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COUNTING PEOPLE, CREATING IDENTITIES: COLONIAL CENSUS AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN BRITISH INDIA, 1871–1941, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PUNJAB

Nida Khadim[*1], Muhammad Bakhsh Lolai[2], Syed Irtaza Ali[3], Zeenat Rana[4], Muhammad Rehan[5]

[*1]*Assistant Professor, Govt. Queen Mary Graduate College, Lahore*
[2]*LUMHS. Jamshoro*
[3]*Assistant Professor, Architecture and Planning Department*
[4]*PhD scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad.*

[*1]talk2nida@msn.com, [2]muhammad.bakhsh@lumhs.edu.pk, [3]syed.irtaza@duet.edu.pk, [4]ranazeenat1223@gmail.com, [5]nawazrehan445@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *
Nida Khadim

Abstract

Between the first all-India enumeration of 1871–72 and the wartime census of 1941, the British colonial state counted the population of the subcontinent eight times. This article argues that the decennial census was not a passive mirror of Indian society but an instrument that reorganised how Indians named, ranked, and mobilised themselves, and it tests that argument against the province where the stakes of enumeration proved highest: the Punjab. Drawing on the all-India and Punjab census reports, contemporary Indian writings, and recent regional scholarship, it traces three processes. First, the census converted overlapping affiliations into fixed and exclusive categories of caste, religion, and tribe. Second, by ranking castes and, after 1909, tying communal numbers to political representation, it gave Indians strong incentives to contest their classification. Third, in Punjab these incentives left measurable traces in the returns themselves: the Hindu share of the province's population fell from 43.8 to 29.1 per cent between 1881 and 1941, with abrupt breaks in 1911 and 1931 that reflect changes in self-description as much as in belief. A case study of the Ad-Dharm movement, which won recognition as a separate religion in the 1931 census, shows how a subordinated community turned census categories to its own ends. The article interprets the census as a site of co-production between colonial governmentality and Indian agency, and follows its legacy into the disputed Pakistani censuses of 2017 and 2023.

1. Introduction

On the night of 17 February 1881, several hundred thousand enumerators, most of them unpaid village officials and schoolmasters, set out across British India and the princely states to record every person present in a single synchronous operation. The schedules they carried asked each household for its religion, caste or tribe, language, occupation, age, civil condition, and literacy, and required every answer to be reduced to one entry that could be tabulated alongside millions of others [1]. This article examines what happened when such questions were asked, decade after decade, of a

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society in which identity had long been plural, contextual, and negotiated.

Its central argument is that the colonial census was a technology of social transformation as well as of knowledge. Between 1871 and 1941 it helped to turn what Sudipta Kaviraj calls "fuzzy" communities into "enumerated" ones [2]. It did so not by inventing caste or religion, but by selecting features of Indian social life, fixing them in print, ranking them, and linking them first to status and then to political power.

The article tests this argument against the Punjab. No province shows enumeration at work more clearly. Punjab had no religious majority secure enough to ignore the count; its reform movements treated each census as a scoreboard; its untouchable castes used the census to declare a new religion; and its 1941 district majorities became the starting point for the Radcliffe boundary in 1947. Yet the major studies of colonial enumeration, from Bernard Cohn and Arjun Appadurai to Nicholas Dirks and Padmanabh Samarendra, concentrate on caste in the Hindu social order and are written largely from the vantage point of present-day India [3]–[6]. Punjab, where religious rather than caste enumeration proved decisive, and whose western half became the core of Pakistan, has received far less sustained attention. Bengal, the other partitioned province, is drawn in only where comparison sharpens the Punjab case.

The discussion moves through three stages: *classification*, *mobilisation*, and *politicisation*. Section 2 situates the argument in the historiography and section 3 sets out sources and method. Section 4 outlines the census apparatus, sections 5 and 6 examine caste and religion, and section 7 presents the Ad-Dharm case study. Section 8 considers tribe, gender, and mortality; section 9 follows numbers into politics; section 10 traces the legacy into Pakistan's recent censuses; and section 11 concludes.

2. Historiography and Theoretical Framework

For much of the twentieth century the census was treated chiefly as a source. Kingsley Davis's reconstruction of the subcontinent's population history, and later work by Leela and Pravin Visaria and by Tim Dyson, corrected its figures for under-enumeration, territorial change, and the incomplete coverage of 1871–72 [7]–[9]. Bernard Cohn's essay of 1987 turned the census into an object of study. He argued that it "objectified" Indian society, converting lived practices into things that could be measured and compared, so that Indians came to see their own society through the state's categories [3].

