

The Politics of Representation

Enumeration and the Mobilization of Caste Identity in Colonial India c. 1900-1935

ICLS Senior Thesis



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Abstract

Ever since the publication of Bernard Cohn's "The Census, Social Structure, and Objectification in South Asia" in 1987, the caste census has become an important node of scholarship on the relationship between knowledge production and social structure in colonial India. Much of this scholarship falls within an anti- or post-colonial framework, emphasizing the ways in which the caste census, as a tool of colonial knowledge-power production, participated in producing the modern "caste system," while leaving out the ways in which such statistical tools as the census were put to use by the most marginalized caste groups in the service of emancipation. In the hands of Dalits, or untouchables, enumeration became an instrument for the mobilization of collective identity, if one shrouded in paradoxes. My thesis will attempt to navigate the tensions between contrasting perspectives on caste enumeration, each of which lay claim in their own way to a "subaltern" narrative. It will frame the census as a case study in the politics of representation, guided by two intertwined definitions of *representation* as they emerged in colonial India: on one hand, the colonizer's statistical-cum-anthropological mode of representing the colonized, as manifested in the census; and on the other, the push towards emancipation through representative politics made by marginalized groups among the colonized, most notably Dalits. A statistical apparatus like the census was foundational for modern Dalit politics, whose battle for equality has been grounded, since its inception, in proportional, "compensatory discrimination."

Through close textual analysis of census documents and related official documents from the period 1900-1935—focusing on records from the Bombay Presidency, which witnessed a flourishing of Dalit activism around this period—and a reevaluation of existing scholarship on the census, this thesis will seek to situate the census within the ferment of caste politics under late colonialism. It will also probe the logistical intricacies of building the census, in order to examine it not as a monolithic structure or exercise of knowledge-power but as a dispersed and dynamic enterprise.

I

Representations of caste

A brief history

Despite the constant changes that have propelled Indian history since Vasco de Gama landed at Calicut in 1498—multiple colonizations, decolonization, partition, and innumerable other sociopolitical upheavals—European or more generally “Western” representations of Indian society have remained remarkably consistent. As Nicholas Dirks notes in *Castes of Mind*, everyone from seventeenth century Portuguese missionaries to 1970s anthropologists “has identified caste as the basic form of Indian society. Caste has been seen as omnipresent in Indian history and as one of the main reasons why India has no history, or at least no sense of history” (Dirks 3).¹ Apparently rooted in texts which predate the New Testament by hundreds of years, it has also been seen as a category which fundamentally, inexorably, distinguishes India from the West.

Much of our current understanding of caste has its roots in the colonial period, when production of knowledge was shaped by the project of empire. In the three and a half centuries between Vasco de Gama’s “rediscovery” of India in 1498 and the formal establishment of the British Raj, growth in trade and increasing military penetration into the subcontinent by multiple European empires was consolidated by social, cultural, and religious colonization, amply documented in diaries, travelogues, missionary tracts, ethnographies, gazetteers, etc. Whether Portuguese, French, or British, European commentators were, more often than not, fascinated with the phenomenon known in English as *caste*.

The term “caste” originates from the Portuguese *casta* (“race, lineage, breed”), first used to describe Indian social groups in the mid-sixteenth century² and assimilated into English, under various spellings, as early as 1613.³ Because caste had little bearing on military conquest, the first Europeans to focus on it in their accounts of the subcontinent were missionaries, who struggled with the question of whether or not Indian customs and social structures were compatible with conversion to Christianity.

¹ All subsequent citations from Dirks refer to *Castes of Mind* unless otherwise noted.

² The OED attributes the first recorded use of *casta* in the Indian context to Garcia de Orta’s 1563 tract on Indian medicine. De Orta was a Portuguese Jewish doctor and naturalist who fled Portugal for Goa during the Inquisition.

³ See OED entry for “caste, *n.*”

The legendary Portuguese Jesuit missionary Fernando de Nobili controversially attempted to adapt Christian faith to indigenous rituals in Tamil Nadu, inaugurating a strategy of *accomodatio* which presupposed a thorough understanding of how these rituals functioned in the first place.⁴ Seeking indigenous informants, de Nobili turned to local Brahmins and, with their help, to the Vedas and other ancient texts, in order to ultimately style himself as a kind of Christian Brahmin. In his assumption that Brahmins and ancient texts were at the heart of indigenous authority, de Nobili established one version of a paradigm which was subsequently canonized in European accounts of caste. This paradigm equated Brahminism with “a general social model of Indian civilization,” and portrayed non-Brahmin rituals and cults as “merely reflections, miscegenation, or shards of the Brahminical ideal” (Zupanov 27). Moreover, it accepted that Indian society was hierarchical and divided, and these divisions could be accommodated for diverse purposes. Carefully navigating the ritual, “religious,” and political spheres, Europeans could freely admix “Western” principles with “native” ones in an ideological hybrid corresponding to the invaders’ own goals.

Meanwhile, around the time that Fernando de Nobili was experimenting with different means of proselytization at the southern tip of the subcontinent, English and Dutch merchants—having both ostensibly established monopolies over sea trade with the East Indies and formed their respective East India Companies in 1601 and 1602—were beginning to wrest Indian ocean trade routes from Portuguese control. The French entered the fray later in the seventeenth century, and each of the competing European powers both allied and battled with existing political groups as it benefited them, often playing into native disputes by supporting rival factions. These opportunistic alliances, and the antagonisms they fueled, had their afterlife in the growing British empire, which replaced the divisive pull of competing European powers with an internal strategy of divide and rule. Through their East India Company, which provided the framework for an unofficial empire, the British had established a virtual trade monopoly and extensive political power in the eighteenth century. However, sustained indigenous resistance to the new empire forced them to develop and deploy more complex mechanisms of control. Acquiring comprehensive information about the colonized population became the

⁴ For a thorough and compelling account of de Nobili’s venture and of Jesuit missionary history in South India more generally, see Ines Zupanov’s *Disputed Mission*,.

precondition of effective governance; not coincidentally, the nineteenth century witnessed a proliferation of Orientalist knowledge, mostly British, which corresponded in scope with the expansion of empire.

British literature about the subcontinent overwhelmingly generated an image of a fragmented, ahistorical, and apolitical people, either tacitly or explicitly affirming the necessity of British rule. Although the Hindu-Muslim divide was long seen as the central fault line in Indian society, caste soon came to rival it in the opportunities it provided for Britain to sustain policies of *divide et impera*. Having studied it since the seventeenth century, Europeans had discerned two separate frameworks which both appeared to constitute “caste”: *varna*, the fourfold division between Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (commercial classes), and Shudras (peasants) described in Vedic texts like the Dharmashastra; and *jati*, the local occupational groups governed by restrictions on commensality and intermarriage. An early textbook on caste was the Abbé Dubois’ *Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*, written in French around the turn of the nineteenth century, then purchased by British authorities and published in English in 1816. Dubois’ deeply personal account detailed Brahminical rituals and emphasized the four *varnas* as India’s principal social groups. It disparaged Indians at every rung of the social ladder, although the “dirty” Shudras incurred a disproportionate share of Dubois’ contempt—even compared to the wily, idolatrous, depraved Brahmins. Despite being largely plagiarized from a prior missionary manuscript and, as Dubois admitted later, enormously flawed, *Hindu Manners* entered the colonial repertoire as an authoritative account of Hindu tradition and social structures, and an important tool in the hands of the British administrators who were coming to dominate India’s political landscape (Dirks 22). It provided a template of sorts for subsequent production of official knowledge, which was beginning to flourish as an inextricable component of colonial rule. The growing epistemic and cultural apparatuses of empire influenced policy, and vice versa, such that representations of the colonized and the demands of political control became entangled

in a mutually enforcing relationship.

It was not until the late nineteenth century, however, that state-sponsored technologies of sociocultural representation came into their own. They both absorbed and influenced the canon of modern social thought as it was taking shape during this period. Sociologists, philologists, and other thinkers from diverse disciplines had begun to incorporate the idea of India, with varying amounts of empirical support, into their theories of society. Marx, following Hegel, depicted India as trapped in the “Asiatic mode of production,” a stage of history which Europe had outgrown, and the colonizers as bringing the subcontinent into the inevitable throes of capitalism. Half a century later—bringing our intellectual timeline into the twentieth century—Max Weber published his study on *The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, which included extensive reflections on caste. *The Sociology of Hinduism*, along with three other works in the same series—*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *The Religion of China*, and *Ancient Judaism*—was an integral part of Weber’s endeavor to achieve a global, comparative “sociology of religion.” These seminal thinkers and many more shared an interest in India as a civilizational counterpoint to the West—a society where hierarchical, collective forms of social organization continued to prevail over individualism and egalitarianism. Meanwhile, various strands of empiricism were gaining in the arena of Western thought. As the social sciences “matured,” turning more than ever towards *data* as the language of “objective” truth, so did the study of caste.⁵ European anthropologists and sociologists like Celestin Bouglé, along with a select few counterparts in the budding Indian academic elite, began to formulate a more precise analysis of the myriad *jatis* composing Indian society. The colonial state, however, remained responsible for the bulk of the effort to generate systematic knowledge about caste, possessing the power, the tools, and the ideological impetus to pursue a sweeping, empirical analysis of Indian society. Its increasingly data-driven approach came to fruition not only in generating information *about* caste, but in administering caste

⁵ I am borrowing the notion of “mature” vs. “immature” sciences from Ian Hacking, “Michel Foucault’s Immature Science.”

itself—a dual process which participated in reproducing social stratification among the colonized.

This data-driven approach reached its apex in the decennial census, launched on an India-wide scale in 1871-72. The census was the colonial state's first attempt to generate an official, unified account of caste throughout the subcontinent, as part of its broader endeavor to represent the totality of the subject population in a manner that would be intelligible and useful to British rule. Much of its impetus lay in the anti-colonial uprising of 1857, which had been sparked by a sepoy mutiny in Awadh. Combating the first major threat to their rule since the late eighteenth century, the British found surprising allies in the Sikhs, the Marathas, and other indigenous groups which had themselves only recently been defeated by the colonizers. British control over India was saved, but the revolt evoked a very real threat to the burgeoning empire and highlighted the imperial necessity of consolidating cultural control in addition to economic networks and military might. Greatly indebted to a few unlikely allies, the British focused on further distinguishing groups who would cooperate with and support the colonial regime from those antagonistic to it, especially so that they could cull all suspicious groups from their armed forces. Meanwhile, the consolidation of the colonial state in the form of the new Raj—the East India Company having been dissolved in 1858 and replaced officially by the Crown—made this goal more practicable. Identifying “martial races” for exclusive recruitment into the military and weighing the respective roles of Hindus and Muslims in the police force thus became realizable strategic imperatives for the British.

The grounds having been prepared for more systematic production of knowledge about the subcontinent, the British renewed their commitment to the policing of colonial difference. In its epic endeavor to condense the entirety of Indian society into a collection of tables, graphs, and reports, the census responded to many of the practical and ideological demands of the colonial state, paving the way for further regulation and perpetuating the image of an apolitical people broken by various forms of division and hierarchy.⁶ Maintaining caste, it seemed, would provide a crucial safeguard against any

⁶ J.A. Baines, census commissioner for 1891, described caste as “a practically unlimited number of self-centred and

kind of nationalist unity among the colonized, and thereby secure perpetual British rule (Dirks 211).

Debates raged, meanwhile, over the organization of caste and the correct methodology for enumerating it. The classifications of caste groups varied from decade to decade, as we will examine below. Despite these debates and the constantly shifting foundations of caste enumeration, however, British administrators overwhelmingly shared the belief that a complete understanding of caste *could* be achieved; for all its mysteries and complications, Indian society was an entity that could, with persistent efforts and sufficient accumulation of hard facts, be objectively categorized, counted, and thereby explained. This notion held fast, even though every attempt to classify and record caste further transformed the social categories which the British assumed to be static. The most controversial of the approaches to caste enumeration was H.H. Risley's attempt in 1901 to establish an India-wide ranking of castes according to "indigenous" standards. Risley's census typifies the effort to generate a totalizing empirical representation of Indian society using scientific methodology, as an antithesis to Western civilization. Anthropology continued to imitate his efforts, albeit in more subtle forms, long after it was divorced from colonial government.

Risley's attempt to rank *jatis* hierarchically had equally profound effects "on the ground," spurring a flood of petitions for higher ranking and exponentially amplifying the difficulties of maintaining a static model of caste. This outburst of competition around official representation of caste status challenged the basic assumption ingrained in the caste census—that Indian society could, with persistent efforts and sufficient accumulation of hard facts, be objectively categorized, counted, and thereby explained—and began to generate tension within the operation. Every census was forced to tackle the challenges its predecessors had engendered until the tabulation of caste was abandoned in 1941.

Perhaps humbled by the failure of Risley's census—or at least by the paradoxes it magnified—subsequent census commissioners tread more lightly in their accounts of caste organization. J.H. Hutton, the Census Commissioner for 1931 who went on to become an anthropologist at Cambridge, condemned Risley's work, emphatically dismissed the scriptural basis of caste, downplayed racial

mutually repellent groups, cramping to the sympathies and to the capacity for thought and action." (Cited in Dirks, 211.)

factors, and generally displayed more sensitivity to the complications of recording caste in his 1931 report. Between 1901 and 1931, the census apparatus was forced to internalize many of the divergent reactions to its early efforts, and the question of abandoning caste as a census category gained prominence in official debates. The consensus among census officials remained, however, that systematically recording caste, one way or another, was a worthy effort.

Responses to the census among Indian public figures varied widely, with many of them participating either first or second-handedly in the debates it raised among British administrators. On the one hand, the eminent sociologist G.S. Ghurye wrote in 1932 that

The total result [of the Censuses] has been, as we have seen, a livening up of the caste-spirit. [...] The desire of the Census officials to give an intelligible picture of caste by means of nice grading of contemporary groups has provided a good rallying point for the old caste-spirit. (Ghurye 158)

Ghurye's assessment reflected a growing sentiment in the public sphere that "enumeration of the myriad castes and sub-castes is a sort of state encouragement to the fissiparous social tendency [...] which has kept the Hindus from becoming one nation and which is an anomaly in these days of democracy, equality, fraternity."⁷ This quote, albeit blindly idealistic, demonstrates a nationalist concern about the political consequences of the census, which was no longer just a medium for the contestation of caste status but also a mechanism which had the power either to inhibit or to help build the modern Indian nation-state. For the minorities who did not fit into the *Hindu* nation, the census was a vehicle for claims to an independent position within the budding state.

