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CHAPTER 1

A Science of Defining Boundaries: Classification, Categorization, and the Census of India

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INTRODUCTION

In 1854, while commenting on the recently completed census in what were known as the North-West Provinces of the Bengal Presidency, G.J. Christian (Secretary, Sudder Board of Revenue for the area) remarked on a serious aberration: “In every district there is an excess of males above females in each class, with but three exceptions; this excess is more marked among Hindoos than among Mahomedans, and is greatest in the agricultural sector of the former community…” (Christian 1854, 428). While considering infanticide as among the various causes that he speculated were at the root of this terrible situation, Christian reported that, “The returns do not distinguish the castes which are known or suspected, to practice female infanticide…But it must be left for another census, when the castes and ages of the population shall be recorded, to shew [sic] fully the effect of this custom on the number of female children” (Christian 433). In so writing, Christian demonstrated a key process in many of the various British ways of knowing India. That is, he analyzed the data on the missing girls and women first through the category of religion and, then, turned expectantly for a more refined analysis through the categories of caste.

As the nineteenth century wore on, the British government in India strove to provide for that refined analysis, not only in terms of the classifications of religion and caste, but increasingly through those of language and race. The historical importance of these classifications and their origin in British and/or indigenous imaginations has been the subject of much recent scholarly argument. In particular, debate about the British census of India has generated a charged field of academic discourse. Scholars such as Arjun Appadurai, C.A. Bayly, and Norbert Peabody argue
for a continuity of information gathering strategies in contrast with Ronald Inden (1990) and Nicholas Dirks (2001) who emphasize discontinuity. The significance of the debate derives from allegations that the British changed Indian societies through the very practices through which they sought to know them. By depicting caste and religious distinctions as more rigid and universal than they were, the argument goes, the British administratively altered the on-the-ground reality. However, this contention would be undermined if pre-British states placed a similar emphasis on these categories in their social measurements.

I would like to consider a position between continuity and discontinuity by arguing that, although some continuities of identity categories and information gathering strategies existed in British India, the completeness of the overall matrix of interrelated epistemologies that provided both the context of knowing and the categories that shaped the content of knowing represent major departures from previous traditions in South Asia. That is, when considering how the British government primarily defined Indians using religious boundaries, at least as important as the specific classifications that the British deployed was the model of classification they developed and its derivation from the natural sciences. Moreover, this model provided a shared paradigm for managing the various data collected and analyzed by the variety of epistemologies. This helped make the resulting information intelligible across disciplines and promoted the resulting matrix of interrelated epistemologies in which each discipline mutually reinforced the others’ conclusions. This classification system was characterized by its reliance on mutually exclusive categories distinguished by definitively drawn boundaries.

Both the divergence of British systems from indigenous ones and their epistemological impact become apparent in a systematic comparison of specific examples of pre-British and British enumerations of Indians. First, an examination of Mughal, Marwari, and early British texts regarding Marwar demonstrate some of the general qualities that distinguished British enumerations – particularly the censuses – from those that immediately preceded them. In so doing, it will outline the mechanics of classification itself to allow for a comparative approach to the issue. Second, the essay will demonstrate how the growing ideal of natural science informed
the developing British system of demographic classification. And third, the essay will consider the matrix of epistemologies that formed to reinforce and authorize the results of the census. By the time they withdrew from India, the British had not only helped re-craft existing social classifications but also established epistemological systems that Indians appropriated. When deployed for information projects of an independent India, these continued to inscribe a system of fixed and exclusive boundaries.

**BRITISH AND PRE-BRITISH ENUMERATIONS**

The difference between British and previous population enumerations is aptly demonstrated in an essay by Norbert Peabody which compares the seventeenth century *Account of the Districts of Marwar* with a nineteenth century British survey of the same district. In his *Marvar ra Parganam ri Vigat*, Munhata Nainsi completed a large survey of the Rajastani kingdom of Marwar between 1658 and 1664. Peabody’s work attempts to weigh in on the debate regarding the significance of caste identity in pre-British South Asia and aptly demonstrates an interest in caste not only in the enumerations of the pre-British Marwari state but also in Abul Fazl Allami’s *Ain-i-Akbari*, which Peabody speculates was influential in Nainsi’s work a century later. However, defying his own conclusions, Peabody’s example also shows two of the distinctive qualities of the British classification model: the centrality of religion as an organizing category in a system supposedly universal in its ability to account for everyone.

