



Making Geography Count in the Censuses of Calcutta and Bombay, 1901

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Accounts of the social geography of colonial cities have often had to rely on anecdotal or impressionistic evidence. India in the late colonial era is one of the few places where systematic information was gathered and reported for small geographical areas, making it possible to document social geographies in detail. Especially rich information was reported in the censuses of Bombay and Calcutta for 1901, and these censuses repay close scrutiny. In a recent paper with Robert Lewis, the present author has considered why so much effort went into the making of these two published censuses. The present paper will explore how they were actually undertaken.

Even in modern, developed societies where enumeration is routine, a census is a major undertaking that attracts public attention and some controversy. Although often taken for granted by the users of census data, their production can repay study, and not just by statisticians. Categories are open to dispute, as is the selection of topics, together with the treatment of subgroups whose enumeration is difficult, or resisted. The resolution of these matters may say much about the motives of census-takers, while offering systematic insights into the nature of prevailing social divisions.

These observations have special relevance to colonial settings, where the resources for census-taking were commonly limited, so that revealing compromises had to be made; where the motives of census-takers were especially open to challenge, and so had to be explained; and where the political stakes associated with social categories and exclusions were high, so that the census itself becomes an issue. In places like Bombay and Calcutta in 1901, where the census relied on a door-to-door canvass, all of these considerations aroused sensitivities which had to be confronted by enumerators as they walked the city. In addition to the published data, then, the making of the 1901 census offers an intriguing glimpse into the everyday geography of two major cities and hence, more generally, how geography counted in the colonial city.

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