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Ethnographic inquiry in colonial India: Herbert Risley, William Crooke, and the study of tribes and castes

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Abstract

Sir Herbert Risley and William Crooke, both officials in the colonial government, published the first two handbooks of tribes and castes in British India in the 1890s, each containing a lengthy ethnographic glossary with entries for individual tribes and castes. The handbooks are rarely consulted by modern anthropologists of India and have been criticized as colonialist misrepresentation. This article, which reassesses Risley's and Crooke's handbooks as contributions to anthropological knowledge, examines their collection and presentation of ethnographic information, particularly Risley's inquiry into caste ranking. It discusses criticism of the handbooks and their elitist bias, as well as the collaborative contribution made by Indian assistants. It briefly considers why Risley's and Crooke's work was uninteresting to leading metropolitan anthropologists and notes the greater interest of European sociologists.

Sir Herbert Risley (1851-1911), British India's leading anthropologist, was elected president of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in 1910. He had recently retired from the Indian Civil Service (ICS) after thirty-nine years, completing his career as secretary of the imperial government's home department and then a member of the viceroy's council. Risley's presidency was cut short by his death, and J.D. Anderson, a former ICS colleague, wrote an appreciative obituary of him in *Man*.

Anderson commented that much of Risley's anthropological work 'was performed officially, and with all the advantages that official authority and prestige confer in India', though he was also usually occupied with heavy administrative responsibilities. He concluded by praising Risley's commitment to 'punctiliously impartial yet sympathetic study', out of which came 'his already classical *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* [1891*b*], which will keep his memory green in India' (Anderson 1912: 3-4).

Alongside Risley, William Crooke (1848-1923) and Sir Denzil Ibbetson (1847-1908), who is briefly discussed below, were the other two ICS officers who did most to develop Indian ethnography and anthropology in the late Victorian period. After retiring to England in 1896 after twenty-five years in India, Crooke was active in the RAI, the British Association for the Advancement of Science's anthropology section (president in 1910), and the Folk-Lore Society (president in 1911-12). Unlike Risley (and Ibbetson), Crooke was never promoted to high office and spent his entire ICS career as a district officer in the North-Western Provinces. Crooke's obituary in *Folk-Lore* was written by H.A. Rose, another ICS officer and anthropologist. Rose called Crooke 'an ideal District Officer', who had still 'found time ... to write much on the people of India, their religions, beliefs, customs, and mentality', and described as 'comprehensive' his most substantial publication, *The tribes and castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896) (Rose 1923: 382-3). In retirement, Crooke wrote prolifically and edited numerous works, including the revised, 'memorial' edition of Risley's *The people of India* (1915 [1908]), which Anderson "proud and punctilious" also praised (1912: 3). But Anderson's expectation that Risley's memory would be kept green by *The tribes and castes of Bengal* was misplaced, because modern social and cultural anthropologists rarely look at any of

the tribes and castes handbooks, including Risley's and Crooke's, or *The people of India*, except to find a few old ethnographic details.

In the literature on colonial knowledge and the state in British India, Risley – whose racial theory of caste has made him notorious – and sometimes Crooke and Ibbetson, are discussed by Bayly (1999: 119-43), Cohn (1987*a* [1968]: 154-8; 1987*b* [c. 1970]: 238-47), Dirks (2001: 43-52, 183-227), Gottschalk (2013: 194-224, 253-65), Inden (1990: 56-66), Metcalf (1995: 113-44), Trautmann (1997: 194-204), and others (see also Fuller 2016*a*; 2016*b*). Some scholars examine the tribes and castes handbooks' role in classifying and ordering 'traditional' Indian society (Dirks 2001: 48-50; Metcalf 1995: 121-2). But the handbooks have typically been condemned as colonialist, orientalist misrepresentations; Inden (1990: 58), who sarcastically calls them 'tomes of alphabetized empiricism', probably expresses a widespread view.

In this article, my deliberately restricted aim is to reassess Risley's and Crooke's tribes and castes handbooks as contributions to anthropological knowledge. I examine how the two men collected and presented their ethnographic information, and which topics they focused on. Partly because good archival evidence exists, I pay particular attention to Risley's inquiry into caste ranking. I also discuss criticism of the handbooks with reference to elitist bias, collaboration between British authors and Indian assistants, and debates about colonial knowledge. Finally and briefly, I look at why the work of Risley and Crooke, despite their institutional recognition, hardly interested leading British anthropologists, but was read by European sociologists.

The development of Indian official anthropology

Various labels have been adopted for colonial anthropologists in India, including ‘official anthropologists’, the term I shall use to indicate both that they were almost all government officials and that their work – ‘official anthropology’ – was mostly undertaken on behalf of the government. The majority were members of the ICS, an elite civil service with a reputation for intellectualism. A minority were army officers and a few belonged to the medical, educational, police, and other services. The ICS’s primary responsibility was, of course, the governance of British India, and all official anthropologists, including Risley and Crooke, spent most of their time on regular administration, whether as junior district officers or advisers to the viceroy.

The systematic anthropology of India developed alongside the decennial censuses, which started in 1871-2. The declared, double purpose of official anthropology was always to contribute to scientific knowledge and to strengthen and improve British rule. This anthropology reflected and reinforced British ideas that ‘traditional’ Indian society – the antithetical ‘other’ of modern European society – was made up of separate religious communities and separate castes, which were the most important social groups, together with a tribal periphery.

At the 1881 census, Ibbetson was the superintendent for the Punjab. His report, the foundational text for official anthropology, included an ethnographic survey of Punjabi castes and tribes classified primarily by occupation, and a theoretical argument that the caste system was fundamentally a product of the evolution of the division of labour (Ibbetson 1883: ch. 6; 1916). Athelstane Baines, the Bombay superintendent in 1881 and later the commissioner heading the 1891 census, also worked out an occupational theory of caste (Baines 1882: ch. 8; 1893: ch. 5), and so did John Nesfield (1885), an educational officer.