In the 1990s this insight hardened into a constructionist position. Appadurai described a distinctively "enumerative" colonial politics in which communities became abstract and countable, and therefore politically comparable; Dirks argued that caste as the defining institution of Indian society was substantially a colonial product; and Benedict Anderson placed the census beside the map and the museum as instruments through which colonial states manufactured the categories later inherited by nationalists [4], [5], [10]. Critics replied that the categories were not conjured from nothing. Susan Bayly showed that caste ideologies were consolidating in the eighteenth century; Sumit Guha demonstrated that Mughal and Maratha states had themselves classified and counted; Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook warned against reducing Indian agency to a reflex of colonial discourse; and Samarendra argued that the census constituted caste through specific procedures of questioning and tabulation while working on existing materials [6], [11]–[14].

A parallel literature examined religion, and it is here that Punjab has been most visible. Kenneth Jones showed how Punjabi reformers came to think of their communities as rival populations measured by the census; Harjot Oberoi traced the redefinition of a fluid Sikh tradition as a bounded religion; and Rashmi Pant and Peter Gottschalk showed how enumeration hardened the line between "Hindu" and "Muslim" where shared shrines and customs had blurred it [15]–[18]. More recent work has added regional depth: Angma Dey Jhala on the labelling of borderland societies, Gopal Krishan on the demography of colonial Punjab, and Ronki Ram and Anna Bochkovskaya, building on Mark Juergensmeyer, on the Ad-Dharm and

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Ravidassia movements [19]–[23]. What remains missing is a synthesis that connects these regional findings to the theoretical debate, treats Punjab as central rather than peripheral, and follows the politics of enumeration across 1947. This article adopts a framework of *co-production*, drawing on Ian Hacking's account of "making up people": new classifications create new ways of being a person, and the people classified respond in ways that alter the classifications themselves, a dynamic Hacking calls the "looping effect" [24]. Applied to colonial India, the framework avoids two errors. It does not treat census categories as pure inventions, because they drew on existing Indian terms and hierarchies; nor does it treat them as neutral descriptions, because once fixed and ranked they changed the incentives of the people they described. Figure 1 summarises the cycle.

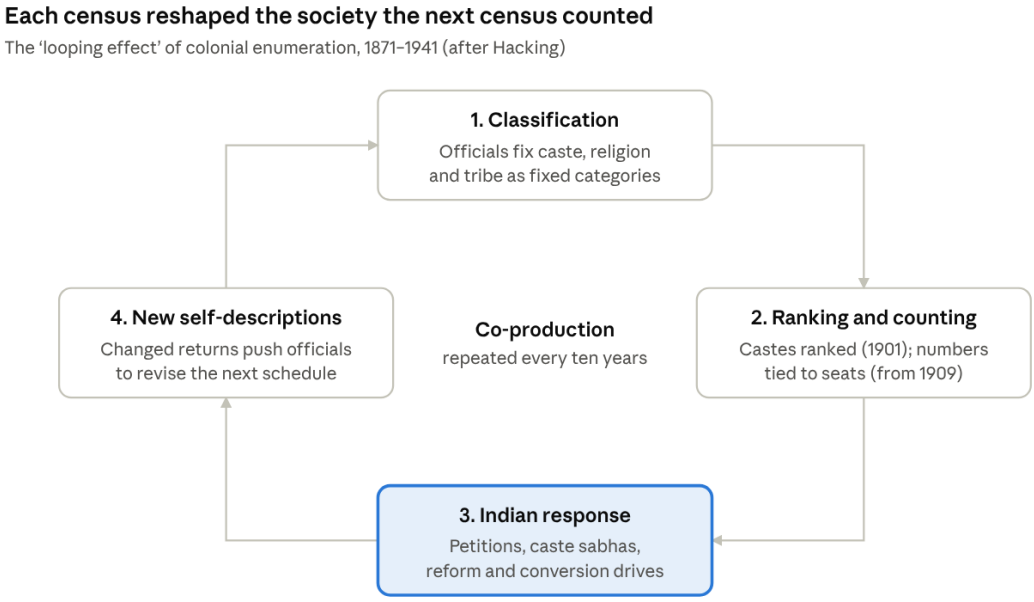


Figure 1. The co-production cycle of colonial enumeration. Classification and ranking by the state provoked Indian responses whose changed self-descriptions forced revisions to the next census. The highlighted stage marks the agency this article emphasises. Source: author, after Hacking, "Making Up People."

