



“The Social Geographies of the Colonial City: Bombay and Calcutta in 1901”

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The need for varied forms of institutionalized knowledge had long been a feature of British rule in India. To gain and maintain control over a diverse, large and disparate population, the British inserted themselves into an ever larger number of spheres of Indian society and constructed a more ‘scientific’ understanding of Indian life. As the need to collect information about the colony became even more pressing, the British constructed new institutions in order to assemble material on the Indian population, to distance themselves from Indian society, and to better control the activities of Indian social communities. The census was just one of many institutions utilized by the British in India. But it was an important one. Beginning with the publication of the first census in 1872, the British collected, assembled and utilized a range of materials on the Indian population. Propelled by growing rural and urban populations, large-scale factory production in key urban centers, the centrality of India in imperial commercial networks, deteriorating environmental and housing conditions, and increasing communal and class conflicts, the British state used the census to provide a store of selective information on its prize colony. Even though the decennial census was always incomplete and frequently contested, the British colonial state in association with the native Indian business, scribal and aristocratic classes slowly built up a picture of the population living in India’s countryside and cities.

Perhaps the most complete counting of the urban population undertaken by the British in India was the 1901 census. It contained an impressive array of material, including religion, caste, occupation, employment sector, sex, marital status, dwelling condition, crowding, and literacy. Even more impressively, the census published much of this material for small (32 and 36 “sections”) and sometimes very small (“circles” of between 1,000 and 4,000 people) areas for Bombay and Calcutta. The reasons (most notably fear of the plague) for this extraordinary collection of material have been laid out in a paper that Richard Harris and I have recently completed. The purpose of the present paper is to make a preliminary examination of what the census can tell us about the social geography of these two cities. We already have a sense of what these cities looked like in the early years of the twentieth century. For example, Prashant Kidambi and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar discuss the social organization of Bombay’s European and native working-class neighborhoods, while Kenneth McPherson lays out the differentiated geography of Calcutta on the eve of World War One. But little is known about the geographies of class and community in Bombay and Calcutta beyond the large scale district. The rich and spatial detailed information compiled in the 1901 census allows us to probe at the social geographies of the colonial city in a new way. Ironically, the imperative of the British to oversee the Indian population and the fear of the social and economic consequences of the plague have offered us an amazing opportunity to better appreciate the complexities of the colonial city’s social geographies.

KEY WORDS: Bombay, Calcutta, census, social geography.