

Ethnography and Racial Theory in the British Raj: The Anthropological Work of H. H. Risley

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The systematic anthropology of British India developed alongside the decennial censuses, which started in 1871–2, and its declared purpose was always both 'scientific' and 'administrative': to contribute to modern, European scientific knowledge and also to strengthen and improve British rule. Various labels have been adopted in the literature for colonial anthropologists in India, including 'official anthropologists', a term that usefully indicates both their status as officials and the fact that their work – 'official anthropology' – was mostly undertaken on behalf of the government. From the middle of the nineteenth century until the First World War, official anthropologists had a virtual monopoly in the field, because very few Indians and very few academics carried out anthropological research in India. The majority of them belonged to the Indian Civil Service (ICS), the elite administrative corps of the British raj, whose members were known as 'civilians', and the remainder were members of other government services or army officers. Sir Herbert Risley, a civilian who always signed himself 'H. H. Risley', was British India's pre-eminent official anthropologist, though before 1900 or thereabouts he often called his field 'ethnology', rather than 'anthropology'. This biographical article focuses almost entirely on Risley's anthropological work and only briefly mentions his duties as a civil servant, which are described in the forthcoming book *Anthropologist and Imperialist: H. H. Risley and British India, 1873-1911* on which this article is based. [1]

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that the governance of India was the primary

responsibility of all official anthropologists belonging to the ICS, so that their administrative, judicial and policymaking duties took up most of their time and energy. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when anthropology was not a professionalised, academic discipline, most leading anthropologists in Britain and elsewhere earned their living in other occupations, so that in this respect official anthropologists in India were not unusual. I should state, too, that this article, unlike my book, does not examine the mainly political questions that have dominated modern scholarship on Indian colonial anthropology, in particular, its relationship with the colonial government and state; its reification and 'ethnicisation' of castes and religious communities as discrete, bounded groups in the eyes of both the colonisers and colonised; and its role in encouraging the politicisation of caste and religion, which has caused so much murderous conflict in South Asia in both the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Upbringing in England

Herbert Hope Risley was born in Akeley, a village in Buckinghamshire in southern England, on 4 January 1851. He was the son of John Holford Risley, Akeley's Church of England rector, who lived with his family as a country gentleman, and Frances Elton Risley, the daughter of John Hope, a retired surgeon in the East India Company's army. Notwithstanding this connection with India, Herbert's early life was particularly shaped by the Risley family's involvement in three venerable institutions: the Church of England, New College, Oxford, and Winchester College. His uncle, grandfather and great-grandfather, as well as his father, were Anglican priests and all four men had been fellows of New College; all of them, except his grandfather, had also been scholars at Winchester, England's oldest elite public school. Herbert held scholarships at both colleges, but unlike his forebears, he did so by passing examinations. While an undergraduate at Oxford, where he took his law and modern history degree in 1873, he also studied for the ICS entrance and final examinations, which he passed in 1871 and 1873. He then joined the service and arrived in Calcutta in October 1873.

Competitive examination became the basis for admission into Winchester and New College, as well as the ICS, in the 1850s as a result of extensive institutional reform in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Herbert Risley, indeed, belonged to the first generation of Englishmen whose path through education and into an upper-middle-class profession depended on individual success in 'rational', competitive examinations, rather than 'traditional' ancestry, family connections and patronage. Yet even though he belonged to a new, modern generation, a formative influence on Risley must have been his upbringing as a clergyman's son among the country gentry in the deeply conservative and extremely unequal world of rural southern England, where age-old ideas about society as dependent on a hierarchical order ordained by God persisted long into the Victorian era. His sense of his own gentlemanly, middle-class status was undoubtedly reinforced, too, by his education at Winchester and New College, so that he almost certainly acquired the innate sense of social superiority characteristic of members of this privileged stratum of English society, which he then carried into his Anglo-Indian identity as well. Moreover, for Risley, social and economic

inequality in India, especially in the villages, did not look much more extreme than in England and the caste system never seemed peculiarly distinctive, despite its differences from the English class system.

Risley's English background also shaped his attitude to the *bhadralok*: the English-educated, urban, professional middle class in Bengal, whose members were almost all Hindus belonging to the high-status Brahman, Baidya and Kayastha castes. In Bengal, most government officials and other professionals, as well as the leaders and supporters of the Indian National Congress (founded in 1885), belonged to the *bhadralok*. Risley's disposition towards the *bhadralok*, the group with which he became most familiar in India, was highly ambivalent, but he still had a particular affinity with its members. Like him, many of them came from an ancient landholding and priestly gentry with a traditional respect for education and learning, and by the late nineteenth century they too belonged to a modern world in which educational opportunity and professional employment were increasingly allocated by competition among individuals, especially through examinations, and regulated by bureaucratic rationality. Risley's perception of the *bhadralok* and his sometimes inconsistent relationship with its members were critical factors in both his anthropological and political understanding of India.

First Years as a Civilian in Bengal

Shortly after arriving in Calcutta in 1873, Risley began his career as a junior district officer in Midnapore district, southwest Bengal. In 1875, he became an assistant to W. W. Hunter (1840–1900), who was compiling the first detailed gazetteer of Bengal, and wrote two of its twenty volumes and parts of two others. In the gazetteer, relying on the 1872 Bengal census report, the castes in each district were grouped by occupation, but Hunter had them rearranged in 'social precedence' or rank order. It was in his gazetteer volumes that Risley first wrote about caste hierarchy. [2] Partly because his work impressed Hunter, Risley was then transferred to the government of Bengal's secretariat (administrative headquarters) in Calcutta. In 1876–9, as an under-secretary dealing with a wide range of subjects, he began to acquire the skills needed by an administrator and policymaker.