3. Sources and Method

The study combines qualitative historical analysis with descriptive demographic evidence. Its core corpus is the all-India census series from Henry Waterfield's memorandum on the operations of 1867–72 to the 1941 report, read together with the 1931 Punjab report of Khan Ahmad Hasan Khan [1], [25]–[32]. The reports are read not only for what they record but for how they reason: the instructions given to enumerators, the definitions adopted or abandoned, and the Commissioners' own commentary on the controversies their work provoked. They are set beside the ethnographic compendia that grew out of census work, above all Denzil Ibbetson's *Panjab Castes* and H. H. Risley's volumes on Bengal and India [33]–[35], and beside Indian writings that answered the census, from caste-claim tracts to B. R. Ambedkar's analysis of untouchability [36], [37]. Every figure is treated as the product of a particular question, asked in a particular way, by a particular enumerator, to a particular respondent. Changes between censuses therefore reflect changes in definition and in respondents' strategies as well as in the underlying population, and the series is subject to the well-known caveats on coverage and territory [7], [20].

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Four limitations should be stated. The study relies chiefly on published English-language sources, so the vernacular press appears only through official summaries. The series is not strictly comparable over time. The princely states are treated only in passing. And the perspective of the enumerated, especially women, peasants, and the poor, survives mostly at second hand, through officials' reports and the petitions of educated elites.

4. Building the Machine: The Census Apparatus, 1871–1941

4.1 Origins and Organisation

The census grew out of a long colonial habit of information-gathering: revenue settlements, district gazetteers, and early nineteenth-century surveys. Several provinces counted their own populations in the 1850s and 1860s, Punjab among them in 1855 and 1868, and the shock of 1857 gave the project new urgency. The operations of 1867–72, usually called the first Indian census, were neither synchronous nor complete, but Waterfield's memorandum on them established the template: a household schedule, standard questions, an all-India compilation, and the fateful practice of tabulating the population by religion and by caste [25].

From 1881 the census was synchronous and decennial. A Census Commissioner drafted the schedule; provincial superintendents adapted it; district officers divided territory into charges, circles, and blocks; and a vast temporary army of enumerators took the count. Schedules were then tabulated centrally, increasingly from the 1890s through the "slip system," in which each person's particulars were copied onto a coloured slip and sorted by hand. Table 1 summarises the eight operations; its figures are the published enumerated totals, unadjusted for changes in territory or coverage [1], [25]–[31].

Table 1. The census operations of British India, 1867–1941

Census	Commissioner	Enumerated population (millions, approx.)	Notable features
1867–72	H. Waterfield (memorandum)	206	Non-synchronous; incomplete coverage; religion and caste tabulated
1881	W. C. Plowden	254	First synchronous census; Ibbetson's Punjab caste survey
1891	J. A. Baines	287	Occupational classification of castes; includes Upper Burma
1901	H. H. Risley	294	Classification by "social precedence"; anthropometry; famine losses
1911	E. A. Gait	315	Debate over tests of "Hinduism"; precedence ranking dropped
1921	J. T. Marten	319	Influenza pandemic of 1918; near-stagnant growth
1931	J. H. Hutton	353	Enumeration of "exterior castes"; last full caste tabulation
1941	M. W. M. Yeatts	389	Wartime economy; caste tables curtailed; communal disputes

Source: all-India census reports [1], [25]–[31]; enumerated totals, not adjusted for changes in territory or coverage.

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4.2 Changing purposes

The census was never a single project. Under Plowden and Baines it was chiefly administrative and statistical; under Risley and Gait it became an ambitious ethnographic enterprise driven by the conviction that caste was the key to Indian society; under Marten and Hutton administrators were increasingly preoccupied with the political consequences of their figures; and by 1941 the census was so charged that its own officials doubted parts of it. Throughout, it depended on Indian intermediaries: patwaris, schoolmasters, and clerks whose own understanding of caste and religion shaped the answers they recorded. The census was always a negotiated product, assembled at countless doorsteps where official categories met local knowledge.

4.3 The census and the constitutional calendar

Enumeration and constitutional change advanced together: from 1901 onwards each census fell close to a major constitutional change, and each change raised the stakes of the next count. Table 2 sets the two sequences side by side from 1871.

