

Concepts of Caste and Race in Colonial Ethnography: Some Reflections on the Census Reports (1881-1931)¹

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ABSTRACT The colonial notions of Indian caste and race is a widely studied area. However, these issues have attracted a fresh attention recently where the ideas of caste and race are being analyzed in terms of its relationship with colonial power and the way those redefined person, community and identity. They follow two broader yet distinct kind of argument in this context: one in which “race” and “caste” are seen as tools for stereotyping the subject society by the colonial officials. This it is argued was done even at the cost of “fabricating” and “inventing” certain identities. This also led to rigidification of the caste structure. In a way, these writings see a monolithic structure of the colonial discourses on caste and race, which was used for reinforcing the colonial power-relation. And, the other, in which the debates on caste and race during colonial rule are emphasized as being a part of the wider contemporary European debates about the civilizations and their progress. This school implicitly denies any element of colonial power interest in these debates, and strongly argues for the scientificity of the debates. It recognizes the shifts within the colonial discourses. Through a study of the census reports carried during colonial rule, the researcher read the concepts of caste and race as they appeared in the classificatory scheme of these reports. A range of conflicting ideas emerge through the discussion which often contesting the previous theories make an attempt to incorporate the subtle nuances of the subject society. Several writers have also missed on the centrality of traditional textual ideas in these discourses. Contesting which only newer theories could emerge, very often caste emerged as a dynamic institution and not static as many argued. Moreover, the researcher emphasize the utilitarian value of science in these discourses. The coloniality of the discourses on “caste” and “race” lay in the significance of science as a “means” for enforcing colonial power-relation rather than confining it to a pure “end” in itself.