In 1880–84, Risley was a district officer in Manbhum district in Chota Nagpur, western Bengal (which is now in Jharkhand), a region with a large population of tribal Adivasis. These four years were important because they were Risley's only prolonged period among 'primitive' tribal people or, indeed, any of Bengal's rural populace. In northern Manbhum, Risley resolved a complex dispute between tribal Santal farmers and their landlord, and also persuaded disaffected Santals not to disrupt the 1881 census. In southern Manbhum, villagers from the Bhumij tribe were traditionally responsible for rural policing in exchange for rent-free land. This system was disintegrating and although Risley tried to resolve its problems, he was only partially successful.

The Ethnographic Inquiry into Tribes and Castes in Bengal

W. C. Plowden (1832–1915), the commissioner in charge of the 1881 census of India, was convinced that caste and occupation were both topics that should be researched separately from the censuses. The central government of India endorsed Plowden's proposals for separate inquiries, but declared that the government of each province had to decide how to proceed and only Bengal's responded positively. It seconded Risley for two years (later extended to three) to carry out an inquiry, which he began in January 1885. Early on, Risley discussed his project with Denzil Ibbetson (1847–1908) and J. C. Nesfield (1837/8–1919) in Lahore. Ibbetson, a civilian in the Punjab, was the province's 1881 census superintendent, whose report was quickly acclaimed for its outstanding ethnographic description and analysis of the caste system; Nesfield, an educational officer in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (later the United Provinces and now modern Uttar Pradesh), published a book on their castes and tribes based on the 1881 census material. [3] Ibbetson had previously circulated a memorandum to encourage research into local customs, which he, Risley and Nesfield revised to produce a new one with 27 simple questions on a range of topics, and another with 391 detailed questions on caste, kinship and marriage. [4]

In the 1880s, the vast province of Bengal, with a population of nearly 70 million, included present-day West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and parts of Odisha (Orissa) in India, as well as Bangladesh (east Bengal). Risley explored the European ethnographic literature for material, but his most important sources were the data on east Bengalis collected by James Wise (d. 1885), a former civil surgeon in Dacca, and the writings of several colonial officials, notably E. T. Dalton (1815–80), a seconded army officer and authority on tribal groups in Assam and Bengal. [5] Risley, who used some information he had gathered as a district officer, carried out a small ethnographic inquiry among several low castes in Bihar in early 1885. Otherwise, though, most of his material was supplied by the 'correspondents' Risley recruited by asking district officers throughout Bengal to nominate a few of their staff to help him. Eventually, he had 188 correspondents; the majority were Indians, mostly subordinate government officials, but around thirty were Europeans. Among the 129 named Indians, 86 (67 per cent) were definitely Brahmans, Baidyas or Kayasthas, and 16 (12 per cent) probably were, 18 (14 per cent) were other Hindus, and nine (7 per cent) were Muslims. Hence the bulk of Risley's correspondents predictably belonged to the *bhadralok*. [6]

A slightly different list of correspondents from December 1886 recorded the number of castes each man was investigating, how much progress he had made, and the 'date by which complete information promised'. Not everyone delivered on time, of course, but Risley had already received 973 sets of answers about 129 castes; he thought most of them were good and some 'extremely valuable'. The answers were responses to four circulars Risley sent to correspondents. Circular A asked them to correct caste names in the 1881 census data and to use the two questionnaires to collect further ethnographic information; circular B requested clarification of obscure data on some castes; circular C sought information about exogamy; and circular D asked about the 'social precedence' of castes.

Circular D was accompanied by four lists of major castes ‘arranged in order of social precedence’ by two Bihari Brahmans for Bihar, one Kayastha for eastern Bengal and one Bengali Brahman for central Bengal. Risley asked correspondents to correct the lists for their own districts or any other places they knew, and also to indicate castes from which Brahmans could take water, those entitled to village barbers’ services, and those allowed to enter the courtyards of great temples. Letters replying to circular D were written by around sixty correspondents, plus a few other people, so that two-thirds of Risley’s correspondents sent no replies, or at least none worth keeping. Nonetheless, these letters provide some of our best evidence about how Risley collected and used his ethnographic data. [7]

Collecting Anthropometric Data

Anthropometry was not part of the ethnographic inquiry originally approved by the government of Bengal, but Risley was probably interested in it from the outset. Like nearly all Victorian writers on India, he believed the subcontinent was invaded in ancient times by fair-skinned Aryans, who were more ‘civilised’ than the ‘primitive’ indigenous inhabitants they conquered and displaced, most of whom were dark-skinned Dravidians. In collecting anthropometric data, he had three principal objectives: first, to discover the racial composition of the Bengali population; second, to gather evidence to support his theory that the caste system originated in the racial inequality between Aryans and Dravidians; and third, to show that caste ranking was correlated with racial ancestry, because high-caste people had relatively more Aryan than Dravidian ‘blood’ than low-caste people, and vice versa.

In June 1885, Risley wrote for advice to William Flower (1831–99), a comparative anatomist and craniologist who was then the president of the Anthropological Institute. In his view, the nasal index – the ratio of a nose’s breadth to its height – was the best anthropometric criterion for distinguishing races and he thought it would still be reliable when calculated for living people. Flower also recommended *Éléments d’anthropologie générale* (1885), a new book by Paul Topinard (1830–1911), professor of anthropology in Paris and expert on anthropometry. [8] After reading the book, Risley obtained a number of Topinard’s ‘anthropometric boxes’, which each contained instruments for making different bodily measurements, especially of the head and nose.