William Plowden, the 1881 census commissioner, recommended that provincial governments should organize their own surveys of castes and occupations, which were both troublesome topics for census enumerators. But only the Bengal government initially responded; in 1885, it appointed Risley to carry out an ethnographic survey for two years, extended to three, which he wrote up in his *tribes and castes handbook*. In 1893, the North-Western Provinces government appointed Crooke to undertake a similar survey. Risley did not neglect occupations entirely, but neither he nor Crooke studied them systematically. Risley became the 1901 census commissioner, but when he was promoted to the home department, he was replaced by Edward Gait, the superintendent for Bengal, who was later the 1911 commissioner. In 1901, the Indian government also established an ethnographic survey, directed by Risley, whose task was to complete the series of *tribes and castes handbooks* for British India ('India' 1901; Risley 1911: 15-18). The handbook for Madras came out in 1909, but the last three – for the Punjab, the Central Provinces, and Bombay – took longer (Enthoven 1920-2; Rose 1911-19; Russell & Hira Lal 1916; Thurston & Rangachari 1909). After Gait's 1911 census, not much new ethnographic data on castes were collected, but hill and forest tribes were studied until the end of British rule, mainly in central India and Assam, whose government sponsored a series of tribal monographs instead of a handbook.

In the late nineteenth century, writers on India generally believed that its people were predominantly descended from the more 'advanced' Aryans or more 'primitive', indigenous Dravidians (Inden 1990: 56-66; Trautmann 1997: 190-204). Risley went further and argued in his handbook's introduction that the ultimate origin of caste lay in the hierarchical distinction between the 'higher', 'fair-skinned Aryan' and the 'lower', 'black Dravidian', and that the evolution of the division of labour

could not adequately explain the system (Risley 1891*b*, 1: xix-xxvii, xxxiii-xxxiv, xxxviii). Risley was also convinced that his theory was supported by anthropometrical measurements, which revealed persisting racial distinctions among modern Indians; thus his extensive data on Bengalis (Risley 1891*a*) supposedly showed how bodily characteristics, especially the shape of the nose (calibrated by the ‘nasal index’), were strongly correlated with social status.

In the 1890s, Crooke shared Risley’s faith in anthropometry, but reached a different conclusion. In his handbook’s introduction, Crooke included anthropometrical data from the North-Western Provinces showing that nasal (and other) indices differed negligibly among different castes and tribes, so that all groups must have had a similar racial background. Hence he concluded that the origins of caste ‘can only be found in community of function or occupation’, and largely endorsed Ibbetson’s and Nesfield’s occupational theories (1896, 1: xxxiii, cxxxix, cxlv; cf. 1897: 195-208). In later years, Risley’s racial theory of caste, along with anthropometry, were generally discredited – not least by Crooke himself in his revision of Risley’s *The people of India* (Crooke 1914; Risley 1915 [1908]: xviii-xxi).

In this article, I shall not dwell on Risley’s racial theory of caste, which has already been extensively and rightly criticized; I have also discussed it elsewhere (Fuller 2016*a*: 229-32). Instead, I concentrate on the ethnography, which previous scholars have ignored, because it was a far more valuable contribution to knowledge about Indian society than the introductory theory in the two handbooks.

The collection of ethnographic data

The two ethnographic volumes of Risley's handbook comprised the introduction, an ethnographic glossary with the alphabetical entries for individual tribes and castes, and a detailed index. The four volumes of Crooke's handbook had a similar format. Risley's and Crooke's glossaries were approximately 400,000 and 800,000 words long, respectively.

Risley explained in his handbook's preface that he had sought 'to apply to Indian ethnography the methods of systematic research sanctioned by the authority of European anthropologists'. In 1885, Risley discussed his project in Lahore with Ibbetson and Nesfield. Ibbetson had previously circulated a questionnaire to officials throughout the Punjab to encourage inquiry into local customs. At the Lahore meeting, by revising Ibbetson's questionnaire, the three men drew up two others: one with twenty-seven simple questions on a range of topics, and one with 391 detailed questions on caste structure, and kinship and marriage (Risley 1891*b*, 2: 143-73, 175-88). The questionnaires resembled *Notes and queries on anthropology* (1874) in style and borrowed some of its questions. Risley, aware that his questionnaires might look too academic, insisted his objectives were always 'partly scientific and partly administrative', and many ostensibly esoteric topics were practically important: for example, accurate information on marriage and divorce customs, which would help district magistrates in court cases (1891*b*, 1: vi-vii).

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 Orissa (Odisha) in India, and also Bangladesh (east Bengal). To collect his data, Risley officially requested district officers throughout Bengal to nominate a few of their staff to help him. Eventually, he wrote, he had a roster of 190 'correspondents', although 188 were actually listed, most by personal name and the rest by official title (1891*b*,

1: x; 2: 189-93). The majority were Indians, mostly subordinate officials, but around thirty were Europeans. A slightly different list of correspondents in a progress report that Risley submitted in December 1886, prior to his third-year extension, 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, and expected more to arrive. The quality of this mass of responses varied, but he thought most were good and some 'extremely valuable'.¹

Risley outlined his 'method of working' in the handbook (1891*b*, 1: xiii), but gave more information in his progress report. During 1885, he sent his first Circular A to batches of correspondents, who were asked to correct caste names in the 1881 census data for their own districts, to use the short Lahore questionnaire to collect information about different groups, and also to use the long one if they wanted to. He also asked a few knowledgeable individuals for extra information about the physical appearance and dress styles of communities. Circular B in April 1886 requested clarification about local castes on which the data were obscure. Circular C in June sought information about exogamy and included some complicated questions for 'intelligent members of any caste' about, for example, its exogamous sections, how they regulated marriage, and whether or how the rules applied to a bride's ancestors, as well as the bride herself. Circular D in July asked about the 'social precedence' of castes, and I return to it below.²

Risley asked for ethnographic advice from two ICS colleagues and six European scholars, including Henry Maine and E.B. Tylor, who mostly sent encouragement and a few comments. F. Max Müller, however, wrote incisively about the dangers of misusing philological terms as ethnological ones and employing

European terms – such as ‘caste’ or ‘totemism’ – uncritically. Müller’s letter was also published separately (Müller 1886; cf. Trautmann 1997: 194-8).³

Risley, probably helped by his German wife, explored the English, German, French, and Italian ethnographic literature, but his single most important source was the copious data on east Bengalis collected by James Wise (1883). Risley discussed collaboration with Wise, a retired civil surgeon in Dacca. But Wise died and his widow gave his papers to Risley, who dedicated the handbook to his memory. Besides Wise, Risley cited numerous other authors, notably E.T. Dalton (1872), whose data he occasionally corrected, for example in the entry on the Juang tribe (1891*b*, 1: 353). Sometimes Risley used information, such as the material about ‘police service’ in the Bhumij tribe, which he had gathered to write an official report.⁴ For two months in early 1885, Risley personally collected data on several low castes in Bihar, especially the Magahiya Doms (1891*b*, 1: 240-51). But most material not taken from cited sources was clearly supplied by Risley’s correspondents, even though they were not individually named in glossary entries.

