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## **Census Categories and Gender Construction in India**

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Abstract:

*In the process of defining and categorizing population, census is involved in the construction of social categories. Gender construction is not only confined to sex categories of male and female, but is also found among the categories like workers and non-workers, rural and urban, migrant and non-migrant and married and unmarried as well. Census provides a wider canvas to look into the process of gender construction that is socially and politico-economically constituted. It is one of the processes through which sex categories are congealed into gender categories.*

*Census tables do not simply present the demographic matrix, but deeply reflect, constitute, reproduce, perpetuate and even counter social processes. It is an instrument to construct gender in the arena of competing social and political forces in an evolving social system. The paper unravels the underlying basis of gender construction through census categories giving examples from Indian censuses.*

### Introduction

It has been argued that census in the process of enumerating the caste and religious identities in colonial India was involved in the process of construction of these very identities, while defining, categorizing, enumerating and tabulating them (Cohn 1987; Kaviraj 1993; Appadurai 1993; Dirk 2001; Guha 2003). In independent India also, census

continued to be implicated in the construction of social identities however in different context often justified by the exigencies and principles enshrined in the constitution (Bhagat 2001).

However, there is hardly any attempt made to look into the gender construction<sup>1</sup> implicated in census categories and the role of census in perpetuating gender construction.

Census categorizes population before counting. Categories must be non-overlapping and mutually exclusive, because in counting everybody has a definite place. Some of the important categories employed in the census are- males and females, workers and non-workers, rural and urban, married and unmarried, migrants and non-migrants etc. These categorizations in census and consequently their counting are not gender neutral, but reflect and constitute the social process of gender construction. The paper presents how each of the census categories mentioned above constitutes and constructs gender in the Indian census during the last one century.

### **Male – Female Category**

Male and female are two biological categories of population. The third sex such as eunuchs<sup>2</sup> or intersexed persons do not fit in either male or female category. But, census does not enumerate them separately. Why this is so? Apparently it looks that the census follows the principles of biologism in the classification of population by sex. However, a little examination of the classification of population by sex reflects that along with biology, the construct of gender is also important in obstructing the enumeration of third gender in the census. Being male and female is not only biological, but are expected to fulfill various roles like father or mother, husband or wife essentially linked to the institutions of marriage and family. These roles are either masculine or feminine and there is virtually no possibility of the role of third gender because of its irrelevance to reproduce the institutions of family and lineages. Thus, the possibility of introducing third sex category in the census is ruled out. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that

many belonging to third sex category present themselves in feminine appearance and wish to be regarded as women<sup>3</sup>, they are not counted as females in the census. But they seem to be regarded to present the degraded masculine values. Thus, we find that eunuchs are counted as males in the Indian census (Census of India 1991a).

During British rule, they were sometimes enumerated as a caste/tribal group who were understood to be performing as dancers and entertainers (Agrawal 1997). Apart from being dancers and entertainers, eunuchs were also employed as guards in *harems* (secluded place in the palace where women usually live- the number of whom were of even several hundreds) during Moghul period. Even to-day there is a practice of eunuchs visiting the families at the time of birth of a male child and marriages in north India. Their presence is considered auspicious as well as terrifying, as they are believed to possess the ability to bless or curse the newborn male and the newly wed couple for their reproductive successes or failures (Lal 1999:123). The fact that eunuchs were preferred as guards in Moghul harems in medieval times in view of their inability to perform sex with women, they obviously represent degenerated masculinity and there is no wrong if census counted them as males. However, there is no justification given by the census why eunuchs should be counted as males. But, it cannot be denied that census inadvertently continues to be an agency in perpetuating gender construction. Is census prepared to ask each eunuchs whether they consider themselves men or women and record them accordingly? The answer will be no. This is precisely due to the fact that the spectre of population growth still looms large and the counting of wombs is essential to know the future trend in population growth. Thus, the male-female category of sex is important so long it is premised on the bipolarity of the gender categories of either masculine or feminine. As such, the third gender has no place in census enumeration so long the Malthusian ideology concerned with the size and growth of population continues to be the prime mover of census and demography.

