PART I

THE GENERAL TRENDS
CHAPTER I

CASTE IN THE PERCEPTION OF THE RAJ: COLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF BENGAL, c. 1858-1911
I

Caste as a social institution figured prominently in British colonial policy since the early days of the Company's rule. In the eighteenth century, not merely the autonomy of caste was recognised and left under the jurisdiction of the Jatimala cutchery, but in matters of civil procedure, particularly in the realm of 'personal' law, the Hindus were governed by the Dharmaashtras and the Muslims by the laws of Islam. The personal law referred to caste in a very significant way, as quite often the rule of law applicable to a person was determined by the identity of the caste group he belonged to. In other words, caste determined the legal rights and obligations of individuals. The situation changed to some extent with the passing of the Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850, under which loss of caste did not legally involve loss of personal rights. Persons disqualified from owning property or taking shares in an inheritance were thus relieved by this statute. But on the other hand, in matters involving purely 'caste questions', the courts refused to interfere. The system was formalised by the Civil Procedure Code of 1859 which removed all such 'caste questions' from the
jurisdiction of the civil courts. Out apart from this judicial endorsement of caste rules and legal recognition of caste autonomy during the early period of British rule in Bengal, a more important phenomenon was perhaps the active interest taken by the colonial administration and the British civilian-turned-ethnographers in the caste system, an institution they considered the most uniquely Indian of all. These official ethnological researches systematized the perception of the Raj about the structure of the society. And when in the early twentieth century, political exigencies necessitated a more concrete caste policy, it was from this perception that the policy emanated.

A lot of discussion on caste may be found in the early missionary works, mainly by Charles Grant, Claudius Buchanon, William Carey and William Ward. They were critical of the system. It was, on the one hand, the social basis of Hinduism which they were out to destroy, and, on the other, an impediment to social interaction between the native converts and the larger Indian society, thereby restricting

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the expansion of Christianity. But for our purpose, more important are the studies by the Orientalists, such as Alexander Dow's *The History of Hindostan* (1768-71) and N.E. Malhead's *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776). They adopted a scriptural view of Indian society and accepted the Brahmans to be the dominant group in this social structure. They saw stability and order in the theory of caste and, therefore, respected it.

The official view of caste was, however, developing out of the administrative exigencies of the colonial government. The rapid expansion of the empire in the country forced upon it the task of developing an administrative system capable of maintaining at least minimum law and order necessary to extract the social surplus in the form of revenue. This necessitated a clear knowledge of the composition of the society and the structure of the economy. As a result, detailed enquiries were made, first into the system of land-tenure and the state of agriculture in Bengal. The outcome was the works by James Grant, John Shore and H.T. Colebrook. Soon, however, the government itself, bewildered by the complexities of Indian society, started sponsoring enquiries about all aspects of the Indian people. As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Court of Directors held that the acquisition of

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2. For a detailed discussion on these early studies, see B.S. Cohn, 'Notes on the Study of Indian Society and Culture,' in Milton Singer and B.S. Cohn, *eds*, *op.cit.*, pp.6-15.
systematic knowledge regarding the castes and occupations of the people "would be attended with much utility," and the subject was expressly mentioned in the instructions given to Dr. Francis Buchanon for his statistical survey of the country - a project which he had started but never completed.

Then the traumatic experience of 1857 taught the British two important lessons. First, they should know more about the customs of the Indian people and respect them. And secondly, the high caste Hindus, with their well entrenched economic and political power, were the most potential enemies of the Raj and, therefore, had to be counter-balanced by patronising the relatively backward communities. Hence there was more urgency to know Indian society, and the tradition of official studies that had started with Buchanon's survey of Bengal and Bihar, developed further through the decennial census reports and the publication of the Imperial and District Gazetteers. To this may be added the endeavours of the civilian-turned-ethnographers - a tradition that was started in the mid-nineteenth century by Dalton and Sherring, developed in the late nineteenth by Wise, Hunter and Risley, and completed in the early twentieth century by O'Malley.

3. Resolution, Government of Bengal, Financial Department, 30 April 1885, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, March 1887, p.36.
Hutton and Blunt. In all these official enquiries caste had occupied a position of considerable importance, in fact, the central position. And a lot of information was made available which developed the imperial corpus of knowledge about the various aspects of Indian society in general, and caste system in particular.

So much effort on the part of the government as well as individual administrators to collect sociological and anthropological data about the Indian people may lend one to "wonder what use knowledge of marriage customs or a cephalic index would be to an administrator?" It is also possible to hazard a conclusion that "the intellectual curiosity of some of the early officials is mostly responsible for the treatment of caste given to it in the Census ...." But motives less innocent are not difficult to detect. These administrative - official studies on caste, it is true, reflected anthropological interest and theories of the period and the anthropometric data which were collected were partly to satisfy such purely academic interests. But the fact that all these studies in the second half of the nineteenth

4. B.S. Cohn, 'Notes on the Study of Indian Society and Culture', op.cit., p.17.

century, without a single exception, were being sponsored or aided by the government, indicates a less academic motive as well. The government sponsored such studies, for they wanted to know, first of all, the customs of the land, so that they could face more prudently, the vexed question of social reform; and secondly, they wanted to have a better knowledge about the internal divisions of Indian society, in order to identify their allies who could be played effectively against the enemies. The colonial ethnographers were also, as a result, looking at Indian society through this administrative prism. To them caste was a distinct structural entity, concrete and measurable, with definable characteristics. They overlooked the important fact that all these units were once tied to each other through inter-dependent relationship and thus constituted an organic whole. On the contrary, they represented Hindu society as a motley collection of such discrete social groups which could be quantified and classified for administrative purposes. In this multi-ethnic community, they detected a central polarity, with the privileged higher castes at the one end and the vast multitude of backward communities at the other. This particular tradition of colonial ethnography had started in the days immediately following the Revolt of 1857. It was formalised in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. In the first two decades of the twentieth, we find it in its fully developed form, when we also observe its influence on administrative policies as well.
In 1858, the Indian empire passed out of the hands of the East India Company and the Queen's Proclamation assured the Indian people that due regard would be paid to their ancient rites, usages and customs. But to do this a detailed knowledge of the local situation was a prime necessity. To meet this exigency, the new government, first of all, tried to compile a gazetteer for Bengal. The work had, however, been started much earlier by the Company's government, when in the early 1840's H.V. D'Ally wrote his Bengal and Mysore Gazetteer, which contained short statistical accounts for each district in the area. Then in February 1855, the Court of Directors decided to have another detailed gazetteer for the districts in Lower Bengal and the Divisional Commissioners were asked to contribute articles towards its compilation. The result was the Gazetteer of India, which later came to be known as 'Thornton's Gazetteer.' But even this was not considered adequate and, therefore, in July 1856 copies of this gazetteer were sent to different district officers for "obtainment from local sources of correct information with a view to ... adaptation to present circumstances." In spite of reminders, 

6. T.R. Lane, Offcg. Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Lower Provinces, to the Offcg. Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.4936A,14 December, 1867, General Dept., GB, May 1868, Prog.No.85.