The years surrounding the last caste census witnessed the Round Table Conferences and the ensuing Poona Pact, which marked a bitter debate in Indian nationalism over how India's budding representative government—still overseen by the Raj—would deal with the Dalit (untouchable) minority.⁸ The Round Table Conferences—three conferences taking place between November 1930 and

⁷ "Untouchables and the Census." *Times of India*, October 14, 1930.

⁸ The term "Dalit," meaning "downtrodden" or "oppressed" in Marathi, is the name adopted in the twentieth century by castes traditionally regarded as "untouchable"—that is, castes with whom various forms of contact including but not limited to physical touch were said to cause "ritual pollution" among the so-called higher castes. The term "Dalit," in use as early as 1917 but more commonly associated with Ambedkar's use of it beginning in the late 1920s, has become the most prevalent form of self-identification among "untouchables," though its acceptance is far from unanimous. It is one in a long list of names which have historically designated these castes. Official terminology has shifted from "Outcastes" to "Depressed Classes [or Castes]" (in use as early as the 1880s) to "exterior castes" (proposed in J.H. Hutton's 1931 census report but short-lived) and finally to Scheduled Castes (SC), the term currently in official use. In addition to various names adopted by regional Dalit groups, such as "Adi-Dravida" or Phule's more expansive "atishudra," non-

December 1932—increased both the visibility and the polarization of Dalit politics; chief Dalit activist and spokesman Dr. B.R. “Babasaheb” Ambedkar seized the statistically-driven concept of the minority and attempted to apply it, in the form of a separate electorate, to secure potentially transformative political power for Dalits. Ambedkar, whose advocacy for Dalit rights in the 1930s led him to participate in framing the constitution of postcolonial India, hoped that allowing Dalits to vote independently for their own representatives would give them enough leverage in politics to begin rectifying centuries of accumulated oppression. His proposal for a separate Dalit electorate offers a valuable bridge between the two registers of “representation” anchoring my thesis.

Unlike British Prime Minister Ramsy MacDonald, who granted Dalits a separate electorate as part of the Communal Award (August 1932), Mahatma Gandhi abhorred Ambedkar’s approach. Gandhi, the *de facto* and sometimes *de jure* leader of the nationalist movement which ultimately brought India political independence in 1947, held that creating a space for “Harijans”⁹ outside the fold of the general electorate would cement irreparable divisions in the developing nation. When Gandhi undertook a “fast unto death” to overturn the Communal Award, Ambedkar caved, and their compromise in the Poona Pact (September 1932) more or less set the limits of the current reservation system. According to the Pact, Dalits would be reserved approximately fifteen percent of seats in the provincial legislatures, and eighteen percent of seats in the central legislature—roughly proportionate to their population—but these seats would be elected by a general Hindu electorate rather than a separate Dalit one.

This fundamental rift between mainstream Indian political parties and Dalits regarding minority representation and, consequently, Dalit emancipation, has evolved little in the interim. The “compensatory discrimination” accorded to Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/ST) has led an increasing

Dalit social reformers have introduced a host of other names since the late nineteenth century. The most memorable remains Gandhi’s “Harijan”—children of god—coined in 1933 but since abandoned for its patronizing and pejorative connotations. In the spirit of Ambedkar and generations of subsequent anti-caste activists, I have used the term “Dalit” as consistently as possible throughout this essay except when discussion of official records demanded otherwise. For a thorough account of untouchability in modern India, see Mendelsohn and Vicziany, *The Untouchables*.

⁹ See the previous footnote.

number of castes to seek “backward” status in order to usurp the unique rights accorded to SC/STs by the Constitution but routinely denied them in practice. The continued oppression of a majority of Dalits, including a number of atrocities even in recent years, have provoked a radicalization of the Dalit movement in the postcolonial period, of which the Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s provides one example. The rise of the BSP (*Bahujan Samaj*, or Majority People’s, Party) represents the most recent political avatar of the fiercely independent Dalit struggle, which continues to be sidelined by nationalists and Marxists alike. It marks a shift from minority- to a majority-driven rhetoric, but remains embedded in the same percentage-driven paradigm.

Meanwhile, despite the fall of the Raj, the dominant patterns in representations of caste established by early Orientalists prevailed at least until the 1980s in European and American as well as in Indian sociology and anthropology. In addition to the broader “fetishization and relentless celebration of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’” inherent in most anthropology (Said 213), scholars on South Asia shared a singular impulse to produce totalizing models of Indian society as an antithesis to the West. This broad philosophical leaning is most evident in Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*, which pitted modern Western individualism against traditional holism. Dumont saw the caste system as an embodiment of this holism, as an unabashed enactment of the “fundamental social principle” of hierarchy. He grounded a philosophical defense of caste in anthropological terms, emphasizing purity v. pollution as the defining axis of caste hierarchy, while departing from the specific lessons of his prior ethnographic research in south India.¹⁰ His approach was profoundly unhistorical, and far more conservative than those of many colonial scholars; it also left behind much of the intensive ethnography Dumont himself had performed a decade or so prior to writing *Homo Hierarchicus*, as manifested in his *South Indian Sous-Caste*. Although he was writing against the tide in 1966, Dumont’s work nevertheless had a lasting impact on South Asian Studies.

¹⁰ It is important to keep in mind, here as elsewhere in this essay, that certain features of Brahmin hegemony and Dalit oppression have always been more distinct in south India than in the north, influencing Dumont’s conclusions just as my focus on western India has shaped mine.

Even the studies of caste which most explicitly sought to refute Dumont shared the philosophical assumption undergirding *Homo Hierarchicus*: that India could be understood as the West's structural Other. In the 1960s and '70s, McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden launched "ethnoscology," a school of anthropology which attempted to ground a quasi-mathematical model of caste in so-called "indigenous categories"—categories which proponents of ethnoscology claimed would be truly objective, unburdened of Western prejudices, and thus generate a more accurate depiction of Indian society. Marriott challenged traditional binaries commonly found in studies of caste—such as the widely accepted dichotomy of pure/impure—and recognized different forms of fluidity between caste categories which models like Dumont's sidelined. But ethnoscology only further anchored an ahistorical interpretation of caste; as Nicholas Dirks writes in his recent article "Futures Past," "there was no room within ethnoscology for a critical engagement with "modernity", since all modern forms were signs of the contamination of the west" and therefore Marriott's approach involved a further "essentialization" of India as an ancient, Hindu society (Dirks 2012, 24). Much like Dumont, Marriott saw the collective structure of Indian society as *fundamentally* different than Western social structures: he went so far as to describe the Indian person as a "dividual" in contrast with the isolated individuals of the West.

Other works written around this time integrated somewhat more historical dynamism into their models of caste and avoided some of the sweeping essentializations driving dominant theories of caste, but nevertheless retained a Brahminical attitude. Such was the case in the works of Oxford-trained sociologist M.N. Srinivas, who saw Sanskritization—the practice of adopting traditionally high-caste habits like vegetarianism and abandoning "impure" habits like drinking alcohol—as the primary vehicle for mobility in the caste system.¹¹ Srinivas made an earnest effort to grapple with the effects of colonialism and the category of "modernity," which opened up a second important means of upward

¹¹ This phenomenon had already been described at length by a string of commentators including H.H. Risley, albeit not in exactly the same terms.

mobility: Westernization. One dimension of this was the census, which he calls “a government-sponsored channel of caste mobility” (Srinivas 101). Srinivas describes the census as conducive to collective caste movements: the opportunity for official recognition gave new momentum to “horizontal”—that is, regional or even national—consolidation of parallel *jatis* through caste *sabhas* (assemblies or councils) and other such organizations. These associative tendencies took on a vertical dimension when the regrouped castes attempted collectively to climb up in the varna hierarchy. While Srinivas’ template accounts for change within the caste matrix, it rules out forms of transformation which challenge existing (hegemonic) social structures: his two models of caste mobility are basically processes of “elite emulation,” whether of the Brahmin (under Sanskritization) or of the colonizer (under Westernization) (Carroll 359; Rao 291ff).

Later in the 1970s, more critical, historical analysis paved the way for the study of caste not as a fixed Brahminical system, but as a complex of social structures indelibly shaped by colonialism. Among the forerunners of this approach was Bernard Cohn, who, independently of Said, studied the cultural implications of colonialism and its forms of knowledge.¹² Cohn’s essay “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia” was among the first texts in South Asian studies to dissect the census as one of many instruments of colonial power with profoundly transformative implications for the structures of Indian society—a society viewed for so long as static and unchanging. In this essay, Cohn reveals some of the troubling assumptions guiding the census project under the Raj, including the basic assumption “that an all-India system of classification of castes could be developed” (Cohn 243). He also emphasizes the influence of the census on the subsequent study of caste—even on anthropology more generally—hinting at the power of what Dirks later calls the “ethnographic state” and the enduring presence of the knowledge it produced in subsequent South Asian studies.

In conjunction with Cohn’s work, Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) paved the way for a critical rupture

¹² *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* is the title of one of Cohn’s later works, published in 1996.

in the study of caste. It took many years, however, for a historical, post-*Orientalism* approach to caste to achieve canonicity; this finally occurred when Nicholas Dirks published *Castes of Mind* in 2001. *Castes of Mind* provides the historical and theoretical cornerstone for my study of caste politics via the administrative and ethnographic apparatus of the colonial census. Dirks' historicization of "tradition," of the colonial archive, and of the categories generated in the attempt to understand a purportedly static civilization, guides my own approach to this tense period in Indian history, when colonial governance both collided with and buttressed the growth of the new Indian polity. *Castes of Mind* is instrumental in explaining the paradoxes generated in the simultaneous production of "tradition" and modernity through the British attempt to classify and systematize the innumerable forces driving Indian society (Dirks 9).

In recent years, Dirks' argument has also incurred considerable backlash in the academy from critics including Susan Bayly (1999), Sumit Guha (2003), and Dilip Menon (2006). Guha in particular presents a strong objection to the notion that "enumerative technologies" like the census caused previously fluid social and ethnic identities to harden around the "alien grid" of the colonial state's fantasies (Guha 149). He reminds us that systematic quantification of Indian population groups was hardly an innovation on the part of the colonial state; that courts in both Mughal and Hindu states had a long tradition of intervention in disputes over caste and other customs; and that older forms of enumeration were just as "inextricably dependent upon identity" as newer ones. "The pre-colonial state did not simply extract revenue from a society composed of 'a harmonious mélange of syncretic cults and local cultures'" (Guha 162); on the contrary, Guha maintains that the "fixing of identities and attributes was an important part of routine administration at the Imperial and local levels" of Mughal governance, and that the Mughals, like the British, maintained stringent policies of divide and rule.¹³

¹³ In this vein, Guha also rightly dismantles an argument that Subaltern Studies scholar Sudipta Kaviraj makes in an essay titled "The Imaginary Institution of India." Kaviraj's argument runs parallel to Dirks' in some ways but it paints the situation in much broader strokes and leaves itself much more open to dispute. I would dare to suggest that Kaviraj's argument about the evolution from "fuzzy" to "enumerated" communities on the colonial stage has a somewhat romantic

Colonial knowledge accumulation was not a British innovation but merely a new avatar of the ongoing interplay between the logistical needs of the state and the formation of group identity in South Asia as elsewhere.

Furthermore, Guha argues that scholars like Dirks and Appadurai “all share a paradigm in which real historical agency is fundamentally Western,” locating “all significant impulse to change in governmental practices” imposed by the colonizer (Guha 150). Although I would dismiss this claim as exaggerated and reductive, it forces us to revisit the historical narratives traced thus far in terms of the fundamental question of agency. Having focused on dominant narratives of caste in South Asian studies—colonial, pre-colonial and postcolonial—which privilege upper-caste or colonial agency in the structuring of modern Indian society, we must now turn to a group of agents overwhelmingly neglected by scholarship on South Asia: Dalits. The Dalit narrative has alternately challenged colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial perspectives on caste, in a tradition of resistance spanning from Jotirao Phule in the late nineteenth century, to Ambedkar in the nationalist period, to contemporary scholars like Vivek Kumar and Ramnarayan Rawat.

The roots of modern Dalit anti-caste resistance lie in the works of Jotirao Phule, whose polemical tract *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* sought to rewrite Indian history as driven by the conflict between Aryan Brahmins and Kshatriya cultivators, the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. With this revisionist history, heavily influenced by missionary accounts like that of John Wilson, as his weapon, Phule sought to create a common identity for low-caste Indians which he mobilized through the Satyashodak Samaj (Truth-Seeking Society).¹⁴ In a sweeping critique, he connected the struggle against the oppression of *shudra-atishudra* (low-caste and “untouchable”) communities with both labor and gender

if not an Orientalist streak, and makes an easier target for Sumit Guha than Dirks’ historically specific and nuanced account.

¹⁴ See O’Hanlon 1985. Ironically, Phule’s account was also corroborated in some sense by colonial racial theories of caste, which achieved their apotheosis just after Phule’s death. One can only speculate as to how he would have responded to the efforts of H.H. Risley and other colonial race “scientists,” discussed in more detail below.

issues. Phule established a school for *shudra-atishudra* girls and generally combated the suffocation of women, including Brahmin widows, under the family structures and marriage conventions of Hindu society. Phule embraced many of the values that the colonizers brought—he praised the “enlightened British rulers” for having provided *shudra-atishudras* the means for their emancipation, particularly in the form of modern education—but he also criticized the colonizers for not holding up to many of their promises of equality. Although Phule’s work largely predates the period that I am focusing on, it is important to acknowledge here that he laid the groundwork for subsequent low-caste resistance through a combination of innovative social critique and selective appropriation of colonial modernism. The scope of the non-Brahmin identity he espoused largely crumbled after his death, however, with Dalits suddenly turned away from the Satyashodhak Samaj and more generally abandoned by the “touchable” lower castes.