Recently, there have been various legislative efforts to improve the conditions of women in India. In this direction the political parties hotly debate an issue on the reservation of one-third of seats in the parliament and legislative assemblies to the women. The question

remains so far- 'who are the women'. Will the legislation allow the intersexed persons who have changed to female sex through surgical procedure to qualify for the reservation of seats in the parliament and legislative bodies? But, it is sure that third sex will have no benefit of reservation, in spite of persons like *Shabnam Mausi* (Mausi means mother's sister)-an eunuch reaching to the legislative body of the state of Madhya Pradesh in the recent past and a film is being made on her life in the Bollywood (see Times of India, National Daily, Hyderabad edition, May 2005, p. 12). This instance shows that third gender is an important category in India existed in the past as well as in the present because of the fact that third sex has an important place in Indian culture and society<sup>4</sup>.

It will be totally wrong if we only implicate census in the construction of gender. On the other hand, census information on child sex ratio has recently exposed the age-old patriarchal tyranny against women. The so called development forces accompanied by rising dowry and the advancement of medical sciences at the close of twentieth century in India brought about a new situation and forms of discrimination and violence against women. This is evident in the decline of child sex-ratios (females per 1000 males in age-group 0-6) mainly due to female feticide, prominently found in developed states of the country (George and Dahiya 1998; Premi 2001; Agnihotri 2002; Unisa et al 2003). Armed with the release of the child sex-ratio data by the Census 1991, the civil liberty and women's organization took up the cudgel to fight against this new patriarchal violence and forced the Government to enact Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act (PNDT) in 1994. With the release of 2001 census data, which showed further deterioration in the child sex ratios, Government has amended the PNDT Act in 2003 in order to plug its loopholes. These efforts at the governmental and non-governmental levels show that census category of male-female not only sustains traditional gender constructs but also is instrumental in deconstructing the same in a changed socio-economic and technological situation.

### **Worker/Non-Worker Categories**

Work is very central to the process of gender construction in a society. Masculine and feminine work is clearly defined. The question therefore arises; does census definition of

work reflect the underlying processes of gender construction? In recent censuses, work is defined as participation in any economically productive activity. Such participation may be physical or mental in nature. Work involves not only actual work but also effective supervision and direction of work. It also includes unpaid work on farm or in family enterprises. Further, a worker is defined as a main worker if he or she has worked more than 183 days in the reference year, otherwise he or she is a marginal worker. Those who have not worked any time in the reference year are classified as non-workers. Generally students, housewives, rentiers and pensioners, sick and unemployed persons fall in this category.

Women are generally engaged in homemaking, bearing and rearing of children and also in the production of goods and services generally consumed at the household level. Women's work at home is not recognized unless it produces something for sale. The work of women therefore mostly goes unrecognized. It is no doubt that the essence of work is socio-economically founded and census has no role except to define and categorize and count them. But by doing so census turns out to be an important instrument of gender construction by overestimating the importance of masculine and diminishing the value of feminine work.

It is well known that women make significant contribution in the agricultural operations like sowing, harvesting, transplantation, tending cattle and even cooking and delivering food to the farm during the agricultural operations. Recently, census being aware about this deficiency has instructed and trained their enumerators to enumerate them as workers. However, the actual impact of census effort is uncertain and enumeration of women workers engaged in agriculture has not shown any impressive increase. It is important to emphasize that while census gave the instructions to its enumerators for possible enumeration of women workers, there was no change in the original questions on work and their categorization. In fact, the question on work is structured in such away that is virtually difficult to capture women's work. On the other hand, in census the male member of the household generally reports women's work. As a result, we find a very low work participation of women and most of them are returned as non-workers.

The concept of work based on economic activity of population was introduced for the first time in 1961 census. This was an improvement on the earlier definition of work based on means of livelihood which divided the male and female population into self-supporting person, or an earning dependent or a non-earning dependent in 1951 census. In this classification, women were mostly categorized as dependents. It was observed, 'a housewife who cooks for the family, brings up the children or manages the household is doing very valuable work. Nevertheless, her economic status is that of non-earning dependents if she does not also secure an income' (Srivastava, 1972: 174). In the latter census, although definition of work based on the concept of economic activity did improve, the situation of women classified as workers did not change much as they themselves hardly got chance to report their work, which is usually asked to the head of the household or a senior male member of the household at the time of census enumeration. A census instruction says:

'A man or woman may be producing or making something only for the domestic consumption of the households and not for sale. Such person is not a worker even though from his or her point of view the activity is productive' (Census of India 1991b: 9).

