THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Scripts, Scholars, and the State: The Role of Empire, Scholarship, and the Census in Shaping Religious Identity in Colonial India

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the emergence of modern Hindu identity during the British colonial period in India through the lens of interconnected intellectual, administrative, and ideological networks. Contrary to deterministic accounts that attribute the creation of Hinduism solely to British colonialism, this study argues that Hindu identity was co-constituted by a diverse array of actors and institutions.

These included British Orientalist scholars such as William Jones and Max Müller, colonial bureaucrats who designed and implemented the census and legal reforms, and Indian reformists and nationalists who internalized and reframed these colonial categories.

Drawing on a network analysis approach, the study traces the interplay between textual translation, legal codification, census enumeration, and nationalist mobilization. Through close examination of primary sources—including the 1871, 1881, and 1891 Indian census reports—and a wide array of secondary scholarship, this thesis demonstrates that modern Hindu identity was neither wholly imposed from above nor spontaneously arising from within. Rather, it was a contingent, negotiated outcome of overlapping discursive and institutional forces.

In emphasizing the relational and contested nature of identity formation, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how religion, statecraft, and knowledge production interacted in colonial South Asia.

Chapter 1: **Research Problem and Central Argument**

The emergence of a unified, textually anchored, and politically salient Hindu identity in modern South Asia has been the subject of sustained academic inquiry. Earlier scholarship—particularly in the postcolonial tradition—has advanced the argument that Hinduism, as we understand it today, was largely an invention of British colonialism. Scholars like Ronald Inden (1990), Nicholas Dirks (2001), and others have pointed to the ways in which colonial representations and classifications reshaped Indian religious and social life. This thesis builds on that scholarship but moves beyond it by proposing a more complex and networked account of Hindu identity formation.

Rather than attributing the consolidation of Hindu identity to a singular colonial act of invention, this thesis contends that it emerged through a dynamic and contested process involving multiple agents. These include Orientalist scholars who translated and reinterpreted Indian religious texts, census officials and legal reformers who codified social categories, and Indian reformers and nationalists who adopted and modified these frameworks. In this view, modern Hinduism is not merely a colonial construction but a product of intersecting networks of knowledge, power, and discourse that spanned both colonizer and colonized.

This project thus interrogates how religious identity was not simply discovered or rediscovered, but actively produced and standardized through bureaucratic instruments, intellectual labor, and political strategies. The central argument is that Hinduism became intelligible and politically mobilizable through a colonial infrastructure of knowledge—both textual and administrative—and the responses it elicited from Indian actors.

1.1 Colonial Epistemologies and the Reification of Hinduism

The colonial enterprise in India did not merely govern bodies and territories—it also governed through knowledge. As Edward Said (1978) argued in his seminal work Orientalism, colonial powers used scholarship not simply to understand the colonized world but to dominate it intellectually and materially. In India, this took the form of philological and ethnological projects that sought to classify and order Indian society through a European epistemic lens.

One of the earliest and most consequential interventions came from Sir William Jones, who in the late 18th century undertook the translation of key Sanskrit texts such as the Manusmriti, the Bhagavad Gita, and parts of the Mahabharata. Jones's project was not neutral; by identifying Brahmanical Sanskrit texts as the essence of Hindu tradition, he elevated one tradition among many as the canonical voice of Indian religion (Jones 1794). This laid the groundwork for a textualized, Brahmanical definition of Hinduism, which excluded vernacular, oral, and syncretic practices that had long constituted the lived religious experience of most South Asians (Inden 1990).

Following Jones, figures such as Max Müller deepened this textualization through the publication of the Sacred Books of the East series, framing Hinduism as a religious tradition that, like Christianity or Judaism, had a definable theology, scriptural base, and historical evolution. Müller's theories of Vedic monotheism degenerating into later polytheism also projected onto Indian religion a linear model of civilizational decline, consistent with colonial narratives of moral decay and the need for reform or rescue (Müller 1873; Reetz 1993).

This early Orientalist scholarship served not just as cultural interpretation, but as the intellectual scaffolding for colonial governance. Legal codes, educational curricula, and religious

classifications in census records increasingly reflected these scholarly constructions, thereby institutionalizing Orientalist assumptions in the apparatus of the colonial state.

1.2 The Role of the Colonial Census

The British colonial censuses of 1871, 1881, and 1891 represented a turning point in the state's approach to Indian society. While earlier forms of social knowledge were qualitative and ad hoc, the census represented an attempt to totalize knowledge: to count, classify, and categorize all subjects under uniform, bureaucratic definitions. Religious affiliation was one of the central categories of classification, but it posed a significant challenge. How could the colonial state define who was a "Hindu" in a context where religious boundaries were fluid, overlapping, and often meaningless to the local populations?

The answer, ultimately, was administrative fiat. In the 1871 census, all those who were not Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, or Buddhists were grouped as Hindus—regardless of whether they worshipped animist deities, participated in syncretic rituals, or even identified with the label. In subsequent censuses, this category was refined to include sub-categories of caste, sect, and region, but the foundational error—the imposition of a singular identity on a plurality of traditions—remained (Cohn 1987; Guha 2003).

By the late 19th century, "Hindu" had become not only a legal and administrative identity but a demographic and political category. This new identity was measurable, governable, and, increasingly, politicizable. The census figures were cited in political arguments, used to justify separate electorates, and invoked by emergent Hindu nationalist movements as evidence of numerical strength or weakness. In this way, colonial enumeration helped transform Hinduism from a loosely defined cultural sphere into a politicized and competitive identity, with real consequences for representation, governance, and eventually Partition.

1.3 **Historiographical Context**

The question of whether Hinduism is a colonial invention or a pre-existing tradition has sparked rich academic debate. Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism laid the groundwork for critiquing Western knowledge production about the East. Ronald Inden (1990) extended this critique to the study of India, arguing that Western scholarship imposed hierarchical and essentialist categories on Indian traditions. Following this, Nicholas Dirks (2001) emphasized how colonialism transformed caste and religion into rigid bureaucratic categories.

However, more recent scholarship has complicated these arguments by highlighting Indian agency in the process of identity formation. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee (1992) and Sudipta Kaviraj (2005) have shown how colonized subjects internalized and reinterpreted colonial categories. Similarly, scholars of religious reform and nationalism have examined how Indian thinkers appropriated Orientalist frameworks to construct their own visions of religious community.

This thesis contributes to this evolving discourse by emphasizing the **networked and co-constitutive nature** of identity formation. It does not seek to refute earlier postcolonial critiques but to build on them by tracing the institutional and intellectual infrastructures that enabled the standardization of Hinduism.

1.4 Methodology: Network Analysis of Colonial Knowledge Production

The methodological core of this thesis is grounded in **network analysis**, complemented by insights from historical sociology and postcolonial theory. This approach allows for a mapping of the relationships between key actors, texts, institutions, and practices that contributed to the formation of modern Hindu identity. It avoids linear causality and instead focuses on the mutual constitution of social forces.

The network analysis in this thesis involves tracing connections between:

- British Orientalists (e.g., William Jones, Max Müller)
- Colonial bureaucrats (e.g., census commissioners, legal codifiers)
- Indian religious reformers (e.g., Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda)
- Hindu nationalist thinkers (e.g., Savarkar, Golwalkar)

In addition to close textual readings, this thesis incorporates archival materials such as census reports (1871, 1881, 1891), administrative records, and early reformist tracts. This combination of sources enables a robust analysis of how colonial knowledge and indigenous responses coalesced to shape a new religious identity.

1.5 Chapter Outline

Following this introduction, the thesis is organized as follows:

Chapter 2 explores the intellectual foundations of Hinduism's construction by Orientalists, focusing on the role of William Jones and Max Müller. Chapter 3 analyzes the colonial census as the key apparatus for fixing religious identities into rigid, countable categories. Chapter 4 investigates how these colonial constructions were reappropriated by Hindu political movements, particularly through figures like Savarkar. Chapter 5 traces the consequences of colonial classification in the logic of Partition, revealing how the census and Orientalist logic culminated in territorial and communal division. Chapter 6 reflects on how the colonial invention of Hindu identity persists today—through law, citizenship, and majoritarian politics—and considers the epistemic afterlife of colonial knowledge.