Risley then described ‘the application of Dr Topinard’s anthropometric system to the tribes and castes of Bengal’ in a letter to the Bengal government, which gave approval to his project. The Indian government, which followed suit, also recommended that anthropometric data should be collected in the North-Western Provinces, the Punjab and the Central Provinces (in modern Madhya Pradesh). Taking measurements and calculating statistics were tasks assigned to assistants instructed by Risley. Most of the measurements, which were all done on adult men, were fairly simple, but recording the nose’s dimensions precisely was especially crucial, because the nasal index represented the ‘most valuable race-characteristic’. It was decided that mensuration could be most conveniently done in jails – a

grotesque procedure by modern standards to which no Indian prisoner could have given informed consent, of course, even if such a concept had existed at the time. On the other hand, we know nothing about what prisoners really thought and being measured was probably less degrading than other indignities routinely suffered in jails. [9]

Anthropometric data were eventually collected on 5,784 named individuals, who belonged to 54 tribes and castes in Bengal, plus east Bengali Muslims, 23 in the North-Western Provinces, and eight in the Punjab, plus Sikhs; in the Central Provinces, nothing was actually accomplished. All the measurements and values for the eight calculated indices, including the nasal index, were tabulated in the two anthropometric volumes of *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891).

Meeting Scholars in Britain and Europe

While planning his inquiry in Bengal, Risley corresponded with several scholars (besides Flower and Topinard) in Britain and continental Europe, including John Beddoe (1826–1911), the English physical anthropologist; Henry Maine (1822–88), the legal scholar, who forwarded his letter to Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), the reader in anthropology at Oxford; Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), the German Sanskritist and historian of religions in Oxford; and Friedrich Müller (1834–98), the Austrian philologist. In 1889, Risley went home on furlough for nearly twenty months, where he almost certainly finished writing all four volumes of *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. [10] He also met several leading anthropologists for the first time, probably including Topinard in Paris, and gave an address to the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte (Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory) where he probably met Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), Germany's most eminent physical anthropologist. He spoke at the British Association for the Advancement of Science's annual meeting in 1889 and joined its new committee to promote anthropological research in India set up on his initiative, whose other members were Flower (the Association's president), Tylor and the craniologist William Turner (1832–1916). He was also elected as a fellow of the Anthropological Institute, whose journal published his address on 'The Study of Ethnology in India', and he met James G. Frazer (1854–1941) and William Robertson Smith (1846–94). By the time Risley returned to India in December 1890, he had made himself and his research well known among metropolitan anthropologists in Britain and Europe, as well as other official anthropologists in India, and after his handbook on Bengal's tribes and castes was published in 1891, he had clearly become British India's leading anthropologist.

In his 1891 article, Risley began with a critique of British ethnology in which, he contended, 'comparatively scanty use ... has been made of the great storehouse of ethnographical data which British rule in India has thrown open to European enquirers'. He acknowledged the poor quality of most Indian ethnographic literature and accepted that it would be 'unreasonable' to 'urge that all ethnographical evidence should be gathered at first hand'; even so, 'a little knowledge at first hand is a very good thing, and some slight acquaintance

with even a single tribe of savage men could hardly fail to be of infinite service to the philosopher' of social evolution. Moreover, he insisted, almost certainly recalling his own time in Chota Nagpur, personal experience would reveal 'the extreme difficulty of entering into savage modes of thought', as well as the factual unreliability of 'books of travel'. Risley obviously wanted to stress that official anthropologists like himself and Ibbetson (who had made similar criticisms) understood the people of India far better than metropolitan 'armchair anthropologists'. [11] His comments, however, did not deter Tylor, Frazer or other luminaries from future cooperation with him.

The Ethnography of Caste

In 1886–91, Risley published five anthropological articles, which he revised for his introduction to the 'ethnographic glossary' of *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. In this glossary, some minor entries merely summarised a few bare facts. Major entries, on both tribes and castes, typically covered several topics in variable detail, including traditions of origin, physical characteristics, internal structure and subdivisions, marriage customs and practices, religion, occupation and social status. Risley sometimes described one community – such as the Rajputs – as both a 'caste' and a 'tribe', but he generally employed these terms more consistently than most other late-nineteenth-century anthropologists. [12] Indeed, improving the classification of social groups, especially for census purposes, was one of his main aims, so that considerable attention was given to describing them and their sometimes numerous subdivisions; the glossary also included a comprehensive detailed table of tribes, castes and subdivisions.

In the introduction, Risley declared that 'caste is mainly a matter of marriage', so that marriage practices, endogamy and exogamy, and related topics were described in particular detail. The preoccupation with marriage also reflected his wish to contribute to the vigorous debates about the origins of totemism, exogamy and endogamy in progress among leading Victorian anthropologists. By contrast, the glossary contained very little ethnographic material on other aspects of kinship, such as descent and inheritance, or family and household.

As mentioned earlier, when Risley contributed to Hunter's gazetteer of Bengal, he listed each district's castes in rank order. But the gazetteer volumes provided no evidence for this order and Risley, I believe, wanted to correct this deficiency through his circular D on social precedence. In the replies he received, however, there were countless variations and disagreements, which is almost certainly why the proposed 'comparative tables of precedence of castes' for different regions of Bengal were never actually produced. Instead, information on the 'social status' of each major caste (or tribe) was just mentioned in its own glossary entry.

