CENSUS OF INDIA, 1901.

VOL. IV.

ASSAM.

PART I.—REPORT.
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VOLUME IV.

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PART I.

REPORT.

BY

B. C. ALLEN, B.A.,

OF THE INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE,

SUPERINTENDENT OF CENSUS OPERATIONS IN ASSAM.

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PART I.
REPORT.
CONTENTS.

INTRODUCTION.

The taking of the census. Preparation of the provisional totals. Compilation of the results—Slip-sorting; compilation. The cost of the census. Comparison between the slip-sorting system and the tabulating machine. Conclusion ...

CHAPTER I.—STATISTICS OF AREA AND POPULATION.

General description. Historical summary.—Assam proper; the Surma Valley; the Hill districts. Climate. Geographical divisions—Assam proper, Surma Valley, the Hill districts. Previous censuses.—Percentage of variation; the census of 1881; earlier censuses. Area and population of Assam. Density of population by districts. Towns.—Percentage of urban population; Sylhet; Gauhati; Silchar; Dibrugarh; Sylhet; Barpeta; Imphal. The rural population, Houses and house room.—House room of no practical importance in Assam ....

Subsidiary Tables:—I.—Density of the population; II.—House room; III.—Distribution of the population between towns and villages.

CHAPTER II.—VARIATIONS IN THE POPULATION.

Increase in the province. Cachar Plains.—Variation; distribution of population by subdivisions. Sylhet.—Variation; distribution of population by subdivisions; increase or decrease outside tea gardens. Excess or deficit of births. Goalpara.—Variation; distribution of population by subdivisions. Kamrup.—Variation; decrease in the indigenous inhabitants; distribution of population by subdivisions. Darrang.—Variation; distribution of population by subdivisions. Nowgong.—Variation; Sylhet.—Variation; distribution of population by subdivisions. Lakhimpur.—Variation; distribution of population by subdivisions. North Cachar. The Naga Hills. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills.—Variation; distribution of population by subdivisions. The Garo Hills. The Lushai Hills Manipur. Increase or decrease in the province. Estimated percentage of increase or decrease amongst indigenous inhabitants. Accuracy of the enumeration. System under which vital statistics are collected. Birth rate; death rate. Decay of the Assamese people ...

Subsidiary Tables:—I.—Variation in relation to density since 1872; II.—Variation in district and foreign-born population; III.—Indigenous castes and tribes; IV.—Indigenous languages; V.—Comparison of actual and estimated population ...

CHAPTER III.—BIRTH PLACE.

Provinces from which immigrants come.—Bengal; the other main provinces. Objects with which immigrants come to Assam. Distribution of immigrants in the natural divisions of Assam. Increase in immigration. Proportion of foreigners to total population. Settlement of garden coolies. Sexes of immigrants. Inter-district migration. Emigration ...

Subsidiary Tables:—I.—Immigration per 10,000 of population; II.—Immigrants into Assam from the several divisions of Bengal; III.—Increase in immigration; IV.—Proportion of foreign females to 1,000 foreign males ...

CHAPTER IV.—RELIGION.

Information recorded at the census. Difficulties of the return. The Hindu sects.—Saktism; Sivaitism; Vaishnavism; the Sahajdhajans; statistics of Hindu sects. Muhammadans.—Islam in Assam proper; spread of Muhammadanism; percentage of variation; Muhammadan sects. Christianity.—Native Christians; Presbyterians; other missions. Buddhists. Jains. Sikhs. Brahmos. Animism.—Brief description of Animistic beliefs; hostile spirits; system of divination; connexion between religion and morality; the Thlen; distribution by districts; increase or decrease. Distribution by religion in Assam and other provinces ...

Subsidiary Tables:—I.—Distribution of population by religion; II.—Distribution of religions by natural divisions and districts; III.—Distribution of Christians by districts; IV.—Distribution of Christians by race and denomination; V.—Proportion of Saktists Sivaites and Mahapurushas; VI.—Percentage of increase or decrease of Hindus, Muhammadans and Animists by divisions and districts; VII.—Distribution of main religions in Assam and other provinces ...

CHAPTER V.—SEX.

Accuracy of the returns. Causes affecting the proportion of the sexes; number of girls to 1,000 boys conceived in healthy and unhealthy portions of the year. Sex distribution by districts. Proportion of sexes at different ages. Sex by age and religion. Sex by caste ...
CONTENTS.