Peabody demonstrates the similarities between Nainsi’s seventeenth century survey and one completed by British agent Alexander Boileau, reflecting the continuities that often carried from pre-British to British enumerations. Both authors compiled their data as servants of a government interested in land revenue and social governance. Boileau, in his survey of 1835, paralleled Nainsi’s practice of distinguishing the households he counted according to caste. However, the differences between the two surveys are instructive of the divergence in enumerative procedures and the changing standards of British classification practices.

The differences between Boileau and Nainsi are three-fold. First, Nainsi did not standardize
his lists. That is, the manner and order in which the survey lists castes and sub-castes varied from locality to locality, whereas Boileau used a single organizational system to present his data. Second, the earlier work did not provide nor allow, in part because of this lack of standardization, regional aggregation of its numbers. Thus, local results seldom were placed into larger comparative contexts whereas Boileau’s numbers were aggregated from the local to the regional level. Third, and perhaps more strikingly, Nainsi and Boileau organized the caste names on their lists using entirely different systems. Nainsi categorized the households of a village by caste and grouped these two larger categories of “purifying castes” (pavan jati) and non-purifying castes. In some instances, he also grouped sub-castes among castes, and groups among occupations. In contrast, Boileau’s survey lists all castes for all towns, ignores any categories that rank caste, and, instead, categorizes them as either Hindu or Muslim – a differentiation almost entirely absent from Nainsi’s lists (Peabody 2001, 828, 834-35).

If Nainsi used the *Ain-i Akbari* as his model, his would be a loose adaptation. This work by Abul Fazl, completed in about 1590, offered a wide-ranging overview of Akbar’s rule, ranging from the imperial household to the cosmological speculations of the emperor’s subjects. Although never attempting to offer an accounting for all of the empire’s subjects, the *Ain-i Akbari* did describe the constitutive sarkars of the twelve subahs or provinces that comprised Akbar’s realm. Overall, the text primarily concerned itself with an account of the annual land revenue from each. However, in many examples (though not in the case of Marwar), a list of kinship groups – *jatis* and *biradaris* – was appended after an accounting of the cavalry and infantry proffered by each, apparently denoting the region’s militarily dominant groups. The text inventoried Hindu and Muslim exogamous kinship groups together for some sarkars, so that *jat*, *rajput*, or *ahir* might be listed alongside Afghan, *sayyid*, or *kiyam-khani*. Occasionally, the list used Musalman as a category, but never Hindu. Elsewhere, the *Ain-i Akbari* differentiated between Hindus and Musalman, but in these listings the kinship group, not its religious association, mattered most. Abul Fazl made no effort at greater aggregation or classification of these groups.

British administrators and scholars often referred to the *Ain-i Akbari*. Unlike Nainsi, they
did not view it as a model of systematic data collection but as data itself. James Rennell, first Surveyor General of Fort William (Calcutta), drew heavily on the work he considered “the highest authority” for his effort to map India (Rennell 1792, ii-iii). Some later Britons would consider Abul Fazl’s work representative of an earlier, less advanced stage in the history of Indian classifications. And so, in 1933, former Indian Civil servant Lord Meston would proclaim in his President’s address to the Royal Statistical Society about Akbar—“one of the master minds of the world”—that “though his crabbed records are now little more than historical curiosities, they provided an inspiration to the Western race who succeeded to his throne, and who show to-day their steadily increasing appreciation of good statistics as a part of the machinery of wise government” (Meston 1933, 14).

A comparison of these classification schemes demonstrates that although indigenous enumerators played a role in fashioning British censuses (and, perhaps, their interest in caste), the type of difference that mattered to the two sides, and the difference in the classificatory type each used, led to significantly divergent conclusions drawn from those enumerations. The British would come to believe that the all-India censuses they commissioned each decade from 1872 onward would be complete in their accounting for almost every Indian. Moreover, these would serve to engrain the seemingly self-apparent truth that communal identity was the first and foremost marker of difference among Indians. Combined with the fixation on caste, British demographic projects from the start emphasized a severely bounded society whose religious and caste borders promoted only prejudice and intolerance, not the interaction and mutual regard required of a modern nation.