7. A.M. Monteath, Under Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept., to W.S. Seton-Karr, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.960,7 May, 1861, General Dept., GB, June,1861,Prog. No.10.
there was, however, hardly any response till the end of the
Revolt, when the matter was again taken up and between
early 1858 and late 1860, a few reports were forwarded to
the Government of India "for transmission to the Home
Authorities." In May 1861, the Government of India once
again urged the Bengal government to expedite the process.
But the local officers moved rather slowly. Only a few
pages of the old gazetteer were returned with any correction
or addition. The project fizzled out, though only for
the time being.

The Bengal government next took up a novel scheme.
It realised that there was "a great deal of statistical,
administrative and historical information of real value in
District Record Rooms which ... now lost sight of,
and which if not preserved, ... would by the natural effect
of the time and climate, become wholly lost." In early 1865,
Mr. W.W. Hunter had already started his own researches in
the Birbhum Collectorate. In September that year, the
government of Bengal proposed to employ him "experimentally
in completing his researches" and "in compiling a history of the
District." If the result of this enquiry were successful, he

8. H. Bell, Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to
the Under Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept.,
No.248, 5 June,1861, General Dept., GB, June, 1861, Prog.No.11.

9. Dr. J. Forsyth, Principal Inspector General, Medical
Department, to H. Bell, Under Secretary to the Government
of Bengal, No.322, 27 June, 1861, General Dept., GB,
September 1861, Prog.No.23.
might then be deputed to other districts until the whole of Bengal was reported on. In November, the Government of India sanctioned his appointment, and the outcome of this enquiry, as we all know, was the famous Annals of Rural Bengal (1868).

But while this enquiry was going on, another important development took place. A Gazetteer for the Central Provinces, one of the most disturbed areas during the Revolt, was written under the orders of its Chief Commissioner, Mr. Temple. This encouraged the Government of India to think whether a similar work might not with advantage be compiled of the other provinces as well. The proposal was sent to the Home authorities in May, 1867. In August, the Secretary of State, Northcote, impressed by the 'valuable information' contained in the Central Provinces Gazetteer, approved of the continuance

10. S.C. Rayley, Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept., No.1464 T, 23 September, 1865, General Dept., GB, October 1865, Prog.No.3.


of the work with reference to other parts of India, regarding which, as he thought, "the information on our records is at present deficient."\[13\] The scheme was set on foot and the provincial governments were asked to make a preliminary assessment of the source materials that could be used for such a work. The Bengal government ascertained that "a large collection of materials" was already in existence, such as Buchanan's survey reports and the replies of the Divisional Commissioners on the earlier gazetteer circulated among them for correction and addition. Besides these, there were various publications and reports of the Survey Officers. The Commissioner of Dacca had compiled a series of full and complete reports on the districts of his Division and they were printed under the auspices of the Bengal government. The results of Hunter's researches in the Birbhum Collectorate had also been published by now. And in addition to all these there were the records of the Board of Revenue and the Secretariat, the supplements to the Calcutta Gazette and the annual reports of all kinds, medical, revenue, police, criminal and especially survey, which contained "a mass of information that only required to be picked out and utilised in a systematic manner."\[14\]

13. Stafford H. Northcote, Secretary of State for India, to the Governor General of India in Council, No. 140, 23 August, 1907, General Dept., GB, May 1868, Prog. No. 84.

14. W.L. Harrison, Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept., No. 2439, 19 May, 1868, General Dept., GB, May, 1868, Prog. No. 91. Emphasis added.
The Government of Bengal also thought that time had arrived for the establishment of a special statistical department to be placed under an officer who should devote his whole time to it and who might also be entrusted with the compilation of the proposed gazetteer. But the Government of India, although it appreciated the usefulness of such a department, not only in Bengal but throughout India, refused to sanction it, for it would "involve a very heavy outlay." Instead, it instructed the Bengal government to confine its attention to the much smaller question of collecting existing materials for the preparation of a gazetteer and to finish it within a year or eighteen months at the most. In a revised proposal the latter sought the permission to employ Hunter as a Special Officer, entrusted only with the preparation of the gazetteer of the Lower Provinces. The proposal was subsequently approved and the work was started in right earnest.

15. Ibid.

16. J. Geoghegan, Under Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept., to the Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.3085, 22 July, 1868, General Dept., GB, October 1868, Prog.No.46.

17. J. Geoghegan, Under Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept., to the Offic. Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.4453, 6 November, 1868, General (Miscellaneous), GB, February 1869, Prog.No.1
But how was such a gazetteer going to help? The government of course had its own ideas. "Such a work", as Dampier, then the Additional Secretary to the Government of Bengal, noted in February 1869, "should contain a historical, geographical and statistical account of each district of Bengal, ...... special attention being given to all places which derive an importance, either from political associations, ...... or from commercial considerations, .... or from recent events ......" The undertaking, if carried out properly, would render "a work of great practical utility to the Officers of the Government", for it would provide an intelligible account of "a population of at least forty millions of many races and creeds, and representing interests so important and so varied...." It might also subserve the earlier recommendation of the Statistical Committee regarding a general Gazetteer of India, by forming a nucleus round which works on other provinces could gather. 18

Simultaneously with this project, the government was also sponsoring ethnological enquiries, apparently to cater to the scientific minds in India as well as in England. In 1861 the Secretary of State asked the Government of India to procure photographs of "a few characteristic specimens" of

18. H.L. Dampier, Additional Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept., No.455, 2 February, 1869, General (Miscellaneous), GB, February, 1869, Prog.No.2.
"the more remarkable Tribes to be found in India." They
were to be displayed in the International Exhibition, to
be held in London in 1862. Provincial governments were
instructed accordingly and were given a list of such
"Tribes". They were, of course, not to be bound by the
list alone, if other specimens of interest could be found.
Only the photographs had to be "large enough to exhibit
both the chief physical peculiarities and the distinctive
costume of each race." The local officers were supposed to
add "a brief written description of the Tribe represented,
their origin, physical characteristics and general habits".
The collection when complete, as the government observed,
would be of "much scientific value." But the list of
'Tribes' it circulated indicates some interesting aspects
of the mind of the civilians who had prepared it. The
'Tribes' which were listed for Bengal proper, speak of four
broad ethnic categories. The first included the immigrant
"Koolin Brahmins (Mookherjee, Chatterjee, Banerjee, Gangooli)"
and the "Tribes who accompanied Koolin Brahmins in Bengal"
like "Ghosh, Bhose, Dutt, Mittra." To the second category
belonged "some of the principal agricultural races" and
"commercial races", while the third incorporated the whole range
of tribal population. The fourth category consisted of the

19. E.C. Bayley, Offcg. Secretary to the Government of
India, Foreign Dept., to the Secretary to the Government
of Bengal, No.3311, 17 June, 1861, General Dept., GB,
July, 1861, Prog. No.13.
the various heterogenous racial elements among the residents of Calcutta, such as "Moguls," "Parsees," "Armenians" and "Jews." The Commissioner of Bhagalpur Division, perhaps, could understand the implications correctly. "It is not.... intended," he inferred, "that pictures should be taken of each caste separately..... but only of distinct races." The concept of a multi-ethnic society and its central polarity thus seems to have taken shape in the minds of the imperial policy-planners. The Bengal collection was completed by July 1862, by Dr. Simpson, then the Civil Surgeon of the 24 Parganas. Without delay they were forwarded to the Government of India for being transmitted to the Secretary of State. A complete series was also presented to the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

A few years later, a more interesting proposal came from the Asiatic Society itself. It issued a circular

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20. 'List of Indian Races of whom it is desirable to obtain Photographs.' General Dept., CB, July 1861, Prog. No.14.