Subsidiary Tables :- I—General proportion of the sexes by natural divisions and districts; II—Proportion of females to 1,000 males in Assam and other countries; III—Proportion of females to 1,000 males, excluding foreigners in the plains districts of Assam; IV—Number of females to 1,000 males at each age by natural divisions and religions; V—Proportion of females to 1,000 males at each age period; VI—Actual excess or defect of females by natural divisions and districts; VII—Number of women to 10,000 men in different cases

CHAPTER VI.—MARRIAGE.

Marriage amongst the Assamese—the "Hompura" ceremony; marriage amongst the lower orders; Universality of marriage amongst the Hindus. Age of marriage:—Child marriage; utility of practice; prevalence of infant marriage; percentage of girls under 12 who are married. Restrictions on widow remarriage. Number of widows amongst 10,000 women between 15 and 20. Comparison with Anistic tribes. Number of wives out of 10,000 girls aged 0—10 and 10—15. Young widows. Age of marriage for men. Polygamy. Marriage amongst Muhammadans. Percentage of single; married; widowed. Proportion of wives to husbands. Anistic tribes. Marriage customs. Number of married out of 10,000 of same age. Christians. Comparison with previous enumerations

Subsidiary Tables :- I—Distribution of 10,000 of each sex by age and civil condition; II—Distribution by civil condition and main age periods of 10,000 of each sex at the last three censuses; III—Distribution of 10,000 of each sex of principal religions by age and civil condition; IV—Distribution by civil condition of 10,000 Hindus of each sex at each age period in the Surma Valley, Assam Proper and Goalpara; V—Distribution by civil condition of 10,000 females at certain age periods in certain districts; VI—Number of unmarried girls under 12 out of 10,000 females of that age in certain castes; VII—Out of 10,000 females of selected castes at two different age periods, number who are widows; VIII—Proportion of the sexes by civil condition for religions; IX—Distribution of 10,000 persons of each sex by civil condition and age for selected castes; unmarried; married; widowed; X—Proportion of wives to husbands by religions and natural divisions; XI—Distribution by civil condition of 10,000 of each sex for natural divisions

CHAPTER VII.—AGE.

Inaccuracy of the return:—Character of mistakes made. Decrease in proportion of children. Fertility of different districts. Age distribution of the main religions; fertility of religions and castes. Birth and death rates; the productive ages; the mean age of the population; mean age by religion. Explanation of the diagram. Comparison with Bengal and England

Subsidiary Tables :- I—Unadjusted age return of 100,000 persons of each sex; II—Age distribution of 10,000 of each sex; III—Proportion of children under 10 per 1,000 of total population; IV—Age distribution of 10,000 of each sex by religion; V—Age distribution of 10,000 persons in Assam, Bengal and England

CHAPTER VIII.—LANGUAGE.


Subsidiary Tables :- I—Population by language; II—Distribution of principal languages; III—Percentage of tribe speaking tribal language at the last enumerations; IV—Number of books registered in Assam during the ten years from 1891 to 1900

CHAPTER IX.—EDUCATION.

Accuracy of return. Education by religion. Education by age. Literacy by districts. Progress of education during the last ten years. Female education. Number of persons literate in English. Education by caste

Subsidiary Tables :- I—Education by age and sex; II—Education by age, sex and religion; III—Education by age, sex and natural divisions and districts; IV—English education by age, sex and natural divisions or districts; V—Education by selected castes, tribes or races; VI—Progress of education since 1891 by natural divisions and districts; VII—Education by language and districts

CHAPTER X.—INFIRMITIES.

Accuracy of return. Insanity. Number insane in 10,000 of either sex; distribution and cause of insanity. Connection between drugs and insanity. Distribution of insanity by sex and age periods. Comparison with England. Deaf-mutes. Number of deaf-mutes in 10,000 of either sex; distribution by age; comparison with other countries. Comparison between the sexes. The blind. Number of blind in 10,000 of either sex; distribution by sex. Leprosy. Number of lepers in 10,000 of either sex; distribution in the province; causes of leprosy; distribution between the sexes

Subsidiary Tables :- I—Average number of afflicted per 10,000 of each sex by districts in 1881, 1891 and 1901; II—Distribution by age of 10,000 persons of each infirmity; III—Distribution of infirmities by age among 10,000 of the population; IV—Proportion of females afflicted to 1,000 males at each age
CHAPTER XI.—Caste.


Subsidiary Tables:—I—Hindu caste by social precedence; Surma Valley and Brahmaputra Valley; II—Variation in caste, tribe and race since 1872... ... ... ... ... 115-151

CHAPTER XII.—Occupation.