A noteworthy feature of the glossary is that many entries discussed social change in both the pre-colonial and colonial eras. Examples from opposite ends of the status hierarchy include

the extreme development of hypergamous marriage (or 'Kulinism') among Bengali Brahmans and the long-term process of 'Brahmanisation' and 'Hinduisation' – forms of 'Sanskritisation' in modern parlance – which led to the conversion of tribal groups into low-status castes. Risley mentioned many other cases, too, including the Brahmanisation accelerated by the 'great extension of the railways': 'Both Benares and Manchester have been brought nearer to their customers and have profited by the increased demand for their characteristic wares. Siva and Krishna drive out the tribal gods as surely as grey shirtings displace the more durable hand-woven cloth.' [13] This was one of his favourite examples of change and, contrary to the claims made by some modern critics of colonial anthropology as a form of orientalist, traditionalist misconstruction, Risley, like other official anthropologists, was fully aware that caste, like all aspects of Indian society, was never a static institution.

Elitist Bias in the Ethnographic Glossary

In *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, the three most evident biases and gaps in the data pertained to women, Muslims and low castes. The gender bias is obvious and was of course present in nearly all writing at the time, so that, predictably, even when women were described in the ethnographic glossary, their own knowledge, perceptions and opinions were hardly ever mentioned.

In the case of Muslims, the scarcity of information is puzzling, since Risley did acquire some material on Muslims and he could readily consult Wise's work. Yet he actually drew on the latter for only a few major glossary entries and he sometimes misleadingly ignored it, so that, for example, the entry on the caste of flower-cultivators and garland-makers quoted Wise on Hindu Malakars, but not on Muslim Malis. [14] Whether intentionally or not, Risley's selective citation of Wise meant that he could avoid any careful consideration of caste among Bengali Muslims in comparison with Hindus. Quite simply, too, his tribes and castes handbook is first and foremost a work about the province's Hindus (66 per cent of the population in 1881), rather than its large Muslim minority (31 per cent).

As we have seen, the majority of Risley's correspondents belonged to the bhadrakok. Although he was sometimes critical of high-caste customs, such as Kulinism, he was certainly predisposed to share the bhadrakok's understanding of caste and hierarchy, so that the glossary entries on the Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas reflect a pervasive, underlying assumption that they were the three 'highest and most intelligent' castes, as he declared in the Kayastha entry. [15] In the entries on very low castes, one noticeable feature is the disparaging language sometimes used. Thus, for example, Risley said the Chamars, whose traditional occupation was leather working, were 'engaged in a filthy and menial occupation' and their ideas about diet were 'in keeping with [their] degraded position', because they ate 'beef, pork, and fowls, all unclean to the average Hindu'. [16] Most of the text on Chamars and other low castes, I should stress, was not written in this sort of prejudicial language. But some of it was, which was never true for middle or high castes.

Moreover, what Risley failed to say about some topics was revealing. For instance, he mentioned evidence that Chamars and similar untouchable castes had their own opinions about their lowly status, as well as origin myths attributing their inferiority to trickery, unfairness or mistakes by their ancestors. Yet he never recognised the significance of divergent attitudes to caste inequality and, like his high-caste bhadrakok correspondents, he consistently looked at the caste system from the viewpoint of those at the top, rather than the bottom, so that the glossary's text reflected an elitist bias combining the bhadrakok's attitudes with Risley's own, especially his English upper-middle-class prejudice against the uneducated lower classes. Thus Risley and his correspondents all conceptualised castes in Bengal as discrete units that could be rightfully ranked in social precedence lists, which was a shared concept of caste epitomising the Brahmanical social imagination that firmly developed among the late-nineteenth-century bhadrakok in Bengal. In the final analysis, the colonial knowledge about caste in Risley's handbook was collaboratively produced through the meeting of minds between its author and the members of the bhadrakok who supplied his ethnographic evidence.

Besides its biases, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* has been criticised on various other grounds as well. For instance, the ethnographic survey method Risley relied on was 'superficial and inadequate', as even he acknowledged later, and the discrete glossary entries for individual tribes and castes seriously limited any understanding of the relationships among these communities and hence of the caste system overall. [17] Nonetheless, despite its defects, Risley's work was in 1891 the most detailed and comprehensive ethnographic study of people in India ever published, and even today it is periodically consulted for information available nowhere else.

The 1901 Census of India and the Ethnographic Survey of India

In 1898, Risley was elected for two years as the president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, India's pre-eminent learned society. In the following year, he was appointed as the commissioner of the 1901 census of India. Edward A. Gait (1863–1950), the 1891 census superintendent in Assam, became the superintendent in Bengal, partly because the government of India wanted him to be available in Calcutta to help Risley, who had no previous experience as a census officer. Risley fixed the census date for 1 March 1901 and the eighteen months before then were taken up with planning and preparation. Data were collected at all decennial censuses on a range of topics that were covered in separate chapters in the commissioner's general, all-India report, as well as the superintendents' provincial reports. For Risley, 'caste, tribe and race' was always the subject of greatest interest; he also decided that castes should be classified according to social precedence, rather than occupation as they had been in 1891, so he instructed superintendents to ascertain the ranking of castes in their own provinces and gave them advice based on his own inquiry in Bengal. In conjunction with the census, new anthropometric data were collected to augment those already available. Risley wrote the general report's chapter 11 on caste, tribe and race – and parts of four others – before he was transferred to the Home Department in September

1902. Gait then replaced him as the commissioner and completed the general report, as well as his own on Bengal. Chapter 11, which Risley only slightly modified, became the core of his book, *The People of India*, published in 1908; it was later revised by William Crooke (1848–1923) and reissued in 1915. [18]

During the 1890s, Risley made several attempts to persuade other provincial governments to follow Bengal's lead by organising ethnographic inquiries. Crooke's *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* was published in 1896, but it was the only fruitful outcome of Risley's efforts. [19] In 1901, however, the government of India gave its backing and provided some financial support for yet another project to complete tribes and castes handbooks for every province in British India that Risley proposed. He was appointed as the honorary 'director of ethnography for India' in charge of the project, which was never actually completed, although a handbook for Madras was published in 1909, and those for the Central Provinces, the Punjab and Bombay between 1911 and 1922. [20]