The North-Western Provinces and Oudh (United Provinces of Agra and Oudh from 1902 and today Uttar Pradesh, plus Uttarakhand) had a population of 47 million in 1891. Unlike Risley, Crooke was not released from normal duty to undertake his survey and write his handbook. Crooke collected ethnographic material throughout his career and had worked in five different districts before going to Mirzapur in 1890. There he wrote a short ethnographic glossary based on published sources (Crooke 1890), which presumably helped him with his handbook. From 1891 to 1896, Crooke edited the periodical *North Indian Notes and Queries*, which published ethnographic and folkloric information, frequently written by Indians, especially his closest

collaborator, Ram Gharib Chaube (Naithani 2006: 44-8), but it was not a major source for the handbook.

Crooke's handbook cited Risley's frequently. Many of its glossary entries relied on official reports and other publications, but many included new data, some collected by Crooke, mainly in Mirzapur, and a lot more sent in by 'independent enquirers, both official and non-official, whose services were made available by the District Officers' (1896, 1: v). Crooke did not list these people, but cited their notes as his sources throughout the text. The majority of notes were sent by Indians, of whom fifty-one, mostly officials, were named and a further eighteen, mostly deputy schools inspectors, were anonymous; the remainder came from seventeen British officials. The authorship of some notes sent 'via' officials is unclear, but in total at least eighty-six 'independent enquirers' gave information to Crooke.

The ethnographic glossaries

In both Risley's and Crooke's handbooks, some minor glossary entries just summarized a few bare facts. Major entries, on both castes and tribes, typically covered a range of topics in more or less detail, including traditions of origin, physical characteristics, internal structure and subdivisions, marriage customs, religion, occupation, social status, and population figures by district. Apart from the first two topics, which led to some evolutionary and ethnological conjecturing, the material was predominantly contemporary ethnography. Crooke's handbook included about thirty photographs of 'typical' people from different groups. To illustrate the handbooks' ethnographic content, I summarize the entries on Kayasthas and Chamars, which were both populous castes found in Bengal and the North-Western Provinces.

]hb[*Kayasthas*

Risley (1891*b*, 1: 438-53) distinguished Kayasthas in Bengal proper from Kayasths in Bihar, who were both described as ‘writer-castes’, but I retain the spelling ‘Kayastha’ throughout. Bengali Kayasthas formed the larger and more influential group, with more complex traditions of origin, but Risley also argued that both they and Bihari Kayasthas probably developed originally as ‘functional’ or occupational groups within the ‘Aryan community’. Bengali Kayasthas were divided into four endogamous subcastes, each subdivided into three hypergamous groups comprising a set of exogamous *kuls* or clans; the system was made still more intricate by the superior *kulin* status of some clans. Risley described the complicated subcaste and marriage systems in considerable detail, though not always sufficiently clearly (cf. Inden 1976: ch. 1). Among Bihari Kayasthas, he explained, there were twelve subcastes, also with exogamous, ranked subsections governed by rules and regulations, for example about sharing food. Risley highlighted the important point that ‘purely social questions’, including rank, among Kayasthas (and other castes) were often decided in the past by ‘the ruling power’, whether Hindu or Muslim, not by caste members themselves. He described how Bihari Kayasthas arranged and celebrated marriages. He gave some information about both Kayastha groups’ religious customs. Risley finished the entry on Bihari Kayasthas by discussing occupation, noting that clerical work was the norm, although some Kayasthas had held high office in the pre-colonial kingdoms and some were now substantial landowners. ‘Popular opinion’ ranked Kayasthas just below Babhans (landowning Brahmans) and Rajputs. Comparable data were not provided for Bengali Kayasthas,

who – alongside Brahmans and Baidyas – made up most of Bengal’s educated, urban, middle-class *bhadralok*. This was probably an oversight, because the Baidya entry, which referred readers to the Kayastha entry, mentioned ranking disputes between the two castes. According to Risley, Baidyas had the better claim to precedence, but the adaptive Kayasthas were more extensively employed in the government service (1891*b*, 1: 49-50).

Crooke (1896, 3: 184-213) began his entry on the Kayasthas, the ‘well-known writer class of Hindustan’, by referring to attempts to raise their status, which made them very sensitive about their ancestral purity, but he thought it pointless ‘to revive a troublesome controversy’. As we shall see below, Crooke was more sceptical about data on social precedence than Risley. Like Risley, Crooke described the Kayasthas’ traditions of origin. Crooke’s list of their twelve subcastes, plus an extra thirteenth, was similar but not identical to Risley’s for Bihari Kayasthas, though he did not explain why; he examined the origin traditions of each subcaste in more detail than Risley. Crooke outlined the Kayasthas’ marriage system and lengthily described a wedding – including the women’s songs, given in Hindi and English – quoting an account written by a Kayastha for Nesfield. Some information on Kayastha religion was provided. In his final paragraph on ‘social status and occupation’, Crooke tersely remarked that despite jealousy from ‘their less astute neighbours’, the caste’s ‘social position’ was high. Its principal occupation was ‘literary’ and many ‘valuable’ government officials, lawyers, and educationalists were Kayasthas, whose ‘higher members’ were held in high repute.

]hb[*Chamars*

The Chamars, whose traditional occupation is leather-working, were and are a vast Dalit group spread across northern India, whose members often disagree about the right name for their community (Deliège 1999: 15).

