

Census Categories and Gender Construction: Reflections on Indian Censuses

R.B. Bhagat*

Abstract

Gender construction is not only confined to the category of male and female, but also found among the categories like workers and non-workers, rural and urban, migrant and non-migrant and married and unmarried as well. Even in the dichotomous male and female category, the transgender remains a problem in the classification. The transgender category in India is traditionally known as hijras (eunuchs) are not only a biological category but has been an important cultural group with recognized role in birth and marriage ceremonies. The census of India used to classify them as male until 2011 Census when the category of 'Other' was introduced. 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 concealed into gender categories. Census tables do not simply present the demographic matrix, but deeply reflect, constitute and sustain gender construction. The paper unravels the underlying basis of gender construction through census categories giving examples from Indian censuses.

Key words: Census, Gender, Gender construction, Eunuchs, Migrant

I. 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. In independent India also, census continued to be implicated in the construction of social identities, but in the different context of governance (Cohn, 1987; Kaviraj, 1993; Appadurai, 1993; Dirk, 2001; Bhagat, 2001; Guha, 2003). However, there is hardly any attempt made to look into the gender construction¹ implicated in census categories and the role of census in upholding gender construction.

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

* R.B. Bhagat, Professor and Head, Department of Migration and Urban Studies, International Institute for Population Sciences, Govandi Station Road, Deonar, Mumbai 400 088. Email: rbhagat@iips.net

¹The ethnographic studies initiated by census produced more knowledge about the upper caste models of womanhood and ritual behaviour. This has led to the resurgence of the Brahmanical gender codes. The net losers 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 (Bandyopadhyay 2004:145; 190). This paper on the other hand addresses the issue of gender construction from the point of view of census categories and their definitions as grounded in the gendered relations of society.

II. Male–Female category

Male and female are two biological categories of population. The other sex categories such as eunuchs² or intersexed persons do not fit in either male or female category. However, the census did not enumerate them separately until 2011 Census when a category of 'Other' was introduced in the census schedule. Apparently the census follows male-female dichotomy in the classification of population by sex which reflects the construct of gender in the enumeration exercise of census. Being male and female is not only biological, but also expected to fulfil 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 other sex category because of its irrelevance to reproduce the institutions of family and lineages. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that many belonging to other sex category like eunuchs present them in feminine appearance and wish to be regarded as women³, census counted them as males in the censuses until recently (Census of India 1991a).

During British rule, eunuchs were sometimes enumerated as caste/tribal groups who were understood to be performing as dancers and entertainers (Agrawal, 1997). Apart from being dancers and entertainers, in the past eunuchs were also employed as guards in *harems* (secluded place in the palaces where women reside- whose number 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 newlywed couples for their reproductive successes or failures (Lal, 1999:123). During Moghul rule eunuchs were preferred as guards in harems in view of their inability to perform sex with women.

The census has realized of late that there is a need to introduce the category of 'Other' along the categories of male and female since 2011 Census, but perhaps no data have been published so far. It has been very hard to look at gender other than male and female and many are not convinced about the alternative way of looking gender delinked from fertility and reproduction. It seems that the Malthusian ideology continues to be the prime mover of census and demography. In this situation any entity other than male and female has no place in census and demography. Some have argued that the dichotomous characterization of only male and female is deeply western and colonial in nature compared with Indian tradition which recognizes a combination of male and female beings (Nanda, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 1993). Transgender category existed in India as a recognizable social category, and the instances of Hindu deities taking transgender forms are often mentioned. The example of *ardhanariswar* (half woman and half man deity) is well known in Hindu scriptures. Thus unlike west, religious approval of transgender category is very much prevalent in India. It seems that census being colonial institution could not assimilate and reflect the Indian tradition of gender categorization.

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 other sex will have no benefit of reservation, in spite of persons like Shabnam Mausi (Mausi means mother's sister) reaching to the legislative body of undivided 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 particular instance as

²Eunuchs 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).

³In 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).

well as several mythological instances shows that the other sex category has been an important category in Indian history.

It will be totally wrong if we only implicate census in the construction of gender. On the other hand, the 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-ratio (females per 1000 males in age-group 0-6) mainly due to female feticide, even found prominent in the developed states of the country (George & Dahiya, 1998; Premi, 2001; Agnihotri, 2002; Unisa et al., 2003). Armed with the release of the child sex-ratio data by the successive censuses since 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 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. The amended act received the assent of the President on the 17th January, 2003. The Act is now called PC & PNDT Act (Pre Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act. The aims and objectives of the PC & PNDT Act lay that it is enacted to provide for the prohibition of sex selection, before or after conception, and for regulation of pre-natal diagnostic techniques for the purposes of detecting genetic abnormalities or metabolic disorders or chromosomal abnormalities or certain congenital malformations or sex linked disorders and for the prevention of their misuse for sex determination leading to female feticide and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. However, the amended Act could not stall the declining child sex-ratio. The 2011 Census shows that child sex-ratio (0-6) further declined from 927 females per 1000 males in 2001 to 914 in 2011. Thus the role of census has been like a double edged razor. While one hand it perpetuates deep seated gendered constructs like male and female ignoring other gender constructs and categories, on the other it could be equally instrumental in exposing the gender injustice.