22. A. Eden, Offcg. Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Dept., No. 12241/2, 18 July, 1862, General Dept., CB, September 1862, Prog. No.11.

23. J. Geoghegan, Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Secretary to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, No. 2348, 3 November, 1862, General Dept., CB, November, 1862, Prog. No.7.
requesting all, who were in a position to do so, to contribute skulls in order to illustrate the ethnology of India. But Dr. J. Frayer of the Calcutta Medical College thought that a study of live samples would be more advantageous for an anthropological investigation. Hence in December, 1865, he gave a rather interesting proposal to the Asiatic Society. What he suggested was to seek the aid of the government for "bringing together in one great ethnological exhibition, typical examples of the races of the old world" and to make them "subject of scientific study." "Such a gathering", he thought, "might well take place after the fashion of the late Exhibition, at Alipore, of the lower animals and the products of the country." The project might "at first seem rather a startling one, " he admitted. But "were it carried out in a liberal spirit, much benefit might result to science, and light be thrown on many obscure points in the natural history and affinities of the various sections of the human race." The Council of the Asiatic Society were unanimous in regarding the proposition as "one highly calculated to advance the science of Ethnology", and sent a scheme to the Government of India for their approval. It proposed, first of all, to bring together in a Congress "typical examples of all the races of man found

24. Dr. J. Frayer, Professor of Surgery in the Medical College, to J. Anderson, Secretary, Natural History, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 16 December, 1865, General Dept., GB, March 1866, Prog. No.39
scattered throughout the Asiatic Continent and the Pacific Archipelago", as this geographical area had in it "the first residence of primeval man". And this Ethnological Congress, the Council thought, would form a fitting adjunct to the General Industrial Exhibition scheduled for 1869-70. However, as a preliminary step to the maturing of this grand scheme, it also proposed to the Government of Bengal to organise on a smaller scale such an Ethnological Congress of the tribes found in Bengal, Nepal, Burma and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, on the occasion of the Agricultural Exhibition, scheduled to be held at Calcutta by the end of 1866. And, if this proposal was approved, all the Commissioners in Bengal were to be instructed to furnish official lists of all the races of men found in their respective districts.

The Bengal Government informed the Society that no Agricultural Exhibition would be held at the time they anticipated. But instructions were issued to all Commissioners for the preparation and submission of lists of men found in

25. J. Anderson, Secretary, Natural History, Asiatic Society of Bengal, to E.C. Bayley, Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept. 8 March 1866, General Dept., GB, March, 1866, Prog. No.39.

26. J. Anderson, Secretary, Natural History, Asiatic Society of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, No.141, 8 March 1866, General Dept., GB, March, 1866, Prog. No.39.
their respective divisions. They were also asked to submit brief statements, in regard to each race, of "the grounds whether of language, physical conformation, or manner and customs, on which they consider(ed) it entitled to be classed apart." When the reports were received, Colonel Edward T. Dalton, then the Commissioner of Chota Nagpore, compiled them into a book, entitled *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. The Asiatic Society offered its services to superintend the printing of the work and Dr. Simpson, then in Darjeling, was asked to illustrate it. In the "interest of science," he was relieved of his normal official duties and permitted to proceed to Assam to supplement his collection of photographs. The book ultimately came out in 1872. As the Inspector General of Registration observed, it was expected to "afford much valuable assistance in the compilation of the statement of nationalities for the census report."
The census reports, as a modern expert comments, reflected the "official mind," if not the actual situation. The government "viewed the census as a critical source of information on which policies could be based or assessed", and thus "continually tried to make the findings as useful as possible." During the Company's rule, there was a census of Nagpore in 1821 and another of the South-West Frontier Districts about the year 1844. In addition to these, the cities frequently had their population enumerated and there was also the practice of taking yearly census in British Burma and the Straits Settlement. At an informal level, in many areas, there had been attempts at it by the Police through the chaukidars, who were supposed to make a Khana-Shumari every year. But in 1856, under instructions received from the Home authorities, the Government of India entered upon a consideration of the means by which a general census of the population of British India might be taken in 1861. The


32. Lt. Colonel J.C. Houghton, Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.2156, 18 November, 1867, General Dept.,GB, November, 1868, Prog.No.17.

33. R.R. Chapman, Commissioner of Presidency Division, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.44ct.*, November, 1868, Prog.No.26.
undertaking was, however, postponed in 1859, in consequence of the Revolt. It was felt that it would not be "prudent to make a general enumeration of the people so soon after the violent disturbances by which a great portion of India had recently been agitated" and from which the country was "not even yet in all parts quite free." 34

The proposal of a general census was, however, once again revived in May 1865, when the Bengal government urged that considerations which led to the postponement of the Census of 1861 no longer existed. Moreover, "the want of anything like even an approximate knowledge of the population was much felt in every Department of Administration." Concurring with these views, in June, the Governor General in Council submitted to Her Majesty's Government a recommendation that arrangements should be made for undertaking a general census in 1871. In September, the Secretary of State expressed his concurrence with the recommendation and it was now left to the Government of India to give effect to the proposition. Meanwhile, a formal census enumeration had taken place in the North-Western Provinces on 5 November 1866. The Government of India, sent copies of these reports as models, to the local governments and asked them to take measures in order

34. E.C. Bayley, Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept., to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 63/4693, 20 September, 1867, General Dept., GB, November, 1867, Prog. No. 20.
to "familiarize the minds of the people ... with the idea of a census ...." The Bengal government, however, thought of more elaborate arrangements. The "most practical means of attaining this object", it thought, would be to make partial and tentative enumerations as was done in the Central Provinces in 1863, and in the North-Western Provinces in 1864. Assuming that these partial enumerations could be finished, and the results digested by the middle of 1869, a rough general enumeration might then be set on foot. These returns would constitute the basis of the regular census papers of 1871. Later, the Bengal government expressed its inability to conduct a census in 1871, simultaneously with other parts of India, because of expenses and inadequate administrative machinery. However, the Bengal census, taken in 1872, gave enormous details of caste nomenclature. But, in the absence of any standardized form and proper tabulation, it became difficult to deduce any order out of it.

35. Ibid.
36. Resolution by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, 11 November, 1868, General Dept. GB, November, 1868, Prog.No.30.
37. N. Gerald Barrier, op.cit., p.TX.
A more systematic enquiry was clearly called for. In the subsequent years a series of studies were undertaken or sponsored by the government in order to have such a streamlined version of the Indian social structure that would help policy-making as well as satisfy scientific interests.

III

As a divisive force in Indian society, the potentiality of caste, along with religion, was being gradually perceived by the colonial government since the Revolt of 1857. One of the causes of the upsurge, as some of the officials suspected, was the fact that the army was overwhelmingly composed of natives from the higher castes, e.g., the Brahmins and the Rajputs, who had greater social interaction among themselves and wider loyalty networks in the interior. The special commission appointed under Lord Peel to suggest reorganisation of the army, therefore, recommended:

"The Native Indian army should be composed of different nationalities and castes as a general rule mixed promiscuously through each regiment."