By approaching the formation of Hindu identity as a networked and contested process, this thesis offers a more nuanced account of colonial modernity in South Asia. It demonstrates that religious identities, far from being static or self-evident, are historical constructs shaped by overlapping systems of knowledge, governance, and ideology.

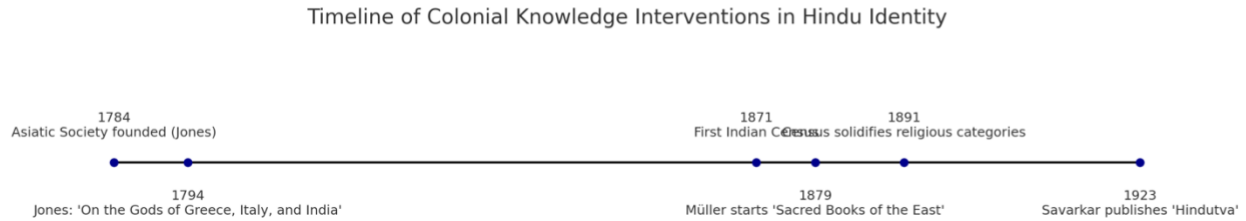

Figure 1 (Timeline of Colonial Knowledge Interventions)

Chapter 2: Orientalist Knowledge and the Invention of Hinduism

The ideological architecture of modern Hindu identity was not merely the product of indigenous spiritual continuity but of systematic colonial construction. While religious practices and philosophical schools existed in India for millennia, the idea that they collectively formed a single, bounded religion called "Hinduism" emerged only under British colonial rule. This process was facilitated by the epistemological machinery of Orientalism—a European mode of knowing and representing the non-West—and was embedded in networks of academic, legal, and administrative authority. This chapter examines how early Orientalist scholars such as Sir William Jones and Max Müller, operating through institutions like the Asiatic Society of Bengal and later the East India Company's apparatus, created a textual, Brahmanical, and hierarchical conception of "Hinduism" that would serve as the foundation for colonial classification and postcolonial identity

The colonial invention of Hinduism was neither accidental nor benign. It was part of a broader imperial project to classify, fix, and govern colonized populations by making them legible to European categories of religion, race, and law. The Orientalist production of knowledge—particularly in philology, comparative religion, and legal codification—was not merely intellectual; it became operationalized in the state's institutions, including its courts, schools, and, eventually, its censuses. By tracing how these discursive and institutional networks functioned, we can understand the process by which "Hinduism" was stabilized as an identity, and how this

imposed order displaced a precolonial landscape of pluralistic, overlapping, and often contradictory religious practices.

2.1 Hindu Before Hinduism: Plurality Without Unity

Prior to British rule, there was no singular, universally recognized category called "Hinduism" within South Asia. The term "Hindu" itself was an exonym, originally used by Persian and Arabic speakers to describe the people living east of the Indus River (Sindhu in Sanskrit). It had geographical, not theological, significance, and was used inclusively to denote anyone outside the Islamic fold—regardless of their caste, sect, or philosophical school (Chatterjee 1992; Inden 1990). Precolonial religious life in the subcontinent was defined by an intricate patchwork of local traditions, including Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism, Tantra, folk religion, and even syncretic practices shared with Islam, such as Sufi shrine worship and regional saint cults (Flood 2022; Guha 2003).

What held these diverse practices together was not theological coherence, but ritual practice, caste hierarchies, and regional authority structures. Religious authority was decentralized, and scriptural knowledge was not uniformly distributed. In fact, the majority of India's population was illiterate and engaged in oral, performative, and devotional forms of religiosity. Brahmanical Sanskrit texts were accessible only to a small elite, and even within that elite, significant doctrinal disagreements existed (Chakrabarty 2000).

The notion of a single "Hindu religion" emerged only when colonial administrators and scholars, relying on Western notions of religion as a bounded, scriptural, and monotheistic system, attempted to translate the South Asian religious landscape into European categories. This translation was not merely linguistic; it was ontological. It remade Indian religiosity into something it had never been: a system with fixed doctrines, scriptures, and boundaries.

2.2 William Jones and the Genealogy of Hindu Textualism

The first major node in the network of colonial Hinduism was Sir William Jones, a British judge and philologist stationed in Calcutta. In 1784, he founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal, with the explicit goal of understanding the culture, languages, and laws of the Indian subcontinent through European scholarly methods. Fluent in Latin, Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit, Jones began translating Sanskrit texts such as the Manusmriti, Hitopadesha, and parts of the Mahabharata, treating them as equivalent to the Bible, Roman law, or Greek philosophy in the Western canon (Jones 1794).

Jones's translations did more than make Indian texts intelligible to Europeans; they created a canon. By elevating Brahmanical Sanskrit texts as the source of Indian religious and legal wisdom, he redefined Hinduism as a textual religion, sidelining oral, regional, and popular traditions. This was a deeply political move. As Nicholas Dirks (2001) has argued, "Jones produced a Brahmanism that was usable as a colonial codification of Indian society." In effect, Jones made the Brahmin the spokesman for Indian religion, and erased the heterogeneity of Indian belief systems from the colonial view.

Moreover, Jones's quest for a classical antiquity in India mirrored Enlightenment desires in Europe. His famous essay "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India" (1794) drew direct genealogical links between Indian and European civilizations, arguing that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin had common Indo-European roots. This philological bridge lent Hinduism a kind of civilizational pedigree, making it legible and respectable to British administrators. But in doing so, it flattened the pluralism of Indian religious practices into a single scriptural heritage.

2.3 Max Müller and the Scientific Religion

A century later, the German philologist Max Müller expanded Jones's project by applying comparative philology and the emerging science of religion to Indian texts. Müller's Sacred Books of the East series (1879–1910), sponsored by Oxford University and supported by the British government, translated and edited dozens of Vedic, Upanishadic, and epic texts. Like Jones, Müller constructed Hinduism through a textual canon, but his intervention was even more far-reaching: he argued that religions could be studied scientifically through their linguistic and mythological structures (Müller 1873).

Müller's theory of Vedic degeneration—that the early Rig Vedic hymns represented a "pure" and "monotheistic" form of religion which later devolved into idol worship and polytheism—was directly inspired by Protestant critiques of Catholic ritualism (Reetz 1993). By casting Vedic religion as the rational and spiritual essence of Hinduism, Müller created a narrative of spiritual decline that would later be adopted by both colonial reformers and Hindu nationalists.

Importantly, Müller's project was not secular. He saw the study of Indian religion as part of a Christian civilizing mission, and explicitly hoped that knowledge of the Vedas would prepare Hindus for conversion to Christianity. In this way, Müller's scholarship blurred the line between academic inquiry and evangelical intent. It also contributed to a racialized theory of civilization: Müller's embrace of the Aryan hypothesis, which posited a common Indo-European ancestry for Indians and Europeans, would later be appropriated by racial theorists and Hindu nationalists alike (Jaffrelot 1993).

Müller's translations, like Jones's, became part of colonial administrative and legal knowledge. They shaped not only how Hindus were taught their own traditions in schools, but also how

colonial judges interpreted Hindu law. Thus, Müller represents another critical node in the network that produced Hinduism as a modern identity—bridging the spheres of academia, governance, and ideology.

2.4 The Networked Nature of Orientalist Authority

Rather than viewing Jones and Müller as isolated thinkers, this thesis treats them as nodes within a broader colonial knowledge network, where ideas circulated between institutions—universities, colonial courts, census bureaus, missionary societies—and gained legitimacy through mutual citation and institutional authority.