Born in 1891—the year after Phule died—B.R. Ambedkar was the next figurehead of low-caste assertion in Western India. Ambedkar remains the hero of the Dalit movement, and much compelling scholarship on him has emerged in recent years. Anupama Rao’s *The Caste Question* charts the creation of the Dalit as a new kind of political subject through the lens of Ambedkar’s complex, polyvalent approach to Dalit emancipation. Rao’s persistent references to the role of colonial classificatory schemes like the census in the articulation of Dalit identity provides a springboard for much of the second part of my essay. “Colonial categorization, the (ideological) prominence of community as constituency and models for limited political participation,” she writes, “intersected with Dalits’ self-identification as a discriminated community to facilitate their shift into formal politics” (Rao 123). Rao describes at length the Dalits’ “sustained engagement of liberal categories—individual, minority, nation, rights—and their redeployment for the emancipation of the community” (157), emphasizing in particular the statistically-grounded category of the “minority” and the unfortunate paradox which it seems to have trapped Dalits in, despite Ambedkar’s efforts to transform “minority” into a platform for

unique emancipation. “*The model of Dalit identity was the model of permanent struggle through the exacerbation, rather than the resolution, of difference*” (158). Behind these complications lies the Dalit challenge of simultaneously fighting both colonialism and Hindu nationalism, which Ambedkar faced in the years leading to independence. The complexity of the Dalit struggle has always stemmed from an effort to affirm the Dalit’s unique position by resisting, in one way or another, virtually every other existing political model, including those provided by the colonial state and the nationalism which butted against it, but also that of Marxism.

In addition to *The Caste Question*, a recent surge in “Dalit studies,” on the part of both Dalit and non-Dalit scholars, offers critical insight into the unfolding of the anti-caste struggle from Phule’s time until the present. Such studies concentrate primarily on three areas and social groups: the Mahars in western India, the Chamars in Uttar Pradesh, and the much broader group of “non-Brahmins” in South India and especially Tamil Nadu. M.S.S. Pandian’s *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* and V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai’s *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millenium* offer valuable examples of the latter, tracing the genealogy of the non-Brahmin movement through the figures of Iyothee Thoss and E.V.R. Periyar, and the associated Justice Party and Self-Respect Movement. Unfortunately, anti-caste movements in South India lie outside the scope of this essay. Ram Rawat’s *Reconsidering Untouchability*, Manuela Ciotti’s *Retro-modern India*, and Vivek Kumar’s *Dalit Assertion*, come closer geographically and thematically to my focus, providing different angles on the state of Dalit politics in U.P. with particular emphasis on Chamars. Rawat’s main projects are to write the Dalit into *history* and out of the narrow confines of anthropology, as well as to break stereotypes about Chamars which have provided a pretense for extensive violence against them until the present day. Rawat’s study is exemplary of a uniquely Dalit historiography, which seeks to rectify the similar ills of colonial and nationalist historiography, both equally culpable for writing Dalits out of history. Kumar’s *Dalit Assertion*, meanwhile, emphasizes the role of electoral politics in shaping contemporary Dalit identity, while Manuela Ciotti’s *Retro-modern India* ties together economic and political aspects of Chamar life with issues of gender and education, using the case of a single village in eastern U.P. to illustrate a broader theoretical claim about the

paradoxes of contemporary Dalit politics. All of these studies have molded the perception of contemporary caste politics which informs this essay.

* * *

Before moving into the next part of my essay, I would like to recall the registers of *representation* framing my discussion of the colonial archive and its relationship with modern caste politics. These quickly multiply from two seemingly simple definitions—textual or graphical on the one hand, political on the other—to produce a myriad intertwined discourses. Without dwelling on the philosophical dimensions of representation, a category which has been in crisis seemingly forever,¹⁵ I will use it as a frame to examine the disjunctures between official representation of the colonized by the colonizers, nationalist representations of Indian society, and Dalit self-representation. How did the latter intertwine with the former two, and how did it depart from them to form its own unique discourse through the framework of representative politics?

Following from his canonical works *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Said's essay "Representing the Colonized" succinctly ties together many of the theoretical issues surrounding "representation" in the colonial and post-colonial contexts. "To represent someone or even something," writes Said, "has now become an endeavor as complex and as problematic as an asymptote, with consequences for certainty and decidability as fraught with difficulties as can be imagined" (Said 206). This effect was tangible for census officials in colonial India not because they were steeped in postmodern theory but because of the obvious implications of applying a statistical model developed in their relatively homogenous homeland to the infinitely vaster and more diverse society they endeavored to control in India. I hope to point to a few ways in which the quandaries facing these census officials resonate with more recent developments in intellectual history.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Said 205.

¹⁶ To bring in another, more distant, discipline to push a comparative perspective: Quantum mechanics offers an appealing metaphor for the paradoxes of representation I discuss in this essay. Physicist Werner Heisenberg suggested a thought experiment in 1927 to illustrate his famous uncertainty principle, which goes roughly as follows. Imagine an electron under a microscope. In order to be located, the electron must be illuminated at high energy. But because light can act as both a particle and a wave, the light colliding with the electron jolts the electron out of place. Now in motion, the

The following letter sent in 1900 from the Government of India's Finance and Commerce Department to the Secretary of State for India, Lord Hamilton, offers a striking illustration of the naïve and paradoxical ideas governing representation of the colonized under the Raj.

It has come to be recognized of late years that India is a vast store-house of social and physical data which only need to be recorded in order to contribute to the solution of the problems which are being approached in Europe, with the aid of material much of which is inferior in quality to the facts readily accessible in India, and rests upon less trustworthy evidence. It is true that various social movements, aided by the extension of railways, are beginning [...] to modify primitive beliefs and usages in India, but that in our opinion is all the more reason for attempting to record them before they are entirely destroyed or transformed. (Natarajan 546)

While on one hand, the writer assumes a transparent, accessible, static model of Indian society—labeling it a veritable warehouse of data—he also recognizes that this society is rapidly changing, thanks to innovations brought by the British. In other words, he pairs an Orientalist fascination with Indian “tradition” with a passion for “development” and reform. Little does he realize, even in 1900, the implications that opening the door to this “vast store-house” will have for Indian society.

Latent in his description is the paradox of simultaneously sustaining or amplifying existing social structures by representing them, and offering the potential to erode these structures by the same process. Colonialism was rife with such contradictions, most of them reflecting more blatant hypocrisy than the one I just evoked. How did the rhetoric of universalism, egalitarianism and uplift sit with relatively unconcealed strategies of divide and rule? These kinds of conflicts and contradictions extend far beyond the colonial context; low-caste activists have struggled with their legacy at least since the time of Ambedkar, unable to overcome multiple layers of historical and current oppression by claiming a straightforward discourse of equality and justice. As Chatterjee notes, Ambedkar epitomizes the “contradictions posed for modern politics by the rival demands of universal citizenship on the one hand and the protection of particularist rights on the other,” the “tensions between utopian homogeneity and real heterogeneity” (Chatterjee 8).

electron's momentum can be measured, but it has left its original position, which therefore eludes the experimenter. Without taking the comparison too seriously, I would like to suggest that a parallel “uncertainty principle” troubled the caste census.

II. Governance, ethnography, identity

Numbers and the colonial state: an “administrative episteme”

As I have already suggested, the mechanisms for the systematic assessment of “real heterogeneity” in South Asia crystallized under colonialism, most conspicuously in the behemoth of the decennial census. A central assumption guided official representation of the colonized through tools like the census: that recording the “readily accessible” facts of Indian society was not only *possible*, for colonial administrators, but *necessary*. Rendering this “vast store-house of social and physical data” on paper became a sine qua non for the colonial government by the turn of the twentieth century. The statistics produced by enumeration would streamline such diverse administrative functions as legislation and policing, army recruitment, sanitation, disease control, and famine relief, amongst others. But from its onset, the census project blurred the boundaries between these “useful” functions and a consuming desire to make India entirely *knowable*, to “*translate* the colonial experience into terms graspable in the metropolis” (Appadurai 326). The census occupied a unique position between governance and scholarship: although the official rationale behind it was “administrative necessity,” this rationale was pushed into the background by the elaborate ethnographic project that it engendered. The census, from its onset, straddled the logistical and the discursive needs of the state (Appadurai 320), transforming an instrument of taxation into a mode of knowledge, an “administrative tool” into an “administrative episteme” (Dirks 221).

The census did not approach India with a *tabula rasa*, but with the assumptions—and the demands—of a canon of prior Orientalist thought, which held caste to be the essence of all things Indian. Combining the notions that to know one’s subjects is to govern them well, and that caste expressed the essence of Indian society, the colonial government made “understanding” caste one of its chief objectives, and subsequently fashioned itself as the hub of all knowledge about caste. The representatives of the GOI’s Finance and Commerce Department once again put it best when they assured the Secretary of State in their letter of Nov. 1, 1900 that “in ethnology, as in archaeology,

nothing can be done in India without the active assistance of Government” (Natarajan 547).

Naturally, a project spearheaded by the government had to be conducted in the government’s language, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, was predominantly the language of statistics. The “enumerative modality,” as Cohn terms it, was a pillar of colonial knowledge, providing “a particular form of certainty to be held onto in a strange world” (Cohn 1996, 8). Numbers converted the mysteries of India into “elegant, discrete, comparable” units, which were useful “in ways that narratives [...] could never be” (Dirks 199). They were not only tools of analysis, but also tools of discipline and justification: on one hand, numbers “constituted a kind of metalanguage for colonial bureaucratic discourse within which more exotic understandings could be packaged” (Appadurai 326), and on the other, they “could be readily compared and analyzed to suggest reasons for political unrest or disaffection, to demonstrate the ‘moral and material progress’ of India under political rule,” and so on (Dirks 199). Cumulatively, therefore, “numbers were a critical part of the discourse of the colonial state” (Appadurai 319).

The genealogy of caste enumeration: gazetteers and early censuses, 1857-1901

What was unique to the Raj was not merely its extensive use of enumeration as a tool for social analysis and, consequently, for governance; it was its attempt to include categories like caste, which not only defied enumeration but added yet another layer of ideology to the already loaded project of counting an entire society. As we saw above, the anti-colonial uprising of 1857 provided a distinct political incentive for the tabulation of caste—a project which was therefore not utilitarian in a simple, referential manner, but directly correlated to the more complex exigencies of colonial power (Appadurai 316). The inclusion of caste in the census also constituted an official acknowledgement that the “caste system” was not only compatible with but conducive to British rule in India, precluding the possibility of a unified anti-colonial uprising. J.A. Baines, census commissioner for 1891, described caste as “a practically unlimited number of self-centred and mutually repellent groups, cramping to the

sympathies and to the capacity for thought and action” (Dirks 211). The maintenance of caste, it seemed, would impede any serious nationalist movement and secure perpetual British rule. The census commissioner for 1901, Sir H.H. Risley, was a still more outspoken proponent of the notion that a people as internally fissured as Indians would never be capable of self-rule. His census, undoubtedly the most monumental to be conducted until that point, is a milestone for colonial knowledge production in South Asia, whose repercussions for caste representation and self-representation continued to be felt for decades. For Dirks, Risley’s project marks no less than caste’s “colonial apotheosis” (Dirks 15).

Before digging into Risley’s census, however, it is necessary to get a sense of its genealogy. The birth pangs of the census’s centralized, statistical apparatus were felt in district manuals and provincial gazetteers: scattered at first, these tracts—combining geography, economics, ethnography, and more—gradually became more widespread and systematized. Under Civil Serviceman W.W. Hunter, statistics collected on the district level were streamlined into provincial and eventually imperial surveys over the course of the 1870s (Dirks 199). Hunter’s efforts coincided with the first attempt at an India-wide census, which took shape in 1871-72. The 1872 report was the first to synthesize demographic statistics on an India-wide level, drawing on provincial censuses conducted from 1863 on and providing the skeleton for future efforts (Maheshwari 30). It contained chapters on relatively uncontroversial concerns such as population increase and decrease, houses, villages and towns, infirmities, sex, and age, but was more heavily slanted towards culturally loaded categories, most notably religion, female infanticide, “nationality, language, and caste.” A mere glimpse through the short all-India report reveals how many deeper assumptions were ingrained within these categories: the term “race,” for example, is used almost interchangeably with various other possible parameters of caste groups, including occupation. In a long list of selected castes from the various provinces, census director Henry Waterfield cites “the Doms, an impure race;” “the Binds, an inoffensive race of fishermen and labourers;” “the Kaoras, an unclean pig-keeping caste;” and “the Jats, a brave hardy race” (Waterfield

23).¹⁷ While his report freely alternated between ethnic and occupational categories, loaded with judgments about caste “cleanliness,” purity, and/or valor, the column demanding *jati* in the vernacular census schedules threw yet another possible category into the mix in its English version: “Caste or *Class*” (Waterfield 23; emphasis mine).¹⁸ Waterfield’s summary only begins to scrape the surface of the provincial reports, in which vastly different numbers of castes and sub-castes were divided into different types of categories, some more compatible than others, with no systematic guidelines to tailor the final results. The first example Waterfield cites is perhaps the most incoherent, with castes from Bengal and Assam classified into everything from broad hierarchical ranks to specific occupational groups: the sixty-nine recorded castes are sorted into thirteen sets whose headings range from “Superior” and “Intermediate” to “Pastoral” and “Agricultural” to “Dancer, Musician, Beggar, and Vagabond” (Waterfield 21). Most of the provincial censuses were somewhat more clear—either breaking up their caste returns according to *varna* categories, as was the case in Bombay, or into more general occupational groups—and Waterfield was ultimately able to regroup the diverse provincial caste returns into a few broad categories, retaining Brahmins and Kshatriyas at the top.¹⁹ The divergences between the various provincial censuses compiled in 1872 reveal how disorganized and unmethodical colonial knowledge about caste was, even in the 1870s. Although some of this confusion lifted with the application of more rigorous standards in subsequent censuses—it needed to, after all, if data on caste was to be incorporated into law and administration—many of the fundamental questions that emerged from the first census were never resolved. What was the relationship between caste, class, occupation, tribe, race, nationality, and language? Was caste commensurable with occupation? What

¹⁷ Normative judgments of ethnic groups according to their perceived valor were evidently par for the course: for example, the report also describes “the Hindustanis of Behar [as] hardier and more manly” than certain Bengalis (19).

¹⁸ Subsequent censuses and scholarship explored the relationship between economic status and caste in great depth—an appealing alternative to analyses focusing exclusively on the ritual basis of caste—only to demonstrate that there is no straightforward correlation between caste and class in an economic sense.