Caste and Race

Caste, race and hierarchy, and their interrelationship, were the topics on which Risley wrote most influentially, but controversially. Prior to Risley, Ibbetson and Nesfield, as well as J. Athelstane Baines (1847–1925) – the 1881 Bombay census superintendent and 1891 census commissioner – all argued similarly, but not identically, that the caste system was the distinctively Indian outcome of the evolution of the division of labour, whereas the class system was the European outcome. Fundamentally, therefore, castes were occupational groups, which were primarily defined and classifiable by their traditional, hereditary occupations – or more broadly their politico-economic functions – rather than their positions in the status hierarchy. [21] Risley, probably influenced by Hunter's ideas, disputed this occupational theory in *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* and his early articles, and instead contended (as we have seen) that the origins of the caste system lay in the racial inequality between Aryans and Dravidians.

For advice on anthropometry, Risley mainly relied on Topinard, who conventionally believed that originally there were probably three primary, 'pure' races – black, yellow and white – which had divided into numerous branches or secondary races over many aeons. All races, moreover, had intermingled over time, so that no pure races now remained: "Nous sommes tous des métis" (we are all of mixed race), and "Toutes les races sont croisées" (all races are 'crosses' or 'hybrids'). [22] Topinard drew an analytical distinction between, first, a 'type', defined by physical or other characteristics; secondly, a 'race', defined by a set of hereditary physical characteristics, such as skin colour or head shape; and thirdly, 'peoples', the human groups (such as tribes) that empirically exist and can be observed. He emphasised that both 'types' – including physical types – and 'races' were abstract concepts (similar to 'ideal types' in modern sociological terminology), whereas 'peoples' alone existed as objective realities. All the same, although physical types were abstractions, physical characteristics could be measured by anthropometric techniques; from these measurements, the frequency

distributions of physical types within particular groups of people could be worked out; using these statistical results, the mixture of different racial ancestries within human groups could be adduced inductively. The nasal index was the most significant characteristic because it most consistently indicated distinctions between races and the degree of mixing among them. [23]

The anthropometric volumes of *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* were dedicated to Topinard, who was naturally honoured, but nonetheless wrote a long critical review of them. He expressed serious doubts about Risley's methodology, statistical analysis and conclusions, and particularly questioned the claim that endogamous marriage had largely prevented mixing between races or physical groups in India. Indeed, he reasoned that Risley's own nasal index data demonstrated that several of the castes and tribes investigated must have had mixed racial origins. [24] Topinard cautioned, too, that even if speculation about origins could be useful, it was imperative to identify existing physical types without playing with the word 'race' before contrasting and classifying them. He did not comment on Risley's theory that racial inequality lay at the root of the caste system.

Risley never mentioned this review and never explicitly engaged with Topinard's criticisms, but I believe they were influential in persuading him to modify the 'early' theory of caste and race published in 1891, because a different, 'late' one appeared in the 1901 census report. The census report's chapter 11 (and *The People of India*) began by discussing the 'physical types' in India, which he did not call 'racial types', even though they were defined in relation to (secondary) races. He further expressed doubt that an Aryan race ever really existed and thereby undermined his earlier assumption that a clear racial distinction existed between Aryans and non-Aryans. He even suggested that caste originated not in any true racial distinction, but in the *fiction* that skin colour differences indicated distinctions of race and hence social status. It is unfortunate – not least for his own subsequent reputation – that Risley failed to explain how his own ideas had changed. Nonetheless, by 1902, albeit tentatively, he was thinking about race much more like a modern social scientist, for whom it is always a social and cultural ideological construct, not a physical or biological fact. [25]

Caste and Hierarchy

After physical types and race, Risley looked at social types, primarily tribes and castes. He was strongly influenced by the French Indologist Émile Senart (1847–1928), whose book, *Les castes dans l'Inde*, first published in 1896, was impressively coherent and original. Senart grasped the sociological importance of understanding how caste existed and functioned as a pan-Indian total system, which almost certainly explains why Risley admired his 'fascinating study', even though he disagreed with many of its particular evolutionist arguments. He may also have adapted Senart's summary definition of caste to write his own, which (in abbreviated form) stated that a caste was an endogamous family or kin group which had a common name, a traditional occupation and putative common descent, and was also generally perceived as 'a single homogeneous community' by informed public opinion. The

definitions in the census report and *The People of India* were phrased slightly differently, but their meanings were identical. [26]

Risley always took it for granted that social precedence depended on ‘public opinion’, but it may have been Gait who first perceived the significance of people’s opinions for defining caste itself and thereby added a crucial insight by emphasising that how people identified the castes to which they and others belonged depended on their subjective perceptions, which could of course vary and provoke dispute. Using the language of later Weberian sociology, the new definition recognised that the actors’ own intersubjective meanings are necessarily constitutive of institutions such as the caste system, which cannot be fully and objectively described as ‘social facts’ in Durkheim’s sense. [27] Or, to put it simply, the very existence of castes as social types or groups – not just their status – depended in no small measure on how Indians themselves thought about them.