CLASSIFICATION IN THE NATURAL SCIENCES
The qualities of British classification systems from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries can most apparently be demonstrated by considering the three specific qualities of classification as understood in modern western science and as identified by taxonomist Kenneth Bailey. Boileau’s classification schema will illustrate each, making the divergence from Abul Fazl and Nainsi more apparent, and foreshadowing the later, decadal censuses of British India. This
comparison will highlight the divergences in practices of knowing that the British introduced which would impact so dramatically Indian perceptions of their own communities. The reliance on a classification model derived from European natural sciences demonstrates the increasing dominance of that set of disciplines. By the nineteenth century, these sciences had established a rationalist and empirical paradigm that displaced all other ways of knowing the natural world while increasingly eclipsing previous paradigms for knowing humanity. Harnessed by the British imperial state in India, its hegemonic power grew among Indians, many of whom gradually accepted the conclusions of British research while adopting the same epistemic paradigm for their own purposes.

Bailey’s outline of the three characteristics of western classification makes apparent the qualities that would feature so prominently in British censuses in India.

(1) Classification categories should be as distinct as possible, ideally allowing no overlap between groups whose individual members must be, in some way, homogeneous (Bailey 1994, 1). Thus Boileau’s list enumerates all of the specific castes and allows no overlap of categories. Moreover, each caste stands squarely in the Muslim or Hindu column, reckoning no overlap there either. Categories must not be ambiguous. At least in the two examples Peabody provides us, each household fits squarely into one caste and each caste is either Hindu or Muslim and never both. It is the ideal of natural science taxonomies that each individual can be identified as belonging to one specific class because of some essential quality that defines that class.

(2) The characteristics that define each classification must be non-trivial (ibid., 2). Obviously, any audience will assume that Boileau chose caste and religion as significant markers of difference, although whether this significance derived from the people he counted or the government he served, or both, remains unclear.

(3) The classes must be exhaustive, encompassing all items that one intends to classify. Boileau’s list appears to have included all residents of the towns he considers. He does not include a listing for “others”: that class used as a file of convenience to place those who do not fit elsewhere because they lack the distinguishing essence central to other classes. We assume that there is no
one who does not fit within the classes he has provided.

But it is also necessary to notice that the categories and the system of organization used by Boileau, like those used by Abul Fazl and Nainsi, are also not chosen randomly. Together they point toward what Bailey calls a “key”—a basic logic included in every classification system—that opens the system to understanding (ibid., 1). The key provides both the logic for determining what categories are established and the organizing principle for the relationships among the categories. It is perhaps most especially in this logic of classification that the difference of the type in British population classifications most obviously originates. Peabody has usefully demonstrated the continuities between certain pre-British and British enumerative strategies by highlighting a similar assumption of caste as a classification, but he overlooks the specific qualities of what they expect from their classificatory categories. It is to modern European scientific taxonomy that we must look to understand the key of Boileau’s census efforts, and those of later British administrations.

Among the best known European figures in the realm of classification stands Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778). As the eighteenth-century inventor of the basis of the taxonomic systems that continue to serve the biological sciences, Linnaeus established one of the most enduring and well-known systems of classification. He built on the notion of species founded by John Ray (d. 1705). Ray classified plants as a single species if they, as a set of individuals, “give rise through reproduction to new individuals similar to themselves” (Boorstin 1983, 434). Ray’s adoption of the term “species” from the Latin word specere “to see” reflects his understanding that classification orders what we observe. Linnaeus gave greater depth to this system as he grouped similar species into larger, nested taxonomic classifications.

The key to Linnaeus’s system was morphology. Similarity in form, as Ray had initially proposed in his plant taxonomy, stood as the key to understanding his system. Linnaeus’ biological taxonomy took all living beings as an enormous field of entities that were, therefore, sorted into genus (e.g., Felis) according to a common trait or set of traits (e.g., feline characteristics). Linnaeus refined this taxonomical system when he later devised a binomial scheme by which a particular
plant or animal was identified with two names: genus and species (e.g., *Homo sapien*) (ibid., 434-42). Some species could be grouped together as a genus, the next classification level, in order to demonstrate the commonality of at least one characteristic they shared despite variations in other qualities. The binomial system declared both levels simultaneously. Therefore, cats of a specific character were given a unique label, *Felis tigris*, which distinguished those not sharing that trait while indicating a larger group sharing some other quality. The system, therefore, differentiated tigers from lions, lynxes, and housecats while placing them into relation with one another as members of the genus *Felis*. After Linnaeus, scientific nomenclature would continue to add nested levels of classification to more effectively include all specimens until they now number seven (species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, and kingdom). Linnaeus established an ideal of a universal schema that could catalog not just the living creatures of his native Sweden, nor simply of Europe, but potentially and preferably of all creatures anywhere on the planet.

