). Upper class Hindu *pandits* (learned, religious men), were typically recruited for this enterprise, given their high literacy rates and indigenous knowledge (Viswanathan 2005). Thus, these men doubled as native informants and commentators of Sanskrit texts (Viswanathan 2005). Rather than alienate them by opposing their practices, these administrators found it more strategic to use their knowledge as the basis for codification of Hindu law (Chatterjee 2010:457; Fisher 1993:45; Viswanathan 2005). Since the *pandits* were of the Brahmin caste, they claimed "to be the mouth of God and gods among men, the twice born" out of self-interest (Smith 2004).

DeSwart (2000), on the other hand, believes that "orientalist" and "constructionist" views on colonial categorization afford the colonial regime too much power. He notes that if indeed, imperial administrators invented a social structure and managed to make generations of scholars, politicians and people in India believe (and act upon the idea) that this structure was real, would have been "a remarkable feat of social engineering." Governments all over the world can only wish they had the capability to do so (DeSwart 2000). Guha (2003:149) likewise critiques accounts that assume that the British extracted revenue and labor from previously "homogenous and isolated" colonial subjects. Rather, he holds the colonial government was able to do so by honing into various manifestations of status and power embedded within the existing social hierarchy, organized through existing social collectivities (Guha 2003:149). Bayly (1996: 20), for example, shows that Indian elites often collected, centralized and organized information on their subjects in terms of a, caste and other social and/or class distinctions prior to the arrival of the British. The Mughal state, too, enumerated its subjects on the basis of group identities, including caste and religious affiliation (Guha 2003: 153). Guha (2003: 155) notes that the British adapted the Mughal system to their own information gathering activities, making few changes to it initially.

In sum, the foregoing literature remains deeply divided over the origin of divisive religion and caste categories employed by the British to organize, enumerate and facilitate rule over the Indian population. Key controversies emerge over the extent to which, if any, precolonial native categories, information gathering techniques and native informants influenced British activities in these respects. Keeping this mind, we begin our examination of precolonial social organization and information gathering and thus, it is hoped crucial insight into these phenomena.

Official Information Gathering in Precolonial South Asia

Early Period

South Asian attempts to classify and/or count local populations go back thousands of years. Martin (1981: 61-62), for example, notes rough population estimates (circa 1500 BC) found in ancient Hindu texts known as the Puranas. Bayly (1999: 13) notes ancient acknowledgments of caste found in the Vedas, a body of Hindu religious texts thought to have been written between 1500 and 1000 BCE. The Rig Veda (circa 600-300 BCE) makes reference to census-like activity (Yadav 2016:156), and the origin of four *Varna* (caste) system (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra) used in later population enumerations (Mandala 10, Hymn 91). [1] Another classic Hindu text, the Manusmriti (circa 1 BCE), lays down the principles of caste as a universal law (Bayly 1999:13). Early visitors to India also make mention of the caste system. A foreigner traveling through India in 3 BCE, Megasthenes, cites the Indian caste system in his travelogue (cited in Ghuyre 1932:1). Megasthenes (cited in Ghurye 1932:1) point out that the Indian caste system, even back then, had stratification implications. Brahmans, for example, could not marry outside of their caste (Dubois 1817: 1; Ghurye 1932:1) and Sudras were bound to a given profession by virtue of caste standing (Dubois 1817: 2-3; Ghurye 1932: 1).

Overtime, enumeration become linked to official information gathering. Hindu philosopher Kautilya ([1967] 2014), in his classic treatise on state craft, the *Arthashastra*, (circa 250 BCE) highlights the centrality of official information gathering for a functional state. He stressed the

[1] We note, however, that references to caste in these earliest extant works do not necessarily imply that these categories were widely used socially during this period. These data do show nonetheless that the four *Varna* system has indigenous origins and a long, storied history.

importance of a collecting variety of data through state-sanctioned espionage; spies (in various guises) would gather information on individuals incomes, prices and quality of liquor, validity of tax assessments and remissions, the area and output of fields, the *caste* and profession of families, etc (Kautilya [1967] 2014: 93, 169, 204-205). Bayly (1996: 10, 12) finds other ancient texts (circa 400-600 AD) that indicate that Indian statesman continued this preoccupation with quality intelligence gathering. He notes the existence of indigenous information gathering apparatuses in the early Christian era that survived until the end of the nineteenth century (Bayly 1996:14).

