

**Counting Caste:  
Household Interviews and the Production of Caste Data**

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Overview

For the first time since 1931, the Government of India is collecting data on caste from every household in the country. The collected data will inform the redistribution of affirmative action and welfare benefits in India. This paper draws upon ongoing qualitative research of a contemporary census to explore the role of household interview and local politics in the production of caste data. In urban areas where data collectors and household respondents are unknown to one another, the production of caste data must be understood within the norms and experiences of building trust real-time during the *social experience* of collecting survey data. For example, while households and enumerators discuss caste as a family identity (even in one of India's largest metro cities), the census data on caste are recorded and generated at the individual level. In addition, I argue that peoples' understanding of *what is at stake* heavily shapes the interaction and the type of data that are collected. Because the state and civil society have remained largely inactive with regards to publicity and mobilizing in relation to the census in Karnataka, respondents have a very limited understanding of the larger implications of the collection of caste data. As a result, the behaviors and understandings of data collectors disproportionately shape respondents' understandings of what is at stake and the type of data that are produced.

Theory

Mainstream realist-accounts of censuses are generally interested in enumeration procedures to understand whether collected data are 'accurate.' In contrast, Kenneth Jones (1981:73) puts forth, "the question of the accuracy of these data is only relevant when census is approached as a source of information; this problem becomes largely irrelevant if the census is studied not as a data source, supporting research into other subjects, but as the subject of research itself." Social scientists and historians in this tradition challenge the view that demographic data represent 'social facts,' as they interrogate common demographic categories to show how they are socially-constructed and politically-charged (e.g. Anderson 1991; Desrosieres 1998; Scheper-Hughes 1997; Kertzer and Arel 2002; Bhagat 2006).

The comparative literature on censuses unpacks how race and caste data are produced through the individual and organizational practices of census officials and other state actors, local elites serving as intermediaries, government enumerators, and civil society organizations (Cohn 1987; Nobles 2000; Curtis 2001; Dirks 2001; Loveman 2007). Rich empirical accounts of *census-making*, "or the process of identifying political subjects and centralizing knowledge" (Curtis 2001:2), show how data are produced by practices at various stages in the process, including the construction of the survey instrument (including the inclusion, sequencing and wording of questions and answer choices); enumerator practices related to recording race information for an individual or household; civil society efforts to shape household identities and responses; and, post-collection classification practices by experts (Nobles 2000; Dirks 2001; Nobles 2001; Loveman 2007). This paper builds upon the literature in anthropological demography, the sociology of knowledge and STS to examine

how scientific knowledge is *co-produced* and “embedded in social practices, identities, norms, conventions, discourse, instruments and institutions” (Jasanoff 2006: 3).

In the Indian context, anthropologists and historians have produced historical accounts of colonial censuses, with particular attention to the production of caste data. The colonial government in India collected and aggregated an immense body of ethnographic and survey data on caste, as it tried to make sense of its colonial subject and create a workable map of social relations. Research by Cohn (1987), Appadurai (1993), and Dirks (2001) on colonial censuses in India suggests that the actual process of producing caste data was messy, negotiated and political.<sup>1</sup> Dirks (2001) traces how the official colonial caste count in India dramatically increases from 3,208 castes in the 1871 census to 19,044 castes in the 1881 census. Dirks argues that the steep increase in the number of official castes reflects differences in how colonial officers and their intermediaries, such as the elite Indians who assisted them, collected and made sense of household level responses across the two successive censuses. Most of the increase in the number of castes relates to a change in what Richard Jenkins (2001) refers to as *externally-imposed categories*, where an expert—such as a sociologist or census official—defines a group according to a specific set of criteria.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, as Cohn (1987) has argued, Indians were also trying to make sense of how to answer externally-posed questions about themselves. The increase in the number of castes between successive late 19th century censuses also captures changes in how Indians perceived, and responded to, caste-related census questions, as they too made sense of the “what was at stake” when answering census questions. Adjustments in *self-definition*, or a “collectivity which is meaningful to its members” (Jenkins 2001: 53), reflect a dialectic interplay of internal and external definitions.

This paper traces how official caste data are generated during the encounter between enumerators, data entry operators, and households. While historical census data on race, caste and ethnicity and much of the current data collected on these social categories—particularly in the Global South—are generated through household interviews, social science research that studies these social processes remains surprisingly sparse. While much of the literature on the production of race and caste data focuses on politics of finalizing the questionnaire or the post-data categorization of collected data, this paper builds upon Loveman’s (2007) approach to explore how enumeration processes, which are embedded in a historically-specific set of relationships, processes, and institutions, shape the production of caste data in India.