The difference between Nainsi and Boileau’s classification systems, between the *Ain-i Akbari* and British census materials can be attributed to the strength of the Linnaean paradigm of classification in the developing European concept of science during the nineteenth century. That is to say that in contrast with Marwari and Mughal data collectors, British census takers self-consciously attempted to build an enduring system based on strictly segregated classifications within a potentially universal taxonomy. Whereas neither Abul Fazl nor Nainsi concerned himself with producing entirely compatible classification systems for all the people found in the different places they surveyed, Boileau and later British enumerators did. It might appear as though the work of Nainsi and Abul Fazl lacked something because their categories do not fit into an overall schema. However, such a conclusion only demonstrates how integral the urge to universal systematization has become for modern epistemologies. As far as we can tell, universal systematization was not a critical component in the enumerative knowledge projects to which Nainsi and Abul Fazl contributed because it was unnecessary to their projects. It does not appear that either author served a government endowed with the conceit that they could classify all of its subjects, let alone all of humanity. The British system facilitated the aggregation of figures into
increasingly abstract, nested levels such as province and empire, always with an ideal of universal comparison. Moreover, the uniformity of the classifications and the hierarchical arrangements of these classifications underscored an understood set of relationships between the people in these different classes and some sort of homogeneity among those within each class. In other words, this system inscribed, or reinscribed more deeply and broadly, communal boundaries and social rankings supposedly derived from the indigenous community.

**BRITISH CLASSIFICATIONS OF INDIANS**

The classification model derived from western natural sciences operated on a logic that demanded absolutely discrete categories, disallowed ambiguity, and assumed the ability to classify everything and everyone. The exigencies of the British Indian state compelled its officers, convinced as many of them were of this categorical capability, to devise classificatory projects in the effort to know their charges. Because this state served as part of a global British imperial system and that system existed as part of a politically differentiated but culturally similar European hegemony that cooperatively devised and promoted its version of natural science, the classificatory scheme became totalizing and globalizing. Certainly not all humans distinguish themselves by religion or caste, but the “fact” that Indians do became an essential quality defining Indianness. Servants of the British Indian state, therefore, often relied on the supposedly primary boundaries of religion and caste to manage the populations about whom they were responsible to know and control.

This impulse to universalize and standardize classification systems reflects three dynamics emerging in Britain at this time. First, as the British wrestled to understand the Indians under their control, they were solidifying their rule in regions around the globe. Second, British administration of these diverse areas and varied people increasingly relied on a coalescing set of intellectual disciplines. Third, despite the competition among European empires, they shared the development of an epistemological regime that gave rise to these disciplines. So a cougar found in North America could be recognized as sharing the category *Felis* with the Royal Bengal Tiger despite the fact the half the world separates their ranges.
As the quote from the 1854 census with which this essay opened demonstrated, and as Boileau has confirmed, religion and caste provided almost a constant set of primary classifications for the apperception of Indians by the British throughout their rule. As time went by, the meta-categories of language and race, with their relevant classifications, would be added but always in conscious relationship with religion and caste. So, for instance, the Census Commissioner and ethnologist H.H. Risley celebrated the evidence from his anthropometric measurements that proved, in his eyes, that caste status derived from racial purity (van der Veer 2001, 149). The key to relating the individual categories in all of these classification systems would be a teleological narrative, just as the key to biological taxonomy has, over time, become evolutionary. The British certainly would not be the first in South Asia to record differences in religion or caste or language. But the manner in which they created and arranged these classifications would be unique and, ultimately, ubiquitous.

Not all British efforts to discern boundaries in India would be so uniquely formulated. In his report on the 1853 census in the North Western Provinces, Christian approvingly explained that the preexisting establishment of townships, *pergunnas*, and districts in these provinces allowed Britons and Indians alike to work within an understood set of mapped land boundaries that would expedite a survey. He noted the facility of area accountants (*putwaris*) and supervisors (*tahsildars*) in this local knowledge, and bemoaned how the lack of *putwaris* in urban areas inhibited the success of the census there (Christian 1854, 435). So, in contrast with the system of recording land boundaries so willingly inherited from the Mughals (who had inherited it from their predecessors), no comparable system of recording social boundaries existed to appropriate. The British would continue to rely on local officials for their demographic surveys, engaging them in a long term statistical project that mimicked the pretense to determining definitive land boundaries in the effort to map the social landscape.