¹⁹ Among Hindus, Waterfield maintained the *varna* distinctions of Brahmin and Kshatriya or “Rajpoot,” set aside “Outcastes,” and dumped everyone in between into the category of “Other Castes.” He also included “native Christians” and “aboriginal tribes” under “Hindoos and Persons of Hindoo Origin,” albeit in their own separate columns.

about with class? Did caste distinctions originate in race? Did the term “nationality” apply to Indian ethnic groups? This last possibility was largely ruled out in subsequent censuses, with the tabulation of “nationality” intended only for non-Indian residents of the subcontinent; but the remaining questions plagued census operations until the effort to count caste was abandoned in 1941. Moreover, these questions quickly entered the popular imagination in a process that undermined the very premises that the enumeration rested on. When the enumerated saw the power of taking census categories into their own hands, the fixity of these categories was called so profoundly into question that even census officials began to doubt their own assumptions. This would not occur, however, until the census categories themselves were organized into more systematic and empirical units, as they began to be in 1881 and 1891.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, census reports at both the provincial and imperial levels became a key forum for debates on Indian social, cultural, and economic structures as well as their origins, uses, and values. The vast majority of these debates, however, were devoted to setting their own terms. How should caste be tabulated in the first place? Finding the right answers to the enigma of caste was predicated on asking the right questions, which increasingly meant asking *more* questions. It was not difficult to achieve clearer standards than the haphazard ones compiled in 1872; but beyond a certain threshold, innumerable problems emerged. With all *varna* categories but Brahmin—and to some extent Kshatriya, a term used interchangeably with Rajput—quickly rendered obsolete by inquiry into *jati*, successive census commissioners struggled to find new ways of organizing their data. Having largely abandoned the elegant imaginary of a fourfold system, census officials were driven to codify smaller and smaller sub-divisions in their tabulation of caste, and their glossaries of anthropological jargon grew correspondingly. The further they probed, the more they felt compelled to insist on increasingly minute sub-categories, of which many of the enumerated were not aware.²⁰ Rather than blaming themselves for misconstruing the importance of caste as a form of social

²⁰ This tendency is conspicuous, for example, in the 1901 census report for Punjab. The “caste” section of the report begins by defining a long list of ethnographic terms, including endogamy, exogamy, hypergamy, tribe, sub-tribe, and sept, which officials were supposed to use to correctly ascertain a caste’s status. It goes on to illustrate, through the case of the

identification, British officials took the varied responses they received in the caste column as a further sign of Indian ignorance. L.J. Sedgwick, Bombay Census Superintendent for 1921, noted that, “Generally speaking, the impossibility of getting true caste figures is due to (1) ignorance, and (2) prejudice. People are very ignorant of what is under their noses...” (Sedgwick 188). Sedgwick lamented that there were more Indians who could summarize Manu’s account of the origins of caste than could “define the differences between the existing tribes of Kolis [or] give a reasonable answer to the question—‘Is a Gamta a Bhil?’” While he discarded *varna* as the “wildest poetical mythology,” acknowledging that it had no place in the social organization of twentieth-century India, he had no inkling that widespread lack of awareness about castes and sub-castes might reflect a false assumption on his and his colleagues’ behalf rather than ignorance on the part of the colonial subjects. Sedgwick’s attitude is widespread in colonial census reports, supporting Dirks’ thesis that caste as it was construed by the British did not correspond to self-identification among most Indians. This is not to suggest that the categories instituted by the British did not reflect—or at least refract—an existing social system; had they been totally irrelevant, they would not have gained the traction they did among the enumerated population. Renewed engagement in these categories generally stemmed from the more powerful, educated higher-caste groups, however, whose growing willingness to establish a caste-based form of civil society along the lines provided by the British reflected a prior investment in caste consciousness. H.H. Risley’s monumental 1901 census played no small role in diffusing the desire for official recognition of caste status, and dramatically accelerated the evolution of caste enumeration into an arena of caste contestation.

Khatri, how a caste can be broken down into a handful of sub-castes and hundreds of local endogamous sections through a careful study of its kinship patterns. Yet superintendent H.A. Rose’s explanation hits a snag when he admits that, “indeed there appears to be no vernacular word which invariably and consistently denotes ‘exogamous section,’ [or] ‘endogamous group,’ much less for ‘hypergamous group’...” (Rose 342). Rose does not dwell on this point for long, however.

Systematizing social divisions: H.H. Risley and the Census of 1901

Risley's census was unparalleled in its ambition and scope, incorporating an official "ethnographic survey" which attempted to derive a unifying theory of social precedence through the combined lenses of anthropometry and race science, kinship patterns, and commensality, amongst other factors. For all his extraordinary ambitions, Risley was quick to acknowledge the unique difficulties that the project presented, describing them at length in his all-India report. The caste column in the census, he wrote, provoked a "bewildering variety" of different responses: when asked about their caste, Indians identified with anything from *varna* groups (such as Brahmin) to "obscure" local sub-castes; sometimes they identified with regional (i.e., geographic) groups, and sometimes with occupational groups; the permutations of these different modes of identification were endless. The mediation of these responses by enumerators further complicated the situation. Risley noted that the various possible responses he cited, "which are far from exhausting the possibilities of the situation, undergo a series of transformations at the hands of the more or less illiterate enumerator who writes them down in his own vernacular and the abstractor in the central office who transliterates them into English" (Risley 537). Risley's account does not quite do justice to the levels of mediation that were involved in the census, though. The 1881 census depended on 52,983 enumerators, 6,399 supervisors, and 1,758 superintendents in Punjab alone (Maheshwari 49); one can only imagine how many were involved in the greatly expanded 1901 census on an all-India level. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the enumerators were unpaid, many of them taking on the task in addition to their local administrative duties. Their motivations for participating, then, must be called into question. But let us first follow, for a moment more, Risley's interpretation of the issues at hand.

For Risley, the problems with such extensive mediation were compounded by the peculiar nature of Indians as a whole. An operation as precise and scientific as the census, he complained, was alien to

the intellect of the Indian population. Risley lamented at length the characteristics that made Indians so difficult to work with and understand.

No one can have studied the literature of social origins which has been so prolific of late years without feeling the force of Sir Henry Maine's remark that theories of primitive society are apt to land the enquirer in a region of 'mud banks and fog.' This is more especially the case in India, where the paleological data available in Europe hardly exist at all, while the historical value of the literary evidence is impaired by the uncertainty of its dates, by the sacerdotal predilections of its authors, by their passion for wiredrawn distinctions and symmetrical classifications, and by their manifest inability to draw any clear line between fact and fancy, between things as they are and things as they might be or as a Brahman would desire them to be. All this is obvious at a glance; it merely reflects the characteristic peculiarities of the Indian intellect, its phenomenal memory, its feeble grasp of questions of fact, its subtle manipulation of impalpable theories, its scanty development of the critical faculty. Its strength lies in other lines of mental activity, in a region of transcendental speculation which does not lead to the making of history. (Risley 546)

Given the circumstances, Risley portrayed himself as a kind of maverick, unveiling the long-hidden truths of the caste system against all odds. The prospect of innumerable difficulties, it seems, only stoked his desire to rise above them. Risley's goal was to cut through "sacerdotal predilections," Brahminical fancy, and the intractable vagueness of the Indian intellect to produce a factual, empirical account of caste. Nothing would stop him, least of all ignorance among colonial subjects about the categories he used to describe them. And indeed, after a laborious process of "sorting, referencing, cross-referencing, and corresponding with local authorities," Risley was able to assert with confidence that India was home to exactly "2,378 main castes and tribes and 43 races or nationalities" (537).

Bolder still, he thought it possible to determine the exact relationship between the 2,378 castes and tribes and the 43 races. Risley's preoccupation with skull measurements and nasal indexes appears laughable in retrospect, meriting a degree of derision even from his successor J.H. Hutton.²¹ Far more consequential was his attempt to *rank* the castes according to "some system which would command general acceptance, at any rate within the limits of the province to which it was applied" (538). The system he had in mind was one of "social precedence as recognised by native public opinion at the

²¹ "All subsequent census officers in India must have cursed the day when it occurred to Sir Herbert Risley, no doubt in order to test his admirable theory of the relative nasal index, to attempt to draw up a list of castes according to their rank in society" (Hutton 433). In *Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations*, Lucy Carroll quotes a particularly memorable passage from Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, published in 1891: "It is scarcely a paradox to lay down as a law of the caste-organization in Eastern India that a man's social status varies in inverse ratio the the width of his nose."

present day and manifesting itself in the fact that particular castes are supposed to be the modern representatives of one or other of the castes of the theoretical Hindu system..." (538). In other words, he sought to tabulate caste *hierarchy* on a province by province basis—a project he undertook with the support of the majority of other census officials, leaving behind a handful of colleagues who were afraid of “hurting people's feelings” (538). Risley’s methodology anticipates that used by postcolonial anthropologists like McKim Marriott in its stipulation that the relative position of any caste on the “caste ladder” could be computed based on purely “indigenous” standards such as marriage patterns, exchanges of water and food with other castes, and access or lack thereof to wells, temples, and other sites of social interaction. Unlike later anthropologists, however, Risley was willing to extrapolate analysis of these myriad relationships from the level of the village, where caste hierarchy was most readily observed, to that of entire provinces—a quantum leap. To put this in perspective: the Bombay Presidency alone (excluding Sind) stretched all the way from what is now the northern tip of Gujarat to coastal Karnataka. Caste hierarchies were thus granted a new frontier by Risley’s approach; and although he conceded that ranking castes on an imperial level would be impossible, doing so on the level of enormous, culturally and ethnically heterogeneous provinces had comparable implications.

As was the case with racial analysis, the notion of tabulating caste hierarchy on a provincial level did not originate with Risley. The 1891 census had made a comparable effort to rank castes, as Risley pointed out, following Denzil Ibbetson’s suggestion in his census report on Punjab in 1881 (Risley 539). But Risley’s insistence on systematizing this endeavor with the most up-to-date techniques of social science propelled it to new heights. Risley’s approach also galvanized public acceptance of the census as a site of dispute over caste status and legitimacy, even when these effects were hidden behind the veil of the numbers themselves. His appeal to “native public opinion” had diverse implications, once again begging the question: who were the “local authorities” upon whom the final tabulation of caste hierarchy rested? Dirks cites various examples of Risley’s correspondence with “official

Brahmins” and other high-caste representatives to argue that these figures had a central influence on Risley’s understanding of caste, including his renewed emphasis on the broad validity of *varna* distinctions (Dirks 222). Since the inception of the census, however, this kind of structural bias was inherent in the apparatus at every level, from the authoritarian Census Commissioner compiling the all-India report to the lowliest enumerator submitting a tally for his locality. Consider the position of the enumerators. The only criterion for their participation besides their willingness to volunteer a hectic night’s work was literacy, which suggests that the majority of enumerators were members of the most educated castes—in other words, Brahmins or members of other influential castes benefiting both from centuries of cultural dominance and from a near monopoly over access to British education. Census reports also indicate that the police force, increasingly dominated by the so-called “martial races,” made up a significant proportion of the enumerators. Between Brahmins, traders, and a carefully-groomed police force, the predominance of educated upper castes in the census apparatus, by default, slanted local caste counts, especially where questions of hierarchy were at play. Even without concrete evidence to indicate the respective roles of specific castes in census enumeration, it is possible to assume that each volunteer enumerator brought his own interests into his account of caste—which, especially by 1901, rested on far more than sheer numbers—and that therefore each one of the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of tallies submitted to census supervisors carried some burden of prejudice.

It is perhaps because of these biases at the lowest level of caste enumeration that various caste groups tried to confirm or amend their status in the official caste ladder through direct appeals to higher-ranking officials. This endeavor took diverse forms, though the most common were petitions on behalf of various castes and sub-castes making claims to a more elevated status than they had been attributed, usually within the scheme of *varna*. Risley was the first to scoff at the historical inaccuracies and other fallacies which filled these petitions. But he also took the proliferation of petitions over

official caste status as a sign of his project's validity. "The best evidence of the general success of the experiment," he wrote, "is the great number of petitions and memorials to which it gave rise. If the principle on which the classification was based had not appealed to the usages and traditions of the great mass of Hindus, it is inconceivable that so many people should have taken much trouble and incurred substantial expenditure with the object of securing its application in a particular way" (Risley 539). Risley's account of a dispute in Punjab over the status of the Khatri illustrates the extent of caste mobilization around census representation and merits being cited at length.

Of these memorials the most elaborate was that received from the Khatri of the Punjab and United Provinces, who felt themselves aggrieved by the Superintendent of Census in the latter province having provisionally classified them as Vaisyas, whereas in the specimen table circulated by me they had been placed in the same group as the Rajputs. A meeting of protest was held at Bareilly, and a great array of authorities was marshalled to prove that the Khatri are lineally descended from the Kshatriyas of Hindu mythology, much as if the modern Greeks were to claim direct descent from Achilles and were to cite the Catalogue of the Ships in support of their pretensions. [...] The result [of prior enumeration] was to include them as number 13 in "Group XV—Traders" [whereas the Rajputs] ranked first in the entire scheme as number 1 of "Group I—Military and Dominant." In the Bengal Census Report of 1891 the Rajputs were placed among "the patrician clans", while the Khatri were grouped with [...] "the Vaisyas Proper or Plebeian Middle Class." It was obviously improbable that the Khatri desired this classification to be maintained, and the evidence laid before me not only brought out the conspicuous part played by the Khatri in the authentic history of the Punjab in modern times but seemed to make it clear that in British India, at any rate, they are generally believed to be the modern representatives of the Kshatriyas of Hindu tradition. [...] Superintendents of census were accordingly instructed to include the Khatri under the heading Kshatriya in their classification of castes. The decision gave general satisfaction and served to illustrate the practical working of the principle that the sole test of social precedence prescribed was native public opinion, and that this test was to be applied with due consideration for the susceptibilities of the persons concerned. The other memorials were disposed of by the provincial Superintendents on similar lines. (539)

Risley's description of the Khatri case reveals a number of important features of census disputes over caste. First of all, it indicates the diverse means that influential castes used to mobilize their claims to a specific status: the Khatri marshalled both texts and bodies in their defense, on the one hand bringing Hindu mythology and clan genealogy into the realm of statistics, and on the other rallying caste members to a "meeting of protest." Second, this description displays the extent to which Risley's analysis continued to be moulded by *varna* categories, which he linked to notions of class: note his characterization of the Rajputs as "patrician class" versus the Vaishyas as "plebeian middle class." Finally, Risley's account exhibits some of the specific patterns surrounding claims to Kshatriya status,

which made up the bulk of caste petitions not only in Punjab but throughout much of northern and central India.²² In order to further examine the ways in which these status battles played out, let us now turn to census reports from the Bombay Presidency, where census petitions played a role in the formation of Maratha identity, a key component of politics in western India even today.