III. 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 included 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 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 but in the process of defining, categorizing and counting, census turns out to be an 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 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 also important to emphasize that while census gives 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 questions on work are structured in such way that is virtually difficult to capture women's work, and the questions related to women's work are asked to male member of the households.

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. The male and female population was divided into self-supporting person, or an earning dependent or a non-earning dependent in 1951 Census. 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 latter censuses with the introduction of the concept of economic activity in place of livelihood, the situation however did not improve either. The census instruction says as follows:

'A man or woman may be producing or making something only for the domestic consumption of the households and not for sale. Such persons are 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 as well as female. But in fact in reality it leads to the exclusion of the women being part of the workforce.

It is therefore evident 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 unpaid work at farm and household enterprises and thirdly not giving them opportunity in most cases to report their own work status.

IV. 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 dominated by primary social groups with informal and face to face contact in everyday life, on the other hand urban is associated with non-farming activities and members of the social groups who 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 & Eyles, 1977:14). Apparently urbanism espouses a new social value giving equal opportunity to both males and females in the urban social structure compared to the rural social organizations predominantly based on the patriarchal structure and values. But in reality, males dominate the urban job market while women continue to occupy the subordinate position. Census as a document of the social process also reflects this bias.

In Indian censuses, rural-urban definition is inherently disposed to gender bias. This is evident in urban definition⁴, which does not recognize the contribution of women workforce in characterizing the urban space. Generally, census defines urban while 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

⁴ Seventy five per cent male workforce in non-agricultural sector 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 corporation with municipal status or notified area committee or cantonment board etc. are also accorded urban status.

satisfies that 75 per cent of its male 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, 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 which is closer to nature, less competitive and less aggressive and, as such, less masculine.

V. Migrant–Non-migrant categories

It has been little realized that migration is a process of gender construction. As it is known that majority of the migrants turn 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 after marriage. By documenting this vital social process and quantifying them, census information reflects how gender is constituted in our society and embodied in different social categories enumerated by the census.

However, in absence of other sex category in the past censuses, we do know the migration of 'Other' sex categories, although they are part of the many city spaces. In metropolitan cities of India-more obviously in Mumbai (Bombay), eunuchs 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 'Others' since 2011 Census while counted as males in earlier censuses. No separate data is available from the census till now. It would be important to know their migration pattern, the area of origin and also the reasons of migration. The city spaces in India provide 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). However, more importantly they constitute a marginal community in cities and many eke out their livelihood through prostitution. As a result nearly half of the eunuchs in Mumbai reported to be 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 'Other' as well as their roles is likely to portray more realistically the social processes related to sex categorization and may weaken the bipolar basis of gender construction in our contemporary society.

VI. Nuptial categories

Marriage is an important institution of gender construction deeply rooted in patriarchy. Marital status like unmarried, married, widowed and divorced are important categories for women and 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/separated was, however, treated as a separate category in censuses after independence. Further in 2011 Census divorce and separated were presented independently. Marriage provides a sacred space in woman's life, which is socially defined and approved. As a result, we find that prostitutes, concubines and *devadasi*⁵ were not categorized as married irrespective of their cohabiting union or having married

⁵ 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).

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 notwithstanding 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 many developed countries (United Nations, 1997)⁶. 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.

Another important characteristics of India's nuptiality pattern is the wide spread occurrence of early and child marriages in the past and its continuity of late 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 *akhateej* (an auspicious day falling in the second week of May every year according to Hindu calendar) in northern India (Hindu, National Daily, editorial, May 20, 2005, p. 10, Hyderabad). But, census regards such persons never married if falls in the age group 0-9 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 of 'age and marital status'. This gives an impression that child marriages below age 10 are not occurring in the country, and if it is so census should be forthright in recording them and saying so. This and many instances mentioned above show that census is very much instrumental in the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of gender and shaping our perception of social reality. It is up to the census officials, researchers and users of census data to highlight the value of census data, and make suitable changes in the definition, categories, method of enumeration and publication and interpretation of gender related data based on values of equality and justice

VII. 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 also found among categories like workers and non-workers, rural and urban, migrant and non-migrant and married and unmarried as well. In fact, census is a mirror of the social processes constructing gender, and can be used for deconstructing them as well by analyzing assumptions census officials, researchers and users make in the production and analysis of gender related data.

⁶For more recent years this information is not available, nor is it available for the immediate preceding years. It seems that the Demographic Year Book has published the information on consensual marriages especially in its 1995 issue.

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