Statistics stood centrally in an epistemological regime upon which the success and expansion of the British in India depended. This became evident from the beginning of British investigative efforts to know their first large dominions. Not long after they obtained the rights to
revenue farm Bengal, the directors of the East India Company instructed Francis Buchanan in 1807 to engage in a statistical survey of the region. The directors had already dispatched Colin Mackenzie to survey South India. “Statistical” at this time did not strictly refer to numerical information but information considered important to the state (Cohn 1996, 81). In their instructions to Buchanan, the Directors outlined that this should include topographical, antiquarian, demographic, religious, economic, agricultural, pastoral, commercial, manufacturing, and botanical information. No small order, but one not out of keeping with the more anecdotally and travelogue-oriented scientific inquiries of the time. Throughout his accounts of the distribution, history, and customs of the people he researched, Buchanan often relied primarily on the classifications of religion and caste to describe them. For instance, in his descriptions of an indigenous narrative regarding a former raja of a region and the architectural monuments remaining from him and others, Buchanan repeatedly described the actors as Hindu and Muhammedan, Chero, Brahman, and Pathan, even when these identities played no obvious role in the resident’s narration. Although Buchanan’s instructions did not require this classification system, and at times he eschewed the caste information he gathered from local khanasumaris (Peabody 2001, 831), it became obvious that the Court of Directors shared his sense of the preeminence of religious identification when, in their first effort to estimate the number of households throughout the territories under their control, they instructed revenue surveyors in 1847 to carefully differentiate which were Hindu and which Muslim (Beverly 1872, 82). However important, none of these surveys would have the broad impact or persuasive authority as the all-India census series that made its first awkward step in 1872.

The utility of the decadal censuses reached far beyond administrative purposes that first prompted them, demonstrating that the social categories they emphasized would be impressed upon not only British and Indian civil servants but a British and Indian public as well. Bernard Cohn (1996) and Arjun Appadurai (1994) have already outlined the significance of the census enumerations on British official understandings of and the developing democratic processes within the Subcontinent. But the census materials were intended for a popular British audience as well.
The census report authors understood that their work would be read by not only government officials but also a British public who could buy the volumes or read them in libraries. With this public in mind, the reports included not simply demographic statistics but geographical, historical, and other descriptions for those unfamiliar with India. These were not the most recent observations of unfamiliar territory as in Buchanan’s record of similar topics. Instead, much of the material simply repeated what previous census reports had already reported. In his preface to the Report of the Census of 1891 the census commissioner wrote: “A good deal has been added, too, in explanation of the statistics that would have been deemed unnecessary had the work been written for efficient readers only, but which becomes advisable as soon as a public is approached that has no experience of what is to us in India a matter of every day observation” (Marten 1924, v). Such comments suggest that the volumes did not have, at least at first, Indian readers much in mind.

Among those who made avid use of the census were British travelers and missionaries. For example, R.G. Hobbes wrote about his travels as a soldier who later entered government service. In his anonymous reminiscences published in 1893, he eagerly awaited the next census to determine whether an earlier census commissioner’s prediction would be proven by a significant increase in the native Christian population (Hobbes 1893, x-xi). A decade later, the authors of the chapter on Bengal in a book detailing the missions of the United Free Church of Scotland relied on census reports for their physical description of the province (Tomory and Macdonald 1910, 11). Clearly, many in the British public turned to the abundance of information contained in the reports in their efforts to know something about India and its people. The scientific quality of these texts lent them a popular authority as scientific discourse became increasingly valued and authoritative.

The ideal of “science” for census officials figured centrally from the very first comprehensive census. In his Report of the Census of Bengal, 1872, H. Beverly, Inspector-General of Registration for Bengal, described the process of and results from the first systematic and comprehensive census of British India. England had conducted a census in Great Britain every decade since 1801 and the government drew on that experience as well as the knowledge of census efforts in India and European nations. The report described the variety of logistical, financial, and
methodological difficulties the government faced for this monumental project, especially in the 
failed effort to conduct the census on one night alone. The centrality of an epistemological ideal 
referred to as “science” became apparent especially in regard to the accuracy of the census. 
Beverley admitted, in the light of the failure of this first effort to be conducted everywhere on the 
same night, that “from a scientific point of view an enumeration which extends over two or three 
weeks, or even two or three days, is so far imperfect” (Beverley 1872, 62). Meanwhile, the report 
also reflects on the inaccuracy of previous British enumerative efforts, again with reference to the 
standard of science that the author expected his audience to understand.