Subsidiary Tables:—I—General distribution by occupation; II—Distribution of the agricultural population by natural divisions and districts; III—Distribution of the industrial population by natural divisions and districts; Class D; IV—Distribution of the industrial population by natural divisions and districts (excluding the sub-order 17—Provision of animal food); V—Distribution of the commercial population by natural divisions and districts; VI—Distribution of the professional population by natural divisions and districts; VII—Occupations by orders, 1901 and 1891; VIII—Selected occupations, 1901 and 1891; IX—Occupations of females by orders; X—Occupations of females by selected sub-orders and groups; XI—Number of persons served by each actual worker in six selected professions by districts... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 161-169

Subsidiary Tables:—I—General distribution by occupation; II—Distribution of the agricultural population by natural divisions and districts; III—Distribution of the industrial population by natural divisions and districts; Class D; IV—Distribution of the industrial population by natural divisions and districts (excluding the sub-order 17—Provision of animal food); V—Distribution of the commercial population by natural divisions and districts; VI—Distribution of the professional population by natural divisions and districts; VII—Occupations by orders, 1901 and 1891; VIII—Selected occupations, 1901 and 1891; IX—Occupations of females by orders; X—Occupations of females by selected sub-orders and groups; XI—Number of persons served by each actual worker in six selected professions by districts... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 170-179
LIST OF MAPS AND DIAGRAMS.

1. Map illustrating the density of population in the different districts of the Province  
2. Diagram showing the density of population in Assam and in other Countries  
3. Map illustrating the increase and decrease of population in the different districts of the Province  
4. Map illustrating the increase and decrease in the indigenous population of the Province  
5. Map illustrating the percentage of people censused in the different districts of the Province, but born outside the Province  
6. Diagram illustrating the results of inter-district migration  
7. Diagram showing the proportionate distribution of 10,000 persons in each district under the three main religions—Hinduism, Muhammadanism and Animism  
8. Map illustrating the proportion born by females to males in the various districts of the Province  
9. Diagram showing the proportion of females to one thousand males at different age periods  
10. Diagram showing, out of 10,000 persons of both sexes, the number living at each year up to 60, (a) as actually returned and (b) after smoothing by Bloom's method  
11. Diagram illustrating the prevalence of education amongst the male population of each district  
12. Diagram showing the proportion born by the principal Hindu castes of each of the plains districts to the total Hindu population of the district  
13. Diagram showing the proportion born by the main tribes to the total population of the hill districts and Manipur  
14. Diagram showing the distribution of the population of the plains districts and Manipur by occupation  

Facing page 1
INTRODUCTION.

THE third General Census of the Province was taken on the night of March 1st, 1901. In the plains districts and the North Lushai Hills, the whole of the country had been divided up into blocks containing on the average about 46 houses, each of which was placed in charge of an Enumerator. This individual had been carefully trained beforehand in the rules for filling up the schedule, and had recorded all the particulars for the persons in his block during February. The entries were tested and, when necessary, corrected by the superior census officers, and on March 1st all that remained to be done was to bring the record up to date by striking out the names of those who had left the house or had died, and entering the necessary particulars for newly-born infants and persons who had arrived subsequent to the preliminary enumeration. Special arrangements were made for the census of boats and steamers, and on roads where there is much night traffic patrols were posted to ensure that no travellers were overlooked. In the North Cachar and Mikir Hills, the number of literate persons is so small, the villages are so scattered, and travelling after dark through the jungles is so dangerous, that it was impossible to form blocks which could be properly tested by the enumerator during the night. This officer was, therefore, obliged to take up his position on March 1st at some central village in his block and correct his record on the following day in the light of the information received from the headmen who came in from the different hamlets and reported the changes that had taken place since his last visit. In the Naga, Khasi and Jaintia, and Garo Hills and in the hills to the east of Manipur, it was impossible to hold a synchronous census, and the enumeration was extended over a period ranging from ten days to six weeks.

2. On the morning of March the enumerators assembled at the various centres prescribed for them, and prepared abstracts, showing the total number of houses and of males and females in their blocks. Totals for circles and charges were then struck and the charge summaries added together to ascertain the district totals, which were telegraphed to the Census Commissioner. The average time occupied by these operations in each district was 5½ days, and the longest time taken in any district was only 8 days; but, though the work was pushed on with the greatest rapidity, accuracy was not sacrificed to speed, and the figures finally worked out only differed by 5 in 10,000 from those originally reported.