Table 2. The census and the constitutional calendar, 1871–1947

Year	Census development	Political or constitutional event	Link between the two
1871	All-India operations begin (1867–72)	Criminal Tribes Act	Whole communities classified and policed as groups
1901	Ranking by "social precedence"	Partition of Bengal (1905)	Census religious majorities used to justify a new Muslim-majority province
1909	—	Indian Councils Act (Morley–Minto)	Separate electorates make community size politically valuable
1911	Gait's tests for counting castes as Hindu	Annulment of Bengal partition	Hindu fears of reduced numbers fuel protest against the tests
1916–19	—	Lucknow Pact; Government of India Act 1919	Seat shares negotiated from census proportions; Sikh representation in Punjab
1931	"Exterior castes" enumerated; Ad-Dharm recognised in Punjab	Communal Award and Poona Pact (1932)	Depressed Classes' numbers underpin reserved seats
1935–36	—	Government of India Act; Scheduled Castes Order	Census-derived lists become a legal schedule
1941	Wartime census; caste tables curtailed	Lahore Resolution (1940); Partition (1947)	District religious majorities are the starting point for the Radcliffe boundary

Source: compiled by the author.

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5. Caste: Classification, Precedence, and Mobilisation

5.1 Naming and theorising caste

No question troubled census officials more persistently than caste. Indians described themselves through *jati* names, clan names, occupational titles, sectarian affiliations, and honorifics, and a single respondent might answer differently depending on who asked and why. The response was not to abandon the question but to standardise it, through glossaries of synonyms and the grouping of local names under larger headings. Standardisation was itself transformative: a *jati* known by different names in different districts became a single unit with a province-wide total, and local endogamous groups were absorbed into larger "castes" that had never before acted together.

Officials disagreed about what caste was. Ibbetson, writing on Punjab in 1881, stressed occupation and political fortune, observing that in Punjab tribe and caste shaded into each other and that groups rose or fell with their wealth and power [33]. Risley, by contrast, argued that caste was rooted in race, and used the anthropometric methods of contemporary physical anthropology to rank castes by their supposed degree of "Aryan" descent [34], [35]. The triumph of Risley's view mattered because of what it licensed: if caste was a fixed racial hierarchy, the census could legitimately determine where each group stood.

5.2 Precedence and its consequences

In 1901 Risley instructed provincial superintendents to classify castes by "social precedence as recognised by native public opinion," producing graded lists that descended from Brahmans to the untouchable castes [27]. To be ranked in an official publication was to have one's status certified by the state, and Indians responded at once. Writing in 1904, the Allahabad advocate Kumar Cheda Singh Varma observed that castes long striving to rise had seized the chance to have their claims recorded and "stamped with the hall-mark of official recognition" [36]. A decade later the Bengal superintendent, L. S. S. O'Malley, reported that "no part of the Census aroused so much excitement as the return of caste," and attributed the agitation directly to the precedence lists of 1901 [38]. By 1931 the United Provinces report could describe the census as traditionally regarded by castes low in the scale as an opportunity to press their claims to higher status [39, p. 528]. Gait, as Commissioner in 1911, abandoned the ranking scheme [28].

5.3 Caste associations and the end of caste enumeration

The agitation accelerated the formation of caste associations, or *sabhas*, which held conferences, published journals, and lobbied the state, above all before each census [40], [41]. They urged members to return a particular caste name, to adopt the sacred thread, or to abandon practices that marked low status, a process M. N. Srinivas later called "Sanskritisation" [42]. The census did not cause such mobility, but it gave it a decennial focus and a formal arena. Here lay a paradox: a project that sought to describe a static hierarchy stimulated competition within it, while reinforcing the hierarchy as the frame of reference.

By 1931 nationalist leaders were arguing that the census perpetuated caste division. Hutton's report of that year, later reworked as *Caste in India*, still treated caste as fundamental, but the 1931 census was the last to tabulate caste for the whole population [30], [43]. Caste tables were curtailed in 1941, and after independence India ceased to enumerate caste except for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, leaving the 1931 data as the baseline for decades of debate.

6. Religion: Boundaries, Numbers, and the Punjab

6.1 The demand for a single answer

The schedule required every person to be returned under one religion, a requirement that sat uneasily with Punjab's religious landscape. Large populations venerated both Sufi saints and Hindu deities, and identified first with a *biradari*, a sect, or a local shrine. Census officials knew this. Hutton's 1931 report acknowledged that the border between Hinduism and Islam was often as hard to draw as that between Hinduism and tribal religion, and noted that

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Punjab's Chuhras took Muslim or Hindu names according to the villages they served, so that some returned Islam and others Hinduism without any real difference between them [30, ch. 11]. Each person nonetheless had to be assigned to one column, and the cumulative effect was to project sharp boundaries onto a terrain of overlapping practice.