Risley's entry on the Chamars (1891*b*, 1: 175-82) began with their traditions of origin and racial ancestry. He mentioned without further comment their claim to descent from Ravidas or Raidas, a Chamar disciple of the fifteenth-century Vaishnava saint Ramananda; according to another legend, they were descended from a Brahman whose brothers tricked him into removing a carcass, so that he was polluted and lost caste. Risley thought Chamars might have been partly descended from 'a degraded section of a higher race', but, since they pursued such a 'filthy and menial occupation', they must have been mainly recruited from non-Aryans. Risley, like Crooke, did not call Chamars 'untouchables', a term originating in the early twentieth century (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 5). The Bengal handbook's index listed the Chamars' endogamous subcastes and exogamous sections (1891*b*, 2: App. 1, 33), though with few details. But Risley noted the resemblances between Chamars and Doms, a similarly low-status caste, and detailed the Doms' internal structure, itemizing variations among different subcastes, so that, for example, the Magahiya Doms he studied in Bihar had very elaborate exogamic rules, whereas in Bengal they were simple (Risley 1891*b*, 1: 241-3). Risley outlined Chamar marriage customs. Partly relying on Wise's material, he discussed the Bengali Chamars' religion, noting their strong dislike of Brahmans and Hindu ritual, though they observed many supposedly Hindu rituals that were probably 'survivals' of pre-Aryan worship. He described the Bihari Chamars as 'more orthodox', however, for some had 'advanced so far' that they employed Brahmans to worship 'regular Hindu gods'. Under the heading 'social status', Risley stated that Chamars were 'condemned' to the very

bottom of Hindu society. Yet they could be ‘proud and punctilious’, so that they refused to eat anything cooked by Bengali Brahmans, though they would accept food from north Indian Brahmans, who were presumably seen as higher status. Chamars followed various occupations besides leather-working, and Chamar women often acted as midwives in Hindu households.

Crooke’s discussion (1896, 2: 169-94) closely followed Risley’s. He thought the Chamar group was probably occupational in origin, but ‘largely recruited from non-Aryan elements’. He also summarized two Chamar legends explaining their low status as a result of misplaced good intentions. Crooke examined Chamar subdivisions more closely than Risley; he listed the principal subdivisions among the 1,156 listed in census returns, and described the sixteen main endogamous subcastes. The rules of exogamy apparently varied between different subcastes. Chamars, Crooke explained, had effective tribal councils or *panchayats*, which dealt with disputes, including frequent ones connected with *jajmani*. Each Chamar family provided services for a set of higher-caste, patron families, the *jajmans*, receiving payment in cash or kind; Chamars guarded their *jajmani* rights very jealously, and if other caste members infringed them, the case was taken to a council, which could levy fines or even prohibit marriages with an offending family. Crooke amply described marriage customs and rituals, and birth and death rituals more briefly. He looked at Chamar religion, including the Srinarayani Vaishnava movement said to have been founded by Ravidas. Finally, Crooke discussed the caste’s very low status and impurity owing to the Chamars’ consumption of beef, pork, and fowls, and other castes’ left-over food, as well as to the pollution attaching to the midwives. The Chamar quarter of a village, he said, was typified by ‘all kinds of abominable filth, where a clean living Hindu seldom, unless of urgent necessity, cares to intrude’. But

Crooke, like Risley, called Chamars 'proud and punctilious'. He also mentioned that they pursued other occupations beside leather-working and some had become rich and influential, especially in the urban leather trade, so that they were trying to raise their status, for example by secluding their womenfolk.

Caste structure, marriage, and social change

In major glossary entries, Risley and Crooke normally gave most attention to the internal structure of castes and tribes, and to marriage, as they did for Kayasthas and Chamars. In the late nineteenth century, the terms 'caste', 'tribe', and 'race' were used quite flexibly. 'Race' was sometimes a mere synonym for the other terms or for 'people', and sometimes it had a specifically ethnological denotation, such as Aryan or Dravidian. Risley, but especially Crooke, commonly described the same group as both a 'caste' and a 'tribe', which partly reflected the fact that castes were less sharply distinguished from hill or forest tribes denoted as 'primitive' than they would be later, owing to their progressively reified classification in the censuses and their formal definition during the twentieth century in policies to benefit Untouchables or Dalits, and Adivasis (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, respectively).

Notwithstanding their own definitional fuzziness, one of Risley's and Crooke's aims was to improve the classification of social groups, especially for census purposes, which had been Plowden's primary goal. Counting and classifying were a Victorian intellectual preoccupation, in India as elsewhere (Metcalf 1995: 113), and all official anthropologists assumed that understanding the Indian social system required accurate counting and classifying of castes and subcastes, and tribes and tribal segments. Caste classification in particular was not a neutral matter,

because how castes were classified – by occupation or status – underpinned the rival occupational and racial theories. Both handbooks accordingly gave groups and their subdivisions considerable attention, although the range of variation – from large, highly segmented castes to small, unitary ones – was implied rather than stated explicitly. The Kayastha entries contained more detail about internal structure and marriage systems than the Chamar ones, probably because Risley and Crooke had fuller data from their predominantly high-caste informants and assistants; perhaps predictably, Risley’s description for Brahmans, especially Bengali Brahmans, was exceptionally long and detailed (1891*b*, 1: 144-67).

In his introduction, Risley proclaimed that ‘caste is mainly a matter of marriage’ (1891*b*, 1: xlii), so that he particularly detailed marriage practices, rules of endogamy and exogamy, and the arrangement of endogamous subcastes and exogamous kinship units structuring castes internally. Crooke followed suit. The emphasis on marriage in the glossaries also indirectly reflected Risley’s and Crooke’s interest in the origins of exogamy, which they discussed in their theoretical introductions. Totemism and exogamy intrigued Victorian evolutionist anthropologists (Stocking 1995: 174-8), and Risley and Crooke wanted to contribute to their debates. Thus Risley concluded from his data that ‘totemistic’ septs (tribal subdivisions) were only one of five types of exogamous groups existing in Bengal, and generally in India, and that the ‘religious aspects of totemism’ were ‘not very prominent’ (1891*b*, 1: lx-lxi, lxix-lxx; see also Risley 1886). Crooke chose to stress that conjectures about communal marriage or other archaic systems were unsupported by his ethnographic data, though they might uphold W. Robertson Smith’s postulate of early ‘matriarchy’ (Crooke 1896, 1: ccvi-ccvii).