Mobility and the limits of caste contestation:

The census and the formation of the non-Brahmin public sphere in Bombay

The 1911 census report for the Bombay Presidency, written by P.J. Mead and G.L. MacGregor, offers much insight into how the census became a medium for the regulation of caste by the colonial authorities, as well as an arena of contestation and potential mobility for certain caste groups. The report reflects an increasing preoccupation among upper-caste Indians with *varna* categories, especially those of Brahmin and Kshatriya. Mead and MacGregor's strict adherence to the "practical test of marriage relations," inherited from Risley's work a decade prior, severely curtailed the ability of castes to identify themselves on their own terms. "Caste as recorded in census tables," they wrote, "is an indication of existing facts as regards marriage relations, and no proper decisions by however weighty an authority can override existing practice" (MacGregor and Mead 198). According to these criteria, Mead and MacGregor asserted their authority to stabilize caste nomenclature based on their empirical observations of caste marriage practices at any given juncture. However, this by no means quelled the efforts of diverse castes to revise their status by recording themselves under a different name.

It is hardly surprising that many sought to be recognized as Brahmins, but these efforts met with little success, except when they came from established Brahmin sub-castes recognized as such in previous censuses. A marked decline in the number of Chitpávan and Deshasth Brahmins, accompanied

²² What Risley's account fails to mention is that the first resolution passed by a Khatri conference in the United Provinces objected to caste being recorded in the census at all: the Khatri stated that "the grouping of the several castes of Hindus, so far as it has been proposed according to the old fourfold division of castes by the Census authorities is likely to rouse the dying embers of sectarianism and class-hatred...." Since the tabulation of caste was already in motion, though, they insisted on being identified as Khatri. See Carroll 242.

by a drastic increase in the category of “Bráhmaṇ—Others,” implies that sub-castes were abandoning their individual distinctions in favor of the more elegant *varna* distinctions (MacGregor and Mead 196). While trends noted in various census reports, including an example cited in the 1911 report, suggest that this change may well have been limited to nomenclature—and not to a change in custom—census officials do not appear to have bothered verifying whether the new patterns of self-identification among Brahmins corresponded to changes in Brahmin marriage patterns. Census authorities, then, placed a unique trust in Brahmins to self-identify “correctly,” while rigorously scrutinizing the status claims of other castes. For example, when “various pretendants to Bráhmaṇical dignity such as the Sonárs and Pancháls” presented themselves, Mead and MacGregor rejected their claims even though the Sonárs had been listed as Daivadnya Brahmins in 1901 (196-198). Because clear parameters for identifying Brahmins had been set by census authorities early on, claiming Brahmin status was not a fruitful avenue of identity mobilization for most castes, nor necessarily a desirable one. Much more common were claims to Kshatriya status, a group whose boundaries were much hazier in the eyes of British administrators. Mead and MacGregor, for instance, accepted claims from certain “groups that preferred honorific titles to the derogatory or less high sounding names in common use,” such as “the Jingars or Arya Kshatriyas, the Bedars or Put Kunbis, Gábíts who doubtless were originally Maráthas and would like to be so styled, [...] Komárpaiks or Kshetri Komárpant, and Shimpis and Rangáris who prefer the euphonic title of Bharsar Kshatriyas” (198). An appendix to the 1931 report for Bombay reiterates many of the same disputes around caste identification and gives some evidence as to the rise of caste-based organizations, particularly those claiming mythical warrior status. By 1931, the Gabíts (mentioned in the 1911 report) were represented by the Konkani Marathi Sangh and once again successfully lobbied for their inclusion as Marathas, despite the reservations of the officers reviewing the cases. Another group of castes, formerly known as Devali or Bhavins, were recorded as “Naik Marathas.” Similarly, the Kurmi Rajabansis, who would typically have been identified as a sub-caste of

Kunbi or Reddis—i.e. members of broad, regional agricultural castes—were listed as “Kurmi Kshatriyas” thanks to an appeal on their behalf by the All-India Kurmi Kshatriya Association, while Beldars in one district were listed as Kamavat Kshatriyas. In another district, Talpadas identified themselves Padhiar Rajputs.

Reading through these reports, one finds considerable evidence of “Sanskritization” as well as horizontal and vertical consolidation among castes, to employ M.N. Srinivas’ terms. Dozens of *jati* groups, it seems, were rallying around broad *varna* caste identification (horizontal consolidation) and using these claims to increase their status in the traditional hierarchy (vertical consolidation). But in her essay on “The Emergence of Caste(s) Associations,” Lucy Carroll reminds us to be wary of concluding from “these carefully stage-managed samples” that caste petitions reflected a widespread obsession with ritual status (Carroll 243). Many of the so-called caste associations which approached the census were “ad hoc petitioning bodies” or even “one-man shows,” whose principal goal to confer some authority to their “representatives.” These would-be authorities, Carroll points out, were more concerned with bread-and-butter, or “rice-and-roti,” issues, than with elevating their caste’s official status: “the rhetoric of ‘caste’ activists and publicists was designed less to elevate the ‘caste’ through some ‘social mobility’ drive than to carve out for the publicists themselves a constituency on whose shoulders they could personally climb into positions of prestige and power,” as informants in the census bureaucracy (Carroll 249). Basic personal and material concerns, and not merely an inflated sense of caste consciousness, motivated much of the perceived agitation around the census.

Whatever their motivations or the size of their “sabhas,” not all castes were able to benefit from either the abstract or material advantages of rewriting their caste status. Both the 1911 and the 1931 Bombay census reports display a clear pattern of discrimination against certain castes, with repeated examples of Kolis, a large group of “lower” agricultural castes,²³ being denied their claims to any

²³ The Kolis are currently listed as a Scheduled Caste.

nomenclature other than that of Koli sub-castes. An Assistant Collector of data quoted in the 1911 Bombay report justifies this exclusion on the basis of a by now-familiar prejudice:

“The difficulties [experienced in connection with the classification of Kolis] were not essential to the subject, and *were solely due to the combined stupidity and ignorance of the lower degree of Koli* (here the so-called Thákara Koli, who will describe himself as anything but what he is) [emphasis mine]. . . . These persons made very effort to get themselves written down under the name of the nearest occurring class of Koli.” (MacGregor and Mead 196)

If a Koli claimed any name other than that of his specific sub-caste, it was either because he was too stupid to know his own caste, or because he was conniving to increase his status. Meanwhile Brahmins and would-be “Kshatriyas,” who had better learned how to navigate the census system, could identify themselves more or less as they saw fit. The issue of Koli assertion returned in the 1931 Bombay census, when members of the Koli Baria community, represented by the Gujarath Kshatriya Samaj, were denied their claim to be listed as Baria Rajputs or more generally as Kshatriyas, on the grounds that “Kshatriyas as such have not been separately tabulated” (Dracup and Sorley 398). This denial came in spite of the fact that census officials, as of 1921, were supposed to list castes as they desired to be listed.

A limited reading of the Bombay census reports, then, establishes a relatively clear pattern of inclusion and exclusion from the “mobility,” by way of amended self-identification, which the census afforded. Both the 1911 and 1931 censuses show that despite their claims of impartiality, census officials were highly selective in their acceptance of caste petitions: local officials were flexible with caste nomenclature only when proposed caste names corresponded to their normative assumptions about the society they were representing. Their role as arbitrators became more strict when it came to the “lower castes,” barring the possibilities for these castes to rewrite their identity in the language of the state.

To rephrase and reiterate Lucy Carroll’s question, though: to what extent did the “pestiferous

deluge” of caste petitions incurred by the later censuses reflect popular self-identification?²⁴ Did a significant proportion of Bombay’s population actively identify itself as Kshatriya or Maratha? Or did revised status claims rise out of a tiny, vocal minority which recieved an exaggerated amount of attention in census reports? Unlike the narratives in these reports, the figures display very few striking variations in caste identification over fifty years of caste enumeration. From 1881 to 1931, the only large caste groups whose population witnessed an implausibly sudden increase—suggesting a shift in their self-identification—were Kunbis and Lingayats. Leaving these exceptions aside, population figures did not vary drastically for any caste. (See Table 1, below.)

Table 1: Variation in population of selected castes in Bombay, 1881-1931

Caste	Percentage of variation*				
	1881-1891	1891-1901	1901-1911	1911-1921	1921-1931
Chambhar, Mochi, Mochigar or Sochi	49	3	-2	0.3	2
Kunbi**	561	-41	24	-	-
Maratha**	-53	72	-10	-	-
Maratha and Kunbi**	-	-	-	-5.8	20.6
Lingayat	-18	371	-6	4.9	11.4
Mahar, Holiya or Dhed	23	-9	11	-11.9	9.7

* My table combines select data from Subsidiary Tables in the 1911 and 1931 Census Reports for the Bombay Presidency. See MacGregor and Mead 213; Dracup and Sorley 385. Positive numbers indicate percent increase; negative numbers, percent decrease.

** In 1931, the categories of Maratha and Kunbi were collapsed in the table showing variations in population by caste.

In the absence of longer-term trends, it is difficult to infer any widespread shifts in caste identification from the isolated spikes in the Kunbi and Lingayat populations.²⁵ The two Dalit groups I chose to list remained relatively constant, supporting my argument above that simply opting out of

²⁴ The phrase “pestiferous deluge” is courtesy of Hutton 433.

²⁵ This stands in stark contrast to the data from Punjab which indicated a swell in a number of castes identified as “martial races” from 1881-1901. Khattars—associated with a warrior lineage—jumped 685 per cent from 1891-1901 alone, while Gurkhas (one of the most acclaimed martial races) increased by 411 per cent, Khokhars (affiliated with Jats and Rajputs) by 208 percent, Dogras by 180 percent, and Pathans by 33 percent (Rose 347).

Dalit status *en masse* through a change in name was not a viable option. Meanwhile, three out of five decades witnessed a decline in Maratha returns, with a substantial increase only from 1891-1901, calling into question earlier conclusions about the development of Maratha identity at this juncture.

The divergence between narrative and data in the Bombay censuses over the question of evolving caste identification betrays a methodological limitation of focusing single-handedly on the census. While much scholarship has charted the rise of a non-Brahmin warrior identity in the Bombay Presidency during this period through close readings of other media,²⁶ juxtaposing these with census data introduces a new set of questions. Has existing scholarship on Maratha(-kunbi)/Kshatriya identity formation in colonial Western India overestimated the mass appeal of such refashioned identities? Have the census and accompanying status petitions been exaggerated as a popular locus of identity articulation, reflecting the appeals of a boisterous few rather than major collective shifts in self-identification? Or are we simply witnessing a chronological discrepancy, insofar as Maratha self-identification had already taken sway before it could be recorded in the decennial censuses at the end of the nineteenth century?²⁷ Another possibility is that census enumerators and officials in Bombay were sufficiently adamant about policing caste returns as to block opportunistic status claims even at the lowest levels, challenging the interpretation that the census afforded a popular channel of mobility: we have already seen how Kolis were rebuffed by superintendents when they disputed their caste affiliation—what of the lone Koli trying to convince a local Brahmin enumerator that he was a Kshatriya?

The puzzles that these statistics lead us into are too great to be confronted decisively here.

²⁶ See O'Hanlon 1985; Rao 2009; Constable 2001.

²⁷ The enormous increase in kunbis from 1881-1891—the most conspicuous outlier in Table 1—came at the tail end of Mahatma Jotirao Phule's non-Brahmin unification movement (Phule himself died in 1890) which vindicated a kind of Maratha heritage through a critical genealogy of Kshatriya *as peasant*. This would substantiate the explosion of the Kunbi category in the 1880s, a period when Phule himself had shifted from an insistence on specifically *shudra-atishudra* (low-caste) to a more expansive engagement “with the rural masses of the Maratha-kunbi complex” (O'Hanlon 257.) Following this argument, it is possible to surmise that these forms of non-Brahmin identity were already well-established in western India by the end of the nineteenth century, and that these changes therefore did not play out in census returns.

However, the basic conclusions drawn earlier in this section remain unchanged. The census provided an opportunity for some middle- and upper-caste groups to get ahead by amending their position in bureaucratic records, while members of castes who were in the most need of uplift were dismissed in their efforts to do the same. These patterns of caste representation would change dramatically, however, when changes in politics at the national level granted members of the lowest castes new possibilities of uplift, not through the assertion of higher status but precisely through the recognition of their disenfranchisement. Risley and followers of his, like the Bombay superintendents of 1911, could not have imagined that their insistence on empirical accuracy would become a weapon in the arsenal of the castes buried all the way at the back of the census. But this is precisely what happened when reformers like Ambedkar used the vocabulary of the census to justify a *uniquely Dalit*—rather than a more inclusive low-caste—entry into the realm of modern politics.

III

Mobilizing minority: statistics, politics, and the Dalit challenge

Colonial governmentality and its interlocutors

As we have seen, official recognition did not provide the same opportunities for all castes: while some groups successfully mobilized the census apparatus to affirm their status, and built associations around this cause approximating a caste-based form of civil society, others continued to be regarded as population groups which could only be represented and administered from above. In its theorization of popular politics in contemporary India, Partha Chatterjee's *The Politics of the Governed* helps elucidate this and many other tensions emerging from my reading of the census thus far. Examining different forms of protest and resistance in postcolonial India through the combined lenses of Foucauldian and

neo-Gramscian analysis, Chatterjee expands Foucault's notion of governmentality to include new forms of agency. He achieves this first by developing the contrast between populations and citizens.