3. As soon as the provisional totals had been compiled, the enumeration books were sent to the district or subdivisional stations, and the entries for each individual were there copied on to a little slip of paper. These slips were of different colours, representing the main religions of the province: for Hindus a brown slip was used, for Muhammadans a slip of unbleached paper, while for Christians red, for Animistic tribes green, and for 'Others' yellow was the colour selected. On each slip was printed a symbol indicating sex and civil condition, e.g., for a married man the symbol was and for a married woman , so that no entries had to be made for religion, sex, and civil condition. Symbols were also used for the commonest class of entries. The great majority of people are born in the
district in which they are enumerated, and for such persons, instead of writing out the name of the district in full, a tick was given; while in the column for occupation, persons who cultivate their own land (the ordinary occupation of the Assamese raiyat) were indicated by the sign +, cultivating tenants by 8, and garden coolies by 6. Abbreviations were also sanctioned for the castes most strongly represented in the province. Each book and each individual in the book were serially numbered, and at the top of each slip the copyist entered the serial number of the charge, the number of the book, and the number of the individual, so that reference could be made at any time without difficulty to the original record. The copyists worked in gangs under checkers, who compared the entries on the slips with the enumeration books, and as each book was finished the slips were sorted by sex and compared with the abstracts, which had been originally prepared by the enumerators. The slips cost Rs. 22-4-10 per lakh if plain, and Rs. 30-11-1 if coloured, and the total average cost of copying in the district offices, excluding Aijal, where the conditions are abnormal, was Rs. 1-3-11 per thousand, the rate varying between Re. 1-14-10 and Re. 0-8-11.

4. The slips, when ready, were despatched to the central office at Gauhati, where they were sorted under my personal supervision. The first step in the process was to count the contents of each bundle to make sure that we had actually received the number shown in the letter of advice, and with this count was combined a simple sorting into three heaps containing (a) those born in the district and speaking the vernacular most prevalent there, (b) those born in the district who did not speak the local vernacular, and (c) those born outside the district. The slips were then made up into boxes containing from twenty to twenty-five thousand units and handed over to muharrirs, who subjected them to the various sorting processes required for the preparation of the final tables. For Table VII, for instance (Civil Condition by religion, sex and age), all that was required was to sort the slips for each religion into seventeen pigeon holes (one for each of the prescribed age periods), and to re-sort the contents of each pigeon hole into three heaps, for single, married and widowed; but other tables, such as XI (birth place), XHI (caste) and XV (occupation), could not be so easily disposed of.

Nearly 13 per cent. of the population of Assam were born outside the province, and many of these persons had returned the name of a village or thana instead of the district in which they were born. The slips were first sorted by provinces and the provinces by districts, but the average muharrir, whose knowledge of geography was of the most elementary character, often had considerable difficulty in determining to what province or country any particular slip belonged. The foreign castes were also a great source of trouble, as in many cases the number of names returned was so large that the sorting became a very complicated matter. In one box containing less than 12,000 Hindus slips the sorter found 460 different names; and, though it was the rule to begin by sorting the slips for caste alphabetically, and then to re-sort each letter of the alphabet, it was impossible, even by this expedient, to sweep all obstacles out of the muharrir's path, as no less than 57 different names began with the letter K, and to sort a bundle of slips into 57 heaps is, I need hardly say, a very tedious business.

Considerable difficulty was also experienced with the occupation table, as not only are there many different kinds of work, but there are also many different ways of describing the same thing; and as it was not possible to allow men of the sorter class discretion to classify the entries made on the slips, they were compelled to sort and enter each functional name separately, even in those not infrequent cases when one occupation was described by several different names.

The muharrirs worked in gangs of six or eight under a supervisor, who checked their work by running through the bundles of slips after they had been sorted, and seeing, for instance, that married persons had not been mixed with unmarried, or
INTRODUCTION.

slips of one caste or age period with those of another. The duties imposed upon these men were of a very responsible character, and the scarcity of men who were really qualified for these appointments was one of the most serious difficulties of census administration.

5. The conclusion of the slip-sorting left the figures for the province arranged in the form of the final tables in units of twenty to twenty-five thousand, and from these units the totals for subdivisions and districts had to be compiled. The caste, language and birth-place returns were examined, synonymous terms were amalgamated, and the occupations entered on the sorter's tickets were classified under the appropriate groups in the scheme prescribed by the Census Commissioner.

This part of the work gave comparatively little trouble; but as it could only be entrusted to clerks in whom confidence could be placed, and as it is not easy to meet with people of this class in Assam who have leisure to take up census work, some months elapsed before it was brought to a conclusion. Had the necessity arisen, compilation could have been pushed through more rapidly by the simple expedient of increasing the number of clerks employed upon the work, but this could hardly have been done without borrowing men from other offices—a proceeding which the circumstances did not seem to warrant. It cannot, however, I think, be considered that the preparation of the Imperial tables was unduly delayed, as the first was ready by the beginning of September and the last by the middle of December, or within nine and a half months from the date on which the actual census was taken.