The priority accorded to marriage over the rest of the kinship domain in the glossaries is striking, for the handbooks contained very little material on descent and inheritance, or family and household. Besides Circular C on exogamy, Risley's short questionnaire had ten questions on marriage and its twenty-seven questions – with only one on inheritance – corresponded fairly closely to the contents of glossary entries. But his long questionnaire, which had about sixty questions on aspects of marriage, also had about seventy on adoption and inheritance. These topics had been important for Ibbetson in the Punjab, where 'customary law' was in principle authoritative (Metcalf 1995: 128-9), and they indirectly testified to Maine's influence on Punjabi official thinking. Maine was still honoured in name by Risley (1891c: 236), but he and Crooke were tellingly silent about his writing on, for instance, the patriarchal joint family in India or the caste system (Maine 1876: 13-19, 56-8, 125-8, 175-7).

Another noteworthy feature of the ethnographic glossaries is that they often included some information about modern change: for example, as in the Chamar entries, about 'Hinduisation' ('Sanskritization' in today's parlance) in the religious domain, the impact of new economic and occupational developments, or social mobility. Risley and Crooke knew that Indian society had always been changing, both before and during British rule, and in particular that the 'system of castes ... so far from being in a stable condition ... is in a state of perpetual flux', as Crooke typically put it in his Kayastha entry (1896, 3: 194). Official anthropologists, like other writers of the kind criticized as 'orientalists' by Edward Said (1978), have been widely accused of portraying India as timeless, so that, for them, caste was 'the unitary, unchanging subject of India's history' (Inden 1990: 74), and its people 'were defined by unchanging racial and cultural identities', of which the most important was

caste (Metcalf 1995: 117). Risley and Crooke were certainly not always consistent and actually tended to exaggerate the modern decline of 'traditional' caste, but their handbooks demonstrate that they always knew that caste and Indian society were continually changing.

Social precedence among castes

Risley's correspondents' replies to his Circular D about the social precedence of castes, the only ones to have survived, provide some of our best evidence about how he gathered his data.

Risley's first publications were two volumes in W.W. Hunter's gazetteer of Bengal, which followed the editor's prescribed format. In the section on castes for each district, C.F. Magrath's mainly occupational classification (as used for Bihar in the 1872 Bengal census [Beverley 1873: 155-79]) was replaced by listings arranging them 'as far as possible in order of precedence', or 'rank in local social esteem', to cite two of several similar phrases (Risley 1877*a*: 60, 75, 300; 1877*b*: 63, 163). But no evidence for these rankings was provided in the gazetteer's volumes. Risley, I believe, wanted sound data on social precedence both to correct this deficiency and to demonstrate that a caste's status and its racial composition, as measured anthropometrically, were correlated.

To accompany his circular, Risley prepared four lists of major castes 'arranged in order of social precedence, as stated by different authorities whom I have consulted': two (A and B), both by Bihari Brahmans, for Bihar; one (C), by a 'highly educated Kayastha', for eastern Bengal; and one (D), by a Brahman pandit in Howrah (Calcutta), for central Bengal. Risley asked his correspondents to correct the lists, 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. He received about sixty replies; many were just his amended lists, but others contained extra information and opinions. In the manuscript collection of replies, Circular D was relabelled 'No. 1', dated 24 July 1886.⁵

As illustrations, I select three replies from correspondents who were specially thanked for valuable assistance and advice (cf. Dirks 2001: 215-17 on the same manuscript). Bipin Bihari Mukherji, a Brahman junior officer in Murshidabad district, returned list D, which arranged the castes into twenty-one classes, from Brahmans at the top to the scavenger Hari caste at the bottom. Mukherji added four Brahman priestly subcastes to the list, and noted that Brahmans accepted water from Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Baidyas, and Kayasthas. In the list's lower half, he raised the ranking of two castes, inserted five other small castes between classes, and added five castes at the bottom, including the large Dom caste, whose omission from list D was peculiar. In his covering letter, Mukerji claimed that all castes below the sixth class – comprising the Navasakha, the so-called 'nine castes' of artisans – actually had no social status, by which he presumably meant they were all degraded, though they could still be ranked by profession.⁶

Sheo Nandan Lal Roy, a deputy magistrate and collector in Patna, and probably a Bengali Kayastha, did not return lists A and B, but instead sent a new list of castes in Bihar 'in order of social precedence which I think would be objected to by very few'. Roy organized his list into six divisions: Brahman, Chetri (Kshatriya), Vysa (Vaishya), Sudra, Maha-sudra (apparently a euphemism for 'unclean' Sudra), and Chandal (Untouchable). List B and Roy's new list were almost identical at the top, but differed significantly in how the middle and low castes were arranged.⁷

Rakhal Das Haldar, a Bengali Brahman who was the Chota Nagpur estate manager in Ranchi, returned lists A and B with corrections, but also conscientiously wrote out his own complete list of castes divided into twelve classes, itemizing their subdivisions. He called his list ‘fairly correct, but not thoroughly complete’, and said he had striven to organize castes by social precedence, though it was ‘a matter of extreme difficulty’.⁸

A few correspondents quoted Hindu texts extensively, such as Tara Prasad Chatterjee, a Brahman deputy magistrate in Burdwan, who thought it was ‘good to begin at the beginning’ with the Brahma Vaivarta Purana.⁹ Dinanath Dar, a government pleader (advocate) in Dacca, affirmed the veracity of the Shastras (Hindu law books) and insisted that Subarnabaniks – ‘the caste to which I have the honour to belong’ – were the sole Vaishyas in Bengal and hence ranked just below Brahmans and Kshatriyas, not in the lowly classes of lists C and D. List C (a Kayastha’s) was absurd, said Dar, particularly because it placed Kayasthas – who had degraded, mixed-caste origins – second only to Brahmans.¹⁰