Unlike the concept of citizen, the concept of population is wholly descriptive and empirical; it does not carry a normative burden. [...] Unlike the concept of citizen, [...] the concept of population makes available to government functionaries a set of rationally manipulable instruments for reaching large sections of the inhabitants of a country as the targets of their "policies." (Chatterjee 34)

The question of whom the government regards as a mere population group, to be measured and administered accordingly, and whom it regards as a citizenry, capable of participating in the processes of governance, has shifted over time. In the postcolonial situation from which Chatterjee builds his case, the division between citizen and population translates roughly to that between bourgeois and subaltern: while the rural and urban subaltern are regarded as population groups, targeted by policies which they have had no role in shaping, the bourgeoisie feels some of the privileges of citizenship. Under colonialism, however—at least until the Raj entered its last decade or so—very few, if any, Indians were recognized as citizens. "Populations [under the 'ethnographic state'] had the status of subjects, not citizens. Obviously, colonial rule did not recognize popular sovereignty" (Chatterjee 37).²⁸

The colonial caste census forces us to reexamine the theoretical distinction between "population" and "citizen" quoted above. Chatterjee mentions that "the concept of population is wholly descriptive and empirical" and "does not carry a normative burden." In line with Chatterjee's argument, the census's role was precisely to "make available [...] a set of rationally manipulable instruments" which would shape policy. As our reading of the census has shown, however, empirical representation of populations under the colonial state carried a *tremendous* normative burden. For one, the traces of descriptors like "hardier and more manly" to describe certain castes or "races" never altogether disappeared from colonial census reports, just as martial race theory continued to shape military recruitment until the end of the Raj.²⁹ Furthermore, as I have sought to demonstrate thus far, the task of

²⁸ Chatterjee cites Dirks' phrase in the preceding sentence.

²⁹ And beyond: many of the caste-based regiments formed under the Raj still exist in the Indian Armed Forces, including the Dogra Regiment, the Rajput Regiment, the Jat Regiment, the Maratha Light Infantry Regiment, and so on.

codifying a hierarchical form of social organization, whether at the village or the provincial level, required profound normative assumptions—assumptions evident not only in the narrative parts of the census reports, but also in the collection and presentation of the data itself. Official insistence on uncovering every Indian’s “true” caste betrayed a profound mistrust of the subject population, which in turn curtailed the agency of the colonized. The colonizer’s exclusive claim to empirical objectivity was a sophisticated weapon it wielded over those it sought to represent, one of the many used to disseminate colonial control.

This characterization fits the broad framework of Foucault’s governmentality, wherein members of “populations” are ostensibly deprived of agency under the dispersed power mechanisms of the state. Yet Chatterjee compellingly shows that through various means, subaltern population groups are often able to forcefully shape the policies targeted at them, encroaching on the territory of the state (both literally and metaphorically) and effectively squatting the rights which the state has promised them but failed to deliver. This, for Chatterjee, is the realm of “political society,” a subaltern route of access to politics wherein the underprivileged appropriate the language and tools of the state to make the mechanisms of governmentality fit their needs. Its opposite is civil society—the realm of the bourgeois citizenry, NGOs, mass media, and so on—which influences politics through traditional means.

One of the central premises of political society in postcolonial India is the state’s promise of welfare and development. These function very differently than they did under the Raj, and it is clear that Chatterjee’s distinction between civil and political society does not map neatly onto the colonial era. But much of the framework for this split society was already established, and underprivileged Indians—targeted as “rationally manipulable” population groups by colonial policy—had already begun using the language of the state to force themselves into politics by the 1920s. With the help of official statistical tools like the census, the most disenfranchised Indians—slowly coming to be recognized as Dalits—attempted to thrust themselves from perennial exclusion to the heart of

mainstream politics, with mixed success. Dalits seized the colonial rhetoric of reform and filtered it through empirical categories already recognized by the state to demand a unique form of inclusion in the budding Indian republic. It was under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar, above all, that they turned colonial technologies of representation like the census into a springboard for Dalit political representation, appropriating the terms in which they were represented as a population group to launch their long battle for citizenship.

How and why was the census useful for Dalits? What was its role in the establishment of their minority rights and representation? As I have already suggested, it was on the terms set by the colonial enumerative modality that the Dalits demanded to be recognized and thereby claim a double entry into legislation. Securing their particular rights to government protection would require that Dalit representatives participate in writing the laws themselves—and the possibility of electing Dalit representatives would itself need to be guaranteed by law if it were to overcome the prejudices of the Hindu majority. Representation in government and particular rights for the Dalit minority were interdependent and mutually reinforcing, it seemed, but the cycle could not begin without a forceful intervention. The specific juncture of the late 1920s and early 1930s provided the opportunity for such an intervention, and Ambedkar seized it. Through a series of reports, conferences, and finally, legislative documents, “compensatory discrimination” for Dalits achieved an official mandate, if a compromised one. In order to trace the evolution of this logic, let us step back into the census documents which provided its empirical and ideological backbone.

A shifting tide: the dilemmas of the last caste censuses, 1921-1931

As we have already seen, Dalits in Bombay were blocked from the channels of mobility that

would-be Kshatriya castes found in the census. If they were to be registered “correctly,” they would have to be listed according to their traditional position in society, as construed by prior census officials. Unlike many of their fellow non-Brahmins, they struggled to deploy Maratha genealogy or other reimagined histories to change their status as recorded in the census. Dalits were thus denied access to this facet of the incipient non-Brahmin public sphere, or “civil society,” emerging in the early twentieth century. Because they could not simply seize a new name to amend their status,³⁰ Dalits took to the census in a different way altogether, asserting precisely what set them apart—social and cultural exclusion—in order to establish the possibility of fair, rational compensation for centuries of oppression.

This strategy reflected, to some extent, a shift within the discourse of the census itself. The project of enumerating caste had been seriously jolted by Risley’s census and the explosion of caste-based petitions which it provoked. By 1921, census officials were making a clear effort to break with Risley’s approach and to process its repercussions. This generated some earnest doubts about the value of counting caste at all, a dilemma which began to fracture the census bureaucracy. The multi-faceted and contradictory effects of the census on Indian society could not but be recognized by British officials, who were still struggling, in 1921 and 1931, to record caste using the categories they had thrown into turmoil. As a result, British views on caste became more antagonistic to one another than ever before. L. Middleton, one of two census superintendents for the Punjab in 1921, launched perhaps the most radical critique of its time against the caste-based census, in a polemic which has not quite received the credit it deserves in scholarship on the subject.

I had intended pointing out that there is a very wide revolt against the classification of occupational castes; that these castes have been largely manufactured and almost entirely preserved as separate castes by the British government. Our land records and official documents have added iron bands to the old rigidity of caste. Caste in itself was rigid among the higher castes, but malleable amongst the lower, we

³⁰ This is perhaps not universally true; citing 1931 census reports, M.N. Srinivas notes a few dozen cases, scattered over four provinces, in which Dalits did advance claims to a new status. He does not detail the effects of these claims, and I think it is safe to assume that whatever effects they had paled in comparison to the legacy of Dalit political engagement in this period. (Srinivas 104)

pigeon-holed everyone by castes and if we could not find a true caste for them labeled them with the name of an hereditary occupation. We deplore the caste system and its effect on social and economic problems, but we are largely responsible for the system which we deplore. (Middleton 343-44).

Middleton continues at length in this vein, developing an argument which bears an uncanny resemblance to the one Dirks makes in *Castes of Mind* eighty years later. Dirks himself acknowledges Middleton's critique in passing, in his discussion of G.S. Ghurye—who also reproduced the above quote in his *Caste and Race in India*—but he attaches very little importance to the fact that a colonial bureaucrat of relatively high rank could launch such a scathing critique of the dominant British views on caste (Dirks 248; Ghurye 160). Dirks is not entirely unjustified in skimming Middleton's polemic. After all, the questions Middleton raised did not cause a broader change in the colonial approach to caste, lucid and provocative as his critique was. Both J.T. Marten, Census Commissioner for 1921, and J.H. Hutton, who was Middleton's fellow superintendent for Punjab at the time, dismissed Middleton's suggestions and advocated for the continued enumeration of caste. Although they were acutely aware of the increasing, rather than decreasing, difficulties facing the project, they remained largely unfazed by the chaos that prior census efforts had unleashed. Responding to the rise in caste *sabhas* and petitions, J.T. Marten wrote in his general report for 1921 that “it was essential, of course, that the census should confine itself to a record of existing facts and avoid the position of arbiter in questions of caste claims” (Marten 223). In practice, though, Marten's methodology confirmed that recording the “existing facts” of caste while simultaneously avoiding the role of arbiter was impossible. Marten attempted to design his census in a way that would reduce census officials' role as arbitrators, but he could not reverse the trends set in motion by his predecessors. Listing castes alphabetically instead of according to hierarchy, a standard that Marten imposed, would hardly suffice to slow down the caste mobilization that prior censuses had sparked.

In an approach that sat uneasily with his commitment to record the “existing facts,” Marten

yielded to the pressures put on the census by the influx of caste-based petitions, and reluctantly instructed enumerators to “enter the caste name given by the person interrogated, provided it was a definite and recognized name of a caste” and as long as it “did not create confusion with other groups” (Marten 224). However, he also urged enumerators to avoid entering people simply as Kshatriyas or Vaishyas, which indicates how drastically the tables had turned since the first caste census. Early British interest in *varna* categories had fired the popular imagination such that, by the time official knowledge had come to accept their inaccuracy and irrelevance, politicized *varna* groups had actually begun to materialize in certain contexts.

Despite—or perhaps as a result of—the difficulties encountered in 1921, census efforts redoubled in 1931, producing the most expansive official account of caste to date. Marten’s successor J.H. Hutton, the only census commissioner whose legacy in anthropology meets or exceeds Risley’s, remained as committed as ever to the project of counting caste.

It has been alleged that the mere act of labelling persons as belonging to a caste tends to perpetuate the system, and on this excuse a campaign against any record of caste was attempted in 1931 by those who objected to any such returns being made. It is, however, difficult to see why the record of a fact that actually exists should tend to stabilize that existence. [...] In spite of the recognition of caste in previous decades the institution is of itself undergoing considerable modification. (Hutton 430)

Hutton’s confidence that recording “a fact that actually exists” could not “stabilize that existence” seems naïve in the wake of more recent scholarship.³¹ As we have seen throughout, the virtual impossibility of establishing stable categories through which to simply “record” caste invalidates Hutton’s tautological description of caste as “a fact that actually exists.” But in a sense, Hutton was right: the recording of caste had not stabilized caste identity, but rather caused it to mobilize.

Hutton’s most profound legacy as a census commissioner—and that which has provided the most persistent challenge to his notion that recording a certain social configuration could not perpetuate that

³¹ Even without challenging the basic concept of “fact,” we can recognize at this point that Hutton’s confidence in the possibility of neutral representation is erroneous, especially in light of the contradictions bred by the census.

same configuration—was his engagement with untouchability. Among all the censuses, Hutton's presented by far the most extensive and enduring account of what he labelled the "exterior castes."³² Its emphasis on Dalits pushed a new frontier for social welfare under colonial rule. After *sati*, or widow immolation, the practice of untouchability represented the most patent social ill in India—a cause which the British, the nationalists, and the Dalits themselves rallied against with equal ardor at this juncture in colonial history. Leaving the nationalists aside, I would like now to return to the overlap between colonial discourse, as reflected in the last caste census, and the budding Dalit political platform spearheaded by Ambedkar in the 1920s and '30s.

For historians of colonialism, the first question to arise when examining how the Raj sanctioned the brimming caste politics at this time is: what were the stakes for British imperialism? How and why had colonial discourse around caste changed to focus on Dalit castes as an object of compassion when, as late as 1911, census reports had labelled them as stupid, impure, and dirty? Hutton's monumental census and its scrutiny of untouchability reflected the evolving discursive needs of the state. Expedient governance—that is, strong-armed colonial "stability"—was no longer tenable as a justification in its own right, whether for specific projects like the caste census or for the continuation of colonial rule more generally. Witnessing the immense threat that nationalism posed, the British hesitantly began to transfer legislative power to Indians—most notably through the 1919 and 1935 Government of India Acts—while clinging to the administration of colonial difference, and thus staking a renewed claim to the necessity of empire under the auspices of protecting minority rights. Without their benevolent watch over India, the British claimed, communal violence and caste oppression would spin out of control. Enforcing difference in the name of welfare, therefore, was a strategic justification for a waning empire.

³² He considered the new label an improvement over "depressed classes," the term for Dalits in official use since the turn of the twentieth century.

Recent decades of scholarship on South Asia have extensively documented such shifts in colonial discourse, and it is easy to analyze, from our present vantage point, the dangers of latching on to the mechanisms of a falling colonial state, whether for Muslims, Dalits, or any other minority group. But it is also easy to see why B.R. Ambedkar, even while maintaining an anti-colonial, if pro-Western, stance, did just that. Accurate representation in the census had much clearer material and political stakes for Dalits, at the turn of the 1930s, than it did for any other constituency besides Muslims.³³ The concept of minority rights, articulated in the language of statistics, appeared to present the most efficient and viable route from subjection to citizenship for Dalits at this juncture. The census, therefore, both fulfilled a basic logistical need for Dalits and lent them a new kind of political legitimacy, permitting them to thrust their way into the realm of legislation just as the foundations for the postcolonial republic were being laid, but not without anchoring perennial Dalit exclusion from the “majority.”

*The Dalit case: diagnosis and prescriptions*³⁴

The rise of the Dalit movement in Bombay and the consolidation of Ambedkar’s role as the national spokesman for Dalits can be charted in a series of conferences and committees that he engaged with between 1928 and 1932: the Simon Commission, the Starte Committee, and the Round Table Conferences. The Simon Commission, or Indian Statutory Commission, was an all-English committee sent to India in 1927 to study constitutional reforms in light of pending further reforms. It was the object of widespread criticism among Indians, provoking mass protest, but also represented an

³³ As provided in the Indian Councils Act of 1909, known as the Morley-Minto reforms, Muslims were already allowed to vote independently for their own representatives, who would sit in reserved seats in the legislature. It was against the backdrop of the Muslim case that Ambedkar developed his campaign for a Dalit separate electorate.

³⁴ As the Adi-Hindu Depressed Class Sabha wrote in a 1930 memorial endorsing the continued enumeration of caste in the census: “Until a disease is carefully and adequately diagnosed, its treatment is difficult if not impossible.” (“Untouchables and the Census.”)

important milestone in Dalit entry into constitutional politics. The Starte Committee was a local body commissioned to report on Dalit welfare in Bombay as part of the initiative to legislate against caste inequality, whose findings were published in March 1930. The three Round Table Conferences brought together delegates from India's major parties and constituencies, religious and political, to set the parameters for representative government and ultimately lay the foundations for the new Indian federation. They came to a head over Ramsay MacDonald's Communal Award of August 1932, which Gandhi successfully overturned by launching his fast "unto death." The Round Table Conferences and the subsequent Poona Pact—which provided an enduring if unsatisfactory solution to the crucial question of Dalit representation—marked the culmination of this stage in Dalit politics, securing reserved seats for Dalits in the legislature but without the Dalit separate electorate for which Ambedkar had fought.