Included in this expectation was an assumption of the advancing nature of science that 
requires a scrutiny of previous research to ensure that its methods are not outmoded. Reflecting on 
the enumerative work of predecessors, including Sir William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrook, 
the report declared only the efforts of Buchanan to be somewhat trustworthy as his predecessors 
made “too implicit a dependence upon unchecked native authorities” (ibid., 81). In contrast, 
Buchanan estimated the population through a calculation involving the quality of land and the 
quantity of ploughs used in cultivating it as he observed and recorded them. Despite this empirical 
quality and the presumed trustworthiness of the estimation, what once may have been adequate no 
longer was. The report concluded that, “Dr. Buchanan’s method of calculating the population 
naturally appears somewhat rough and uncertain in the light of modern science…” At the same 
time, Beverley criticized some more recent officials for making unwarranted adjustments to their 
enumerations according to what they confuse to be “careful scientific investigation” (ibid., 82). 
Clearly, then, officials referred to an ideal of science that they considered universal and evolving 
while both advancing and contesting methods used to collect and analyze data regarding the 
population of Bengal.

If consensus was somewhat lacking in 1872 regarding proper scientific process, there was 
far more certainty regarding the classifications to be used when describing the population. Besides 
age and sex, the primary classifications were grouped into two overarching meta-categories as 
prescribed by the Government of India: the first “religions” and the second a conflation entitled
“nationalities, races and tribes.” At the start of the chapter on religions, Beverley admitted the lack of agreement regarding the definition of “Hindu” and the classification of “tribal religions.” He lamented that the social interaction between the two groups he presupposed had blurred their boundaries. In his words,

The ring of the true metal is wanting. The coin has been adulterated and debased. And the cause of this, they [who study this phenomenon] go on to say, is due to contamination from aboriginal sources. Hinduism has been lowered from its purer type in order to meet the necessities of the indigenous tribes among whom it made its home. Its Pantheon has been crowded with elephant gods and bloodthirsty goddesses, of whom the Aryans knew nothing, but who have been adopted into the Hindu system to win the goodwill and reconcile the superstitions of a wild and devil-worshipping race. And just as we find in the present day tribes in every stage of civilisation, so does the Hindu religion in Bengal assume a Protean form, from the austere rites practiced by the shaven pundits of Nuddea to the idol-worship of the semi-barbarous Boona (ibid., 130). [my emphasis]

Beverley suffered this frustration because he knew that science demanded distinct boundaries between the classifications “Hindu” and “tribal”—classifications, here referred to as types, reliant on the non-trivial characteristics of a pure and distinctive essence—whereas the confusing facts on the ground appeared to mitigate against this clarity. But the passage also demonstrated another critical dimension to this scientific classification, which helps us distinguish between mere classification and categorization.

Taxonomist Ramkrishna Mukherjee emphasizes that classification systems not only provide classes to sort individual datum, they also arrange these classes relative to one another. By doing so, the systems establish—implicitly or explicitly—a relationship between classes. These relationships often create hierarchies of value that originate in the ideology of those who create the categorical system (Mukherjee 1993, 7). In his statement, Beverley delineated not only specific classes of religion but their relation to one another. On the one hand he included “original” Hinduism as among the pure Aryan type and on the other established tribals as a devil-worshipping
type. The obvious valuation of Aryan Hinduism as higher is signposted by its “lowered” status that results from its contact with the aborigines that “debased” its pure form. The key to this classificatory system rests in a teleology of religious evolution derived from the Christianity of medieval and early modern western Europe which divided the world into Pagans, Jews, and Christians (Saracens, or Muslims, were grouped commonly among either Pagans or Christian heretics). The biblical narrative made clear that the idol-worshippers preceded the Abrahamic covenant which had elevated the Jews who were, in turn, subordinate to the true Christian faith that they failed to embrace. Islam represented variously a return to idolatry, a heresy, or the work of the Anti-Christ. As Beverley’s language testifies, the hierarchal organization of religious categories of the Census of 1872 carried the valuative connotations of early modern theology, although reframed in the paradigm of secular science and expressed in terms of social evolution (Sharpe 1986, 11-13).