In his progress report, Riskey said he intended to publish comparative ‘tables of precedence’ for different regions of Bengal.¹¹ Yet these tables did not appear. Some rough notes in the manuscript collection may be Riskey’s attempts to work them out, but in the end his handbook just provided information on rank for each major caste (or tribe) in its own, separate glossary entry, normally under the heading ‘social status’.¹²

We do not know what instructions Crooke gave his Indian assistants, but he surely did not send out circulars about social precedence. He reproduced without comment the 1891 census’s table of castes in the North-Western Provinces arranged by occupation, not rank (1896, 1: cxlvii-clix). Crooke said he had tried to avoid

topics such as disputed claims to higher status ‘likely only to cause pain’ to some informants (1896, 1: vii), and throughout his glossary he periodically queried the value of information on caste rank and included it inconsistently. Crooke did not explicitly reject Risley’s ideas about social precedence in his handbook, but when he revised *The people of India*, he was openly sceptical and deleted the first edition’s table of castes by ranked ‘social grouping’ (Risley 1915 [1908]: 114, fn.). The contrast between Risley’s and Crooke’s views, which is obvious in their writings, was almost certainly shaped by their different official experiences and Indian interlocutors. Before starting his ethnographic survey, Risley had spent six years as a rural district officer – mostly in tribal areas – and three years in the Bengal and Indian secretariats (central administrative offices), plus about one year working on Hunter’s gazetteer. Crooke began his survey after some twenty years as a rural district officer among people from many different communities. In the secretariats in Calcutta and in Bengal district offices, the Indian officials and clerks were almost all educated Brahmans, Baidyas, and Kayasthas belonging to the *bhadralok*. A lot of Bengalis worked in the North-Western Provinces government offices as well, but Risley must have spent far more time with the *bhadralok* than Crooke, and far less among caste Hindu villagers.

Caste always varied regionally, but during the colonial period it tended to become more rigid, hierarchical, and Brahmanical in some respects, while also being weakened in others. Thus, for instance, the increasingly ‘orthodox’ beliefs and practices relating to caste among the late nineteenth-century *bhadralok* differed considerably from those among north Indian peasants. Dirks arguably exaggerates ‘Risley’s reliance on a Brahmanical sociology of knowledge’ (2001: 218), but his inquiry into social precedence, which relied heavily on the four tables he circulated

and the replies he received, plainly reflected the Brahmanical, textual outlook on caste prevalent in the *bhadralok* among Brahmans, Baidyas, Kayasthas, and an occasional Subarnabanik, who generally regarded themselves as orthodox Hindus. Among north Indian villagers in the 1890s – even those belonging to high castes, such as Brahmans or Rajputs – such self-proclaimed orthodoxy was much less common. The empirical evidence is not clear-cut, partly because much of it actually comes from colonial anthropology, but Crooke's more sceptical, inconsistent treatment of social precedence probably mirrored notions of caste that he and even his educated, high-caste assistants understood as normal in the North-Western Provinces.

For Risley, Circular D turned out to be a kind of pilot study for the inquiry he would oversee as the 1901 census commissioner, when he instructed superintendents to work out the ranking of castes in their own provinces. Gait accomplished this in Bengal and R.A. Burn in the North-Western Provinces. Gait's and Burn's ranking systems differed significantly, however, and both superintendents reported that the task was difficult and committees of 'native gentlemen' consulted about caste rank often disagreed (Burn 1902: 216-33; Gait 1902: 368-73). Risley completed the 1901 census report's chapter on caste, tribe, and race before moving to the home department. In that chapter and *The people of India*, which was based on it, Risley claimed the census data on social precedence added greatly to knowledge about caste, which was true, but not in the way he supposed, because the data (like those he gathered in 1886) really showed that caste rank was endlessly disputed by Hindus themselves and could never be objectively determined for 'tables of precedence' (Risley 1915 [1908]: 111-15; see also Fuller 2016a: 233-6). After 1901, mainly to avoid endless petitions and complaints from aggrieved Hindus, no further scrutiny of

caste rank at the censuses was ever attempted. In the end, Crooke's scepticism prevailed.

Early criticism of the handbooks

The tribes and castes handbooks were being criticized before the series was completed. Risley himself admitted that the ethnographic surveys on which they relied were 'superficial and inadequate', and 'fell far short of the high standard of research' that Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen achieved among Aboriginal Australians (1899) or W.H.R. Rivers among the south Indian Todas (1906). But he defended the surveys on the grounds that they were indeed surveys, and hoped to have opened the way to 'more exhaustive forms of research' (Risley 1911: 19). Crooke also criticized the handbooks as superficial and called for ethnographies of particular groups (1921: 4). Crooke was writing in *Man in India*, the journal founded by Sarat Chandra Roy, the pioneering Indian anthropologist, who made similar criticisms, but thought the handbooks could be useful starting-points for detailed studies (Roy 1921: 20, 43); Roy himself wrote several monographs on tribes in Chota Nagpur (mostly in Jharkhand today). Gait, following his 1911 census, called for information on 'the working and ramifications of the caste system and the dynamics of caste' (1914: 630). The limitations imposed by separate glossary entries may have been in Gait's mind, and E.A.H. Blunt, the 1911 census superintendent for the United Provinces, later stated plainly that Crooke's handbook never provided 'a full and connected account of caste as a system' (1931: v-vi). Crooke did outline the system elsewhere (1897: 204-20), but Blunt was more thorough in his proto-functionalist analysis of the caste system in his 1931 monograph (Fuller 2016b: 474-5). For modern anthropologists,

too, one of the handbooks' most obvious and significant flaws is that their format precludes holistic analysis of local or regional caste systems studied through fieldwork.