Risley, as already mentioned, criticised the predominantly occupational classification of castes in the 1891 census. Instead, he wanted them classified according to ‘social precedence as recognised by native public opinion at the present day’, and instructed superintendents to collect data on social precedence using schemes suitable for their own provinces. But because these ranking schemes varied among provinces (and three superintendents failed to collect the data), Risley recognised that no single, all-Indian scheme could be devised. The census report therefore contained a series of tables for regional ‘tracts’ defined by physical types, which listed the main castes in rank order according to criteria that Risley outlined in general, comparative terms. But he only summarised Gait’s information on Bengal in any detail. Gait explained that he had used a set of five ‘well recognised tests of social position’ for Hindu castes, including rules about giving and receiving food and water; he also consulted committees of ‘native gentlemen’ about the accuracy of lists of ranked castes. The outcome for Bengal proper was a set of seven groups, from Brahmans at the top to ‘unclean feeders’ (later classified as ‘untouchables’) at the bottom. But none of this was straightforward, said Gait, because trying to sort out social precedence caused an ‘extraordinary amount of ill-feeling and jealousy’, and some local committees could never agree. Furthermore, the five groups in Bihar and seven in Orissa differed from those in Bengal proper. [28] Nonetheless, Gait’s results were particularly interesting – though neither he nor Risley pointed it out – because he effectively drew up the regional tables of social precedence that Risley could not work out for *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*.

In the other provinces of India, as well as the princely states that were not under direct British rule, yet more schemes were used by superintendents, so that neither the tests nor the lists were the same as those for Bengal. Even so, Risley declared that the full set of reports on social precedence ‘added very greatly to our knowledge of an obscure and intricate subject’. [29] That was true, but he only sketchily discussed regional variation in the caste system and, though his criticisms of Baines’s classification were telling, his broad-brush generalisations could not hide the fact that classifying castes by social precedence was scarcely more systematic or consistent than classifying them by occupation. He also made no

serious attempt to examine caste and hierarchy among Muslims or other non-Hindu communities in the subcontinent. [30]

Several superintendents besides Gait noted that local committees commonly disagreed about caste ranking. Comparable disagreements surfaced in the numerous petitions submitted by individuals or caste associations who wanted census officials to record their own community by its supposedly correct name and rank. In addition to petitions, many tracts supporting claims to higher status were printed around this time. After the census was finished, too, people who were disappointed by the results often protested vigorously.

Claims to higher status by individual castes and subcastes, or blocs of allied castes, as well as disputes over relative rank, have probably existed since time immemorial, but they became more frequent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when census reports, tribes and castes handbooks, district gazetteers and other official publications were all regarded by many Indians as government documents certifying caste status. But the 1901 census was unique in attempting to gather comprehensive data on caste ranking for the whole of India simultaneously and it gave rise to petitions, protests and disputes on an unprecedented scale. Moreover, all this dissension plainly demonstrated that caste status was almost always open to dispute, at least potentially, so that there was often no consensus of 'native public opinion' on the overall order of social precedence in a region or even a small locality. Risley, indeed, was asking for yes or no answers to questions about caste rank that were highly unlikely to elicit any such answers, so that his ambitious plan to work out the order of social precedence, first in Bengal and then all of India, could never have produced a truly definitive result.

Yet Risley saw the dissension as confirmation that he had been right to undertake his inquiry and he insisted that if it 'had not appealed to the usages and traditions of the great mass of Hindus', it would have been 'inconceivable' that so many people would have tried so hard to secure their status at the census. As evidence, Risley mentioned the case of the Punjabi merchant caste of Khatri who pressed their claim for kingly Kshatriya status, which he formally accepted because in British India, Khatri were 'generally believed to be the modern representatives of the Kshatriyas'. His decision, he said, 'gave general satisfaction' and illustrated the point that social precedence was determined by 'Indian public opinion'. [31] But Risley's confidence that his Khatri decision led to 'general satisfaction' was certainly misplaced. As countless cases had already shown, if one caste's higher status was confirmed, a second caste of similar status was likely to be unhappy, and yet another whose request for higher status was rejected would probably be angry. Risley must have known all this, so his lack of concern about the social and political unrest provoked by his inquiry into social precedence is surprising. And however insouciant he was, a similar inquiry was never undertaken again because of the dissension it provoked. Furthermore, when Crooke edited the revised edition of *The People of India*, he deleted the appendix containing tables of castes in rank order, justifying his action by referring to the trouble, especially in Bengal, that resulted from publication of 'this so-called "warrant of precedence"'. [32]

In my judgement the most valuable sections of *The People of India* and the census report chapter – both of which certainly have many flaws – were and are the proposed definition of ‘caste’ and the discussion of caste as a holistic system (which were probably inspired by Senart), and the examination of caste ranking. Although it was never immutable, caste as a hierarchical system has been one of the most important and longstanding institutions of Indian society. Moreover, despite overstating his case, Risley was right to say that a classification of castes in order of social precedence generally, though not invariably, conformed well to indigenous ideas and practices, as many modern anthropologists, notably Louis Dumont (1911–98), have also argued. In this connection, it is important that Risley’s treatment of caste ranking was easily detachable from his racial theory, mainly because the evidence on social precedence and its interpretation were never contingent on the anthropometric data. Thus, for example, Gait’s five tests of caste status were based on the same kind of evidence about ‘attributes’ (for example, inherent capacity to pollute) and ‘interactions’ or ‘transactions’ (for example, food and water exchanges) that modern anthropologists have collected and analysed with more sophistication to determine local caste hierarchies in the mid-twentieth century.

