

CENSUS OF INDIA, 1901.

VOL. IV.

ASSAM.

PART I.—REPORT.

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CENSUS OF INDIA, 1901.

VOLUME IV.

ASSAM.

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.

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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 2nd 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 $5\frac{1}{2}$ 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 6 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 Re. 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

Slip-sorting.

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), XII (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

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.

Compilation.

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. 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 cost of the Census.

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,

Comparison between the slip-sorting system and the tabulating machine.

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 $3\frac{1}{2}$ 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 muharrir 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.

8. 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 muharrirs. 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,

B. C. ALLEN,

Superintendent of Census Operations, Assam.

February 19th 1902.