Thus, Gait (1903: v) notes that the "of making periodic estimates of the [Indian] population is of very old standing." This is especially true in the provinces of Madras and the Punjab (Gait 1913: xiii). Indeed, many of these earlier indigenous efforts to gather official data and statistics were so elaborate that they often mirrored the later efforts of British colonial officials (Bayly 1996: 21).

[add more evidence here and conclude section].

Medieval Period (Eighth-Fifteenth Centuries)

[background material on the medieval period and key players such as the Sultanates here]

Recall that much of the literature on colonial information gathering centers around the extent to which the British adaptation of existing social categories into the colonial census was extension of previous South Asian information gathering techniques; caste being on such one such identity. Evidence shows that caste both continued to a marker of social difference into the medieval period. Al Birūnī (1914a 100-101;1914b:236-238), chronicling the state of India during the reign of Mahmud of Ghazni (circa 1030) discussed the four Varna caste system and the customs observed and duties incurred by each caste, notes the existence of *candâlas* (outcastes)

and *mlecchas* (non Hindus). However caste was not always characterized in what is viewed as the conventional four Varna system (i.e., Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Sudra). Al Irdīsī (1867:76), an Arab geographer exploring India (circa 1100) notes seven Hindu castes: the Sákriya (kingly caste), the Brahmans (religious caste), Kastariya (likely Kshatriya), the Shárduva (laborers), the Basya (artisans), the Sabdáliya (singers) and Zakya (musicians). These different interpretations of caste, do speak to the fluidity of caste in early times as noted by scholars such as Appadurai (1993), Dirks (2001: Chapter 2) and Jaiswal (1997:17).

Another controversial social category incorporated into the colonial Indian census was religious affiliation, particularly the categories of Hindu and Muslim. Historical evidence shows that Hindu-Muslim distinctions during this period, in particular, provided a basis for tax assessment and/or enumeration, and thus, had far-reaching social and political ramifications. Hintze (1997: Chapter IV) and Sharma (1962: 1-2) note that Muslim rulers of the Delhi Sultanate imposed a poll tax, the *jiziya*, on Hindus in northwestern India. This tax proved so divisive, however, that the Mughals initially abolished it in the interest of promoting inter-communal harmony after assuming power.

[put in more evidence from official documents about Muslim/Hindu differences in terms of enumeration and taxation (*zakat versus jiziya)* and information gathering techniques here.]

Despite this, we also find evidence of symbiotic relationships between Muslim rulers in the Delhi and Bengal Sultanates and educated, high caste Hindu officials and informants. Chatterjee (2010:448), looking at the specific case of early medieval Bengal (later a major British economic and political center during the colonial period) notes the elite status of high caste Hindu scribes, a status linked to their high educational attainment and proximity to political power. Their prominence continued in the Bengal Sultanate period (14^{th}-15^{th} centuries), as the Muslim rulers

recruited and promoted high caste Hindu scribes to all types of administrative offices (Chatterjee 2010:453). Many families served successfully for generations (Chatterjee 2010:452). [more evidence here]

[put in the rest of the evidence here and conclude section]

Mughal Period

This emphasis carried over into the early modern period: Indian rulers of the 17th and 18th centuries considered their kingdoms to be "treasure houses of knowledge as well as accumulation of wealth and power (Bayly 1996:10, 12). The Mughal state exemplifies these tendencies as discussed below.

The Mughal Dynasty, the dominant political force in India prior to the establishment of the British Raj, in particular was known for its sophisticated information gathering techniques (Wolpert 1997: Chapter 10). The Mughal emperors ruled over a population of over 100 million and a vast territory that spanned most of the Indian subcontinent (Richards 1993:1). Consequently, they required a sophisticated surveillance and data gathering system for maintaining order and extracting revenue. As was the case in the medieval Sultanates, the Mughals made strategic use of high caste Hindu informants to gather, collate and disseminate official information (Chatterjee 2010:456). Many of these officials were drawn from the same high-status communities that had served in prior administrations (Chatterjee 2010:456). Per Chatterjee (2010:457), members of these lineages, thus, exhibited a high degree of "occupational adaptability" and were particular adept at seizing opportunities in administrative and scribal professions. These scribes and administrators were in such high demand, that the advent of Mughal rule in Bengal, for example, witnessed not only a continuation of, but an expansion of the association of scribal elites with the imperial administration (Chatterjee 2010:459).

