



Original Article

Knowledge as Power: A Historical Analysis of Foucault's Theory in the Context of Colonial India

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Abstract

Using Michel Foucault's concept of "knowledge as power" as its mode of analysis, the paper discusses the introduction of new imperial power-knowledge regimes in British India, particularly in the context of education, the census, and bureaucratic documentation. The study applies secondary research by examining colonial censuses (1872–1941), policy documents and scholarly literature. Results suggest how the English Education Act of 1835 and the Macaulay Minute institutionalised English education, institutionalised middleman in education and reinforced cultural hegemony. The census process under officials such as H. H. Risley rigidly divided the population into castes and followed an extreme form of casteism by stating that they observed the principle of rank and ascribed a strictly observed hierarchy, the lining up of castes from top to bottom of the caste hierarchy, and followed exactly the opposite procedure with unreliable motives. Quantitative data reveals a wide gender, caste and regional gap in literacy that justified selective colonial interventions and administrative domination. Drawing on Foucault's notions of classification, surveillance and normalisation, these mechanisms illustrate how processes of knowledge production served the imperial project. The paper suggests that colonial knowledge systems transformed Indian society and are still felt in post-colonial governance and social formations.

Keywords: Foucault, Knowledge as power, Colonial India, census, English education, caste, literacy

Introduction

Foucault's maxim "knowledge is power" draws attention to the complex connections between the production, administration and dissemination of knowledge and the governance of populations. British practices in colonial India education, census and bureaucracy documentation are already examples to be cited in support of this argument. The introduction of English education by the English Education Act of 1835 had created a group of Indians - who were not numerically very large - who came to be seen "as partners of the colonizing race and potential beneficiaries of the system, providing a basis for unity against other Indians" (Chatterjee, 1993) thus creating a cultural and linguistic barrier ideal for colonial governance. Census practices, including under the leadership of people like Herbert Hope Risley, were key in classifying Indians by caste and race, causing 'facts' to be "spoken that buttressed existing social structures" (Guha, 1997). This categorisation was not only administrative but also a form of identity and subject formation of the people of India, which had conditioned their way of life as traditional or modern according to the state. The statistics collected through these censuses served to justify policies and techniques of government that legitimized imperial rule and offered a technology of rule that took root in various domains of colonial Indian life (Metcalf, 1995). Not only did the British impose administrative control through such processes, it enabled them to anthropologically author Indian self-images and social relations as well as regimes of power that would shape Indian society even after independence (Bhabha 1994). The dynamic interplay between knowledge and power in shaping knowledge regimes is a clear indication of the significance of the historical conjuncture during which knowledge though worlds are established.

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Research Methodology

Methodologically, the present paper is exclusively based on secondary sources through a variety of scholarly articles, historical materials (including colonial censuses), policy documents and verifiable web resources to construct an all-round perspective of the subject. The theoretical background is based on Michel Foucault, more precisely some of his thoughts detailed in *The Order of Things*, but it is important to use his analysis on classification, naming and knowledge/power when thinking about colonial systems of governance. We study the evolution of these problems under several analysis methods. The content of this policy and historical narrative is analysed via a qualitative text analysis that seeks to be more meticulous about how data systems were created and mobilised. A quantitative synthesis is also provided for published census data to

generate demonstrating tables for empirical findings that provide context to, and validate, the qualitative analysis. This integrated methodological approach ensures a sophisticated analysis of the entanglement of knowledge production and colonial power.

Data Collection

Sources include:

Census summaries (1872–1941) for literacy and population trends

Scholarly analysis of colonial literacy, including caste and regional disparities

Historical accounts of the English Education Act and its ideological role.

Academic discussion on the census as a powerful tool, especially in constructing caste categories.

Statistical Data Tables

Census Year	All Persons	Male (%)	Female (%)
1901	5.35 %	9.83%	0.60%
1931	9.50%	15.59 %	2.93%
1941	16.10%	24.90%	7.30%

Source: Derived from aggregated census trends.

Table 2: Literacy by Region (1901–1941)

Region	Literacy (All Persons)
Madras	Highest among provinces
Bengal & Bombay	Middle range
Interior Provinces (e.g. Punjab, Central Provinces)	Significantly lower

Table 3: Literacy by Caste (1931 Census Highlights)

Caste/Community	Male Literacy (%)	Female Literacy (%)
Baidyas (Bengal)	78.2 %	48.6 %
Kayasthas	60.7 %	19.1 %
Nayars	60.3 %	27.6 %
Brahmins	43.7 %	9.6 %
Yadavs	3.9 %	0.2 %

Analysis & Discussion

Application of Foucault’s “Knowledge as Power” to British Colonial Policies in India

1. Census and Classification of Indian Society

A very important application of “knowledge as power” in the context of colonial India was seen with the introduction of systematic censuses by the British. 1891 onwards, the census aimed at categorising and enumerating different groups for the purposes of caste, religion, ethnicity and occupation. This classification was not neutral but political, since it defined the colonial state’s perception of Indian society and its approach to the issues of taxation, law, and representation. Foucault’s conception of naming and categorisation as instruments of control is perhaps nowhere clearer than this: the census had the effect of reifying caste hierarchies, of hardening social categories that had hitherto been somewhat fluid. The production of colonial knowledge via the census, in that way, helped manage populations and assert imperial power (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001).