In contrast to the teleological key that unlocks the ordering of religions, Beverley implied that he relied on a genealogical key that makes sense of the second major meta-category of “nationalities, races, and tribes.” He explained that, “In classifying the people according to race and nationality, an attempt has been made to group such semi-aboriginal tribes together, and to distinguish them from those of purer Hindu and Aryan blood” (Beverley 130). But, in fact, the report relies on a less coherent set of classifications that collapses language, race, and regional habitation to create categories describing “the semi-amphibious Bengali,” the “isolated” Oorya, the “mongrel” Assamese, and “more manly” up-country Hindustani (ibid., 152). The effort to classify according to bloodline, seemingly so promising in the context of the supposedly rigid endogamy of castes and tribes, failed. The diversity of caste and sub-caste groups overwhelmed the census officials and the inability or unwillingness of individuals to admit their gotra (sub-caste) foiled any effort, at least in 1872, to break caste groups into smaller classifications. Confronted by the paucity of systematizing tools at his command, Beverley noted hopefully the promise of the new ethnological field of research (ibid., 153) about which we will hear more soon. C.F. Magrath, Deputy Inspector-General of Registration, bewailed the same situation in his “Memorandum on
the Tribes and Castes of the Province of Behar.”

In his memorandum, Magrath speculated (perhaps a bit wistfully) that a simple alphabetical list of the various castes would have been “more satisfactory.” “It was, however, necessary,” he lamented, “to attempt some sort of classification.” First, he divided the groups into three while admitting that “it is in no way pretended that the lines dividing the three groups of aboriginals, semi-Hinduised aboriginals, and Hindus are rigid. In fact, no line whatever exists” (Beverley 155). Nevertheless, he compiled lists of the tribes under the first two groups and arranged them alphabetically. Motivated by an understood requirement to order the classification of Hindus otherwise, he settled upon a system based on status ranking. Although he attempted to dismiss Manu’s four divisions as meaningless in the face of observations that troubled any absolute ranking of status, Magrath nevertheless capitulated and organized his list with Brahmans first, followed by Rajputs (which he considered synonymous with Manu’s *kshatriyas*), intermediately ranked castes, and finally castes associated with specific professions such as artisans and laborers.

Overall, therefore, some of the authors of the Census of 1872 admitted its limited classificatory abilities while bowing to the Government’s requirement to construct categories and sub-categories. They arranged these, in the case of religions, with a logic of religious evolution and, in the case of races and nationality, with a logic of both genealogical bloodlines and Manu’s ritual status. If the 1872 Census reflected the importance of the natural scientific paradigm in the effort of the British Indian government to know its subjects, its restriction to two classes of information—“religion” and “nationalities, races, and tribes”—demonstrated the narrowness of their epistemological regime at this early date. No one surveyor would be responsible for the great breadth of subjects for which the Directors had held Buchanan. Disciplines coalesced and crystallized while scholars and officials become more specialized. Yet, the interaction of disciplines with one another, their mutual reinforcement of the scientific method, and their reliance on the data collected by each other would deepen the sense of the legitimation of the social categories upon which they relied. The census would be expanded to satisfy the demands of this growing matrix of knowledge, increasing the categories for social statistical analysis even as they
reinscribed the oldest of them: religion.

CONCLUSION: THE MATRIX OF EPISTEMOLOGIES

The developments since the census of 1872 demonstrates the slow evolution of this epistemological regime that promoted the interrelation of a variety of intellectual disciplines such as demographics, linguistics, ethnology, and archaeology. The British Indian government added new fields of information in each successive decade, ultimately including language, literacy, infirmities, and marital status. These reflected the development of new disciplines of knowledge, accredited through the scientific method, and gaining authority through their recognition by already acknowledged epistemological disciplines. These new disciplines offered their own narratives of universal humanity in which Indian categories found their established place in evolutionary development. Together, these formed what C.A. Bayly has labeled a “matrix of knowledge” (Bayly 1996, 22).