6. The census accounts have been prepared in two ways—(a) to show the actual cost to Government, and (b) to show the departmental cost.

The cost of the Census.

Under system (a) the actual expenditure incurred has been entered in the accounts, e.g., if a mandal was temporarily lent to the census office and no substitute was taken in his place, his deputation allowance only was entered in the accounts; but under the second system the mandal's pay, as well as his deputation allowance, was charged against the census, though he would have drawn his pay from Government whether he had gone to the census office or not. It is the first set of accounts which shows the actual cost to Government of the census; and the second set of figures in this province, at any rate, are liable to give a somewhat misleading impression as to the actual expenditure incurred. The total cost of the census, excluding the printing of the report, was Rs. 62,826, or Rs. 10-12-1 per 1,000 of the population. It is impossible, however, to compare the figures under the head of superintendence at the last two enumerations, as there has been a difference in the arrangement of the accounts; and if the charges for superintendence (charges, I would point out, over which the Superintendent of Census Operations can exercise no control, and with regard to which he can practise no economy) and the expenditure incurred on the printing of the report are deducted on both occasions, the rate per 1,000 is Rs. 7-11-10 for the present census and Rs. 9-11-7 for that of 1890-92.

The departmental cost to which I have referred above was Rs. 91,964.

7. A comparison between the slip system, which has now been employed for the first time in India, and the electric tabulating machine, which is its counterpart in the new world, is not without interest, as it has been claimed for this machine that it works more quickly, more accurately, and more cheaply than any non-mechanical process. The rapidity with which the figures can be compiled by this means depends largely upon the number of machines used, but the ordinary census budget would not allow of their purchase in large numbers; and in Austria, where only twelve were employed, the tabulation of 24 millions of people took over two years to complete. At the Cuban census, where economy seems to have been a secondary consideration,
1,572,000 people were tabulated by the machines in five months; but even this is not a record with which the Indian slip system need fear comparison.

As to accuracy, the machine itself must, I suppose, be presumed to be free from any liability to err; but the accuracy of the final tables depends upon the accuracy with which the particulars about each individual have been punched upon a card by the abstracting staff, and the card employed is of such a complicated character that there must, I think, be an appreciable risk of the hole being punched in the wrong place. But it is when we come to consider the question of expense that the most serious doubts arise as to the superiority of the machine over the human being.

The figures for Cuba were tabulated at a contract rate of 3½ cents for each person, which, taking the dollar as equivalent to three rupees, works out to a rate of Rs. 105 per thousand of population. It is a little difficult to ascertain exactly what items of expenditure in Assam should be charged to tabulation, under which term I include slip-copying, slip-sorting and compilation, but the total cost to Government for the slips and the staff employed on these processes was only Rs. 28,812, or Rs. 4·11·3 per thousand.

It is true that clerical labour is much cheaper in India than in Europe, but even if we assume that the charges under that head in England would be five times what they are in Assam, the cost of compilation by the slip system would still be only one-fifth of the rate which was paid in Cuba; and we must not lose sight of the fact that, though the lowest grade of Indian moharrir is cheap, he is also unreliable and slow, and that the higher paid English clerk would get through two or three times the amount of work in the same time. Comparisons between India and Europe are of course liable to be misleading, but as far as economy and speed are concerned, there seem grounds for supposing that the slip copying and sorting clerk may challenge comparison with the machine, and it is by no means certain whether even in accuracy he is its inferior.

S. My acknowledgments, I feel, are due to all District and Subdivisional Officers and their staff, as upon them fell the burden of making and supervising the arrangements for the actual enumeration of the people, and the copying of the slips. Where all have done so well, it is scarcely possible to single out individuals, but the work of Major Gurdon in Kamrup, Captain Cole in Darrang, Mr. Gruning in Nowgong, and Mr. Reid in Lakhimpur, and of Mr. Hart and Mr. Majid, the Subdivisional Officers of South Sylhet and Habiganj, seems to call for special mention.

It is only right, too, to place on record my appreciation of the services of Babu Tarini Charan Nandi, who acted as Superintendent of my office from the inception of the operations, and of Babu Padma Nath Bhattacharyya, my gazetted assistant. Both of these officers were models of industry, and laboured unceasingly during the time that the slips were being sorted, while they proved of the greatest assistance in the troublesome task of training and managing the large staff of census moharrirs. I have also to express my thanks to Mr. Chalmers, Superintendent of Government Printing, Bengal, and to Mr. Conyngham Francis and the staff of the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, for their hearty co-operation in all matters where census was concerned.

Shillong,
February 19th 1902.

B. C. ALLEN,
Superintendent of Census Operations, Assam.