2. Land Surveys and Revenue Systems

Land Surveys and Revenue Settlements: British rule was based on the idea of securing property rights to land, revenue entitlements, etc. Britain launched a series of measures including Bengal’s Permanent Settlement Act (1793), Ryotwari system in Madras and Bombay. These surveys were all built on detailed maps, measurements and mathematical classifications to transmute land into something quantifiable. This application of the Foucault model shows that knowledge forms are instruments of power since they redeploy local economies for imperial advantage. The hierarchical system of agrarian knowledge made it possible from the colonial state to enforce standardized taxation and to undermine indigenous tenure practices. The collection of land, crop and yield statistics provided a key means by which both British administrative power was extended and the Indian peasant disciplined (Cohn 1996). So it was through these mechanisms that colonial knowledge itself constituted a direct lever of colonial economic force.

3. Educational and Legal Systems as Instruments of Governance

Such knowledge production was employed by the British in order to educate its population, in addition to transforming the sub-continent into a new colony with new social structures by providing English education, making laws more codified and setting up new forms of government. Thomas Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) laid bare the colonial purpose of producing a class of go-betweens, "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." Through privileging Western discourses of truth over indigenous practice, the British attempted to assert a dominant culture and reproduce colonial power relations. And as the codifying of laws served to transform non-codified, pluralistic and customary orders into codified, legal moulds that could be applied over entire territories,⁸¹ so too with the codifying of music: it worked in the direction of uniformity and homogeneity. Since this refers to the Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, quoting some authors here it is "the one institution use knowledge in order to regulate conducts and control social life" (Foucault, 1977; Chatterjee, 1993).

Analysis of Educational Policies in Colonial India

1. Macaulay's Minute and the Ideological Agenda of English Education

That it was not coincidental that English education was to be implemented not only to indoctrinate but indeed to provide cultural and ideological development as the British sought their long-lasting rule. When Thomas Babington Macaulay in the *Minute on Indian Education*, was straightforward about the undertaking: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between... us and the millions whom we govern, – a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect. The British, in their endeavour to cultural hegemony, preferred to promote English and Western knowledge over vernacular languages and indigenous traditions. This practice is in accordance with the Foucauldian understanding of the exercise of power through the apparatus of knowledge, where education created subjectivities, discourses of cerebrality and legitimized the ruling colonial authority (Viswanathan, 1989; Cohn, 1996).

2. Education as a Mechanism of Administrative Control

The encouragement of English education also had a utility value in that it furnished the colonial state with a reservoir of clerks and bureaucrats, and interpreters of different kind. It was in places of learning, in schools and universities, that this middle class was trained that served as a bridge between the rulers and the ruled. This is an example of Foucault's idea of disciplinary power, through which institutions create 'docile bodies' to maintain the status quo (Foucault, 1977). Through the control of curricula, examination processes, and teaching norms, the colonial state homogenized knowledge production in ways conducive to governance but dismissive to traditional indigenous knowledge systems (Kumar, 2005; Chatterjee, 1993).

3. Cultural Alienation and the Reinforcement of Colonial Power

English education further served to make the Indian elites 'sick' by this cultural split that was created in Indian society. English educated people were, more often than not, removed from vernacular traditions as well as indigenous forms of knowledge and so the dominance of western epistemologies was perpetuated. The displacement undermined traditional intellectual foundations, and contributed to the internalization of colonial rule. By universalizing western science, literature, and law, the British claimed symbolic capital to suit their political and economic hegemony. In Foucault's language, this is the condition of possibility for the normalization of colonial discourse through knowledge production that cannot be divorced from the process of consolidating imperial domination (Basu, 2011; Dirks, 2001).

Examination of Census Operations in Colonial India

1. Caste Enumeration and the Reinforcement of Hierarchies

Installed from 1871, the colonial census sought to profile Indian society in a rigid order, notably use of its caste. A system of social identity that was once more fluid and locally varied has become solidly hierarchical. The British recorded caste identities in official records, as the historian James Campbell has pointed out, not just solidifying but institutionalizing these distinctions, sometimes even fabricating new categories and sub-castes along the way. Such typology meets the assertion that knowledge systems are instruments of governance, according to Foucault—the transformation of social identities into instruments for the management of population. The census thus encoded relatively fluid social practices into more solidified objects and inscribed them beyond colonial time (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001).