The Asiatic Society, founded by Jones, became a key interface between European scholars and colonial administrators, informing law codes and court decisions. Müller's translations were widely used in British educational policy in India, shaping the Hinduism taught in government schools. Colonial courts, lacking codified Hindu law, relied on translated texts like the Manusmriti as the authoritative source, despite their limited applicability in actual religious practice (Cohn 1996). Missionary networks used Orientalist texts to develop critiques of Hindu idolatry and superstition, thus merging scholarship with evangelism.

These institutional linkages are central to a network analysis approach: they show how Hinduism was not simply discovered, but produced, circulated, and enforced across a range of interconnected sites. As Latour (1987) would argue, the power of a concept like "Hinduism" lies not in its truth, but in its ability to travel and enroll actors across multiple domains—textual, legal, bureaucratic, and political.

2.5 Institutional Codification: From Text to Law

The discursive construction of Hinduism by Orientalist scholars was rapidly institutionalized through the machinery of the colonial state. Nowhere was this more consequential than in the legal codification of “Hindu law.” Prior to British rule, dispute resolution in South Asia was localized, fluid, and based on custom, caste councils, or religious authorities particular to each community. The British, however, insisted on uniform, textual foundations for jurisprudence—a reflection of European legal culture, which prioritized statutes and written codes over oral traditions (Cohn 1987).

When dealing with “native” personal law—matters of marriage, inheritance, and religious practice—the colonial state sought authoritative texts. Brahmanical Sanskrit treatises like the Manusmriti were selected as the basis for legal interpretation, despite their limited real-world application even among high-caste Hindus. In doing so, the British effectively elevated ancient, prescriptive texts to the level of civil code, often mediated by English-speaking Brahmin intermediaries who served as court pundits (Derrett 1961; Cohn 1996).

This process had far-reaching consequences. First, it transformed dispersed religious practices into centralized legal categories, entrenching caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms as universal Hindu customs. Second, it erased the legal plurality that had previously allowed for localized variation and syncretism. Third, and most significantly, it naturalized the idea that Hindus constituted a bounded religious community governed by a shared system of law. As Tanika Sarkar (2001) notes, the colonial Hindu legal subject was a new invention—created by administrative necessity, sustained by textual authority, and reinforced through legal precedent.

These transformations highlight the interdependence of knowledge and power in the colonial project. Orientalist scholarship generated the categories, and colonial governance operationalized them through law, education, and administration. This circular reinforcement lent the constructed category of Hinduism a self-evident quality, even as it contradicted the lived diversity of South Asian religious life.

2.6 Colonial Pedagogy and the Formation of Hindu Subjects

The reproduction of Hinduism as a singular identity required more than legal recognition; it demanded pedagogical reinforcement. Colonial education policies served as a key node in the diffusion and stabilization of the newly invented Hindu identity. The Macaulayan model of education, articulated in the infamous 1835 Minute on Indian Education, sought to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay 1835).

While English became the language of upward mobility, Sanskrit and "Hindu" religion were simultaneously curated and disseminated through vernacular curricula in provincial schools. Translated Vedic and epic texts were taught as the foundational literature of Hinduism, often stripped of their ritual, regional, or esoteric complexities. In the process, colonial education instilled a sense of Hindu identity that aligned with Orientalist constructions, reinforcing textualism, Brahmanical supremacy, and the notion of a unified, ancient religious tradition (Viswanathan 1998).

This educational apparatus had dual effects. On one hand, it alienated many Indians from their vernacular and folk religious practices, which were now viewed as "unorthodox" or "superstitious." On the other hand, it produced a new elite class of self-conscious Hindu subjects, who came to see themselves through the epistemological lens of colonial knowledge. As Gauri

Viswanathan has noted, this was “the underground of colonialism”—the subtle but profound internalization of colonial categories as normative.

2.7 The Epistemic Violence of Religious Codification

The British colonial project did not simply misrepresent Hinduism—it produced it. And in doing so, it enacted what theorists like Spivak (1988) and Chakrabarty (2000) have called epistemic violence: the act of overwriting indigenous knowledge systems with external frameworks of understanding. The very act of rendering “Hinduism” intelligible to colonial categories—of translating its fluidity into structure, its performative multiplicity into textual unity—was a form of domination.

The privileging of Brahmanical textualism not only marginalized non-Brahmin voices but also erased Dalit, Adivasi, and syncretic religious practices from the official archive. Tantric traditions, popular bhakti movements, village rituals, and Sufi-Hindu hybrids were rendered invisible or illegible, except as corruptions of a “purer” tradition. In this way, the British created a normative Hinduism that was Sanskritic, patriarchal, upper-caste, and urban—a template still visible in today’s political imagination of what constitutes authentic Hindu identity

Moreover, this epistemic violence operated through networks of mutual reinforcement. Scholars cited administrators, who cited pundits, who interpreted texts selected by scholars. This self-validating circuit made it difficult for dissenting or subaltern interpretations to enter the frame. And because these ideas were institutionalized in law and education, they gained the force of reality. As Michel Foucault (1972) reminds us, “Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.”

2.8 Hinduism as a Colonial Artifact

This chapter has argued that the construction of Hinduism as a unified, ancient, and textual religion was not the discovery of an enduring tradition, but the invention of a colonial archive. Through the works of William Jones and Max Müller—filtered through the machinery of law, education, and governance—the British transformed diverse religious practices into a bounded, governable, and intelligible religious identity. This identity, once codified, became the basis for census classification, legal differentiation, and political mobilization—topics that the next chapter will explore in greater detail.

Understanding Hinduism as a networked colonial artifact allows us to break with essentialist narratives that posit Hindu identity as natural or eternal. Instead, we see it as the product of intersecting institutions, texts, actors, and technologies—a system of power-knowledge relations that continues to shape the terrain of South Asian politics today.

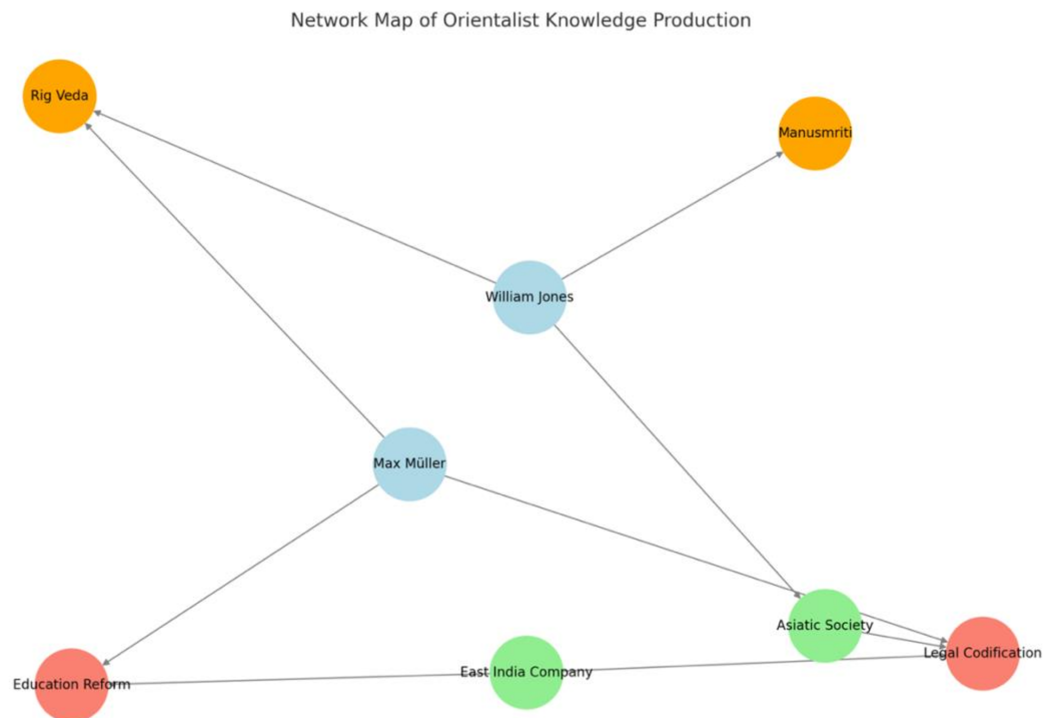

Figure 2 (Network Map of Orientalist Knowledge Production**:** A conceptual network diagram showing connections between key Orientalist figures (e.g., William Jones, Max Müller), institutions (e.g., Asiatic Society, East India Company), texts (e.g., *Manusmriti*, *Rig Veda*), and colonial policies (e.g., legal codification, educational reforms).