While often drawing upon existing modes of information/information gathering, the Mughals reformulated these data/technologies in accordance with their own political and cultural values (Fisher 1993:46). Once such adaptation was the appointment of '*akhbār nawīs* (news/information writers) to gather and collect specific types of official information (Fisher 1993:45). The emperor Akbar, drawing upon this model, created an elaborate systems of court diarists (*wāqi 'a nawīs* or "events writers") to record official acts, words and events of his reign (Fisher 1993:47). The diarists were to record appointments to offices, salaries, increases and decreases in taxes, proceedings of marriage and births in addition to a wealth of other information (Fisher 1993:47; Ibn Mubārak 1891:258-259). These detailed accountings reflect the Mughal concern that all important data by precisely and flawlessly preserved (Fisher 1993:48). Once recorded, these diaries were scrutinized and synthesized by courtiers and then by the Emperor himself (Fisher 1993:48).

[transition to the imperial *namas*, which epitomized Mughal information gathering].

The *Bābur-nāma* (circa 1500) chronicles the reign of the Mughal Emperor Babur. This work contains information germane to the royal court: battles, other events and royal edicts (Bābur 1922). It also, however, contains a survey of indigenous flora and fauna and an accounting of revenues for each district (*Sarkar*) under Mughal control (Bābur 1922:488-514, 521).

The *Akbar-Nāmah,* written by Abul Fazl Ibn Mubārak (aka '*Allāmī* or "the wise") provides extensive documentation of the Emperor Akbar's reign in the sixteenth century. Ibn Mubārak proved to be a driven collector of official information; as Jarret (1891[1949]:vi) noted, "no details, from the revenues of a province to the cost of a pineapple, from the organization of an army…to the price of a curry-comb are beyond his microscopic and patient investigation." Volume I traces the lineage of the Mughal bloodline, and the history of the reigns of early

Mughal emperors (Blochmann 1873:xii). Volume II provides a detailed accounting of nearly 46 years of Akbar's reign (Blochmann 1873:xii).

The *Ain-i-Akbari*, the third volume of the *Akbar-Na'mah***,** is particularly noteworthy for its breadth of information (Blochmann 1873:xii; Gascoigne 1971: 99-100). This expansive work likewise consists of three parts. Volume I has a vast array of statistics including the official prices of gems of given weights and qualities, the average prices of essential foodstuffs, prices of perfumes, wages of construction workers and prices of building materials, army officer salaries and number of soldiers and elephants under their command, etc (Ibn Mubārak 1873: 15-16, 62-65, 66-67, 75-76, 225-227).

Volume II provides a very detailed accounting of the geography, peoples and natural resources of the 12 *Subahs* (provinces) under Mughal control at that time (Ibn Mubārak 1891 [1949]:115-418). It provides an accounting of the revenue generated by each district (*Sarkar)* and subdivision (*mahal)* within each *subah* (Ibn Mubārak 1891 [1949]:115-418). It likewise notes the number of military personnel (in terms of infantry, cavalry, elephant) in each *subah (see various tables in* Ibn Mubārak 1891 [1949]: 115-418*),* and in some instances the caste status of inhabitants of each *mahal (*see for example data from the *Sarkars* of Behar, Bhadrak, and Ilahabas in Ibn Mubārak 1891 [1949]: 143, 153-154, 161).

Volume III of the *Ain-i-Akbari* (prefaced as an "Ethnography of Hindustan" [Ibn Mubārak 1894:18]) provides a detailed accounting of the Hindu and Muslim communities during Emperor Akbar's reign. These writings are noteworthy in that the Mughals were clearly aware of the Hindu *Varna (caste)* system. As Ibn Mubārak (1894 [1949]:114) notes:

> The Hindu philosophers reckon four states …which they term *varna.* 1. *Brahmana.* 2. *Kshatriya.* 3. *Vaishya 4. Shudra*. Other than these are termed *mleccha* [outsider]... the first of these classes was produced from the mouth of Brahma…the second from his arms; the third, from his thigh and the fourth from his feet.