2. Literacy Statistics and the Construction of 'Backwardness'

The census also recorded the literacy rates which later became an important concern for the colonial state to assess the "progress" and "backwards" of Indian societies. These were not neutral statistics: they informed educational and social policy, with particular categories being advantaged over others. For instance, Masipi (1975:85) also mentions the preference for "higher levels of literacy" amongst certain castes or communities, which was cited to justify their suitability for employment while other castes or communities were "unsuitable". Making a measure of modernity out of literacy, the British supported the legitimacy of continued intervention by their civilizing mission narrative. In this sense, according to Foucault, statistics operate according to the disciplinary nature of knowledge: they govern populations by classifying, by making normal and by relegating-to-the-margin (Foucault, 1977; Bayly, 1999).

3. Documentation, Surveillance, and Administrative Power

Over and above caste and literacy, the census operated as a general device of registration and surveillance.

Populations, occupations, languages, and religions were enumerated by the colonial state to render the diverse communities of India into a manageable, governable population. This - process called 'biopower' by Foucault, is the general name for states exercising power over life by systematically tracking demographic knowledge. The census wasn't just descriptive, it was prescriptive; its tax, policing and recruitment policies turned surveillance into part of the everyday governance. This is how the colonial census becomes an example for how documentation and knowledge production is rendered into a tool of domination right connected to state power (Scott 1998, Cohn 1996).

Statistical Evidence and the Colonial Knowledge-Power Nexus

1. Gendered Literacy and the Marginalization of Women

The Decennial Censuses from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century revealed that profound gender gaps in literacy existed. For instance, literacy was 0.7 percent for females and 9.8 per cent for males in the Census of India, 1901). Numbers such as this were used by the colonial state to highlight women supposed "backwardness", in order to then justify targeted interventions into female education. However, instead of attending to structural inequalities, policies were targeted at the production of such a limited number of educated women who would then work in the homes of elites. In Foucauldian terms, the census mediated as a normative judgment, to reassert patriarchal normativity and become a central colonial legitimization in controlling the male-ordered definition and extension of female education (Forbes, 1996; Foucault, 1977).

2. Caste-Based Disparities in Literacy and Occupational Control

Colonial censuses noted as well that literacy inequalities were extreme on the basis of caste, with upper castes (Brahmins and Kayasthas) reporting much higher rates of literacy than other castes and communities or sub-castes including those under other lower caste classifications such as Scheduled Tribes. Similarly, in several provinces in 1911 there was over 20% literacy among some Brahmins, but less than 1% among the "Depressed Classes" (Cohn, 1996). These data were not only descriptive, they also constituted access to education and employment. Why the higher castes had literacy rates to achieve their dominance in clerical and administrative positions, while artificially lower levels of literacy were recorded for the oppressed to justify their exclusion. This becomes Foucault's power-knowledge: In coding of inequality, colonial statistics naturalized social order and legitimated partial empowerment (Dirks, 2001; Bayly, 1999).

3. Regional Variations and the Unequal Distribution of Colonial Investment

Census returns indicated vast differences in regional literacy levels which mirrored and sustained uneven colonial investment. One glaring contrast was between stated rates of literacy in 1911 for the Madras Presidency (10%) and Bihar (<5%) (Census of India, 1911). These variations hewed to colonial officials' favoritism of

some regions over others in administrative and economic terms. When literacy was high, they used it as a centre from which staff for the bureaucracy were drawn; where lower, they referred to the place as "backward" and left behind. This, in Foucauldian jargon shows that statistical knowledge was put to territorial use: populations were spatially governed and regions 'mapped' in relation to their production and as ideal counterparts of the state (Kumar 2005, Scott 1998).

Conclusion

This article shows that British empire in India, and as Enrique Dussel writes of India's history, is an instance of what Foucault called the knowledge-power process rather than data merely being a body for collation and inscription, it was actively produced to secure power. The easy identification necessarily meant the nose being thrust into a category down which Indian society was coercively organized by colonial state: legislating severe lines of demarcation through such instrument as the Education Act, statute laws and land records but above all by the Ritual Decennial Census. Census inscription changed fluid identities of caste, gender and region into hard wired hierarchies because it "concretized" social hierarchies; education an order of intermediaries. Quantitative maps of varying literacy beckoned colonial interventions, and once knowledge and control were wedded they could never be divorced again. These were not just efforts at governance-as-normal, but they indelibly imprinted how Indians themselves understood themselves, incorporating caste and class hierarchies as well as scripts of exclusion that endured long beyond the age of British ascendancy. In this sense, the knowledge-power complex of coloniality is not one regime of rule among others. It was a cultural project that also persists in shaping post-colonial-form/relations of domestic/social institutions.

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Conflicts of interest

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