The precedent for the debates of 1928-32 had been set by the Government of India Act 1919, which established limited franchise for Indians under the banner of dyarchy. This act was, in turn, based on a report prepared by the Franchise Committee, chaired by the Right Honorable Lord Southborough along with three other British officials and three Indian representatives—two prominent Brahmin nationalists and a Muslim leader of the Aligarh movement.³⁵ The committee recommended a separate electorate for Muslims, as well as for Sikhs, Indian Christians, Europeans and Anglo-Indians in certain provinces (Southborough 7). Other constituencies received other limited representation, varying from province to province: in Bombay, for example, "Depressed classes" and "Labour," like Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians, could both nominate one representative, but not elect him by popular vote. Meanwhile, commerce and industry representatives in Bombay obtained a total of eight seats, to be elected by members of their respective groups. Even the University of Bombay was accorded a reserved seat, to be filled by a nominee of the university administration. The disparities in

³⁵ Namely, Surendra Nath Banerjea, Srinivasa Sastri, and Aftab Ahmed Khan.

minority representation were glaring, and Ambedkar challenged them in a long, forceful testimony, reviewed by the committee in January 1919. Ambedkar's "Evidence before the Southborough Committee" was his first major political essay, a substantial and sophisticated meditation on the various political remedies available for the oppression of untouchables. Pitting it against various alternatives, Ambedkar unequivocally embraced "communal representation" as the only solution for Dalits: "communal representation cannot be withheld from [the untouchables], for communal representation and self-determination are but two different phrases which express the same notion" ("Evidence before the Southborough Committee" 270). Ultimately, the most effective form of communal representation for Dalits would be a separate electorate—a position which all of Ambedkar's "Evidence" leads up to but which he uncharacteristically tiptoes around in this essay.

The first justification Ambedkar provided for Dalit "communal representation" was the debilitatingly low number of voters among Dalits. For every one thousand Dalits in Bombay, he noted, less than one met the criteria for franchise; meanwhile, 197 Brahmins and 546 Lingayats in every one thousand of their respective constituencies were eligible to vote. It was obvious that Dalits would be crushed in a general Hindu electorate, not only as a minority but as an overwhelmingly disenfranchised minority. The Dalits who could vote would need to do so in isolation if they were to have any hope of achieving fair representation; but given that the Dalit voters under existing conditions would probably number in the hundreds, the first step in providing for their genuine representation would be to increase the number of voters among them. The first condition for increasing Dalit participation in the political process, then, would be to lower the criteria for their franchise. Ambedkar argued that low turnout among Dalits had a structural basis, which was quickly exposed, and which could be remedied with equal swiftness. The most obvious obstacle to Dalit participation—greater even than illiteracy, which the Southborough committee suggested could be overcome using colored ballots—were the standards

of property ownership. The way that Ambedkar tackled this issue put him on a radical platform, challenging both class- and caste-based exclusion in one fell stroke.

If the untouchables are poor, the committee, it may be hoped, will not deny them representation because of their small electoral roll but will see its way to grant them adequate representation to enable the untouchables to remove the evil conditions that bring about their poverty. At present when all the avenues of acquiring wealth are closed, it is unwise to require from the untouchables a high property qualification. To deny them the opportunities of acquiring wealth and then to ask from them a property qualification is to add insult to injury. (262)

Ambedkar portrayed Dalit entry into electoral politics as a fundamental transformation which would provide the first step in redressing poverty and lack of education, rather than vice versa. Responding to claims that “the franchise should be given to those only who can be expected to make an intelligent use of it,” Ambedkar argued, quoting British liberal politician and sociologist L.T. Hobhouse, that “the exercise of popular Government is itself all education.... Enfranchisement itself may precisely be the stimulus needed to awaken interest. The ballot alone effectively liberates the quiet citizen from the tyranny of the shouter and the wire-puller” (261). Political engagement was its own education: this was a central tenet which Ambedkar would maintain for years to come. It was not by waiting for an elite government to alleviate their poverty and educate them that Dalits would become qualified to enter politics; instead, it was by launching Dalits into government that the preconditions for broader Dalit welfare would be secured. Only in this shift from government “for the people” to government “by the people,” phrases which Ambedkar repeatedly invoked, could caste inequality begin to be dissolved. Because caste fissures and prejudices were so deeply engrained, however, government “by the people, for the people” could only be established by tackling the divisions among “the people” head on. The precise mechanisms that Ambedkar proposed to tackle these divisions were inescapably grounded in the statistical regime introduced under colonial governmentality. The subversive power of his approach was to turn a technology instituted in the service of social control and welfare from above into a platform for political self-determination from the ground up.

Although Ambedkar's argument had a strong theoretical foundation, statistics provided the building blocks throughout: a model of proportional representation for minorities could not exist without correspondingly delineated demographic data. Relying on census data from 1911, which placed the Dalit population at about eight percent of the total in Bombay, or eleven percent of the Hindu population, Ambedkar prescribed exactly nine reserved seats for Dalits out of a total one hundred seats in the Bombay assembly. He justified the additional seat on the grounds of the crippling social circumstances Dalits faced, and went on to propose exactly how to distribute these seats, district by district. A caste census was such a basic premise for a Dalit separate electorate that Ambedkar could not entangle himself in the fundamental controversies associated with counting caste—at least at this stage. In the next decade, however, his goal of establishing sufficient representation for Dalits hinged increasingly on *correct* representation of the Dalit minority. In the evidence he submitted to the Southborough committee, Ambedkar had already firmly distanced Dalits from non-Brahmins, who “[could] not prove to have a common non-Brahmin interest” on the grounds of social, economic, or educational exclusion and therefore failed to present a legitimate case for separate representation (“Evidence” 253). Not only were non-Brahmins a numerical majority, but they had already established a foothold in the existing limited franchise scheme. To expose the extent of Dalit disenfranchisement, Ambedkar provided a table early in his testimony to the Southborough committee comparing the number of voters in select districts to the total population for select caste groups in those districts. After Brahmins, of whom approximately five percent were eligible to vote, the Lingayats fared second best at 1.3 percent.³⁶ Even Marathas, the group with the second-lowest proportion of voters to total population

³⁶ I have calculated these percentages based on the statistics Ambedkar provides, drawn from the 1911 census. These were far greater than the figures given by the Southborough committee, which, for inexplicable reasons, were wildly divergent from those provided in the census, in nomenclature and classification as well as quantity. The report listed 577,216 Dalits while Ambedkar counted a total of 2,158,699 in the census. Meanwhile, the Southborough committee listed Dalits merely as “Others” in the Hindu section, after Brahmans, Marathas and allied castes, Lingayets, and Other non-Brahmans, with only a footnote to indicate that “Others” referred to castes “ordinarily denied access to a Hindu temple” and “generally described as ‘untouchables.’” Ambedkar’s outrage at this misrepresentation reemerged in his testimonies to the Simon Commission: see page 52, below.

at 0.4 percent, had forty times more voters per person than Mahars, among whom only twenty-two out of a total 196,751 in three sample districts could vote—that is, 0.01 percent.³⁷ If Dalits were to make a stamp in politics which would even begin to correspond to their numerical strength, they would need be set apart from other non-Brahmins in an empirical, politically applicable way. This is a project to which Ambedkar was forced to return more explicitly a decade later.

Despite Ambedkar's extensive and detailed suggestions, the trifling concession accorded to Dalits in the Southborough Committee's final proposals shows no evidence of his input. For one, Dalits were to be vastly under-represented relative to their numerical strength, receiving the same number of representatives as Anglo-Indians and European British subjects despite outnumbering these constituencies exponentially (Southborough 29). The proportions were even more staggering in the United Provinces, where Dalits reportedly outnumbered Europeans and Anglo-Indians 309 and 1250 to one, respectively—and yet each group received one representative! Furthermore, Dalits were not even able to vote for this representative: having ascertained, as Ambedkar himself had, that (on the basis of the existing franchise requirements) this group would “furnish few or no voters,” the Southborough committee deemed it best for their representative to be selected by nomination—a process which Ambedkar had flatly rejected (Southborough 5).

Ambedkar as Dalit representative

The official tone shifted drastically within the following decade, however, and the various preparations for what would become the 1935 Government of India Act placed so much emphasis on the question of the “depressed classes” as to make their treatment in the Southborough Committee

³⁷ And Mahars were widely considered to be the least disenfranchised among Dalits!

report seem laughable even from a government standpoint. Despite having been ignored by the colonial government in 1919, Ambedkar's early intervention on behalf of Dalits paved the way for his critical role in the debates of 1928-32 and, in turn, for the enshrining of Dalit minority rights in the postcolonial Indian constitution. In the decade between the passing of the Government of India Act 1919 and Ambedkar's interventions before the Simon Commission, he had established himself as the figurehead of the Dalit movement and the Dalit representative to the British. The proposals and evidence Ambedkar presented to various delegations of the Simon Commission, addressing virtually every facet of India's future legislative structure, would fill a book in themselves, and it is clear that at this stage Ambedkar's influence had outgrown his role as a spokesman for Dalits alone. This became still more evident in his contributions to the subsequent Round Table Conferences, which anticipated his central role in the framing of India's postcolonial constitution fifteen years later. But the welfare of Dalits was always his chief concern, and it will remain my focus in the final pages of this essay. How did Ambedkar's vision of political and social enfranchisement for Dalits evolve over the course of five tumultuous years culminating in his legendary confrontation with Gandhi and the ensuing Poona Pact?

Having tentatively advocated a Dalit separate electorate in 1919, Ambedkar retreated from this position in his proposals to the Simon Commission, contenting himself with reserved seats in a general electorate. Adopting an optimistic stance, Ambedkar suggested that all communal electorates should be abolished except the European one. This meant withdrawing the Muslim separate electorate and establishing minority representation strictly on the basis of reserved seats under a general electorate. Reiterating the position he had taken in his 1919 essay, he advocated that the number of seats reserved for Muslims should be reduced and the number for Dalits increased, although the portion of reserved seats allotted to both minorities would slightly exceed their proportion to the total population. The argument took on new dimensions when he introduced a formal principle of "weightage" in 1928. If

the goal of the new government was to provide “fair and adequate” representation for every community, a crude, “arithmetical” theory of representation would quickly betray its limits (*Writings and Speeches* Vol. II, 362).³⁸ It would be necessary to introduce more complex social and ideological factors into the equation in order “to determine a satisfactory quantitative measure for the distribution of seats.” Representation of a minority “in strict proportion to its population” was not to be confused with *adequate* representation.

...the Legislative Council is not a zoo or a museum. It is a battle ground for the acquisition of rights, the destruction of privileges and the prevention of injustice. Viewed in this light a minority may find that its representation is in full measure of its population yet it is so small that in every attempt it makes to safeguard or improve its position against the onslaught of an hostile majority it is badly beaten. Unless the representation of minorities is intended to provide political fun the theory of representation according to population must be discarded and some increase of representation beyond their population ratio must be conceded to them by way of weightage. (362)

Ambedkar went on to suggest that adequate minority representation could be achieved “if [...] the number of seats to which a minority is entitled will be a figure which will be the ratio of its population to the total seats multiplied by some factor which is greater than one and less than two” (363). As the text progresses, he builds an equation of sorts to determine the exact amount of weightage appropriate.

This multiplier [...] should vary with the needs of the particular minority concerned. [...] For, the needs of a minority are capable of more or less exact ascertainment. There will be general agreement that the needs of a minority for political protection are commensurate with the power it has to protect itself in the social struggle. That power obviously depends upon the education and economic status of the minorities....

Without dwelling any further on the specifics of this calculus, he then suggests

that out of 140 seats the Mohamedans should have 33 and the Depressed Classes 15. This gives the Mohamedans 23 per cent and the Depressed Classes 10.7 per cent of the total seats in the Council. By this, the Mohamedans get nearly 4 per cent and the Depressed Classes 2 per cent above their respective population ratios. This much weightage to the respective communities is, in my opinion, reasonable and necessary and may be allowed. (363)

Wielding rationality in one hand and responsibility in the other, Ambedkar proposed to mete out

³⁸ Selections from *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* Vol. II hereafter referred to either by page number only or cited as *BAWS* where clarification is necessary.

quantified justice to the minorities of Bombay, establishing a template for the rest of the nascent Indian federation. A “fair and adequate,” “reasonable and necessary,” numerical solution would open a window onto new sociopolitical opportunities for erstwhile disenfranchised minorities: thus Ambedkar set the tone for policies of “compensatory discrimination” which would tread the line, in his words, between the principles of equality and adequacy. Protecting minorities under such a scheme would create greater equality, which would in turn pave the way for a more universalist approach to representation in future.

In order to set this process in motion, however, a precise balance needed to be struck: adequacy was a delicate concept whose quantitative application was more delicate still, resting first and foremost on correct enumeration of the minorities to be protected. Ambedkar made this clear in a subsequent testimony to the Simon Commission:

The computation of the exact strength of the Depressed classes is a matter of considerable importance. The Depressed classes of the Bombay Presidency *have already suffered a considerable injustice* at the hands of the Southborough Committee in 1919 [emphasis mine]. *That Committee gave in its Report a grossly wrong figure as to the exact strength of the Depressed classes of the Bombay Presidency—a figure which was absolutely unwarranted by the Census of 1911.* [Emphasis mine...] Similar attempt is now being made in responsible quarters to whittle down the population of the Depressed Classes. (435)

The attempt in question was that of one Mr. Bajpai, speaking on behalf of the Government of India, who claimed that there were only 28.5 million Dalits, cutting in half the 1921 census estimates of fifty-two to sixty million. Ambedkar dismissed this suggestion and defended the upper estimate of sixty million given in the census, citing J.T. Marten’s report at length. He also reiterated that strictly proportional representation for Dalits would not suffice and, adding a few new terms to the repertoire of his argument, that their representation would need be weighted in order to be *effective* and not submerged under the tyranny of the majority.