Ibn Mubārak (1894:115) describes the duties associated with each of the first three *varnas;* as for the Shudras, he indicates that they have no duties except serving the serving the three other castes and "wear their cast-off garments and eat their leavings." He also discusses caste marriage rules and other characteristics (mythical origins, traditional occupations, etc) (Ibn Mubārak (1894:115-119). He further relates caste to Karmic law (the conditions under which the three lower castes may be reborn into a higher caste; and three higher castes reborn into a lower caste) (Ibn Mubārak 1894:225-226), and documents the fines levied for certain caste infractions (Ibn Mubārak 1894:267-268). For example, if a *shudra* slanders a *Brahman,* "he is fined 100 *dams,* a *Brahman* reviling a *Shudra* pays six-and-a-quarter *dams* (Ibn Mubārak 1894:267-268). He also describes the "practical modes of life" of caste-appropriate religious training, appropriate dress codes, marriage practices, purification rituals, food consumption, etc (Ibn Mubārak 1894:271-281; 293-298; 308-310).

Religion also remained a marker of difference, despite the importance of high caste Hindu scribes and administrators, and early attempts to mitigate social differences by abolishing the *jiziya*, the poll tax imposed upon Hindus by the medieval Muslim rulers. The *jiziya* was re-instated in 1679 the notorious Mughal emperor Arangzeb (Azad 1990: Chapter 4; Darbari 1982: 256; Richards 1997: 177). As Guha (2003: 153) notes, the Mughal state had to identify those liable for tax prior to assessment. Therefore he concludes that Indian population enumerations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflected actual social cleavages (Guha 2003: 155).[2]

[2] In this respect, Guha takes a position contra that held by Kaviraj [insert cite] and Appadurai [insert cite] among others, which hold that religious and caste distinctions were very fluid and

The expanse of the Mughal information gathering apparatus was impressive: the Mughals also conducted extensive cadastral surveys, known as the zabt, to assess taxes (Richards 1997: 85). In some ways, the zabt mirrored future colonial information gathering endeavors. For example, field workers gathered the data meticulously and systematically. The information collected, too, was subject to quality control checks at regular intervals during the collection and tabulation processes (Richards 1997: 83).

However, elaborate indigenous data gathering technologies, may not have been in and of themselves, enough to ensure successful census enumeration in a territory as vast and diverse as colonial India. Such an enormous undertaking would have required a rather large contingent of literate and numerate field enumerators, especially in light of the complex nature of the census forms. Thus, it is possible that India's enduring legacy of popular literacy and numeracy too, may have facilitated various administrations', including the Mughals', attempts to enumerate the Indian population.

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thus blurred prior to the arrival the British. They argue that British administrative activities and the colonial census, in particular, reified these social distinctions, often with explosive consequences. Guha, in contrast, argues that religious and caste differences were important life determinants well-prior to the advent of colonialism in India. For example, he notes that the existence of pre-colonial Hindu-Muslim tensions in Maharashtra attests the historical salience of religious identity in India (Guha 2003: 155).

Despite the fact that literacy rates among the lower Indian castes and classes were very low, India was otherwise a highly literate society during this period (Bayly 1996: 37, 39). Indeed, scribes (*munshīs, karanams, kanakukkukppillais),* as noted previously, had long been a key social group in South Asia, though their importance/status increased significantly in the eighteenth century (Alam and Subrahmanyam 2010:394-395). Bayly (1996: 37), for example, cites 19th century records that indicate high levels of literacy in Punjab and Rajasthan. Indeed, literacy was central to many aspects of Indian society. For example, most upper caste families drew up written contracts for marriage arrangements (Bayly 1996: 39). Ultimately, paper records became the preferred form of testimony in adjudications (Bayly 1996: 40), and also as a source of official information (Bayly 1993a: 11). Bayly (1993a: 11), for example, notes that a mass of official documents and orders were transported daily, along with private letters, by a dense network of runners and camel-riding postmen. Bayly (1996: 40) goes on to argue that the importance of literacy in Indian society not only enhanced the social status of "writing people", but also greatly facilitated indigenous information gathering attempts there (Bayly 1996: 36-37).