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Suspicion of the high castes became a dominant theme in British administrative policies hereafter. The security of the empire came to be associated with the persistence of divisions in Indian society. As Charles Wood wrote to Lord Elgin in May, 1862: "If all India was to unite against us how long could we maintain ourselves?" To prevent this unity, caste, along with religion, was considered to be an effective tool by many officials, like Sir Lepel Griffin. James Kerr, the Principal of Presidency College at Calcutta revealed this motive in 1865, in no uncertain words:

"It may be doubted if the existence of caste is on the whole unfavourable to the permanence of our rule. It may even be considered favourable to it, provided we act with prudence and forbearance. Its spirit is opposed to national union."  

In the late nineteenth century, the image of a horizontally divided Indian society was taking shape in the minds of other British civilians as well. Eustace Kitts, for example, observed in 1885 that:

"... India is a land inhabited by a large diversity of people, cut apart from one another by lines other and (in one sense) deeper than those which separate one European nation from another ...."  

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42. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 199.

M.A. Sherring had noted five years earlier than Kitts:

"Caste dissolves the social compact found in other countries /and/ ... exercises the strongest power of disintegration the human race has ever been subjected to .... In Europe the Hindu race is spoken of as an integer, which although separable into parts, is nevertheless a whole containing all the parts .... But it would be much more correct to regard the numerous Indian tribes and castes as so many distinct integers complete in themselves, independent and unassociated." 44

These observers were gradually shaping the colonial perception of Indian society, the caste system being the pivot of its organisation. The administrative exigency to politicise this socio-cultural dichotomy in Indian society, later on, prompted the colonial government to collect more detailed ethnological data both through census reports and specialised enquiries.

But, apart from this urgency to know about the divisive potentiality of caste, there was perhaps another objective of such official ethnological studies. It was to have a clear knowledge about the customs and beliefs of the different groups of people that shaped the Indian milieu. The British administrators had become cautious about such things since the Revolt of 1857 which was caused to a large extent by the social reforms of the earlier period, that had hurt the religious susceptibilities of the Indian people. Social reforms were once again being talked about by the leaders of Indian society and the government might any day be impelled to interfere.

But this the Government of Bengal wanted to avoid, for they believed that "more evil than good would be likely to result at the present time from any interference by Government in the socio-religious questions which are now under consideration." In October 1886 the Home department of the Government of India laid down three "general principles":

1. When caste or customs involved a breach of criminal law, the state would enforce the law;
2. When caste or custom laid down a rule which went against morality or public policy but was enforceable in civil courts, the state would decline to enforce it;
3. "When caste or custom lays down a rule which deals with such matters as are usually left to the option of the citizens, and which does not need the aid of civil or criminal courts for its enforcement, state interference is not considered either desirable or expedient."

And the legislature, they thought, "should keep within its natural boundaries, and should not by overstepping those boundaries place itself in direct antagonism to social opinion." Accordingly, nine years later, when Peary Lall, who was organising a movement among the Kayasthas of Bihar against extravagance in marriage ceremonies, solicited government help, the latter could promise

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45. A.P. Mac Donnell, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary, to the Government of India, Home Dept., 2 March, 1886, General (Miscellaneous), GB, April, 1886, File 90-38.

only friendly co-operation with "the influential members of the community," who were expected to "take the lead in a matter of this kind." And even for arranging the Darbar list in the early twentieth century, the government decided that "in Darbar, as far as possible, gentlemen should be seated according to their social status." This social status was to be determined by caste and not by the nature of the government title which, as a high caste Bengalee title-holder himself believed, did "not give any distinction within society." Hence, a thorough knowledge of the customs and the practices of the people was urgently needed. The extraordinary emphasis on ethnological enquiries during this period is, therefore, not at all difficult to explain.

Between 1875 and 1877 came out an important series of books, The Statistical Account of Bengal, under the general supervision of W.W. Hunter. The twenty volumes in the series,

47. C.E. Buckland, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Dept., to all Commissioners of Divisions, Circular No.1T-G, 16 May, 1895, General (Miscellaneous), GB, May 1895, Prog. No.6, File 8-X-1-3.


49. Modhusudan Chaudhuri to W.R. Gourlay, Private Secretary to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, 17 July, 1905, Home (Confidential), GB, File 43 of 1905.
mainly compiled by the district officers, contained valuable statistical data, based mainly on the 1872 census, and important comments on all aspects of life in all the districts of Bengal. The sections on castes and occupations gave not merely the numerical strength of each caste in the districts but also important information about their traditional and present occupations, their customs and beliefs, as well as the regional variations in their social rank. Hunter had now been working as the Director General of Statistics to the Government of India. But in November, 1877, after the publication of the series, he was given the new designation of the Director General of Gazetteers. From now on, he was supposed to devote his full time to the compilation of the proposed gazetteers, which would incorporate more detailed and descriptive information about the districts, including the social and religious life and the organisation of the native society in these administrative areas. The Imperial Gazetteers, under his editorship, started coming out from 1881. However, the publication of the provincial series had to wait till the beginning of the twentieth century.

Meanwhile, ethnological studies in India had been given a great booster by Dr. James Nise. He was for ten years

the Civil Surgeon of Dacca and in that capacity had great opportunities of studying the social life of the people. He collected during his residence at Dacca, massive information concerning the religion, customs and occupations of the people in eastern Bengal as represented in the district of Dacca. He also employed a photographer in order to prepare an exhaustive illustrated monograph. The greater portion of his materials came out from London in 1883, with the title *Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal.* It contained copious references to the special literature on the subject and evoked ethnological interest in the minds of many other civilians, Herbert H. Risley being the foremost among them.

The official effort to collect ethnological data was, however, still confined to census operations. The enormous information of the 1872 census had made the complex system of caste all the more confusing to the alien rulers. Hence to bring order out of chaos, more meticulous arrangements were made in 1881. 'Caste Index' volumes were published for each province, giving details of the numerical strength of each caste in every village. Apart from this attempt at quantification, it was also intended that castes would be

classified by their social position. But this sparked off a controversy. Petitions started pouring in, complaining of the position assigned to castes to which the petitioners belonged. And "the whole subject was shrouded in so much uncertainty and obscurity that the original arrangement was dropped." 52

The Census Commissioner, Mr. Plowden, therefore, suggested, a few months later, that some special measures should be taken to collect full information regarding castes and occupations throughout India. A special officer should be appointed to deal with castes, while the regular district agencies would collect information about occupations. The Government of India strongly recommended his proposal, the results of which they considered "would be of great value." A circular was issued to all the provincial governments to ponder over the feasibility of the scheme, the expenditure for which had to be met from the provincial funds. But it was the Bengal government alone which seems to have taken an active interest in the proposal. In October 1882, the circular of the Government of India was sent to Mr. Bourdillon the Deputy Superintendent of Census in Bengal, for early report. In April 1883, he submitted a memorandum on the subject, 52. Report on the Census of British India, 1881, Vol.I, p.277.
recommending that lists of castes and occupations should be prepared in his office at an estimated expenditure of Rs.2,000, and that three special officers should be appointed for Bengal, Bihar with Chota Nagpur, and Orissa.\footnote{53} The Government of Bengal, however, decided to appoint one special officer for the whole of Bengal for a period of two years and Risley was selected for the post, for "the aptitude he had displayed for the literary and ethnological enquiries."\footnote{54} On 6 January 1884, his appointment was recommended to the Government of India and the proposal was sanctioned by them on 28 January.\footnote{55}

For administrative reasons, Risley took charge of the appointment one year later, on 29 January 1885. After collecting a mass of information in Bihar and consulting D.C.J. Ibbetson and J.C. Nesfield at a conference in Lahore, he submitted a detailed scheme of collecting "fresh data in a systematic form" through the agency of district officers as well as informed and enthusiastic individuals. It was designed, on the one hand, "to elicit the salient characteristics of several castes" and at the same time, to prepare a detailed

\footnote{53} 'Ethnographic Enquiries in Bengal', by H.H. Risley, \cite{53} 22 December, 1886, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, March 1887, Coln.1-49.