Ambedkar’s communications with the Simon Commission displayed the cogency and comprehensiveness of his political project at this stage. His proposals rested on the premise of

sweeping reforms, however—including universal adult franchise and the re-integration of Muslims into the general electorate—which had little chance of being implemented in the political climate of the time. If these two conditions were not met, the election of Dalit representatives by a (Hindu) majority electorate would not adequately protect Dalit interests, even if they had sufficient reserved seats. If voter eligibility requirements were not significantly amended, Dalit presence in the elections would continue to be dwarfed by that of propertied “touchable” Hindus, who would in turn select weak Dalit representatives on the basis of their prejudices. The practical constraints of the time therefore pushed Ambedkar to advocate for a separate electorate, which he recommended be instituted on a provisional basis (551). The writings he submitted to the Minorities Committee at the second Round Table conference in November 1931 suggest that he had not yet paired the principle of the separate electorate with the ideological correlative of Dalits as *non-Hindus*, which had become central to his platform for Dalit emancipation by the time he staged a mass conversion to Buddhism in 1935. This is clear from a note on the desired amendment of the term “Depressed Classes,” wherein he suggests that a designation along the lines of “Non-caste Hindus,” “Protestant Hindus,” or “Non-conformist Hindus” would be more suitable and less derogatory (672).³⁹

I have no intention of charting the fierce debates—between Gandhi and Ambedkar, most notably—over the question of separate electorates and that of Dalit inclusion or exclusion from the Hindu fold. Instead, I would like to point out the continued importance throughout these debates of defining and delimiting the Dalit minority in a general, practical way which would produce politically viable figures. It was in this respect that Ambedkar’s politics converged most pronouncedly with the final caste census under the Raj. By secularizing the terms of untouchability, Ambedkar—in dialogue with J.H. Hutton—

³⁹ It is noteworthy that he does not suggest “Dalit” as an option, suggesting that this term of socio-historical self-identification was not appropriate for government use—and logically so, since officially registering a group as “oppressed” would amplify the paradoxes already inherent in the politics of “backwardness” in his model of compensatory discrimination. For more on how this paradox has carried over to the present, see Manuela Ciotti, *Retro-Modern India*.

reinforced the political salience of social stigmatization and gave the category a modern twist.

Secularizing untouchability

For my final comparative reading, I will pair a March 1930 report by the Bombay “Depressed Classes and Aboriginal Tribes Committee”—or Starte Committee, after chairman O.H.B. Starte of the Indian Civil Service—with Hutton’s 1931 census report and Ambedkar’s contributions to the Round Table Conferences to show how, despite his independent posture, Ambedkar’s platform for Dalit emancipation remained entangled with the colonial state’s welfarist remedies to Dalit oppression. Despite Ambedkar’s inspiring vision of justice for Dalits, his practical and ideological debt to the caste census set the precedent for the paradoxes which continue to stand in the way of Dalit emancipation today.

In a memorandum presented to the Minorities Committee at the Second Round Table Conference, Ambedkar noted that “the representation of the Depressed Classes has been grossly abused in the past insasmuch as persons other than the Depressed Classes were nominated to represent them in the Provincial Legislatures...” and that it was therefore urgent to close any “loophole for defeating the purpose of the special representation we claim.” To this end, Ambedkar stressed that “in each Province the Depressed Classes shall be strictly defined as meaning persons belonging to communities which are subjected to the system of untouchability of the sort prevalent therein *and which are enumerated by name in a schedule prepared for electoral purposes*” (671; emphasis mine). Despite his allusion to the particular circumstances in each community, Ambedkar therefore demanded that rigorous criteria be applied to the definition of the Depressed Classes on an all-India basis. The Starte Committee report, which Ambedkar had participated in drafting, had begun to lay down such criteria. The report began by condemning the principle of untouchability for its irrationality, noting that “there is nothing strange in the idea that an unclean person or thing causes repulsion which underlies pollution,” but that

untouchables in India had the peculiar onus of remaining so for life “however superior [they might] be in personal cleanliness to the so-called touchable.” Furthermore, the “regrettable” irrationality of the practice infringed on the territory of the state.

Pressed to its logical limit, in an orthodox Hindu Society, it would prevent the Depressed Classes from obtaining entry into a public school though it is maintained at the expense of the State, it would prevent them from entering the public services though they may be qualified for it.... It would also prevent them from taking water from the public watering places maintained out of public funds. Looked at from this point of view untouchability is not merely a social problem. It is a problem of the highest political importance and affects the fundamental question of the civic rights of the subjects of the state. (Starte 4)

It was one thing for Dalits to be denied access to a temple. It was another altogether for them to be denied access to facilities financed by the state under the pretense of public welfare. This argument prefigured the litmus test J.H. Hutton offered in his census report: “From the point of view of the State the important test is the right to use public conveniences—roads, wells and schools, and if this be taken as the primary test, religious disabilities and the social difficulties indirectly involved by them may be regarded as contributory only” (Hutton 472). Exclusion from publicly funded facilities marked the apex of “social disabilities,” for Hutton, and the only applicable guarantee of untouchability, trumping the numerous other possible tests that he and his predecessors had proposed on the basis of food and water exchange, etc. Because these tests relied on vague designations like “clean Brahmin,” they could not meet the exactitude demanded by the task at hand. A secularized test simplified the empirical classification of Dalits enormously; therefore, it also made it easier to rule out would-be Dalits seeking to benefit from the particular rights the real Dalits were beginning to be granted. Without proof of “tangible disability,” the enumerated were to be scratched from the list of “exterior castes” (473).

Naming and counting therefore remained elemental to securing Dalit welfare, with the emphasis, in the Starte Committee Report as in the censuses, placed on correct representation according to the “objective” standards selected by authorities. “We admit the possibility of error,” wrote the Starte Committee, “and the lists may need further examination, but we think that once the list is fixed, no

change should be made except with the consent of Government, as progress and its absence as tested by figures may easily be obscured, and in fact are so obscured at present, by frequent changes of classification” (Starte 11). Nevertheless, the members of the Starte Committee were willing to accept a change in caste name as an initial step towards greater equality. If “the great majority of a caste desire to change their caste name for the purpose of social betterment”—as in the case of the Dheds in Gujarat, lobbying to be recognized as Wankars (weavers)—then the Committee was willing to accept their request, but this would affect the otherwise stringent conditions of their inclusion or exclusion from the list of Depressed Classes.

While Ambedkar had made a point thus far of bolstering the cause of Dalit self-representation by affirming the numerical strength of his constituency, the possibility of establishing a separate electorate and other forms of reservations also made it necessary to bookend that constituency, to ensure that compensatory discrimination would only be afforded to the victims of a very specific kind of (negative) discrimination. The Starte Committee had attended to this question at length, proposing to break down the vague group labeled as “Backward Classes” into three schedules: an appendix listed all of the Backward Classes in the Bombay Presidency as either Schedule I (“Depressed Classes”)—referring exclusively to untouchables—Schedule II (“Aboriginal and Hill Tribes”), or Schedule III “other Backward Classes” (Starte 77). Furthermore, the committee proposed that a Backwards Classes Board review the conditions of the Depressed Classes periodically and remove a community from the list “after the special aids and protection to be afforded to these Classes become no longer necessary for its advancement.” In order to reach this point, the caste in question would require economic independence and “a certain standard of literacy, the exact standard to be fixed by Government in consultation with the Educational Department;” but it would also need to no longer be “treated as untouchable by the other Classes of the community” (Starte 11). The Starte committee’s proposal was double-edged. On

one hand, it established a definite telos for Dalits—projecting emancipation into tangible economic and educational standards—and placed its faith in their constant progress towards that telos. On the other, it failed to recognize a number of structural flaws underlying this proposal. The first was that granting “special aids and protection” provided a new incentive for castes to claim “Depressed” status; that the desire for the material benefits afforded by these unique rights might exceed the desire to cross the threshold of literacy and economic independence prescribed by the state. The second was that the social stigma of untouchability might not disappear however much progress Dalit castes made in prosperity and education. Finally, it would be extremely difficult for an entire caste, dispersed across a large state, to achieve the prescribed standards all at once—gains that would more realistically be realized on a local basis if not an individual one.

In their shared obsession with correctly demarcating the boundaries of untouchability, Ambedkar and the colonial authorities set the stage for yet another instance of caste’s modernization, even though they did so in the name of the dissolution of untouchability if not that of caste altogether. The paradoxes of claiming backward status have been amply discussed in recent studies on caste including Rao’s *The Caste Question* and Ciotti’s *Retro-Modern India*, and require no further discussion here. I do not wish to further entangle myself in questioning the structures and legacy of compensatory discrimination for Dalits—but rather to show that its foundations were laid on the already unstable grounds of the caste census. For all its originality and theoretical salience, Ambedkar’s platform of Dalit political emancipation was contingent on a convoluted statistical vernacular inherited from the colonizers. Insofar as he accepted the caste census as a political tool, criticizing it on quantitative but not on more profound theoretical grounds, his platform also inherited many of the fundamental flaws undergirding this endeavor from the onset. Tragically, it is in the official, political version of Dalit resistance to Hindu social hegemony—relying on mechanisms originally instituted to sustain colonial political hegemony—that the legacy of these contradictions manifested themselves most clearly.

Conclusions

India's 2011 census—the first in eighty years to include caste in its questionnaire—has, to no great surprise, revived many of the fierce debates touched on in this essay. As I write this in April 2012, caste enumeration continues in various parts of the country, and the initial shock that its announcement incurred among Indians and international observers alike is gradually receding. After all, the present caste survey is only a logical extension of the fact that caste has persisted as a postcolonial reality—not only as a category of social identification, but also as an administrative category—despite not having been comprehensively tabulated for the better part of a century. Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe affirmative action policies are deeply entrenched in the welfare mechanisms of the modern Indian state, and claims to “backward” status have consequently shaped their own brand of the “politics of the governed,” with both Dalits and a plethora of other would-be Scheduled Castes mobilizing to demand what Ambedkar promised India's most disenfranchised at the dawn of independence. If caste-based welfare programs have resuscitated the age-old endeavor to define and delimit caste groups—in the interest of adequate allocation of government resources whose underlying goal, ostensibly, is to pave the way for the eradication of caste inequality—then the ultimate telos of a casteless society seems as distant now as it was in the early 1930s. Meanwhile, it is hard not to recognize, at this juncture, that British colonialism and its forms of power/knowledge played a critical role in fermenting the paradoxes which continue to plague caste politics today.

As we have seen, layer upon layer of contradictions were embedded in the caste census from its onset. Far from being a monolithic exercise in colonial power, it was ideologically volatile, and, by logistical necessity, heterogeneous; moreover, it constantly undermined itself, as every progressive attempt to fix caste categories—particularly after 1901—made the realities of caste more capricious and elusive. As Kenneth Jones writes, the census created an unruly network of feedback effects which unsettled the ordering that the census aimed to achieve.

The act of describing meant providing order to that which was described, and at the same time stimulating forces which would alter that order. A decade later the new modified world would be delineated by the next census which would itself generate further change. This created a cyclical effect, as the census fed back into itself, becoming in the process a crucial point of interaction between the British-Indian government and its subjects. (Jones 74)

From 1901 to 1931, Indians became increasingly invested in the categories which the census had adopted; and while some of the strongest critiques of the census began to emerge from the inside, the opportunities provided by this process were seized by the enumerated at both the elite and the subaltern levels, and everywhere in between. We saw, for example, how early insistence on *varna* among British administrators revived a passion for *varna* status among the colonized subjects, and how *varna*-based identity claims flourished long after the colonial authorities had retreated from using *varna* groupings as a strategy of caste classification. At the same time, Dalits struggled to use the census as a means through which to assert their particular position as one of historical detachment from the *varna* fold. Caste consolidation and caste splintering coincided in unintuitive ways, while an initiative expected to bolster colonial rule began to challenge the latter's fundamental assumptions; as Nicholas Dirks writes, "it is perhaps the greatest irony of colonial rule that the very evidence that could finally be accumulated and contained by the extraordinary apparatus of the decennial census became the basis for the colonial state's ultimate failure to contain both caste and custom" (Dirks 197). Before we get lost in these complex and interwoven chains of cause and effect, however, let us recall that the caste census was not some isolated imaginary whose fictional categories materialized in the society it sought to represent. Rather, it was a complex depiction of an oppressive social configuration. It had clear, tangible effects on the subjects it sought to represent because the categories it employed resonated with the material, social, and political circumstances of the tense historical period from which it arose.

In its attempt to systematize knowledge about the subcontinent, the census contributed both to the consolidation and to the disaggregation of caste groups at different levels: while it played a role, for example, in consolidating Maratha identity in the Bombay Presidency, it also provided a medium

through which Dalits confirmed their rupture with broader non-Brahmin politics to claim their isolated space in the “new India.” The caste census was a colonial experiment, and while it yielded a limited range of practical results—in the service of colonial control, on the one hand, and subaltern political affirmation on the other—its most profound legacy was to lend official legitimacy to aggressive and overwhelmingly exclusivist forms of caste assertion. This manifested itself, as much as anywhere else, in the uniquely Dalit claim to state protection, which has played no small role in propagating tensions between Dalits and other non-Brahmin “lower” castes in postcolonial India—tensions which still regularly erupt into brutal violence.

In brief, the colonial census furnished the long-standing institution of caste with a new lexicon, helped caste adapt to the still-coagulating structures of the postcolonial Indian state, and thereby facilitated caste’s extension into political modernity. Although colonialism offered a new range of opportunities for the dissolution of caste, the Raj’s stubborn commitment to recording and administering difference among its subjects ensured that caste tensions would persist. Today, both government and Dalit discourse remain trapped in overlapping epistemic paradigms which were politically mobilized under colonialism. Postcolonial India has inherited the flawed assumptions embedded in colonial knowledge production, simultaneously through the bureaucratic mechanisms left in place at every echelon of the state and through a Dalit minority which clings to its margin of political protection in the face of continued oppression. Recent gains for Dalits in and through mainstream politics have not eliminated the fundamental question: can and must caste inequality be resolved through the affirmation of (stigmatized) difference? I cannot pretend to have an answer, but hope that, in sketching one possible genealogy of the question, I have not ruled out the possibility of there being such a solution. Despite all the obstacles in its way, hope for Dalit emancipation thrives and continues to forge new paths towards equality; if Ambedkar’s egalitarian vision is ever to materialize, however, the struggle must continue not only by pushing the boundaries of the political mechanisms left in place by colonialism, but also by connecting with a revitalized global struggle against all forms of oppression.

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