Notwithstanding the criticisms, some defects in Risley's and Crooke's handbooks were almost unavoidable, because they were very long and written quickly. Many glossary entries also described huge, dispersed groups – for example, nearly two million Kayasthas lived in Bengal and the North-Western Provinces – on which ethnographic evidence could obviously be collected only through surveys like those pioneered by Risley and Crooke. As Pels and Salemink (1999: 34-9) explain, ethnographic surveys were seen as valuable by Victorian anthropologists until Rivers, and then Malinowski, persuasively argued that intensive, solo fieldwork was methodologically superior. Rivers also asserted that most survey work, which was often done by untrained government officials, provoking suspicion among 'natives', was 'incomplete and misleading' (1913: 7-9). But most anthropologists at the time were untrained and, as Rivers surely knew, colonized subjects were wary of all white Europeans, not just officials. His polemic, moreover, ignored the expertise acquired over many years in India by men such as Risley, Crooke, or Edgar Thurston, who compiled the Madras tribes and castes handbook, and helped Rivers when he spent just five months among the Todas.

The role of Indians and elite bias

Colonial anthropologists have been criticized for their misuse of 'native' informants and assistants, whose contributions were not acknowledged. Risley and Crooke, though, printed the names of their Indian correspondents and assistants (unless only

official titles were mentioned), and thanked them for their help, individually or collectively, much as researchers do today. Other official anthropologists and census officers did the same.

The question of who produced colonial knowledge is more complicated, however. Wagoner (2003: 783-6), considering the Indian case, usefully summarizes two opposing positions on the issue. The first, 'postcolonialist' position, to oversimplify, is that colonial knowledge was actively created by the colonizers and shaped by European thought, so that Indians supplying facts contributed only passively. The second position, a revisionist critique of the first, is that Indians had an active role, so that colonial knowledge was the fruit of collaboration and therefore shaped by both European and indigenous thought. Wagoner examines the development of epigraphy in early nineteenth-century Madras to show that it exemplified collaborative knowledge. Broadly taking the postcolonialist position, Cohn (1996), Dirks (2001), Inden (1990), Metcalf (1995), and others have argued that British official anthropologists heavily relied on ethnographic information from Indians, but organized it through their own reifying classifications and developed their theories – about the origins of caste, for example – within a European, evolutionist paradigm.

When we look at the official anthropologists' descriptive ethnography, instead of their theories, an intermediate position fits better than either the postcolonialist or revisionist ones. Admittedly, we cannot determine who contributed what to most glossary entries without all the material sent in by those who helped Risley and Crooke. But Risley's inquiry into social precedence is instructive. Four Indians prepared the lists of castes Risley sent with his circular, and the majority of responses came from Indians. Some people just returned the amended lists, but others wrote to

explain and justify their own diverse opinions, which did not actually help Risley to work out tables of precedence and may have limited the data on caste rank he could usefully include. Yet most material that was included – unless other sources, such as Wise (1883), were used – clearly depended on what Risley's Indian correspondents told him and, in that respect, they were active producers of knowledge about caste ranking. On the other hand, their conception of castes as discrete units that could be rightfully ranked epitomized the Brahmanical outlook that emerged, as mentioned above, among the late nineteenth-century *bhadralok* in Bengal. Risley and his high-caste correspondents, in other words, shared a particular view of caste encapsulated in his social precedence lists. The colonial knowledge about caste in his handbook was collaborative, but unlike Wagoner's example of epigraphers, Risley's Indian interlocutors supplied content that confirmed, rather than modified, an already shared understanding.

Whether the same conclusion holds for Crooke and his Indian assistants is hard to tell. Their information probably depicted a less rigidly hierarchical caste system anyway, but even if it did not, Crooke might have discounted it and relied on his own knowledge of rural caste, which left him unconvinced by Risley's ideas about ranking. For other topics besides caste ranking, it is also unclear how much glossary entries depended on collaborative work.

Risley, of course, was an ICS officer with official authority and prestige, as Anderson (1912: 3) emphasized, and so was Crooke. Many of their Indian correspondents and assistants would have acted cautiously, and some may always have been reluctant volunteers. Some may have supported the nationalist movement, too, as growing numbers of educated, middle-class Indians did by the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in Bengal. Risley and Crooke undoubtedly knew that

their own status could be unhelpful, especially when collecting information from ordinary, uneducated people. Thus Crooke, after retiring to England, commented that it was best ‘to chat quietly with people in their own villages, without the company of native officials’, especially on occasions when ‘the gulf ... between the “Sahib” and the native is temporarily bridged over’ (Crooke 1902: 303). But whether it was ever really bridged is debatable. Crooke and Ram Gharib Chaube collaborated closely, but in general Indians from all social strata probably hesitated to answer questions from British officials fully or frankly, since all their exchanges ‘were enmeshed in the imbalances of power’ (Gottschalk 2013: 237).

In any case, though, two biases in the handbooks are plain. The first is gender bias: men wrote them with information from men, so that women’s knowledge and opinions are entirely absent, with occasional, oblique exceptions, such as the Kayastha wedding songs included by Crooke (1896, 3: 197-208). The second is caste bias, which is present in both handbooks, despite Crooke’s greater scepticism about ranking. Their assistants’ high-caste background may have ensured that glossary entries on high castes were more accurate than those on low castes, because their own members supplied most of the information. Thus for his Kayastha entry, Crooke used notes from two Kayasthas and a Brahman, and two Kayastha texts; for his Chamar entry, he relied on his own inquiries, a report from a district officer, probably a Brahman, and other notes from one Brahman and several unnamed officials. But accuracy apart, entries on high and low castes sometimes differed starkly in the language used. For instance, as we have seen, Crooke described the Kayasthas’ ‘social position’ as high and referred to the generally high repute of the caste’s ‘higher members’, though he mentioned duplicitous village accountants held in ‘evil repute’ (1896, 3: 212-13). The Chamar, in contrast, was ‘considered impure’ because he ate

beef, pork, and fowls, ‘all abomination to the orthodox Hindu’, and the Chamar village quarter was a site of ‘abominable filth’ (Crooke 1896, 2: 189-90). I should stress that glossary entries, even for low castes like the Chamars, were mostly not derogatory. Even so, the highly prejudicial remarks about subaltern groups patently reflected an elitist bias that combined Indian educated, high-caste attitudes with Crooke’s own Victorian class prejudice against the unlettered poor, coupled with his sense of superiority as a member of the imperial ruling class. Risley was no different and Anderson was simply wrong to say he was ‘punctiliously impartial yet sympathetic’ (1912: 4) in his ethnographic studies.