Two brief examples will suffice to illustrate this trend. In the first, the Linguistic Survey of India—a massive project under George Abraham Grierson that culminated in a twenty-part report—used the Census of 1891 to spring into being. Undoubtedly influenced at least as much by the needs of empire as by the emerging field of philology, the Linguistic Survey drew on the local knowledge of officials to complement the census data, which reported language alone, with information on dialects. The Census of 1911 then confirmed the figures. Grierson’s reliance on the census meant that he had to reconcile himself to the classifications used in the latter census even though “that is not now altogether in accordance with the latest results of philological research” (Grierson 1919, 7). Once again, we hear the voice of relentless scientific progress: a teleological advance that validates today’s tools, in part, by revealing their improvement over the revealed faults of yesterday’s.

Ethnology similarly shared both in this scientific paradigm and association with the census. Its proponents encouraged the Government of India to collect ethnographic data as early as 1866 while the Government of Bengal published E.T. Dalton’s Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal six
years later. It was not until 1901, however, that an all-India census included ethnographic questions and that anthropometrical specimens were measured in the field. By 1921, the census report for Bihar and Orissa admitted its limitations in communicating the results in the face of the successful development of the field: “the study has now reached a point at which it has become a specialized branch of science from which further advance must be made in detailed investigations conducted by qualified experts.” Its author explained that the publication of anthropological books and a journal in the province as well as the establishment of a university chair of anthropology reflected “the course along which the science is progressing in this province” (Tallents 1921, 232). This handily shows how coalescing sciences became recognized as disciplines through publications and institutions through the efforts of both Britons and Indians.

These two examples demonstrate how epistemologies developed in part in league with the census—gaining material while offering methods of analysis—and, then, diverging as mature disciplines that mutually reinforced one another’s conclusions. In this way, historians drew upon the results of archaeological research, ethnographers considered the implications of geography, and linguists projected their conclusions on maps prepared by topographers. The practitioners of these various disciplines may not have understood the technicalities of one another’s ways of knowing, but their results, available through variously available publications, could complement and support each other in part because of a common universal, positivist frame of reference. Most significantly in its impact on the lives of Indians, these epistemologies confirmed the categories used by the census, the concrete lines that divided them, and the essential qualities that defined them.

Obviously, there remains much more to be said about the historical shape and role of the census than can be told here. For one thing, a truly comprehensive examination of the British census of India needs to compare it with the history of the British enumerations of its home population. For example, Peter van der Veer has already argued that choices in classifications for the Indian population were informed in part by English self-perceptions of a united, and unique, British nation (van der Veer 2001, 4). And it is of more than passing interest that just at the time
that the British Government in India was preparing for the first all-India census with its reliance on the category of religion, outrage on the part of Nonconformist parliamentary members torpedoed a proposal to enumerate church attendance in England as an unjustifiable intrusion into the freedom of the individual conscience. In fact, it was not until 2001 that a census would ask all residents of the United Kingdom about their religious preference.

In addition, development of the census in relation to indigenous South Asian sciences and its broader legacy requires consideration. We would not, of course, want to overstate the significance of the census and its associated epistemologies on South Asian understandings and categories. These epistemological tools developed in correspondence as well as in competition with pre-existing forms of knowledge and classification systems. The role of village information gatherers and record keepers such as _chokidar_ s and _patwari_ s in the census efforts and the reliance of some census officers on Brahmans to order their caste lists demonstrated some of the continuities between indigenous and British enumerative efforts. However, as David Arnold has argued, “science was intimately bound up with both colonial and Indian concepts of what constituted the modern world; it gave shape and authority to the understanding of modernity” (Arnold 2000, 15).

And so the post-independence Indian state, in many ways seeking to be as recognizably modern as it was Indian, has continued the decadal census albeit with modifications over time suited to its particular and changing needs. The new government maintained the rhythm of the decadal census that had continued without disruption through to the end of British rule, though non-cooperation and the war crippled the 1941 census. Today the census reports, long available in relatively inexpensive published form from government offices in New Delhi and in the state capitals, are also available on CD-ROM and on the internet.

Despite the historical changes and political interests of a succession of British imperial and independent Indian administrations, the Census of India has retained religion and caste as prominent meta-categories, although they do not report publicly the details of this data. Even the latest census reveals the presumption among some of the primacy of religious identity, a primacy
that expects all other categories to adhere to religious boundaries. Instructions for the 2001 census warned enumerators that, “You should not mistake religion for caste names and also not try to establish any relationship between religion and mother tongue” (Census of India, 2001).

NOTES

1 For an insightful comparison of Cohn and Bayly’s perspectives, see William R. Pinch (1999).

2 I thank Phil Hopkins for this observation.

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