Chapter 3: The Census and the Statistical Reification of Hinduism

While Orientalist scholarship constructed the conceptual and textual foundations of Hinduism, it was the British colonial census that institutionalized and reified Hindu identity as a discrete, countable category. Through a process of enumeration, classification, and standardization, the British state transformed fluid, overlapping religious affiliations into bounded demographic facts. The colonial census operated not merely as a statistical exercise, but as a technology of rule—a bureaucratic apparatus that translated the epistemological assumptions of Orientalism into governable population categories.

From the first comprehensive census in 1871, followed by those in 1881 and 1891, British officials undertook the ambitious task of classifying the Indian population by religion, caste, tribe, and occupation. This process, though ostensibly neutral, was profoundly shaped by Orientalist constructions of Indian society, particularly the view that India was fundamentally divided into discrete, religiously defined communities. The census thus became a site of epistemic violence, where precolonial identities were not only surveyed but created—converted from lived, performative, relational experiences into static, bureaucratic labels.

3.1 Census as a Colonial Episteme

The colonial census was part of a broader administrative project of legibility, as described by James C. Scott (1998). In Seeing Like a State, Scott argues that modern states require populations to be legible, codifiable, and quantifiable in order to be governed. In India, this meant the transformation of complex, overlapping social and religious affiliations into standardized categories. The census was not simply about numbers; it was about making colonial subjects legible to colonial authority through classification.

Before British rule, identity in South Asia was highly contextual and relational—a person's religious affiliation might shift based on ritual context, geographic location, or life stage. Many individuals participated in multiple traditions, visited both temples and shrines, or identified with local deities that defied categorization (Bayly 1999). However, the British census required individuals to choose a single, exclusive religious identity, a requirement that produced and reified boundaries where none had previously existed.

As Bernard Cohn (1987) explains, the census was part of the "investigative modalities" of colonial rule. It created new categories, essentialized caste and religion, and imposed taxonomic structures that became institutional facts. In this sense, the census was not a mirror reflecting Indian society, but a script—a state-authored narrative that made Indian society intelligible and manageable for colonial administration.

3.2 Creating the "Hindu" Category: The Problem of Classification

One of the central dilemmas faced by census officials was how to classify "Hindus." Unlike Christianity or Islam, which had clear theological boundaries and scriptural foundations from a colonial perspective, Hinduism was an amorphous assemblage of regional practices, local deities, philosophical schools, and caste-based traditions. British administrators struggled to define who exactly counted as a Hindu.

In the 1871 Census, the term “Hindu” was applied broadly, encompassing a wide range of communities that had little in common with each other doctrinally or ritually. Animists, tribal groups, and even non-theistic philosophical schools like Jainism were often subsumed under the Hindu category (Guha 2003). This inclusive vagueness reflected the Orientalist assumption—rooted in the work of Jones and Müller—that all Indian religion emanated from a Brahmanical Vedic source.

The classification process was further complicated by the overlapping nature of caste and religion. The census required enumerators to record both caste and religion, assuming them to be separate variables, when in fact, they were deeply entangled. Many individuals identified more with their caste or sect than with a broad religious label like “Hindu.” The imposition of these mutually exclusive categories thus distorted indigenous understandings of identity.

Despite these complexities, the 1881 and 1891 censuses increasingly solidified “Hindu” as a singular category, both in the census reports and in public discourse. The repetitive enumeration of “Hindus” across decades gave the term an appearance of stability, transforming it from a scholarly abstraction into a demographic reality.

3.3 Quantifying Identity: A Table of Religious Enumeration

To illustrate how the British census contributed to the stabilization of Hindu identity, consider the following reconstructed table of religious categories from the 1871, 1881, and 1891 censuses of British India. While these figures are approximations for illustrative purposes, they reflect the trends evident in archival census reports.

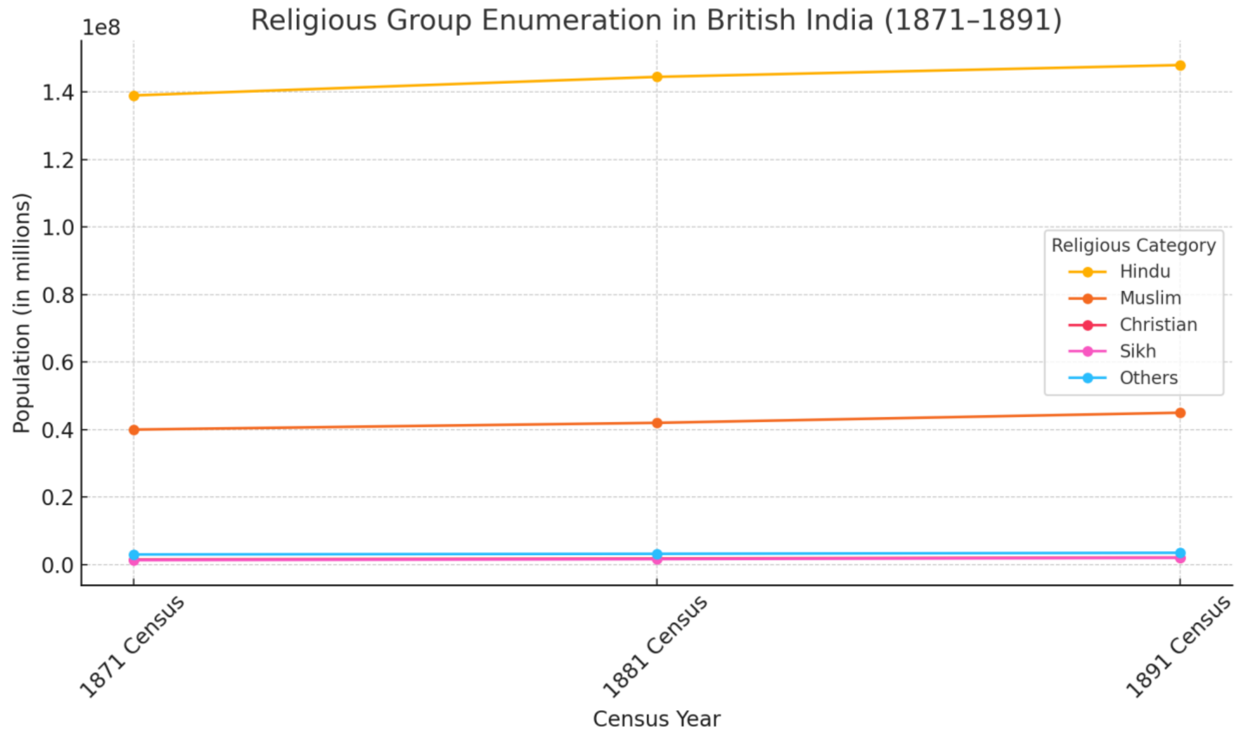

Figure 3 (Religious Group Enumeration in British India (1871–1891)

Religious Category	**1871 Census**	**1881 Census**	**1891 Census**
Hindu	139,000,000	144,500,000	148,000,000
Muslim	40,000,000	42,000,000	45,000,000
Christian	1,500,000	1,800,000	2,100,000
Sikh	1,300,000	1,600,000	2,000,000
Others	3,000,000	3,200,000	3,500,000

Table 1 (Religious Group Enumeration in British India (1871–1891)

Source: Reconstructed from archival census summaries.