\footnote{54} R.H. Wilson, offic. Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Dept., to the Secretary to the Government of India, Finance and Commerce Dept., No.1081 T-F, 5 July, 1886, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, March, 1887, Coln.1-7.

\footnote{55} 'Ethnographic Enquiries', p.27.
account of the 'caste customs'. The scheme was approved by the Government Resolution of 30 April 1885, which reviewed the whole question and provided the machinery for its execution within a reasonable time.  

What Risley initially proposed to do, was to conduct an "ethnographic enquiry into the customs of all castes and tribes in Bengal" which either formed "a substantial proportion of the population of any district, or, though numerically insignificant, .... [were] specially interesting from the scientific point of view." He selected 165 local correspondents, both official and non-official, in different districts. The list included the names of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in Howrah and Aswini Kumar Datta in Bakargunj. They were asked not merely to submit memoranda on all the castes and tribes found in their own districts but also to arrange them "in order of social precedence", as it occurred in that particular region. All these reports would then form the basis of an 'Ethnographic Glossary',


57. 'Ethnographic Enquiries', p.28.


containing all the necessary information about most of the important tribes and castes of Bengal, their customs, occupational status and social rank, both general and regional. The task left unfinished by the census authorities in 1881, was thus taken up by Risley with great enthusiasm.

But during these years another important idea was also taking shape in the mind of Herbert Risley. Sir Alfred Lyall, a few years back, had spoken of "the gradual Brahmanisation of the aboriginal non-Aryan, or casteless tribes". Risley believed that this was a continuous process and was still "progressing on a large scale." A whole tribe or sometimes a section of it, became gradually converted to Hinduism, without even abandoning their tribal designation. The tribe would thus become a caste and would go on stripping itself of all customs likely to betray its true descent. In such a situation, the physical characteristics of its members would alone survive. Risley was already facing much difficulty in throwing light upon the true origin of the lower and the intermediate castes, as they had liberally borrowed from the higher castes. Hence, around June, 1885, he began to think about "the possibility of applying to the leading castes and tribes of Bengal, the methods of recording and comparing typical physical characteristics which have yielded valuable results in other parts of the world." 60

60. 'On the Application of Dr. Topinard's Anthropometric System To The Tribes And Castes of Bengal,' by H.H. Risley, 8 March 1886, Thereafter Application of Anthropometric System, Financial (Miscellaneous), G3, March 1887, pp. 83-85.
Immediately, he wrote to Francis Galton, an ex-President of the London Anthropological Institute, and W.H. Flower, the then Director of the Natural History Department in the British Museum, asking for their suggestions. In August, Flower wrote back expressing his full agreement with Risley. "Language, customs, & c.", he wrote, "may help or give indications, but they are often misleading. Therefore, the physical examination which you propose to make of the tribes of the Indian empire will be most important." 61

Flower had also advised Risley to look into the works of Dr. Paul Topinard, then a Professor of the School of Anthropology and the Secretary to the Anthropological Society of Paris. His famous book *Elements d'Anthropologie Générale* was published early in 1885 and reached Risley in September. After a careful reading, he was convinced that the author's instructions for dealing with living subjects were applicable to Indian conditions. Immediately, he wrote to Paris for Dr. Topinard's "anthropometric box" containing "four simple instruments." In late February, 1886, he received the box and made some experiments on the Rajbansis of Rangpur. The result showed that there was "no practical difficulty in carrying out Dr. Topinard's suggestions for measurement on a large scale at a very moderate cost, and that the experiment.....likely to yield valuable result." 62

61. W.H. Flower, Director, British Museum, Natural History Dept., to H.R. Risley, 8 August 1885, Financial (Miscellaneous), 62, March 1887, p.96.

In March, 1886, Risley, therefore, submitted to the Government of Bengal, a proposal to supplement the enquiries by an examination of the physical characteristics of selected castes and tribes. The proposal was immediately sanctioned for Bengal. Later on, with the approval of the Government of India, it was extended to the North-Western Provinces, Punjab and the Central Provinces, to provide a comparative dimension to Risley's experiments. In July, 1887, the Secretary of State, "considering the probable value of the result of the enquiries being conducted by Mr. Risley", approved of the prolongation of his appointment up to 31 March, 1888, within which the enquiry had to be completed.

Risley had thus developed two distinct lines of enquiry. They were, as he himself described them, an "ethnographic enquiry" into the customs and an "ethnological enquiry" into the physical characters of the tribes and

63. H.H. Risley, on Special Duty, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Dept., No.51, 8 March 1886, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, March 1887, p.81.
64. E.N. Baker, Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Dept., to H.H. Risley, No.1033, 22 March 1886, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, March 1887, Coln.1-3.
66. Secretary of State for India, to the Government of India, No.73, 21 July, 1887, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, October 1887, Coln.1-95-96.
castes of Bengal. The whole scheme was later on sent to some leading anthropologists and Indologists in Europe, like Francis Galton, Sir John Lubbock, Professor Max Muller, Professor Taurard and Sir Henry Maine. All of them agreed that the enquiry was being conducted on approved scientific methods and it was likely to yield valuable results.

But the question is, why had Risley planned such an elaborate and intensive investigation? And, above all, why did the government sponsor it?

In his memorandum Risley stated the objectives of his enquiry in unequivocal terms. First of all, the results of the enquiry "shall be useful, directly or indirectly, for the purposes of practical administration." And then, after "those official conditions" were complied with, it was "further desirable that the operations should be carried on in a manner likely to yield results of some scientific value." Administrative necessity, therefore, seems to have been his first priority. But how was such an enquiry going to help the administration? First of all, the proposed 'ethnographic enquiry' would identify and classify the different social

67. 'Ethnographic Enquiries', p.28

68. H.H. Risley to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Financial Dept., No.655, 5 October, 1886, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, March 1887, Coln.1-33-20.

69. 'Ethnographic Enquiries', p.28, Emphasis added.
groups that constituted Indian society. The "native society", Risley observed, "is made up of a network of sub-divisions governed by rules which affect every department of life, and that in Bengal at any rate, next to nothing is known about the system upon which the whole native population regulates its domestic and social relations." For any legislation or executive action and for the development of representative institutions, such knowledge was more than essential. Hence "nothing can be useless," he concluded, "which enable us to understand the working of an institution which exists nowhere else in the world, and which supplies the chief motive power of the society we have to govern. How that society will behave under novel conditions, that use, for example, it will make of any particular form of political representation, is, it seems to me, a question which cannot be answered without a fairly minute knowledge of the internal organisation of the society itself." In other words, ethnic composition had to be taken into consideration in order to secure proper representation of the different segments of the society in the representative bodies, so that no particular group could monopolise political power. And this ethnicity had an economic connotation as well, for caste, as Risley supposed, was often

71. 'Ethnographic Enquiries,' p. 30.
"an index of wealth". Hence an ethnographic glossary would not merely ensure an equitable distribution of relief, but would also facilitate "the assessment of any direct cost."