The category "Hindu" was especially fraught because it lacked a single creed; in practice it was residual. When Gait circulated tests in 1910–11 to decide whether particular castes should be counted as Hindu, including whether they were denied temple entry or caused pollution by touch, Hindu leaders read the exercise as an attempt to shrink Hindu numbers at the very moment numbers had acquired political value [28].

6.2 Punjab: the census as a scoreboard

In Punjab, with its narrow Muslim majority, large Hindu minority, and politically significant Sikh community, reform movements treated each census as a measure of communal strength. Jones showed how the Arya Samaj promoted *shuddhi* to reclaim converts and "uplift" low castes, how Muslim organisations answered with *tabligh* and *tanzim*, and how rising Christian numbers among the Chuhras sharpened Hindu anxiety [15]. The Singh Sabha movement, especially its Tat Khalsa wing, sought to define Sikhism as a religion distinct from Hinduism and urged followers to return themselves as Sikhs [16].

By 1931 the contest had become open. Hutton wrote that "feeling on the subject of the return of religion ran highest in the Punjab," where canvassers from all three major communities pressed the depressed castes to return themselves as each side wished, and where false rumours circulated to stir enthusiasm. He also reported that some Punjabi families brought up one son as a Hindu and another as a Sikh, to improve the family's chances of government employment [30, ch. 11].

The returns record the effect. Table 3 gives Punjab's religious composition (British territory and Punjab States combined) at each census, as compiled by Krishan from the 1931 and 1941 reports [20, table 4], [32, p. 328].

Table 3. Religious composition of the Punjab (British territory and Punjab States), 1881–1941, per cent

Census	Muslims (%)	Hindus (%)	Sikhs (%)	Christians (%)	Others (%)
1881	47.6	43.8	8.2	0.1	0.3
1891	47.8	43.6	8.2	0.2	0.2
1901	49.6	41.3	8.6	0.3	0.2
1911	51.1	35.8	12.1	0.8	0.2
1921	51.1	35.1	12.4	1.3	0.1
1931	52.4	30.2	14.3	1.5	1.6
1941	53.2	29.1	14.9	1.5	1.3

Source: Krishan [20, table 4], compiled from the 1931 and 1941 census reports.

Two breaks stand out. Between 1901 and 1911 the Hindu share fell by 5.5 points while the Sikh share rose by 3.5, too abrupt for births and deaths alone; Krishan attributes the long Hindu decline mainly to conversion among low castes, and the timing matches the Singh Sabha campaigns. Between 1921 and 1931 the Hindu share fell by nearly 5 points again while "Others" rose from 0.1 to 1.6 per cent, a rise that corresponds to the Ad-Dharmis examined in section 7. In both cases the numbers record a change in self-description as much as in belief: the census measured, and in measuring

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encouraged, the redrawing of religious boundaries.

6.3 Bengal in comparison

Bengal offers a contrast. There the census of 1872 revealed, to officials' surprise, that Muslims formed roughly half the population [25], and later censuses showed them growing slightly faster than Hindus. These modest differentials were read through communal anxiety: U. N. Mukherji's *Hindus: A Dying Race* (1909) used census figures to forecast Hindu decline, and such arguments fed Hindu mobilisation [44], [45]. But where Bengal's anxiety was largely demographic, Punjab's was organisational: its three-way contest made the census an arena in which communities actively campaigned for returns.

6.4 From "people" to "population"

Taken together, these developments mark a shift in how religious communities were imagined. A community once experienced through its practices, places, and leaders was now also experienced as a *population*: an aggregate with a size, a growth rate, a distribution, and a share of the whole that could be gained or lost. That demographic imagination was a precondition for the politics of majority and minority that dominated the late colonial period.

7. Case Study: The Ad-Dharm Movement and the Punjab Census of 1931

7.1 Origins

The Ad-Dharm movement shows, in compressed form, every stage of the cycle in Figure 1. Its founder, Mangu Ram Mugowalia, was a Chamar from Mugowal in Hoshiarpur district, who in June 1926 convened the conference that launched the movement [23]. Its central claim was at once historical and religious: Punjab's untouchable castes were the original inhabitants of India and possessed their own faith, older than Hinduism or Sikhism. A movement poster of 1927 put it simply: "We are the original people of this country and our religion is Ad Dharma" [23, p. 86].