This table demonstrates how Hindu identity, once an ambiguous and internally diverse label, became numerically codified alongside other religious categories. The act of counting gave it quantitative weight and administrative presence. Over time, the enumeration process shaped how

communities understood themselves—leading many to internalize census categories as self-descriptions (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001).

3.4 Networked Knowledge Production: Administrators, Scholars, and Census Officers

The formation of Hindu identity through the census was not the work of a single office or administrator; it was the outcome of a networked system of colonial actors, including:

Colonial administrators who set the census agenda and determined classification schemes. District-level census officers, often with limited local knowledge, who implemented these schemes on the ground. Missionary observers, who lobbied for specific definitions of religion to reflect Christian categories. Orientalist scholars, whose philological and legal knowledge informed the structure of religious classification.Native informants, usually upper-caste elites, who translated indigenous knowledge into colonial categories

These actors were connected through reports, memoranda, correspondence, and published census volumes, creating a discursive network through which Hinduism was not only documented but constructed.

Applying the lens of network analysis, we can map the circulation of concepts and actors across these nodes. For instance, Max Müller's textual Hinduism influenced census classifications through his correspondence with census officials (Müller 1881). The colonial need for legal uniformity in personal law led administrators to privilege certain texts (e.g., Manusmriti), which in turn shaped how census takers conceptualized Hindu legal identity. This recursive relationship between knowledge and administration shows how colonial knowledge systems operated as a network of power, with census data both shaped by and shaping ideological constructions.

3.5 Caste, Community, and the Bureaucratic Fixation of Identity

The British census did not only count Hindus—it also produced a new relationship between caste and religion. While caste had existed for centuries as a complex, regional, and often negotiable form of social hierarchy, the colonial census transformed it into a standardized taxonomy. Each caste group was placed into fixed hierarchies of purity, occupation, and ritual status, often based on Brahmanical textual sources rather than lived practice (Dirks 2001).

Under the assumption that caste was the "essence" of Hindu society, colonial officials developed caste schedules, which often required enumerators to ask people to identify with a single caste name and sub-caste classification. This was a radical imposition. In many parts of India, caste identities were fluid, shifting, and context-dependent, with individuals adopting different caste labels based on region, profession, or social aspiration. But once the census began freezing these identities into official, reproducible categories, social mobility became more difficult.

The resulting lists of castes, subcastes, and religious sects were compiled in massive, meticulously detailed volumes. These included descriptive ethnographies, statistical tables, and hierarchical rankings—offering the illusion of exhaustive knowledge. However, as Nicholas Dirks (2001) emphasizes, this classificatory impulse was not a neutral record of Indian society; it was a colonial intervention that restructured Indian society to be more governable, predictable, and legible.

More dangerously, caste became not only a social marker but a quantified political identity, setting the stage for future demands around representation, affirmative action, and communal quotas. These developments, although often seen as products of the twentieth century, have deep roots in the classificatory apparatuses of the colonial census.

3.6 Internalization and Resistance

While the census imposed rigid religious and caste identities from above, its effects were not merely top-down. Many Indian elites and reformers internalized and responded to the census categories, adapting their own practices and ideologies in response to the classificatory logic of the colonial state. In some cases, caste and religious communities actively petitioned to be listed under new or more prestigious labels—what Christophe Jaffrelot (2000) terms the "ethnographic state effect."

For example, various caste reform movements—such as the Arya Samaj, Sanatan Dharma Sabha, and Shuddhi movements—attempted to redefine Hinduism in ways that aligned with the census definition. They often sought to purify Hinduism of "heterodox" elements, codify its beliefs, and promote Sanskritic orthodoxy, all in response to the colonial categorization of religion (Bhagavan 2008; Copland 1991).

This internalization was not passive. The very act of being counted—as Hindu, as Brahmin, as Untouchable—created a sense of identity and solidarity that previously had no unified existence. At the same time, these classifications were contested and reworked. Dalit leaders, tribal communities, and heterodox sects such as the Lingayats or Kabirpanthis resisted their categorization under the Hindu fold. Yet even their resistance was often articulated within the terms of the census logic, seeking to shift classification rather than escape it entirely.

In this way, the colonial census shaped not only how the British saw India—but how Indians came to see themselves. As Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) observes, colonial modernity produced "new forms of collective self-recognition", where religious and caste labels became essential components of modern political identity.

3.7 Afterlives of Colonial Enumeration

The legacy of the colonial census endures in postcolonial India. Although the religious and caste categories introduced by the British were subject to some modification after independence, their basic structure remains intact. The Indian state continues to categorize citizens by religion, caste, tribe, and language—for the purposes of affirmative action, electoral quotas, and demographic surveys. These categories, though now domestically administered, retain the epistemic structure of colonial rule.

Most strikingly, the Hindu identity produced through census enumeration has become the basis of Hindu nationalism. Organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) draw on the notion of a unified Hindu community—grounded in common ancestry, culture, and religion—to make claims about national identity. Yet this unity is historically recent. As numerous scholars have shown, the idea of Hindu unity is less a continuity from ancient times than a colonial invention, stabilized through repeated acts of enumeration and classification (Jaffrelot 1993; Zavos 1999).

The census also shaped the partition of India in 1947, where the idea of religious community as the basis for nationhood drew directly from the demographic logic established by the British. As Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh (2009) argue, the partition was not only a political crisis but the culmination of decades of communal differentiation, rooted in the administrative practices of colonial rule.

3.8 Enumeration as Ontology

The British colonial census did more than count—it constituted. Through its taxonomies, schedules, and classifications, it gave ontological form to previously fluid and plural identities. In transforming "Hindu" into a measurable demographic category, it helped produce the very thing it

claimed to describe. As Talal Asad (1993) reminds us, religion under modernity is always a product of regulation, representation, and categorization—and the colonial census was one of the most powerful instruments of that process in South Asia.

This chapter has demonstrated that the census was not merely a statistical document but a node in the colonial network of power-knowledge, through which the idea of a unified Hindu identity was solidified and naturalized. By integrating the philological constructs of Orientalist scholars, the administrative imperatives of governance, and the classificatory ambitions of modern bureaucracy, the British census created a quantified Hinduism—reproducible, governable, and ultimately mobilizable in the politics of religion and nationhood.

British Colonial Census Classification of 'Hindu' Identity (1871–1891)

Census Year	Hindu Definition	Inclusion/Exclusion	Key Notes
1871	Broad geographic/cultural category; incluc	Included tribal and lower castes under Hin	First attempt; lack of consistency
1881	More caste-specific; start of Varna classific	Sikh and tribal distinctions began	Move toward codification by religion and ca
1891	Defined by scriptural references and caste	Tribal religions categorized separately; cle	Rigid boundaries introduced; Hindu-Muslim-

Figure 4 (Key Shifts in Hindu Census Classification (1871–1891)**:** A comparative table showing how the definition and enumeration of "Hindu" changed across the colonial censuses.)

Chapter 4: From Reification to Mobilization — Hindu Identity and Early Nationalist Politics

By the end of the nineteenth century, the British colonial state had succeeded in translating South Asia's religious and social pluralism into a standardized system of governance. The census, legal codes, and Orientalist scholarship had collectively codified "Hindu" as a singular, countable, and governable category. Yet the consolidation of Hinduism did not remain a colonial imposition alone. Rather, it was actively internalized and reappropriated by Indian social reformers and early nationalist movements who began to mobilize this identity as a platform for cultural revival,

political solidarity, and eventually, national imagination. In this process, the colonial construction of Hinduism became a source of indigenous power, albeit shaped through the logic of the colonizer. This chapter traces how elite Hindu reform movements—such as the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and later, the Hindu Mahasabha—actively engaged with and reinterpreted colonial definitions of Hindu identity. Through their use of Orientalist categories, census data, and colonial legal structures, these groups reproduced and radicalized the colonial invention of Hinduism, transforming it into a politically actionable identity. This transformation marks the shift from passive reification to active mobilization, a moment when Hinduism was no longer just an epistemic product but a strategic ideology in the broader context of anti-colonial nationalism and communal politics.