The evidence on caste ranking in the 1901 census reports obviously has to be read critically, but it represented in total an unprecedented amount of ethnographic data from the whole of India, which cannot be dismissed as a spurious artefact of colonialist, Brahmanical orientalism, or Victorian anthropometry and racial ethnology. Yet Risley only considered Gait’s evidence in any detail, so that he once again wrote about caste and social precedence with the high-caste, Bengali Hindu perspective that he developed early in his ICS career and his bhadrakok-inflected understanding of Indian society was barely altered by his experience as the census commissioner. Of course, Risley could not have completed a comparative analysis of all the data before the census report was due; nor could he have done so before publishing his book in 1908, given his heavy workload in the Home department. But they were missed opportunities all the same, perhaps especially because the collection of so much evidence on caste hierarchy in 1901 was really the fruit of Risley’s abiding interest in the topic, which had been with him since he assisted Hunter twenty-five years earlier.

Secretary in the Governments of Bengal and India

During most of the 1890s, Risley worked in the Bengal secretariat, mainly as the secretary heading the provincial government’s Financial and Municipal departments. The most important and politically contentious issues he dealt with were urban sanitation, plague control and the Calcutta Municipal Bill, which reduced the number of elected Indian representatives in the municipal government and was the first of several confrontations between the colonial authorities and Bengali members of the Congress.

Risley was transferred to the government of India in 1898. From 1902 until his retirement in February 1910, he became one of the British raj’s most powerful policymakers while serving under Lord Curzon (1859–1925) and Lord Minto (1845–1914), the viceroys in 1899–1905 and

1905–10, respectively. Risley was successively the secretary of the Home department, a special advisor to Minto and a member of his executive council. Curzon's most controversial policy, as well as his final assault on the bhadralok nationalists, was the partition of Bengal in 1905. This policy was exhaustively discussed by Curzon and his senior officials, including Risley, who wrote the final version of the partition plan. Soon after it was implemented, Minto replaced Curzon. The partition gave rise to widespread nationalist protests, which the government regarded as 'anti-British agitation' and 'sedition', and Risley introduced new laws to repress them. But John Morley (1838–1923), the British secretary of state for India, insisted on reform as well as repression and the outcome was the Morley-Minto reforms, which enhanced Indian representation on the legislative councils. Risley, who played a key role in Minto's negotiations with Morley, produced final proposals for the reformed councils which became law in 1909. The government's aim was to satisfy 'moderate' Congressmen and the 'educated classes', who would elect some council members, as well as Muslims and 'loyal' conservative landowners, who would choose members from separate 'class electorates'. For the first time, though minimally, legislative power was devolved to Indians, but by introducing an early form of 'reserved' council seats for the Muslim minority, a crucial, initial step in the development of religious communalism in South Asia was taken as well.

After retiring to England, Risley became a senior official in the India Office in London, advising Morley on Indian affairs and drafting his replies to questions in Parliament. Within a year, however, Risley fell ill and stopped work; he died on 30 September 1911.

Risley's Legacy: Official Anthropology and European Sociology

After retiring from the ICS, Risley served as the Royal Anthropological Institute's president until illness forced him to resign. But despite his election as its president, most of the Institute's members had never been very interested in the bulk of Risley's research and writing on caste, marriage and other Indian topics, unless he was reporting evidence of archaic 'survivals', because by around 1870 anthropologists in Britain – as well as other European countries and North America – had become preoccupied by the study of 'primitive' societies. Except for the small minority belonging to hill and forest tribes, the subcontinent's inhabitants were therefore too evolutionarily advanced to be intellectually interesting and India had become peripheral to British anthropology. Before the First World War, the only British academic anthropologist to carry out fieldwork in mainland India was W. H. R. Rivers (1864–1922) among the south Indian Todas in 1901–2, although A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) studied the Andaman Islanders in 1906–8 and Charles G. Seligman (1873–1940) studied the Veddas of Ceylon in 1907–8, assisted by his wife Brenda Seligman (1883–1965), to whom he left "the social stuff". [33] Significantly, all three men selected groups they regarded as especially 'primitive'.

The most notable Western scholars to take a real interest in the official anthropology of India during the colonial era were, apart from Senart, two sociologists, Célestin Bouglé (1870–1940) – who was Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss's colleague – and Max Weber

(1864–1920). Sociology in Britain was underdeveloped compared with France, Germany or the United States, so that there were no British sociologists who might have compensated for the anthropologists' uninterest or, more significantly, drawn on the Indian data to compare caste, class and other forms of social stratification. Senart, and after him Bouglé and Weber, were important mainly because they were all able to comprehend caste as a system *qua* system by looking beyond the classificatory empiricism of official anthropology, while also seizing on the mass of detailed, contemporary evidence that it contained. They, so to speak, could see the wood despite the trees in a way that anthropologists in India could not, at least before they read Senart's 1896 book, whose impact on Risley has already been mentioned. In his text, Senart cited a range of publications for his account of the present-day caste system, but *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* – as well as Ibbetson's 1881 Punjab census report and Nesfield's essay on caste – were major sources.

Bouglé, whose essays on the caste system were first published in 1908, was sent a complete set of the 1901 census volumes by Risley, and he repeatedly cited the latter's census report chapter, as well as his tribes and castes handbook; several other works by official anthropologists also appeared many times among Bouglé's sources. Tellingly, too, Bouglé's introduction relied heavily on Risley, supplemented by Crooke and others, for the ethnographic examples of caste occupations, commensality restrictions and hypergamous marriage that were vital evidence for his three key principles of caste: 'hereditary specialization, hierarchical organization, reciprocal repulsion'. [34]