7.2 The census as target

From the start the movement treated the census as the place where this claim could become official. Under existing practice Punjab's Chamars and Chuhras were returned as Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, or Christians according to the religion of their patrons, and appeared in every column as a subordinate caste. Ad-Dharm leaders petitioned for recognition as a separate religion, and Hindu leaders opposed them [22], [23]. Hutton's report records the outcome. Harassed by rival canvassers, the depressed castes staged a large demonstration in Lahore insisting on being returned as Ad-Dharmi; because they denied being Hindus, and because the census could only accept each individual's own statement of religion, they were shown under "Others." For the province as a whole, including the Punjab States, the return was 418,789; elsewhere in the same chapter Hutton gives a figure of 399,307, apparently for British districts alone. He calculated that, had the Ad-Dharmis been counted as Hindus, the Hindu population of British Punjab would have shown an increase of 2.3 per cent over the decade instead of a decrease of 3.81 per cent [30, ch. 11]. A community never before recorded separately thus accounted for the whole of the recorded decline in the province's largest minority.

7.3 From numbers to votes, and back

Recognition was quickly converted into political capital. The 1931 total gave Ad-Dharm leaders a figure to cite in the debates over the Communal Award, and in the provincial elections of 1937, when eight seats in the Punjab assembly were reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the movement's leaders entered electoral politics; Seth Kishan Dass, one of its principal figures, was elected from Jullundur [21], [23]. Yet the case also shows the limits of census-based identity. Recognition as a religion was not repeated; in later enumerations Ad-Dharm was recorded as a caste rather than a faith, and the movement shifted towards the devotional tradition of the saint Ravidas, whose legacy survives in Ravidassia institutions in Indian Punjab [21], [22].

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7.4 Significance

Three conclusions follow. Census categories were not simply imposed from above: here a subordinated group took the initiative and used the census against the dominant categories of its society. The case shows the looping effect at work, as an identity articulated in 1926 was ratified by the state in 1931 and reshaped political behaviour in 1937. And it reveals that the religious columns which in Punjab mostly hardened Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh boundaries could also be used to escape them, though only for as long as the state chose to keep the column open.

8. Tribe, Martiality, Gender, and Mortality

The census also institutionalised categories beyond caste and creed. It fixed a distinction between "caste" and "tribe" resting on evolutionary assumptions, recording tribal religion as "Animist" and later under headings such as "Tribal," and so prepared the ground for the Excluded Areas of 1935 and the Scheduled Tribes of independent India. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, passed while the first all-India operations were under way, allowed whole communities to be notified as hereditarily criminal, while the theory of "martial races" privileged Punjabi Muslims, Sikhs, Jats, Rajputs, Dogras, and others as natural soldiers. Both rested on the same premise as Risley's caste theory: that character was an inherited property of groups, and for Punjab, "martial" classification brought pay, pensions, and canal-colony land that reshaped local economies and identities.

The census made women a matter of statistical concern. It recorded a marked deficit of females in Punjab and neighbouring regions, which officials linked to infanticide and neglect among certain landowning castes as well as to under-enumeration, while its tables on age at marriage and literacy supplied evidence for the reform debates examined by the Age of Consent Committee of 1928–29, which culminated in the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 [46].

Finally, the census recorded the catastrophic mortality of the period. The 1911 report counted nearly 6.5 million plague deaths in the preceding decade, more than a third of them in Punjab, whose population actually fell between 1901 and 1911 [20], [28]. Famine in the 1890s and the influenza pandemic of 1918 left similar marks. Demographers identify 1921 as the "great divide" in Indian population history, after which mortality declined and growth became sustained (Figure 2) [7], [8].