Another purpose of the Ethnographic Glossary was to inform the government officials of the local customs, so that they could handle better the more concrete day-to-day administrative problems. Wherever "distress occurs and relief measures become necessary," Bisley observed, "the Glossary will tell the district officer who is the characteristic occupation of each caste in the distressed area, what is their social status, and even whose hands they can take cooked food or sweetmeats respectively, without losing caste. In this ignorance of these peculiarities is due the loss of life which so often results from the reluctance of people to come to relief camps where they think their notions of purity of diet are likely to be disregarded, or their caste endangered by work which to them is degrading." As an example, he cited the case of the Chattar-Khais of Orissa, a caste composed of people who had lost their caste by eating food prepared at the relief kitchen during the great Orissa famine in 1866. A government measure had thus inadvertently put these people in much social misery. Similar things might also happen if

72. Ibid, p.31
73. Ibid.
the government, without knowing the customs of the particular
groups of people, had tried to exert its influence for
discouraging infant marriage or promoting the remarriage of
widows. Hence Risley's cautious suggestion was: "the more
Government officers know about the religious and social customs
of the people of their districts, the better able they will be
to deal either with the possible social problems of the future,
or with the practical questions referred to above." Moreover,
in both civil and criminal proceedings, questions of caste
usage were continually coming up, particularly in connection
with marriage, abduction, adulterous etc. As these matters fell
within the realm of 'personal law', the custom of the caste
involved determined the law to be applied. "In cases of this
kind" Risley noted, "an officer who knows what the custom
of the caste is, must clearly be in a better position to deal with
it." An Ethnographic Glossary, therefore, was urgently needed.

The government might not have shared the scientific
interests of Risley, but it could hardly ignore the
"substantial administrative benefits" of the proposed enquiry.
"It has always been the policy of Government," it observed in
a Resolution, "to encourage researches which tend to throw light
upon the actual life of the general mass of the population, which

75. 'Ethnographic Enquiries,' p.31.
even now is not adequately represented either by the vernacular newspapers, or by any of the various public bodies and associations." As early as the beginning of the century, the Court of Directors, had taken initiative for "the acquisition of systematic knowledge regarding the castes and occupations of the people", when they instructed Dr. Francis Buchanan to conduct a survey of the country.

"The enquiry then abandoned," the government thought, "may now be resumed with greater prospect of success. The census of 1881 has provided a sound statistical basis for further research, while recent events have served to bring to prominent notice the necessity for more minute knowledge on the part of Government officers of the actual usages and beliefs of the people at large." An ethnographic enquiry of the people was, therefore, "as desirable as a cadastral survey of the land."

For, "social reforms are beginning to be discussed by the leaders of the native society, and a time may come when Government will be invited to exercise its influence in such matters." 76

The Resolution which approved of Risley's scheme of enquiry thus reveals two expectations of the government. First of all, it was searching for a depressed underclass, ignored by the vernacular press and left out by the public bodies, vis-a-vis the more privileged sections, 'the leaders of the

76. Resolution, Government of Bengal, Financial Department, 30 April, 1885, Financial (Miscellaneous), 20, March 1887, 5 36.
native society.' Secondly, it wanted to have 'a more minute knowledge' of Indian society in order to face the sensitive question of social reforms without hurting the sentiments of the masses or 'the people at large'. The supposed polarity in Indian society, with small sections of privileged upper castes at the top and the vast body of depressed lower castes at the bottom, had thus taken shape in the perception of the Raj. And this dichotomy had not merely a social or economic, but a racial dimension too, which Risley was trying to find out through the second part of his enquiry, i.e., through ethnological survey.

Risley, while explaining the purposes of his enquiry, had observed that the 'ethnological branch of the work will be of little or no use for administrative purposes, and will in fact interest a small number of persons in India and Europe.' But his assumptions and methodology betrayed other purposes as well. Risley had borrowed from Alfred Lyall the idea of a bi-racial composition of Hindu society, the higher castes belonging to the Aryan stock, and the lower castes being the non-Aryan autochthons of the land. The anthropometric methods, he believed, would "detach considerable masses of non-Aryans from the general body of Hindus." Max Muller also largely concurred with those notions. He wrote to

77. 'Ethnographic Enquiries,'p.31.
78. 'Application of Anthropometric System,'p.85.
Risley:

"In India we have first of all the two principal ingredients of the population - the dark aboriginal inhabitants and their more fair-skinned conquerors. Besides these two, there have been enormous floods of neighbouring races .... all mingling more or less freely, with the original inhabitants and among themselves. Hence, therefore, the ethnologist has a splendid opportunity of discovering some tests by which, even after a neighbourly intercourse lasting for thousands of years, the descendants of one race may be told from the descendants of others."

Risley, therefore, went for anthropometric measurement in order to classify the different castes of Bengal into two broad categories according to their racial origin explicit in their physical characteristics. His anthropometric instructions to the enumerators reveal this objective adequately. "In measuring the higher castes," he asked his enumerators "to reject persons of very black complexion and with very broad and depressed noses, as in such cases there is at least a suspicion of the intermixture of low caste blood. Similarly among the lower castes, men of very

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79. Max Bailey to H.H. Risley, 26 July 1886, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, March 1887: Colln.1-33-34.
fair complexion and high caste type of feature should be rejected. 80 And the results of the enquiry, he believed, would be of much "political value" as they would demonstrate the ethnic composition of the population to be governed. 81

The other anthropologists and Indologists, who had received copies of the scheme, also agreed with Risley about the importance of the enquiry for the purposes of administration. Sir John Lubbock, for example, wrote in his letter to Risley:

"There can be no question, I think, that the information you are collecting would be of great interest and value, both scientifically and also in the interest of good government. Our ignorance, for instance, of the laws relating to land has led into much trouble on various occasions." 82

Max Muller was, perhaps, far more eloquent on the subject:


81. 'Application of Anthropometric System.' P.85. Emphasis added.

"... Both from a practical and scientific point of view, the inquiries which, with the sanction of the Indian Government, you have set on foot will, I have no doubt, be productive of most valuable results. They will enable the statesman to understand more thoroughly many of the traditional beliefs, local customs and deep-rooted prejudices of those whom he has to influence and control ...."83

After years of relentless labour, Risley completed the four volumes of his book, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. The first two volumes, which came out in print in 1891, contained the Ethnographic Glossary, while the next two dealt with anthropometric data. A formal trend was thus set in, which developed further during the next three decades and contributed to the framing of the colonial policy on caste.

IV

When Risley was undertaking his survey, another important proposal to acquire systematic knowledge about Bengali society had been mooted. In September, 1886, the Government of India enquired whether the *Statistical Account of Bengal* could be revised and updated with the help of the district officers. The Bengal government initially approved of this suggestion and the Divisional Commissioners were asked to issue the necessary instructions to the district officers "to revise and correct the several volumes of the Statistical Account, so as to embody the recent statistics." But, on a second thought, it was found that the proposal in

83. Max Muller to H.H. Risley, 20 July 1886, Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, March 1887, Coll.1-33-34.
its present form needed to be reconsidered. For statistics
change rapidly. "The statistics in the present edition of
the Statistical Account of Bengal were obsolete before it
was issued." Therefore, it seemed clear "that the publication
of a new edition ... would not be of practical value." For the
"figures in the revised edition would be out of date before
they were published." Hence, the plan was dropped, 84 although
temporarily, to be revived again when the preparation of annual
statistical abstracts became a regular practice.