Commerce, too, required that large segments of the Indian population have reading, writing and accountancy skills (Bayly 1996: 37). Bayly (1993a: 8; 1993b: 585) notes the early emergence of a monetary economy in India, dating back at least as far as the 13th century. Furthermore, there was a high degree of economic integration, despite the fact that coinage varied regionally, since written communications between merchants gathered and dispersed information on the prices of metal and produce (Bayly 1993a: 8). The Mughal monetary economy, in particular, was highly integrated, and serviced by trader-bankers known for their sophisticated double-entry bookkeeping (Bayly 1993: 586). Increasing numbers of accountancy

manuals attest further to the growing salience of numeracy in Indian society during the Mughal period (Bayly 1993a:11).

Official information gathering was not limited to the Mughals during this period. This shows a fair degree of continuity with the Medieval Period. Peabody (2001), for example, details the wealth of official information gathered by Munhata Nainsi between 1658 and 1664 in the kingdom of Marwar in Rajasthan, which was collated in his *Account of the Districts of Marwar*. Nainsi's *Account* presents both narrative and statistical information about Marwar's capital, Jodhpur, its surrounding district and 6 adjoining districts (Peabody 2001:825). The account has seven sections covering these seven administrative units; each starts with a historical narrative and concludes with lists pertaining to each respective district (Peabody 2001:825). The lists generally include gross revenue statistics of each district, statement of district headquarters true state of affairs, descriptions of frontier areas and an enumeration of every village (Peabody 2001:825). More importantly, each generally included a caste-wise enumeration of households (Peabody 2001:825).

A French missionary, working in India during this period, Abbé Jean Dubois (1817: Chapter 1) similarly notes the existence of the caste system in southern India, well prior to the implementation of any formal, extensive colonial census on this region (Dubois 1817: xvi).[3] He

[3] Dubois' (1817: xv) credibility is bolstered by the fact that during his long stay in India that he "remained among the natives…made it [his] constant rule to *live as they did*…In this way [he] became quite familiar with the various tribes that compose the Indian nation."

states that there are four principle castes: Brahmans (first rank), Kshatriya (second rank), Vaishyas (third rank) and Sudras (subordinate to the other castes) (Dubois 1817: 1). Dubois (1817: 1) goes on to provide a detailed account of caste-based rules and rituals.

[conclude and transition to next section]

Early British Colonial Period

Later European rulers drew upon these existing indigenous information gathering techniques when collecting data on the Indian population. Guha (2003: 151, 155), for example, cites the widespread adoption of Mughal administrative practices, including information collection, by colonial regimes. Indeed, East India Company officials, the first British colonizers of India, initially used the existing Mughal information apparatus for its own purposes, fearing that it lacked the technology and know-how to develop a comparably efficient tax assessment and official information gathering system on its own (Ballantyne 2002: 20-21).

Colonial India was part of a political entity known as the Second British Empire, a vast, geographically dispersed set of territories that also included Canada, Australia, Egypt and Southern Africa. The British occupation of India was initiated under the auspices of the East India Company (EIC). The EIC's monopoly of trade and territorial possessions in India had been obtained through a royal charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I on December 31, 1600 (Huttenback 1966:1). The charter permitted the EIC to enact necessary laws, constitutions, and ordinances for the effective and beneficial administration of its trading settlements (Sen 2002: 5), although company rule was not officially established over large South Asian territories until 1757 following the defeat of the Mughal forces at Plassey in Bengal. The company's hold on India abruptly ended following the colony-wide great Rebellion of 1857, which resulted in

hundreds of British causalities. Afterward, the British crown assumed control of the EIC's Indian territories. This second phase of the British occupation lasted until India was officially granted independence from Great Britain in 1947.

The Role of Indigenous Social Categories in Early Colonial Information Gathering

Early Company officials required information about the populace in order to facilitate rule over and extract resources from their colonial subjects. Thus, early on, they were confronted with the issue of how to categorize the Indian population, in an easily quantifiable, yet socially meaningful way. The latter criterion was especially important: it follows logically that indigenous persons would be more likely to cooperate with field enumerators if the census categories resonated with them. Company officials, based on extensive anthropological investigations and consultation with native informants eventually decided on two key markers of social difference: religious affiliation and caste/tribe. We examine these processes below.