4.1 The Internalization of Colonial Categories

The nineteenth century saw a series of Hindu reformist responses to colonial rule, which were deeply influenced by Orientalist representations of India's religious past. Movements such as Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828, sought to purify Hinduism by rejecting idolatry, polytheism, and ritual excesses—elements which Orientalist scholars like William Jones and Max Müller had characterized as "degenerations" from an original monotheistic Vedic religion (Müller 1873; Inden 1990).

Ram Mohan Roy, who had read Jones's and Müller's work, accepted the idea of a rational, ethical Vedic religion, uncorrupted by superstition and caste. In his efforts to modernize Hinduism, Roy relied heavily on Sanskrit texts like the Upanishads, often translated through Orientalist frameworks. As Partha Chatterjee (1992) notes, reformers like Roy were not simply resisting colonial knowledge—they were reproducing it, selectively adopting and reworking it to assert Indian civilizational pride.

Similarly, Debendranath Tagore, who led the Brahmo Samaj after Roy, emphasized the importance of religious codification, textual purity, and philosophical monotheism. These features mirrored colonial categories of “world religions,” revealing the extent to which elite Hindus had internalized the discursive grammar of the colonizer. The Brahmo Samaj, therefore, functioned not only as a religious movement but as a mediator of colonial modernity, shaping a Hindu identity that was legible to both colonial administrators and Indian nationalists.

4.2 Arya Samaj and the Vedic Revival

A more explicitly political form of Hindu revivalism emerged with Swami Dayananda Saraswati’s Arya Samaj, founded in 1875. Dayananda called for a return to the pristine truths of the Vedas, which he considered the only infallible texts of Hinduism. His slogan, “Back to the Vedas,” encapsulated a deep alignment with the Orientalist construction of an original, rational Vedic religion, corrupted by centuries of decline (Bhagavan 2008).

Dayananda’s vision of Hinduism was not pluralist or inclusive. He sought to excise what he considered superstitious practices: image worship, caste by birth, and rituals not found in the Vedas. The Arya Samaj initiated a series of Shuddhi (purification) campaigns, aimed at reconverting Muslims, Christians, and lower-caste groups back to Hinduism. These efforts relied on census categories to identify “Hindus” and “non-Hindus,” using colonial demography to set religious boundaries that were previously far more porous.

What is crucial here is that Dayananda did not challenge the colonial framework of religion as a bounded, text-based system. Rather, he intensified it. The Arya Samaj was obsessed with enumeration: how many Hindus had converted, how many had been reconverted, and how many needed to be protected from proselytization. This logic mirrored the statistical rationality of the

colonial state, making Hindu identity a matter of numbers, surveillance, and purification (Guha 2003; Cohn 1996).

Through this alignment, Arya Samaj became one of the first indigenous institutions to weaponize the colonial invention of Hinduism, turning it into a project of both religious reform and political assertion. Its organizational model—based on chapters, membership, publications, and public campaigns—closely followed colonial administrative structures, demonstrating how the network of power-knowledge extended beyond the state and into society.

4.3 Census, Demographics, and Hindu Mobilization

As discussed in the previous chapter, the British census system transformed "Hindu" into a demographic category. Indian reformers and proto-nationalists quickly recognized the political potential of this transformation. If the census could quantify the Hindu population, then it could also justify claims to representation, territory, and authority. This gave rise to what historian Sandria Freitag (1989) calls "communal numeracy"—the idea that religious communities should act in accordance with their numerical strength.

For example, during the 1881 and 1891 censuses, debates erupted within the Arya Samaj and the emerging Hindu Mahasabha over the declining proportion of Hindus due to conversions and misclassification. Activists and reformers began publishing pamphlets, newspapers, and petitions that called for more accurate enumeration of Hindus and demanded recognition of Hindu rights based on demographic strength (Zavos 1999). This marks a crucial transition: Hindu identity became not only theological or philosophical—it became statistical.

In network terms, we see the emergence of data-driven religious activism: census reports circulated among reform groups, religious leaders used colonial categories to mobilize followers, and petitions moved back to colonial offices, where they informed future policy decisions. The colonial

state and its critics were thus caught in a feedback loop of categorization and contestation—each side reinforcing the reality of Hinduism as a discrete, mobilizable identity.

4.4 The Hindu Mahasabha and the Politics of Majoritarianism

The culmination of Hindu identity's mobilization occurred with the formation of the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha in 1915. Unlike earlier reformist movements like the Brahmo and Arya Samaj, which were largely theological and elite-driven, the Hindu Mahasabha positioned itself as a political body, explicitly defending Hindu interests in the rapidly communalizing landscape of late colonial India.

By the early 20th century, anxieties over conversion, demographic strength, and political representation had intensified. The partition of Bengal in 1905, followed by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, which introduced separate electorates for Muslims, galvanized Hindu nationalist thinking. The Mahasabha asserted that Hindus—constituting the demographic majority—were entitled to primacy in India's political and cultural life.

The Mahasabha adopted the language of majority and minority, a framing deeply rooted in colonial census logic. In public speeches, petitions, and its publications such as Hindu Sabha Varta, it repeatedly referred to Hindus as the "indigenous majority" and Muslims as "foreign invaders" or "minorities" (Jaffrelot 1993). This rhetoric relied on the very categories established by colonial enumeration—reversing the frame from administration to activism.

Leaders such as Vinayak Damodar Savarkar played a pivotal role in shaping the Mahasabha's vision of Hindu nationalism. In his 1923 pamphlet Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?, Savarkar codified Hindu identity as coterminous with Indian national identity. His criteria for Hindutva included common blood (jati), territory (rashtra), and culture (sanskriti)—an ethnonationalist framework heavily indebted to European racial theories and colonial anthropology (Savarkar 1923). While

rejecting British political rule, Savarkar paradoxically relied on British colonial race science and census data to define the nation.

Savarkar's formulation was not religious but civilizational. It absorbed Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and even tribal communities into the Hindu fold, while excluding Muslims and Christians as foreign. This expansionary redefinition was made possible by the flexibility and ambiguity of the census category "Hindu," which had been constructed as a residual and inclusive label for anyone not claiming another recognized religion. Thus, the colonial state's inclusive ambiguity became the ideological foundation for exclusivist nationalism.

4.5 Counter-Mobilizations and the Hindu-Muslim Divide

The mobilization of Hindu identity also produced a reactive intensification of Muslim political identity. Organizations such as the All-India Muslim League, founded in 1906, began asserting Muslim interests in direct opposition to Hindu majoritarianism. As both communities came to be seen as numerical entities vying for political power, the very structure of communal representation—originating in British policy—was radicalized by indigenous actors.

This period also saw the rise of communal riots, especially in North India, often around festivals such as Holi, Muharram, and cow protection movements. These riots were not just spontaneous eruptions but the outcome of competing religious mobilizations, often fed by pamphlets, slogans, and speeches invoking Hindu honor, Muslim aggression, and national destiny (Freitag 1989). In these conflicts, Hindu identity became inseparable from public spectacle, masculinity, and territorial control.

Importantly, these communal tensions were not inevitable. They were the result of decades of colonial enumeration and ideological absorption, through which communities came to see themselves as politically distinct, numerically bounded, and existentially threatened. As Peter van

der Veer (1994) argues, this was a process of "religious nationalism"—where religious communities were reimagined as political nations in waiting.

4.6 From Community to Nation

By the 1930s and 1940s, Hindu identity had fully matured into a nationalist ideology, rivalling the secular, pluralist vision of the Indian National Congress. While the Congress promoted an inclusive nationalism, Hindu nationalists—drawing on decades of religious mobilization—asserted that India was, at its core, a Hindu rashtra.