### Research Design and Methods

This paper utilizes an extended case study methodology to examine how official state data on caste are produced. The case study approach, and its extensions, examines a historical episode, or an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events (George and Bennett 2005). The extended case study

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<sup>1</sup> The historical scholarship on caste counts has focused on actors whose practices and perspectives remain accessible through historical archives of government documents, newspapers, and personal diaries. As such, colonial officials, elite Indians, and caste based organizations play a central role in the production of caste and religion data.

<sup>2</sup> Colonial censuses commonly put individuals into categories that had little meaning in their daily lives (see Anderson’s (1991) discussion of colonial censuses). These imagined communities were largely the products of colonial officials and local elites and it took time for these categories to permeate and make sense locally.

looks at the world from the standpoint of participants without losing the ability to explain intricacies in more generalizable terms (Burawoy 1998).

*Research Site:* Caste is a localized system of stratification that is sustained in relation to a specific political history. The common *varna* view of caste, “in which the unvarying position of the Brahman and the untouchable” fill the top and bottom of India’s hierarchical caste system, is repeatedly found to be the exception not the rule (Bayly 1999; Dirks 2001). Therefore, this project examines census-making within a sub-national region in India that shares a common socio-political history. I ground my empirical study of the caste census in the South Indian State of Karnataka.<sup>3</sup> Politics in Karnataka shares many similarities to other parts of the country where ‘dominant castes’ control formal politics (Srinivas 1962).<sup>4</sup> Two castes—the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats—have controlled much of the formal political power and material benefits in the state since it was created in 1956 (Manor 1989). For example, the inclusion of these two castes in Karnataka’s Backward Classes list—which means members of both groups are eligible for a subset of ‘reserved’ government jobs and seats in educational institutions—reflects the political power of these two groups and not their economic and social ‘backwardness’ (Nataraj 1990).

*Data:* I utilize data from three methods: (1) interviews, (2) observations; and, (3) a systematic review of primary and secondary documents.

*Interviews:* This paper draws upon thirty in-depth interviews with enumerated families in Bangalore Urban and Rural Districts. In addition, I have conducted interviews with caste-based organizations to examine how they have tried to shape household perceptions, participation and responses (or public understandings of caste) during the enumeration.

*Observations:* I draw upon observation of field operations of the census in the Urban District of Bangalore. I have attended an enumerator training and visited local data processing centers. I have also observed approximately 300 household interviews in three different neighborhoods in Bangalore during the canvassing of the survey (between December 2011 and March 2012). I have also observed the re-enumeration of 100 households in a fourth neighborhood in Bangalore.

*Primary and secondary documents:* The primary documents related to this project come from two main sources. The first set of documents includes government-produced materials related to the caste census. This includes training manuals; census schedules; government circulars and memoranda; and related documents. I will also analyze the data entry program, including the wording and sequencing of questions. The second source of documents comes from the media—both the English and vernacular press.

### Preliminary Findings

I find that ground-level enumeration processes create a face-to-face meeting of different sensibilities and objects, in which the encounter of “getting caste data from households” involves a relational process of co-producing data. In addition, the social process of

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<sup>3</sup> Similar in population to the United Kingdom with about three-fourths the geographic area, Karnataka is home to the majority of India’s Kannadigas, or Kannada-speaking population.

<sup>4</sup> M.N. Srinivas coined the term dominant caste in his essay social system of a Mysore Village and the term is used to refer to a caste which “wields economic or political power and occupies a fairly high position in the hierarchy.” These castes are accorded high status and position in all the fields of social life. The people of other lower castes look at them as their ‘reference group’ and try to imitate their behavior, ritual pattern, custom and ideology.

collecting the data shapes the structure of the data, in systematic ways that differ significantly from how survey designers and data users imagine the data to be. Most households and census workers view religion and caste as household identities, in contrast with official caste and religion data which will be at the individual level—and artifact of perceptions and intentions of designers of the census and the questionnaire and not reflecting the interactions across data collectors and households. In my observations of census data collection in Bangalore, I have found that who participates in the enumeration matters; enumeration does not simply involve collecting “hard data” or pre-existing facts about a household. This paper will show how these micro-level processes matter in the production of caste data, which will inform the distribution of quotas and welfare benefits within the world’s largest democracy.

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