Caste Categories and East India Company Information Gathering

The earliest use of caste as a basis for categorizing Indian society emerged from British officials' attempts to stamp out female infanticide, which they believed to be customary in western and northern India in the mid nineteenth century (Bates 1995). Around the same time, a new classificatory trend in European intellectual tradition emerged, which motivating EIC administrators to develop a taxonomy of the Indian population based on primordial categories (Bandyopadhyay 1992:26; Bhagat 2001).

Early studies led to the production of an ethnological questionnaire the British Association for the Advancement of Science (circa 1841), based on a prototype created by the Société Ethnologique in Paris (Bates 1995). This protocol mandated the gathering of detailed information demographic and anthropometric data (such as head measurements (Bates 1995).

Another line of inquiry, drew information from the aforementioned classical Vedic texts, particularly the Brahminic theory of caste classification, based on four major caste (*Varna*) divisions: Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras (Bandyopadhyay 1992; Bates 1995; Bhagat 2003). Brahmans did not eat with non-Brahmans; the British rulers would not eat, drink, or mix with Indians. The Brahmans were essentially different from the other castes, for all castes were essentially different from each other.

Gradually, the British used caste to categorize the Indian population according to occupation and social structure, as a sophisticated attempt at social engineering, as exemplified in the criminalization of certain tribes (Bates 1995). Legislation, including the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act, criminalized male members of certain tribes, and mandated that they report weekly to the local police (Bates 1995). Other caste categories, such as moneylending, agricultural or 'martial' was used to craft legislation regulating land transfers, proprietary rights, and rent regulation; it also distinguished between the loyal and the disloyal for armed forces recruitment (Bates 1995).

Not all British officials agreed with the use of caste to organize and eventually enumerate the Indian population. Denzil Ibbetson (1883), a high-ranking colonial administrator, was critical of the above practices and summed up these earlier polices as driven by "our ignorance of the customs and beliefs of the people among whom we dwell." He further added that the EIC's early information gathering techniques were driven by the concern that such "ignorance deprive[s] European science of material which it greatly needs, but it also involves a distinct loss of administrative power to ourselves" (Ibbetson 1883).

Ibbetson (1883) summarized the dominant and widely received administrative understanding of caste (based on the above noted early information gathering efforts) as follows: (1) caste is an institution of the Hindu religion, and wholly unique to that religion; (2) it consists primarily of a

fourfold classification of people into Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra; (3) caste is perpetual and immutable, and has been transmitted from generation to generation throughout the Hindu history without the possibility of change (see also Bates 1995).

While the above stance was widely held by colonial administrators, Ibbetson (1883) argued it was fundamentally flawed in the following ways. First, he argued, caste was primarily a social as opposed to religious institution; noting the presence of Muslim castes (Ibbetson 1883). Secondly, he noted the presence of Brahmins outcasts and high-ranking Sudras, and dismissed the practical existence of the Vaishya and Kshatriya castes outright (Ibbetson 1883). He further asserted that castes were essentially guilds (Ibbetson 1883), and that many so-called caste divisions or sub-caste units, such as *gotras,* he then argued, were essentially tribal in origin. Ibbetson's suggestions lend some support to arguments made by later scholars that stress that caste boundaries between Indian communities historically remained fluid, fuzzy and dynamic (Kaviraj 1993; Bandyopadhyay 1992; Dirks 2001; Das 1994).

Others tie this emphasis on caste to machinations of high caste Hindu scribes and administrators, who as with previous regimes, offered their services to the British in attempts to preserve/bolster their high social status, as the four *Varna* system privileged high caste Brahmins and Kayasths, who typically filled the ranks of the educated, scribal elites, at the expense of the lower castes (Smith 2004; Viswanathan 2002:31). For example, pre-colonial Kerala was socially stratified, society was organized into a system of interdependent castes and religious groups, each with a particular social, economic, and ritual roles (Kurien 2004). However, the boundaries between each were fluid formation (Kurien 2004). She argues that the consequence of the economic and political compulsions of colonial rule first phase (i.e., the EIC rule), existing social arrangements were harnessed to the exigencies of revenue generation and political control. In the

process there was an increase in the exploitation of the lower strata and an empowerment of the elites; thus, certain categories were exploited both for the purposes of efficient colonial administration as well as to the benefit of the Company's Brahmin informants (Kurien 2004).