A few years later, another proposal came from Risley
himself. Even before his book was published, in December 1890,
he submitted to the Bengal government a scheme for continuing
similar ethnological researches in the Lower Provinces and for
extending them to other parts of India. The plan, he submitted,
offered "a reasonable prospect of collecting at comparatively
small cost a mass of information of great scientific value,
which would at the same time be of use to the government of
India in dealing with the large class of administrative and
legislative questions which directly or indirectly affect the
social and religious life of the people." 85 But in the
meantime the census operations had started. And in this
census the government had planned to collect extensive

84. Colman Macaulay, Secretary to the Government of Bengal,
to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept.,
No. 122 T-F, 21 September 1887, Financial (Miscellaneous).
GB, October 1887, Colln. 1-19.

85. H.H. Risley, to the Secretary to the Government of
Bengal, Financial Dept., 12 December, 1890, Financial
(Miscellaneous), GB, File 93-C/2-1, February 1891
sociological data about the Indian people. The enumerators were asked to collect information, not only about "Religion", but about "Sect of religion" as well, and not merely on "Caste &c", but on "Subdivision of Caste &c," too. In addition to broad provincial data, district-wise breakdown was also made available in the district census reports. A large body of information about caste, both at macro and micro levels, was thus compiled for ready reference.

But Risley's proposal was not fully rejected. In August, 1891, the Bengal government referred it to the Government of India. The local governments were informed accordingly and almost all of them expressed their willingness to co-operate. But nothing as such was done immediately. Hence two years later, in early 1893, Risley revived his earlier proposal to prepare a revised edition of his Ethnographic Glossary and to expand it so as to include the whole of India. But the Government of India refused to approve it. For it thought, the "proposal if carried out, would be likely not only to swell the glossary to unwieldy proportions, but also greatly to delay its revision and to cause the revised work to consist of 86.

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86. 'Instructions to Enumerators', Financial (Miscellaneous), GB, File M 3-C/16-1, May 1890.
materials of very unequal value." The Government, therefore, preferred the enquiries to be carried out on a provincial basis. Each province would have an honourary Director, and if necessary one or more honourary Assistant Directors. The provincial Directors would be in charge of the work in their respective provinces and, if necessary, would correspond directly with Risley for any advice or assistance. Due to financial exigencies, the Government of India declined to provide any additional grant for the enterprise, which had to be left to amateur efforts, to be assisted, if possible, by the local government from the provincial funds. The Bengal government accordingly sanctioned in June, 1893, an expenditure of Rs.6000 for the publication of a revised edition of Risley's Ethnographic Glossary, which would incorporate the statistical information compiled in the last census and as much additional matter as he could find time to collect.

But before this new scheme could be carried out, Risley was appointed the Census Commissioner. And the census of 1901, which was conducted under his supervision, forms an important landmark in the history of census-based colonial ethnography in India. In December, 1899, when


88. H.J. McIntosh, Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Dept., to H.H. Risley, No.297T-G, 12 June 1893, General (Miscellaneous), GB, July 1893, Prog.No.2
the preliminary arrangements for the coming census were
under consideration, the British Association for the Advancement
of Science recommended to the Secretary of State that certain
ethnographic investigations should be undertaken in connection
with the census operations. The census report, the Association
thought, constituted a valuable ethnographic document in
itself. It could be made even more valuable by incorporating
certain easily ascertainable ethnographic data, such as the
history, structure, traditions, as well as religious and
social usages of various races, tribes and castes in India.
This could be done without overburdening the census officials
or incurring any large additional expenditure. Furthermore,
the Census Commissioner, Risley, was himself an
accomplished ethnographer, who could efficiently supervise
such a survey. 89

The proposal of the Association was referred
to the Government of India, which in May, 1901, came to the
following conclusion which throws some important light on
the motives of the government for incorporating ethnographic
information in their census reports:

89. Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India,
Home Department (Public), No. 3219-32, 23 May, 1901,
also copy of the letter from Sir Michael Foster on
behalf of British Association for the Advancement of
Science, December, 1899, Enclosure No. 1 to the letter
from Lord George Francis Hamilton, Secretary of State
for India, to the Governor-General of India in Council,
No. 5 (Revenue), 18 January, 1900, Risley Collection,
Reel No. 1.
"The scientific importance of the investigations recommended by the British Association is admitted and the Government of India are in entire agreement with this view.

It is unnecessary to dwell at length upon the obvious advantages to many branches of administration in this country of an accurate and well-arranged record of the customs and the domestic and social relations of the various castes and tribes. The entire framework of native life in India is made up of groups of this kind, and the status and conduct of individuals are largely determined by the rules of the group to which they belong. For the purposes of legislation and of almost every form of executive action, an ethnographic survey of India and a record of the customs of the people is as necessary an incident of good government as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants. The census provides the necessary statistics; it remains to bring out and interpret the facts which lie behind the statistics."\[90\]

In other words, to rule effectively the government must know properly the customs and beliefs of the people, as well as, the inner divisions of the society, both vertical and horizontal. The economic divisions could be brought out through cadastral surveys, while social divisions had to be determined through census reports.

The Resolution quoted above was probably drafted by Risley himself, for the same passage occurs in the introduction of his book.\[91\] And it was his enthusiasm and the government's interest which explain the

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great attention paid to caste returns in the census of 1901. Risley's endeavours were not merely confined to the collection of descriptive information alone. On this occasion, he actually tried to classify each caste according to its place in Hindu society, both in terms of local hierarchy and varna - affiliation. This he did for "presenting an intelligible picture of the social grouping of that large proportion of the people of India which is organised admittedly or tacitly on the basis of caste." 92

Simultaneously with the census operations, the Government of India had also devised a scheme for more systematic and prolonged ethnographic survey of India. Under this scheme, prepared in May, 1901, the local governments were to select from among their officers someone who would, in addition to his normal duties, undertake to carry on inquiries to prepare a "systematic account of the tribes and castes of the province," somewhat in the form adopted by Risley and followed by Crooke. He was to be called the Superintendent of Ethnography and assisted by the district officers. The general direction of the scheme was to be entrusted to Risley, whose official title would be, for this purpose, the Director of Ethnography for India. The Secretary of State sanctioned an expenditure of Rs.1,50,000

for this purpose, for a period of four years. For the Government of India believed that by "working on these lines it will be possible to get a fairly complete account of the ethnography of the larger provinces drawn up within four or five years."93

In Bengal, E.A. Gait was appointed the first Provincial Superintendent of Ethnography. His "primary object," as he stated in his circular to the district officers, was "the collection of material for a fresh edition of Mr. Risley's book on the Tribes and Castes of Bengal." The proposed work would incorporate "full information regarding castes and tribes not dealt with by Mr. Risley." It would also correct "statements which are either not quite correct or require modification" and amplify "accounts which are not very full." It would also have a "discussion of the status and affinities of certain groups." But more significantly, it would also contain "similar information regarding Muhammadan castes." A new dimension was added, perhaps, due to the political exigencies of the time. To encourage the district officers, arrangements were made with the Asiatic Society of Bengal for the publication of papers of sufficient merit in their journal, with the names of the authors themselves.94