Elitist bias was visible, too, in what Risley and Crooke failed to say about some topics. Both authors, for instance, referred to legends attributing the Chamars’ inferiority to trickery or unfairness, but said nothing about the divergence they revealed between Chamar and high-caste perceptions of their status (Deliège 1999: 84), and they largely overlooked Vaishnava Hinduism’s significance for Chamar identity. Crooke reported that some Chamars were prospering and aspiring to higher status, but when describing the Srinarayani religious movement, he merely implied without explanation that it served as a vehicle for upward social mobility, as it did in the twentieth century (Cohn 1969 [1955]: 58-60). Risley commented that Chamars disliked Brahmans and Hindu ritual, and both he and Crooke called them ‘proud and punctilious’, so that they did report evidence that Chamars refused to accept their degraded status long before the community began to assert itself politically. But neither Risley nor, more surprisingly, Crooke ever developed this vital point about divergent attitudes to caste inequality, and they consistently wrote less about how Chamars or other low castes saw their own place in society, compared with Kayasthas or other high castes. All in all, therefore, both handbooks’ perspective was slanted

towards those who could speak for themselves to men in authority and against members of subaltern communities – and, of course, women – who could not.

Conclusion

Risley's and Crooke's tribes and castes handbooks, despite their flaws and biases, were the most detailed and comprehensive ethnographic studies of people living in India published in the Victorian age. Arguably, too, they were the best ethnographic accounts produced in the British Empire until 1899, when Spencer and Gillen's monograph appeared. Furthermore, because their authors had extensive experience among the Indians described, the handbooks differed radically from books written at home by 'distinguished ethnologists' such as Herbert Spencer and John Lubbock, who, Risley complained, were unacquainted 'with even a single tribe of savage men' (1891c: 238).

Yet scholars in Britain took little interest in Indian official anthropology, so that historians of British anthropology have largely overlooked it as well. Kuklick (1991: 196-9) discusses Risley briefly, describing him misleadingly as an 'amateur' anthropologist 'disdaining theory', and Kuper (2015: 68) and Stocking (1995: 380) mention him still more tersely; none of them refers to Crooke. Like Northcote Thomas in Africa (Basu 2016), official anthropologists in India have fallen victim to the 'whiggish' bias that Pels and Saleminck (1999: 1-2, 5, 7, 35) identify among British anthropology's historians, who have concentrated on theories and overlooked ethnographic practices, largely excluded non-academic practitioners from the discipline's 'real' history, and assumed that its crucial intellectual events invariably took place in the metropolitan centres.

Before the First World War, however, British anthropology was not dominated by professional academics. Its leading figures, such as Tylor, did not scorn Risley and Crooke as amateurish civil servants and lowly fact-gatherers in the colonies. Rather, they praised their expertise and scholarship, as well as Risley's effectiveness in promoting research in India, and recognized their anthropological credentials, which were ratified when Risley became the RAI's president and Crooke the British Association anthropology section's president (Haddon 1903: 19; Read 1901: 11-13; Ridgeway 1910: 22; Tylor 1892: 401). Nevertheless, most of the work done by Risley, Crooke, and their colleagues in India mattered little to metropolitan anthropologists, because it was primarily about the majority population, who were mostly villagers, mostly Hindus or Muslims, and mostly divided, more or less rigidly, into castes. By the 1860s, the study of 'primitive' peoples, and the evolution from 'savage' to 'civilized' society, had emerged as anthropology's true subject matter (Kuper 2005: 56-8; Stocking 1987: 126-8, 167-9, 172-9, 183-4; Trautmann 1987: 179-86, 194-204). The majority of Indians were therefore too evolutionarily 'advanced' to be anthropologically significant, unless they retained traces of customs such as totemism, so that only the small minority belonging to the supposedly primitive, 'animist', hill and forest tribes intrigued anthropologists in Britain. The majority population and the caste system did not become the main objects of study until after Indian Independence, when a new, international generation of anthropologists trained in fieldwork and functionalism began to do research.

During the colonial era, except for other officials and Indian researchers, such as Roy, the most important scholars to take a real interest in official anthropology were continental Europeans. In the 1890s, Émile Senart, a French Indologist, used the literature to write an original and coherent description of the pan-Indian caste system

(1930 [1896]), which Risley praised highly. Frequently citing the 1901 census reports (which Risley sent him), Risley's and Crooke's handbooks, and other official anthropology, Celestin Bouglé, a sociologist and Durkheim's colleague, wrote an influential essay on the caste system (1971 [1908]). Max Weber also used the literature quite extensively to examine the 'Hindu social system' (1967 [1917]: 3-133). All three writers can be justly criticized as orientalist and evolutionists of a kind. But they were the first to try to understand caste as a pan-Indian system, so that they saw beyond the classificatory empiricism of official anthropology, while also seizing on the mass of intelligible, contemporary evidence it contained. Weber's judgement that the writings of Risley and other officials 'belong to the best general sociological literature available' (1967 [1917]: 344) can serve as the last word in my historical reassessment of Risley's and Crooke's ethnographic work.

NOTES

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¹ H.H. Risley's note on 'ethnographic enquiries in Bengal', 22 December 1886, in Government of India, Home (Public) Department Proceedings, May 1887, pp. 741-867 (esp. 744, 859-61), IOR/P/2952, in Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library (APAC, BL).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 789-90, 791, 813-28.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 835-50. James Urry kindly informed me about Müller's letter.

⁴ H.H. Risley, 'Report on survey and demarcation of ghatwali lands in Manbhoom', Government of Bengal, Judicial (Police) Department Proceedings, March 1884, pp. 67-131, IOR/P/2247, in APAC, BL.

⁵ Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes (1886-7). Risley Papers, Mss Eur E101, in APAC, BL.

⁶ Ibid., ff. 85-8.

⁷ Ibid., ff. 147-9.

⁸ Ibid., ff. 223-37.

⁹ Ibid., ff. 1-10.

¹⁰ Ibid., ff. 97-100, 112-16.

¹¹ Risley's note, p. 746.

¹² Ethnographical Papers, ff. 247-9.

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