Ultimately Ibbetson's critiques of caste categories and their dubious basis, offended both Victorian common sense, as well as the social prejudice of educated English and Indians (Bates 1995). The fluidity and fuzziness of ethnic boundaries likewise made colonial state uneasy and uncomfortable (Bhagat 2007), thus sparking the revival of 'pseudo-scientific' racism and the adoption of newer approaches to anthropometry and racial classification (Bates 1995), and the institutionalization of formal categories through official information gathering (Bhagat 2007). [add more documentary evidence and transition to next section]

Religious Categories and East India Company Information Gathering

The EIC's financial imperatives required administrators to remain mindful of two larger goals (Anderson 1993). First, to extract economic surplus from the agrarian economy; the second to maintain effective political control with minimal military involvement. Typically, various EIC administrators took the path of least resistance, relying upon co-opted indigenous intermediaries as well as military and police power to ensure control (Anderson 1993). Per Anderson (1993) EIC officials exercised power by adapting themselves to the contours of pre-colonial political systems, including law. Therefore in many of its structural features, as well as its substantive policies, EIC rule maintained what were essentially pre-colonial political forms until well into the nineteenth century (Anderson 1993). British officials, in particular, drew upon Mughal institutions. Mughal administrative ranks, honors, rituals, and terminology persisted in muted although significant form even after Company rule shifted to British rule (Anderson 1993). In

adapting these institutions to their own governance, it will be shown, that the EIC drew upon existing distinctions between Muslims and Hindus.

By the early nineteenth century, the court system expanded, a new legal profession established, and a growing body of legal practices extended the influence of the colonial state. The actual social impact of the courts was constrained by the reluctance expressed by many colonial administrators to interfere in agrarian society unless presented with a compelling need. Moreover, the resilience of precolonial political systems meant that actual authority was shared among a number of entities, so that most disputes were settled at the local level (Anderson 1993).

Nonetheless, colonial courts introduced various legal technologies, primarily bureaucratic procedure and methods of inquiry that differed significantly from pre-colonial arrangements (Anderson 1993). Most of these new bureaucratic methods focused on categorizing and systematizing indigenous phenomena (Anderson 1993). Within a centralized bureaucratic framework, the EIC established protocols for gathering information, crafting regular reports, and distilling data for analysis in Calcutta or London (Anderson 1993). A hallmark of the early nineteenth century was the introduction of standardized printed forms in district administration (Anderson 1993). After the British Crown formally established rule in 1857, these village records and district reports supplied detailed knowledge of the colonized society. Thus, legally speaking, perhaps the most striking EIC innovation was the implementation of documentation in matters of law and evidence (Anderson 1993).

Legal documents were not completely new. Mughal administrative manuals are testimony to the importance of documents in the political administration of the empire in the seventeenth century (Anderson 1993). Written contracts likewise provided a flexibility of financial arrangements that allowed merchants to share risks and accumulate capital for participation in

pan-Asian trading networks (Anderson 1993). Yet in terms of evidence, pre-colonial legal theory of Islamic inspiration placed a special emphasis upon oral testimony for the Shari‘a held that only spoken testimony of a morally reliable witness was admissible evidence in court (Anderson 1993). Thus under British rule, the process of documentation and the role of the aforementioned scribal elites were amplified.

Thus, standardized business forms, contracts, and government agreements became more widespread. Legal administrative categories —written into codes of custom, bureaucratic orders, investigation mandates, and after 1871, into census forms— exemplified a practical and ideological need for stable knowledge of the colonized society (Anderson 1993).

The devices of Anglo-Islamic scholarship helped standardize the previously, fluid practices of indigenous society in legal categories that served as a basis for political and legal decisions (Anderson 1993). Even when colonial legal institutions minimally affected everyday life, their operation provided information about Indian society. Relying on texts over customary oral practices served to contain the legal complexities of local customs and mores.

Colonial legal understandings were not entirely baseless, but represented static, frozen ideals (Anderson 1993). They were rooted in idealized texts, not peoples' everyday life experience (Anderson 1993). In simplifying indigenous legal arrangements to a form that could be administered by colonial courts, Anglo Islamic scholarship reduced living norms to immutable concepts of divine inspiration (Anderson 1993).