94. Circular No.1, from E.A. Gait, Superintendent of Ethnography, Bengal, to all District Officers & L.C.Es., 1 December 1902, Risley Collection, Reel No.1
A close co-operation between the government and the Asiatic Society, for the purposes of ethnographic research, was developing for a long time. In 1892, a grant of Rs. 2000 a year was sanctioned to the Asiatic Society in order to enable them to add a new section to their journal dealing with anthropology, ethnology and folklore. While this grant was continued, in 1908, a fresh annual grant of Rs. 3,600 was sanctioned to provide for the establishment of a Bureau of Information under Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri. He was supposed to conduct "research work in connection with the history, religion, usage and folklore of this province and its people." And his "duty" was "to reply to any question that might be asked on the subjects mentioned above." The grant was sanctioned "in view of the importance to the officers of Government of a knowledge of the customs of the people of the country and their traditions and conditions of life. The idea appears to have been that the Asiatic Society would become a centre of reference and Bureau of Information for all Government officers in Bengal." 95

But the officers themselves seemed to be less enthusiastic. Shastri, after his retirement from Sanskrit College, had taken up the new appointment in November, 1908. In the next six months he replied to the enquiries of only

95. General (Miscellaneous), GB, File 5-G/2, May 1916, Progs. Nos.1-6, Notes, pp.3-5.
eleven civilians.\textsuperscript{96} The situation continued for some
more years, when in 1913, it was found that, in spite
of the Government circular issued on 25 November 1908, only
a few officers knew about the existence of such a bureau of
information. And this explained their lukewarm response.
Hence it was found necessary to invite once again the
attention of all the heads of departments to that old
circular.\textsuperscript{97} But it was only after two years, in September,
1915, that a fresh circular was issued "to bring the
existence of the Bureau once more to the notice of all
officers in the Presidency."\textsuperscript{98} Such urgency during this
particular period was perhaps due to the fact that the colonial
perception of caste or ethnic relations in India had by now
taken a concrete shape. The officers were supposed to act
accordingly.

Meanwhile, the census operations of 1911 had been
completed and this had provided for further systematization
of this perception. For this census, the Superintendent, in
consultation with the district officers, had compiled a
comprehensive list of castes which either numbered 50,000 or

\textsuperscript{96} Copy of a report by Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri,
in connection with the history, religion, usage and
folklore of the Province of Bengal and its people,
General (Miscellaneous), GB, July 1909, Progs.
Nos.1-6, Notes, p.14.

\textsuperscript{97} General (Miscellaneous), GB, File 5-C/2, May 1916, Progs.
Nos.1-6, Notes, p.14.

\textsuperscript{98} Circular No.14, Government of Bengal. General Department
(Miscellaneous), 24 September, 1915, General
(Miscellaneous), GB, File 5-C/2, May 1916, Progs. No.3.
were in 1901, or accounted for 25,000 or more persons in a
single district, or were of "special interest." The list,
revised and finalized in June 1911, contained 234 "Hindu,
Buddhist and Animistic castes". There were 27 new caste entries,
all of them being sub-castes that were accorded full caste
status for the first time in this census. The process
of fission or disaggregation was thus officially recognised
and encouraged by the authorities.

Apart from this, it was also felt that there was
very little information available regarding vernacular terms
of relationship and customs connected with kinship. This
sort of information was considered necessary, for the
French anthropologist, M. Jules Bloch, had shown in 1909 how
the names of relationship differed among the high and the low
castes in Madras. In other words, caste distinction, it
was realised, had a cultural dimension, too, reflected in
the use of dialects. This had to be explored in greater
detail for the whole of the country. And with this objective

99. General (Miscellaneous), GB, File 10C-40,B May 1911,

100. L.S.S. O'Malley, Superintendent of Census Operations,
Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal,
General Dept., No.606/C, 28 June, 1911, General
(Miscellaneous), GB, File 10C-40, July 1911, Progs. Nos
249-250.

101. 'Terms of Relationship' by E.A. Gait, Census Commissioner
for India, General (Miscellaneous), GB, File 10C-40,
in mind, the Census Superintendent in Bengal instructed the district officers "to ascertain how far names of relationship differ among high and low castes" and "whether tribal castes, such as Doms, Chandals and Namasudras, have the same names for their relatives as more orthodox castes." The theory of a central dichotomy in Hindu society, as it seems, had by now taken a concrete shape in the perception of the Raj. The two components, as the colonial government believed, were structurally separate, not merely in terms of racial origin or economic position or social status. But they had different cultural and linguistic traditions, too, a phenomenon discovered in South India had to be sought for in other parts of the country.

Information is an essential tool of effective social control. And it is all the more necessary for an alien ruler. What almost every European colonial power felt in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, was the urgent need to understand their 'primitive' subject societies. As it happened in North America or in the East Indies, Africa or India, the ethnographers tended to...

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"followed the flag into their colonial empires". They were, first of all, supposed to make this "other" society intelligible to the new colonial governors or administrators. Then, in a consolidating empire, they had to carry on social espionage to keep the colonial authorities informed about the beliefs, attitudes and temperaments of the governed. In India the imperatives of an empire facing resistance forced upon the ethnographers new responsibilities, i.e., to determine the structure and identify the polarity of the subject society. The experience of 1857 had made the British more cautious about the customs and beliefs of the natives. Hasty intervention in social questions of the subject society was to be avoided in order to keep the system of extraction going. The ethnographers were, therefore, in great demand. They had to dissect, disaggregate and thus determine the structure of the subject society and at the same time provide an exhaustive as well as intelligible (to the foreign rulers) account of its customs and belief-systems.

The first thing that attracted the attention of these British official chroniclers of Indian society was religion or, more particularly, religious conflicts. The two religious communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, were taken to be two

distinct social groups, structurally separated, with different heritages, traditions, legal systems, customs and convictions, with no commonalities whatsoever. And then, within the Hindu community, another form of structural separation was discovered, which was caste. The institution was uniquely Indian and, therefore, baffling to these foreign observers. But it was a phenomenon that could hardly be ignored as it seemed to be the only key to the understanding of the social behaviour of the Hindus.

"A man's caste", observed an early twentieth century British ethnographer, "determines his place in Hindu society, and consequently his relations with all other Hindus." But they overlooked the most important fact about this structure of relationship, that it had been going through a continuous process of evolution. Movement, up or down in social plane, was a regular feature in almost every stage of this evolution. The colonial ethnographers studied the system bounded in a particular time and space and, therefore, presented a static view of this structure of relationship, where every group had a fixed role defined by its permanent position in a status hierarchy. And in this hierarchy they detected a central contradiction between the 'high' castes and the 'depressed' classes, reflecting the age-old imbalance in the distribution of social opportunities.

104. I.S.S. O'Malley, Indian Caste Customs, (Reprint, Calcutta, 1976), pp.4-5.
This streamlined version made the complex structure of Indian society much more comprehensible to the colonial rulers and the colonial policies reflected these assumptions. As the 'high' castes questioned the legitimacy of the Paj, the colonial government sought to legitimise its rule by patronising the 'depressed' classes, who needed this patronage much more urgently than any other social group. Both these categories, along with their various components, were identified, defined, quantified and classified into a fixed order of precedence by those civilian ethnographers and the Census Superintendents, who were, unknowingly, agents of an empire in strain, if not actually at bay.