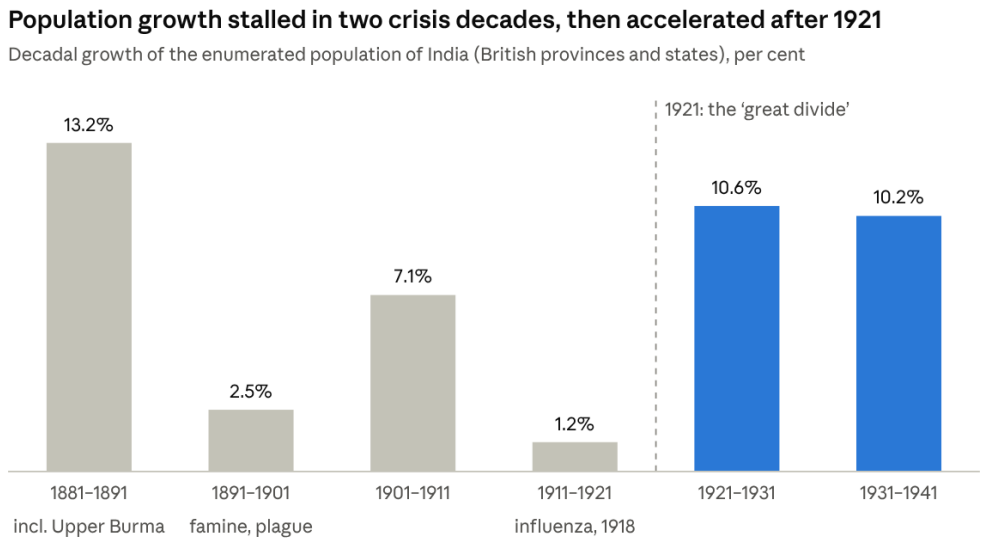


Figure 2. Decadal growth of India's enumerated population, 1881–1941. The 1881–91 figure is inflated by the addition of Upper Burma. Source: all-India census reports [1], [25]–[31].

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9. Numbers into Politics: Representation, Reservation, and 1941

9.1 The political value of numbers

Until the early twentieth century, census numbers mattered chiefly as markers of status. The Indian Councils Act of 1909 changed this. Responding to the Simla Deputation of 1906, the government conceded separate electorates for Muslims, and the principle that representation should be allotted to communities by their numbers and "political importance" tied the census directly to power. The Lucknow Pact of 1916 negotiated communal seat shares by balancing population against "weightage" for minorities; the 1919 reforms extended communal representation to Sikhs in Punjab; and every later constitutional negotiation turned on census-derived proportions. In Punjab, where Muslims held a majority too narrow to be secure and Hindus and Sikhs each held minorities too large to be ignored, every percentage point counted.

9.2 The Depressed Classes

For 1931 Hutton enumerated the "exterior castes" by criteria of social disability such as exclusion from temples and public wells, producing a figure of around 50 million [30]. Leaders of these communities, above all B. R. Ambedkar, read the census closely and critically. Reviewing Risley's scheme of 1901, Ambedkar remarked that for a society which refused equality and was organised as a gradation of higher and lower, ranking by social precedence "was the most appropriate one," a verdict that turned the census into an indictment of caste [37]. He also recorded how the value of numbers changed behaviour: once the Indian Franchise Committee of 1932, on which he sat, began to translate population into seats, caste Hindu witnesses sought to shrink the untouchable count, and in Punjab a majority of the provincial franchise committee denied that depressed classes existed in the province at all [37]. The Communal Award of 1932 granted the Depressed Classes separate electorates; Gandhi's fast against it produced the Poona Pact, which substituted reserved seats within a joint electorate; and the Government of India Act of 1935 and the Scheduled Castes Order of 1936 turned census-based lists into a legal schedule, the ancestor of the Scheduled Castes of the Indian Constitution.

9.3 1941: a census under suspicion

The 1941 census was taken amid war and the deepening rivalry between the Congress and the Muslim League after the Lahore Resolution of 1940. Both understood that its results would shape any settlement, including claims to territory. Communal organisations campaigned before enumeration, accusations of inflated returns were exchanged in Punjab and Bengal, and the census curtailed its tabulations, including caste, on grounds of wartime economy [31]. Contested as they were, the 1941 figures became the starting point from which the Radcliffe Boundary Commission identified contiguous Muslim and non-Muslim majority areas in Punjab and Bengal in 1947, although its terms of reference also allowed "other factors" to be taken into account.

It would be wrong to attribute Partition to the census; its causes lay in high politics, in war, and in popular mobilisation. Yet the census supplied the conceptual and technical conditions under which a territorial partition along religious lines became thinkable and administrable. It had taught Punjabis to imagine their communities as populations with majorities and minorities distributed across maps in measurable proportions, and the claim to a homeland where one's community formed a majority rested on exactly that enumerated, territorialised imagination.

10. Colonial Legacies in Pakistan: The Census Disputes of 2017 and 2023

10.1 Numbers and entitlement after 1947

The fusion of enumeration and entitlement forged between 1909 and 1947 did not end with independence. Pakistan's Constitution allocates National Assembly seats among the provinces on the basis of population according to the last preceding census officially published [47], and population has carried the largest weight in the formula by which the National Finance Commission divides federal revenue; under the

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Seventh National Finance Commission Award of 2010, population carried a weight of 82 per cent in the distribution among the provinces [48]. Census results therefore determine both representation and resources, as communal numbers did under the late Raj. The categories at stake have shifted from religion and caste to province, district, and ethnolinguistic community, but the structure of the contest is recognisably colonial.