Therefore, under the colonial legal system, the category of 'Muslim', or often 'Muhammad an', took on a new fixity and certainty that had previously been uncommon. In theory, each individual was linked to a state enforced religious category. Courts only accorded limited local, hybridized identities limited legal recognition; thus, generally speaking litigants were legally

obliged to present themselves as ‘Muhammadan’ or ‘Hindu’. For example, while colonial courts recognized the important legal differences between Shi’a and Sunni Islam but not between local, more syncretic sects such as Khoja, Memon, and Mappilla groups, who practiced Islam but historically adhered to Hindu legal codes (Anderson 1993). This once again speaks to a complexity and fluidity of precolonial social categories, which by many accounts was eclipsed by simplistic official categories.

While it was presumptuous that diverse personal law arrangements could be subsumed under a simple ‘Muslim’ and ‘Hindu’ distinction, it provided a framework for legal rule (Anderson 1993) by forcing individuals and groups into particular categories in order to secure the state’s economic, political, social, and religious patronage. These legal distinctions thus fostered the formation of new coalitions rooted in pan-religious identities (Anderson 1993).

While initially effective, this policy exemplified the contradictions of a non-Muslim government administering a Muslim law, often resulting in misunderstanding and simplification. Company administrators encountered an array of legal norms and institutions that varied according to local customs. Therefore, seeking effective and inexpensive ways to rule, the British relied increasingly on translation, textbook, and codification of classic Vedic and Islamic dictates, in adapting indigenous understandings to the dictates of colonial rule (Anderson 1993; Raj 2000:123, 127). Some argue that in this respect the British are the architects of Hinduism, creating a faith based on Christian models and understandings of religion, with the intention of creating an predictable India that could be classified and controlled (Cohn 1987; 1997; Smith 1962:144; see also review in Keppens and Bloch 2010:2-3). Given the constraints of language, financing, and a limited tradition of scholarship, colonial administrators developed a legal system

that could secure the allegiance of elite informants, while facilitating their rule over a vast diverse population (Raj 2000:123; Smith 2004; Viswanathan 2002:31).

[More evidence here and transition to conclusion]

Conclusion

In sum, thus far our ongoing analysis reveals a few key patterns. Caste, as a concept is indigenous in origin and has a long history, dating back thousands of years. It is doubtful that it is completely a colonial fiction, as the understanding of caste as a social category and its role in society was likely conveyed to various Indian rulers (Medieval Sultans, Mughals and the British) by upper caste Hindu elite informants, who clearly had a stake in the four *varna* system, as it privileged them over other castes. However, other evidence does show caste was indeed more fluid than official documents, particularly written legal documents of the British, would lead us to believe.

Second, understandings of Hindu-Muslim difference go back at least as far as the medieval period, with the imposition of *jiziya* poll tax on Hindus by Muslim rulers. The Mughals clearly were aware of social strife caused by this form of selective taxation, and for this reason the tax was suspended when they initially assumed power. It was reenacted by Emperor Aurungzeb, once again aggravating communal relations. These differences were perceptible to EIC officials, who created two sets of legal institutions, one for Muslims and for Hindus, which likely helped to crystallize these differences. However, evidence once again shows that the British were shortsighted in this manner, as "Muslims" like Hindus were far from a homogenous group, split up into various sects, which in varying degrees drew upon local, Hindu traditions. Thus, once again, we do find evidence of "fuzzy boundaries" (pace Kaviraj 1993) between these two key religious communities prior to colonialization.

Third, there appears to a remarkable degree of continuity with respect to the elite Brahman and Kayasth informants and administrators that served various regimes (e.g., medieval Sultanates, Mughals, EIC and later the British Raj proper), suggesting perhaps a strong role accorded to traditional intellectuals in the production/maintenance of state hegemony. We will continue to delve further into their roles in these various regimes to confirm this.

However, we do stress that these findings are preliminary, as we are still analyzing various documents and other sources to get a better understanding of the various factors involved in the production of official knowledge at various historical points and to what extent it has contributed and continues to contribute to contentious relationships between various communities in India.

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