Apparently it looks that this rule is equally applicable to male and female. But in fact in reality it leads to the exclusion of the women being part of the workforce. It is no doubt, therefore, that the masculine bias in the categorization of work is very much conspicuous in the census- firstly by not recognizing the unpaid domestic work and secondly by underreporting the work at farm and household enterprises and thirdly by not giving them opportunity in most cases to report their own work status.

### **Rural-Urban Categories**

The rural and urban are not only spatial categories but are social constructs as well. The rurality and urbanity are two dichotomous social processes with different economic base and social relations. Rural is characterized economically by the predominance of farming activities and socially by the dominance of primary social groups with informal and face

to face contact in every day life, on the other hand urban is associated with non-farming activities and members of the urban groups are formally related based on a charter of principles supposedly egalitarian and non-discriminatory. The examples of the secondary groups are the trade unions, professional bodies, citizen forums etc. (Jones and Eyles 1977:14) Apparently urbanism espouses a new social value giving equal opportunity to both males and females in urban social structure compared to the rural social organizations predominantly based on the patriarchal structure and values. But in reality, as males dominate the urban job market, the subordinate position of women continues even in the urban areas. Census as a document of the social process also reflects this bias.

In Indian census, rural-urban definition is inherently disposed to gender bias. This is evident in urban definition, which does not recognize the contribution of women workforce in characterizing the urban space. Generally, census defines urban, and rural is treated as a residual category. In several countries, places are defined urban on the basis of size, density and administrative status of the settlements. It is presumed that with increased concentration of population, economic activities are likely to be more non-agricultural based (Bhagat 2005). On the other hand, in India the definition of urban implies that a place could be declared urban if it satisfies that 75 per cent of its male<sup>5</sup> workers engaged in non-agricultural sector. As census is the only official source of defining rural and urban areas in the country, the exclusion of women workers from the rural-urban categorization makes the urban definition masculinised.

Further, like the dichotomous category of male and female resulting into non-recognition of third sex category, the census also does not consider the transitional area (semi-urban, or semi rural) in respect to rural-urban classification. It is worthwhile to mention that the recognition of third space may upset the apparently innocuous urban construct based on hegemony, power and domination and is likely to redefine our perception of what constitutes rurality.

### **Migrant Categories**

It has been little realized that migration is a process of gender construction. As we know that majority of the migrants turns out to be males who leave their household in search of means of livelihood and employment. On the other hand, majority of the women migrate in India on account of their marriages because of the culture of leaving the parental homes and joining the husbands' households. By documenting this vital social process and quantifying them, census information reflects how gender is constituted in society and how it is embodied in different social categories enumerated by the census. However, in absence of third sex category in the census, we do deny their existence and significance in Indian city space. In metropolitan cities of India-more obviously in Mumbai (Bombay), eunuchs are seen to have a conspicuous presence. They are largely migrants who have moved into the city from elsewhere in the country. As per census criteria, they are supposed to be counted as male migrants. But the reasons of migration elicited in the census such as employment, education, family moved and marriages do not apply to them. The city space provides them opportunity to survive and act like a cohesive group engaged in various activities. For example, in Mumbai and also in Delhi sometimes bankers seek their services to recover loans from the defaulters (The Hindu, National Daily, January 01, 2005, Metro Plus Visakhapatnam-Online publication). But more importantly they constitute a marginal community in city space and many eke out their livelihood through prostitution. As a result nearly half of the eunuchs in Mumbai are HIV positive (Times of India, Mumbai edition, National Daily, May 27, 2005, p.2). Thus not recognizing them in national statistical system like census is laden with health hazards. However, their enumeration through census and knowledge of their characteristics cannot be overlooked for a long time. Moreover, the recognition of the third sex as well as their roles is likely to portray more realistically the social processes related to sex categories and weaken the bipolar basis of gender construction in our contemporary society.

### **Nuptial Categories**

Marriage is an important institution of gender construction deeply rooted in patriarchy. Marital status like unmarried, married, widowed and divorced are more important

categories for women than men. In British census population was divided into unmarried, married and widowed. Divorce was not a separate category, but included in the widowed. The category of divorce was, however, treated separate since 1951 census.

Marriage provides a sacred space in woman's life, which is socially defined and approved. As a result, we find that prostitutes, concubines and *devdasis*<sup>6</sup> were not categorized as married irrespective of their cohabiting union or married status until 1951 census, however since 1961 census the marital status of the prostitutes was enumerated as reported by them (Srivastava, 1972).