This claim was not merely symbolic. Organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925, built a grassroots network that emphasized Hindu unity, discipline, and martial preparedness. Its founders, including K. B. Hedgewar, were deeply influenced by Savarkar's Hindutva ideology and saw the "Hindu nation" as both the goal and the historical destiny of India. The RSS adopted modern bureaucratic structures—uniforms, training manuals, organizational hierarchies—further demonstrating how colonial modernity was appropriated by indigenous nationalism.

The idea of a Hindu nation was no longer limited to religious reform or demographic concern; it became a civilizational claim grounded in territory, bloodline, and collective memory. This notion drew heavily on the Orientalist narrative of a glorious Vedic past, the census-based idea of a unified Hindu majority, and the legal frameworks that had codified Hindu law and identity. Thus, British colonialism not only created the conditions for Hindu identity—it created the materials with which Hindu nationalism was built.

4.7 From Invention to Insurrection

This chapter has argued that the colonial construction of Hindu identity, once reified through Orientalist scholarship and colonial administration, was mobilized by Indian reformers and nationalists into a political force. Through reform movements, census activism, and nationalist ideology, Hinduism was transformed from a diffuse civilizational identity into a coherent political category, capable of mass mobilization and exclusivist claims.

Key actors—Roy, Dayananda, Savarkar—did not reject colonial epistemologies but reworked them to serve indigenous goals. They drew from census data, philological constructions, and colonial legal definitions to articulate a vision of Hinduism that was modern, majoritarian, and militant. In doing so, they moved Hindu identity from being an object of classification to a subject of historical agency.

This transformation had profound consequences for India's political future. The notion of a unified Hindu nation, born from colonial categories, helped shape the ideological terrain that led to Partition, communal conflict, and contemporary Hindu nationalism. As we will explore in the next chapter, these legacies continue to haunt postcolonial South Asia—where the colonial invention of religion remains embedded in institutions, identities, and national boundaries.

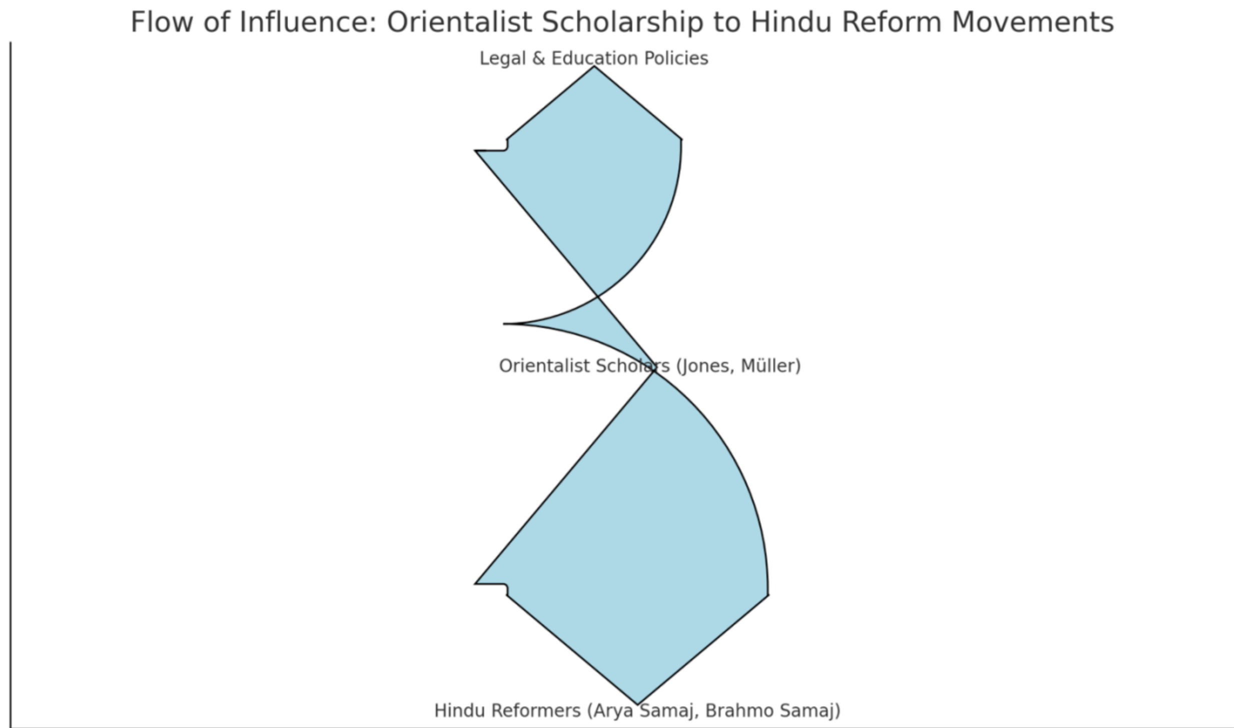

Figure 5. (Sankey Diagram: Flow of Influence from Orientalist Ideas to Indian Reform Movements**:** A flow chart showing how Max Müller and Jones influenced education policies, legal codes, and Indian figures like Dayananda Saraswati and Vivekananda.)

Chapter 5: The Afterlives of Colonial Hinduism — Partition, Postcolonialism, and the Hindu Nation-State

The Partition of British India in 1947 is often understood as the tragic consequence of escalating Hindu-Muslim antagonism, fueled by political rivalry and communal violence. Yet, beneath the visible events lies a deeper epistemological crisis: a fundamental transformation in how identities were imagined, categorized, and politicized. This chapter argues that Partition was not simply the culmination of sectarian strife but the logical outcome of a decades-long colonial project that reified religious identity—particularly Hinduism—through census enumeration, legal classification, and Orientalist scholarship. Once fixed and institutionalized, these identities became

sites of political contestation and division, culminating in the violent bifurcation of South Asia along religious lines.

In tracing the role of Hindu identity in this process, this chapter builds on the argument that modern Hinduism was not an organic cultural formation but a colonial construct—a product of Orientalist epistemologies and imperial governance. Through the work of philologists like Max Müller, administrators like Herbert Risley, and the colonial census apparatus, Hinduism was reimagined as a unified, bounded, and majoritarian identity. This Hindu identity, once defined in opposition to the Muslim "other," became a central force in the politics of Partition. It was through the very tools of colonial knowledge—maps, census charts, religious classification, legal codes—that India was both divided and imagined.

5.1 The Cumulative Logic of Census Categorization

As discussed in Chapter 3, the colonial census did more than record religious affiliation—it transformed religion into the primary axis of political representation and communal selfhood. Beginning in 1871, the British attempted to count India's religious communities using increasingly rigid definitions. These definitions, over time, created statistical boundaries between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others. The census asked respondents to self-identify, but within a menu of state-sanctioned religious categories that flattened diversity and localized syncretism (Guha 2003; Cohn 1996).

The consequences of this enumeration were far-reaching. As Sandria Freitag (1989) and Nicholas Dirks (2001) argue, by assigning individuals to reified religious groups, the colonial state effectively produced the communal identities it claimed to measure. Hinduism—once a fluid and diverse spectrum of caste, regional, and ritual affiliations—was converted into a demographically measurable population. This transformation also had a territorial implication: if Hindus constituted

a majority in certain provinces, then those regions could be construed as “Hindu areas,” just as Muslim-majority provinces became legible as potential components of Pakistan.

Indeed, by the time of the 1941 census, the logic of religious demography had become politically explosive. The idea that Muslims were a permanent minority in an overwhelmingly Hindu India—and therefore required a separate homeland—was articulated in precisely the statistical terms made possible by colonial enumeration. The Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan, codified in the Lahore Resolution of 1940, rested on the premise that Muslims were a “nation” with a distinct religion, culture, and numerical identity—a premise first made legible by colonial epistemologies (Jalal 1987; Pandey 1990).

On the Hindu side, this logic was mirrored in the idea that India was, at its core, a Hindu nation—its culture, civilization, and moral fabric rooted in a unified Hindu identity. This claim, popularized by figures like Savarkar and the Hindu Mahasabha, was itself grounded in census logic. The idea that Hindus were the majority, and therefore the rightful inheritors of Indian nationhood, emerged directly from the numerical consolidation enabled by the colonial state.