The subject of the first part of Weber's essay on Hinduism and Buddhism – originally published in 1917 and translated into English as *The Religion of India* – was the 'Hindu social system', more specifically the caste system. [35] In a bibliographical note, which described the census reports as basic sources for understanding caste and Hinduism in contemporary India, Weber commended Risley and Gait's 1901 census report, as well as *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, as among 'the best general sociological literature available'. [36] In his essay, Weber mentioned his sources inconsistently, but some of the missing ones can be identified. For example, to support two key arguments – first, that the essence of caste is social rank determined with reference to Brahmans and, secondly, that a caste is a 'closed status group' – dietary and commensality restrictions were crucial evidence that Weber mainly took without specific citation from Risley's Chapter 11 in the 1901 general census report and Gait's report on Bengal; he also summarised in some detail Risley's account of caste ranking throughout India. [37] Weber's most distinctive, seminal thesis was that the Hindus' 'traditionalistic' caste system and its characteristic 'spirit' were 'anti-rational', so that they impeded the development of modern industrial capitalism; moreover, the *karma* doctrine, which stipulated that someone's status in this life is determined by how far their past conduct conformed to the morality of caste, made caste traditionalism inviolable. He cited census data relevant to caste traditionalism, but hardly anything to support his propositions about *karma* and he noticeably failed to refer to the extensive evidence that *karma* was an unusual explanation of misfortune or inferiority among ordinary Hindus throughout India.

Senart was undoubtedly read more often than either Bouglé or Weber until the 1950s, since his book was less technical and appeared in English earlier. From around 1960, however, Senart was infrequently cited (or presumably read) by social and cultural anthropologists and sociologists. Bouglé, on the other hand, became influential because Dumont, the most prominent theorist of caste in the mid-twentieth century, as well as the most controversial, hailed him as an intellectual ancestor. Bouglé’s essays finally appeared in English in 1971. Weber’s writings on caste were disseminated quite diffusely among anthropologists, but for those who read him in English the key texts were the essays on India in *From Max Weber*, as well as *The Religion of India*, which were first published in 1948 and 1958, respectively. By the 1960s, his theoretical importance was increasingly recognised, for example, by Dumont and other anthropologists, such as Milton Singer (1912–94), who productively criticised Weber’s concept of Indian ‘traditionalism’ in his own study of religious and cultural ‘modernization’.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Bouglé’s and Dumont’s ideas had lost much of their earlier currency, but Weber’s have not, partly because he remains such a towering figure in the social sciences and related disciplines, such as economic history. The official anthropologists of India have never been widely read by metropolitan social anthropologists and certainly not in the postcolonial era. Nonetheless, their rare appearance in bibliographies and citations obscures the fact that Risley, like other official anthropologists, exerted a notable intellectual influence on modern scholars of South Asia via the indirect route of early European sociology and its pioneers.



Fig. 1

H. H. Risley wearing the star and badge of a Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire, which he was awarded in 1907, and the insignia of his other honours.

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[1] Published in New Delhi in 2022 by Social Science Press and subsequently by Routledge.

[2] Risley wrote volumes 16 and 17 and parts of volumes 12 and 14 (all published in 1877) of *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (Hunter 1875-77).

[3] Ibbetson 1916; Nesfield 1885.

[4] 'Proceedings of conference on ethnography at Lahore', in Risley 1891b, 2: Appendix 2.

[5] Wise 1883; Dalton 1872.

[6] Risley 1891b, 2: Appendix 4.

[7] Risley's inquiry is described briefly in the 'Introduction' (Risley 1891b, 1) and in detail in 'Special enquiry into the castes and occupations of the people of Bengal', which included his note reporting his progress ['Progress report'], dated 22 December 1886, India Home (Public) Proceedings, May 1887, pp. 741-867, esp. pp. 789-92, 813-27, 859-61, IOR/P/2952; Replies to circular D in Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes (1886-87), H. H. Risley Papers, Mss Eur E101, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library.

[8] Topinard 1885.

[9] 'Progress report', esp. 797-807, 829-32.

[10] Risley 1891a; 1891b.

[11] Risley 1891c.: 235-8; cf. Risley 1886: 71; *Census 1881 Panjab*, p. 124.

[12] Risley 1891b, 2: 184-92.

[13] Risley 1891b, 1: xxix.

[14] Risley 1891b, 2: 60-3; Wise 1883: 50-2, 69-76, 78-9, 91-2, 342-4.

[15] Risley 1891b, 1: 442.

[16] Risley 1891b, 1: 176, 180.

[17] Risley 1911: 19.

[18] *Census 1901 India*; *Census 1901 Bengal*; Risley 1908; 1915. (The 1915 edition is more widely available and therefore cited here.)

[19] Crooke 1896.

[20] Thurston and Rangachari 1909; Russell and Hira Lal 1916; Rose 1911-19; Enthoven 1920-22.

[21] Ibbetson 1916; Nesfield 1885; *Census 1881 Bombay*; *Census 1891 India*.

[22] Topinard 1885: 203; 1891a: 42.

[23] Topinard 1885: 187-307 *passim*.

[24] Topinard 1891b: esp. 352–5.

[25] *Census 1901 India*, 507–9, 555–6; Risley 1915: 47–9, 273–6.

[26] *Census 1901 India*, 517–18; Risley 1915: 68–9; Senart 1930: 20.

[27] Risley almost certainly knew nothing about Weber, but probably was aware of Durkheim, Celestin Bouglé's senior colleague; see below.

[28] *Census 1901 Bengal*, 366–77.

[29] *Census 1901 India*, 538; Risley 1915: 112.

[30] *Census 1901 India*, 543–4, 546; Risley 1915: 121–3, 126–7.

[31] *Census 1901 India*, 539; Risley 1915: 112–13.

[32] Risley 1915: 114, footnote.

[33] Kuper 2017: 2.

[34] Bouglé 1971: 20–27.

[35] Weber 1967: Chaps. 1–3.

[36] Weber 1967: 344–5.

[37] Weber 1967: 30, 39, 43–9.