It is no doubt that gender is anchored to marriage, but census being the mirror of society reflects the social values in defining the marital categories. We, therefore, find that in recent censuses it has been clarified that in case of a dispute on marital status, the census must recognize a stable de-facto union married in spite of the fact whether such marriages are approved by the community or not. It is also made clear that census is not concerned about the legality of marriage (Census of India 1991b: 5). This is an important departure of the census from being involved in the social construction of gender. However, census is not prepared to include the category of consensual or cohabiting marriages in the classification of marital statuses of population like in many developed countries (United Nations, 1997)<sup>7</sup>. The inclusion of consensual or cohabiting marriages fundamentally challenges the institution of marriage based on patriarchy. But, our social condition is not conducive to accept such unions and census cannot take risk to count them.

One of the important characteristics of India's nuptiality pattern is the wide spread occurrence of early and child marriages in the past and its continuity in the present in some parts of the country (Bhagat 2002). As we are aware that the practice of early and child marriages within the patriarchal system is one of the worst forms of domination over women. Early and child marriages make women docile and passive and deprive them the opportunity for education. It is also true that more girls are married during childhood than boys.

Every year there is a large number of child marriages solemnized on the occasion of *akha teej* (an auspicious day falling in the second week of May every year according to Hindu Calender) in northern India (Hindu, National Daily, editorial, May 20, 2005, p. 10, Hyderabad). But, census regards persons in the age group 0-9 as never married irrespective of their marital status (Census of India 1971: p.3). Due to this practice, no person is reported as married in the age group 0-9 in the census tables on 'age and marital status'. This gives an impression that child marriages below age 10 are not occurring in the country. It further shows that census is an important document shaping our perception of social reality.

### **Conclusion**

Census defines categories and counts them. In this process it also aids in the construction of social categories. Gender construction is not only confined to sex categories of male and female, but is also found among workers and non-workers, rural and urban, migrant and non-migrant and married and unmarried categories as well. In fact, gender construction is pervasive in census, which provides wider canvas to look into the process that is not only socially constructed but politico-economically constituted as well. Further through census, categories are standardized and the gender constructs implied in the categories are sometimes stereotyped. Looked from this perspective, census tables are not simply numbers of demographic matrix, but deeply reflect, constitute, reproduce and perpetuate or even counter the social processes. It could be an instrument in the hands of competing social and political forces to construct or deconstruct gender in a changing social system.

### **End Note**

<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic studies initiated by census produced more knowledge about the upper caste models of womanhood and ritual behavior. This has led to the resurgence of the Brahmanical gender codes. The net loser were the women belonging to the middle peasants and trading castes and some of the better off dalits groups, as they had to bear the burden of reproducing purity and guarding the honour of their respective communities (Bandypadhyay 2004:145; 190). This paper on the other hand addresses the issue of gender construction from the point of the view of census categories and their definitions as grounded in the gendered relations of society.

2. Eunuchs in north India are called *hijras*. They are generally of two types -those who are born with ambiguous genitals and those who are made through castration (see Lal 1999: 119).

<sup>3</sup>. In the west there is a practice of assimilating the intersexed persons into the female sex due to the advancement in medical sciences. Through surgical procedure it is possible to construct female genitalia with greater success than penis (Lal 1999: 128).

<sup>4</sup>.In Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva is depicted *Ardhra narisvara* (half woman). In a Hindu epic Mahabharata- the great warrior Arjuna pretended to be a eunuch to lead a life in disguise in court of king Virata.

<sup>5</sup>. This is one of the criteria of defining a place urban along with population 5000 or more and density of population 400 per sq kilometre. The places with municipal status or notified area committee or cantonment board etc. are also accorded urban status.

<sup>6</sup>. The term devadasi literally means servant of God, who have been supposedly married to the temple deity and are debarred from marrying in their social life. On the other hand, they do have sexual relationship with priests and rich devotees (Chakraborty 2000: 13). Over the ages the devadasis system has degenerated into an institution of prostitution in some parts of south India (Tarachand 1991: 2).

<sup>7</sup>. For more recent years this information is not available, nor it is available for the immediate preceding years. It seems that the Demographic Year Book has published the information on consensual marriages specially in its 1995 issue.

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