10.2 The 2017 census

The sixth census of 2017 was contested almost as soon as its results appeared. Parties based in urban Sindh, notably the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) and Jamaat-e-Islami, had long argued that it undercounted Karachi, with consequences for the city's share of seats, jobs, and funds, and they repeated the complaint during the 2023 count [49]–[51]. The disputes were serious enough that the federal government later cited reservations about 2017 in justifying a new count [52].

10.3 The 2023 digital census

Pakistan's seventh census, launched on 1 March 2023, was its first digital census, conducted by more than 120,000 enumerators with tablets and mobile devices [51]. Intended to settle the disputes of 2017, it reproduced them. A preliminary estimate in April suggested that Karachi's population might fall by about 6.5 per cent from its 2017 figure, prompting objections across the political spectrum [51]. MQM-P leaders claimed the city's true population was around 35 million and urged all its ethnic groups to take to the streets against the count [49], later claiming that without their objections Karachi would have been recorded at only 14.4 million [53]. Jamaat-e-Islami's Karachi leadership warned that the city's rights in resources, quotas, and representation were at stake [50], and the Sindh government, led by the Pakistan Peoples Party, threatened to reject results if its concerns were ignored [54].

The disputes ran in more than one direction. Commentators in Sindh argued that claims of a Karachi population in the tens of millions had been inflated for political ends [55], while sections of Sindhi and Baloch civil society regarded the final results as undercounting rural Sindh and Balochistan, and a recorded decline in Balochistan's population was challenged before the Balochistan High Court [56]. In August 2023 the Council of Common Interests approved results putting Pakistan's population at 241.49 million; because fresh delimitation was now required, the decision also affected the timing of the general elections [52].

10.4 Continuities and differences

The parallels with colonial Punjab are close. Groups mobilised before and during enumeration to maximise their numbers; accusations of inflation and suppression were exchanged; and the reliability of the count became inseparable from the legitimacy of the settlement built on it. As in 1941, a count taken under acute political pressure became the basis for redrawing political boundaries despite doubts about its accuracy. The differences matter as much: Pakistan's disputes are adjudicated through constitutional bodies, courts, and elected governments rather than an unaccountable bureaucracy. Yet the persistence of the underlying logic, in which a community's share of the state depends on its share of the count, suggests that the colonial census bequeathed not only categories but a way of doing politics. Understanding that inheritance is a precondition for census institutions that command trust across Pakistan's provinces and communities.

11. Discussion and Conclusion

The evidence supports neither a strong constructionist reading, in which caste and communal identity were colonial inventions, nor a primordialist one, in which the census merely recorded unchanging realities. Caste hierarchies, religious affiliations, and tribal distinctions all pre-dated British rule. What the census changed was the *form* in which they existed: singular rather than plural, exclusive rather than overlapping, fixed in print rather than negotiated in practice, ranked, compared across vast territories, and, above all, counted. Once counted, identities acquired a new social

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reality, because their numbers could be cited, contested, and converted into political claims.

Indians were not passive objects of this process. Caste associations petitioned for higher rank; Arya, Singh Sabha, and Muslim reformers campaigned for returns; the Ad-Dharm movement won recognition as a new religion, a return that accounted for the recorded fall in British Punjab's Hindu population; Ambedkar turned the enumeration of untouchability into a platform for political rights. These were creative uses of colonial categories, not mere reactions to them. Hacking's looping effect operated with great force: each census altered the incentives that shaped the next, so that categories and communities evolved together [24]. Punjab shows this cycle in its most concentrated form, and in its 1941 district majorities it shows how the cycle could end in the partition of a province.

The colonial census set out to describe a society and ended by helping to reshape it. In Punjab it sharpened religious boundaries, gave subordinated castes a new vocabulary of self-assertion, turned communities into competing populations, and supplied the arithmetic of 1947. Counting people meant creating identities, and the identities so created have outlived the empire that counted them, as the census disputes of present-day Pakistan make plain. Further research might reconstruct individual enumeration encounters from surviving district records in the Punjab Archives, compare census-making in British Punjab with the princely states, and recover the vernacular debates on enumeration that remain under-explored.

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