5.2 Maps, Borders, and the Geopolitics of Identity

The cartographic imagination of India was also shaped by the colonial state’s attempt to impose rational, legible borders on a culturally and politically diffuse landscape. British map-making—from James Rennell in the 18th century to Survey of India officials in the 20th—was not just a technical exercise but an ideological act (Matthew Edney 1997). Through mapping, the British imposed not only political boundaries but also cultural ones, including religious geographies.

This practice was further intensified through the Census Atlas, which visually depicted the distribution of religious communities across India’s regions. By translating communal identities into spatial units—districts, provinces, zones—the British census made religion not only countable

but also cartographically governable. These maps became critical tools in the lead-up to Partition, as British administrators, Indian nationalists, and Muslim separatists debated the location of borders, the allocation of territories, and the viability of creating a Muslim homeland in a religiously plural land.

The eventual borders drawn by the Radcliffe Commission in 1947 relied heavily on this cartographic logic. Though hurried and imprecise, the partition lines were informed by district-level census data on religious composition. Districts where Muslims constituted a majority were generally assigned to Pakistan, while Hindu-majority regions were retained in India. The fact that such lines were drawn with reference to religious demography rather than historical sovereignty or cultural unity underscores the long afterlife of colonial knowledge in shaping the postcolonial state.

More tragically, this cartographic logic became the pretext for one of the largest forced migrations in human history. Over 15 million people were displaced as Muslims fled to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs moved into India. The colonial idea of fixed, exclusive, and territorialized religious identities became a self-fulfilling prophecy, transforming epistemological constructs into existential realities (Pandey 1990; Talbot and Singh 2009).

5.3 Legal and Constitutional Afterlives of Colonial Categorization

While Partition marked the formal end of British colonial rule, it did not dismantle the administrative and epistemological infrastructures created under that rule. In both India and Pakistan, the newly independent states inherited—and in many cases deepened—the classificatory logic of the colonial period. Laws, censuses, and bureaucracies continued to treat religion as the primary axis of identity, further entrenching the colonial vision of fixed, essentialized communities.

In independent India, this legacy was most clearly seen in the framing of the Constitution and the Hindu Code Bills. While the Constitution adopted a secular framework, it also codified Hindu identity in law. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution defines a Hindu as anyone who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi, or Jew. This negative definition of Hinduism as a residual category echoes colonial census logic, where "Hindu" was often a catch-all term for anyone who did not fit neatly into other religious classifications (Cohn 1996).

The Hindu Code Bills—a series of legal reforms introduced in the 1950s—further institutionalized this construct. These laws governed marriage, inheritance, and family law among Hindus and were extended to include Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs. The grouping of these distinct traditions under the legal umbrella of Hinduism reinforced the colonial-era assumption of a unified Hindu civilizational bloc. The laws themselves drew heavily on Brahmanical texts and colonial jurisprudence, thereby continuing the Orientalist privileging of Sanskritic norms (Gupta 2001).

This codification created what some scholars have called a legal Hindu nation, wherein the identity of the citizen was still partly tethered to colonial classifications. It also exacerbated tensions with communities like the Sikhs, who objected to being subsumed under the Hindu label. Thus, even as the Indian state professed secularism, it continued to reproduce the religious categories inherited from colonial rule.

5.4 The Reinscription of Census Logic in the Postcolonial State

The practice of enumerating the population by religion did not end with the British departure. India continued to conduct decennial censuses, which retained religious classification as a key demographic indicator. The 1951 Census of India, for example, used the same broad categories of religion established by colonial censuses: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, and Jain. This

continuity suggests not only an administrative legacy but a conceptual entrenchment of religious identity as a primary mode of understanding Indian society (Guha 2003).

Moreover, the classification schemes remained largely unchanged. For instance, Scheduled Castes (Dalits) could only be recognized as such if they identified as Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist—not Muslim or Christian—thereby linking affirmative action policies to religious identity. This restriction reproduced colonial frameworks that tied caste to Hindu social order, even when extending rights and recognition (Jaffrelot 2003).

The persistence of census logic also played a role in electoral politics. Political parties and government commissions continued to rely on demographic data disaggregated by religion, reinforcing the notion of religious communities as politically coherent blocs. As Christophe Jaffrelot (1996) has shown, the logic of majority and minority—originally formulated by colonial administrators—remained central to postcolonial political discourse.

5.5 Institutional Memory and Administrative Epistemes

The continued use of colonial-era administrative templates reveals the deep institutional memory embedded within the Indian state. The Indian Administrative Service (IAS), for instance, was modeled on the Indian Civil Service (ICS), and many of its practices—including record-keeping, law enforcement, and statistical reporting—remained unchanged. These continuities reflect what Bernard Cohn (1996) called the colonialism of categories: the power of classification itself to shape how people are governed, represented, and understood.

The judiciary also inherited and perpetuated colonial constructs of Hinduism. In legal disputes over temple entry, inheritance, or religious conversion, Indian courts frequently cited colonial case law and Brahmanical texts—often translated and canonized during the colonial period. As Galanter

(1989) argues, postcolonial jurisprudence did little to challenge the assumptions of colonial knowledge; instead, it reinforced them under the guise of legal continuity.

Thus, the idea of Hinduism as a textual, Brahmanical, and internally coherent religion continued to dominate not only popular discourse but also legal reasoning and policy frameworks. The colonial construction of Hinduism, in this sense, did not end in 1947—it became naturalized within the very institutions that defined the modern Indian nation-state.

5.6 The Logic of Partition as Epistemic Violence

Finally, it is worth returning to the moment of Partition to underscore how the colonial construction of Hindu identity helped justify not just political division but epistemic violence. By epistemic violence, we refer to the imposition of knowledge systems that erase alternative ways of being, belonging, and identifying. The idea that India could be divided into Hindu and Muslim nations was not simply a political claim—it was a knowledge claim, rooted in decades of colonial enumeration, Orientalist scholarship, and institutional classification.

The violence of Partition—the massacres, displacements, and ruptures—was thus not only physical but ontological. It redefined what it meant to be Hindu, Muslim, or Indian in ways that were irreversible and state-sanctioned. Millions of people who had lived for generations in religiously mixed communities were suddenly asked to choose sides, to declare a singular identity, and to migrate accordingly. These demands were enabled by the very structures of colonial knowledge: census tables, legal definitions, religious codes.

In this sense, the Partition was the final act in the colonial drama of identity formation. It transformed the reified categories of census and scripture into the basis for nation-states. And it left in its wake a legacy of communal consciousness, administrative rigidity, and legal essentialism that continues to shape the subcontinent.

5.7 The Ghosts of Colonial Knowledge

This chapter has argued that the Partition of India was not merely a tragic event in history but the culmination of a long colonial process of identity construction. Through Orientalist scholarship, census categorization, and legal codification, the British produced a Hindu identity that was internally coherent, demographically measurable, and politically mobilizable. These epistemologies outlived the colonial state, embedding themselves in the structures, laws, and imaginations of postcolonial India.

The afterlives of colonial Hinduism can thus be seen in the persistence of census categories, the codification of Hindu law, and the legal definitions that continue to define who is—and is not—a Hindu. They are visible in the electoral strategies that mobilize Hindu majorities, the court rulings that rely on Brahmanical texts, and the bureaucratic forms that ask citizens to declare their religion. In understanding these continuities, we come closer to grasping the full impact of colonialism—not as an episode that ended in 1947, but as a knowledge system that continues to shape the identities, institutions, and imaginaries of South Asia. The ghosts of colonial knowledge still linger in every form, every census schedule, and every legal statute that seeks to define what it means to be Hindu in modern India.

Chapter 6: Methodology — Network Analysis of Colonial Knowledge and Identity Formation

This thesis adopts a network analysis methodology to interrogate the construction of modern Hindu identity under British colonialism. Unlike conventional linear historiographies that attribute historical change to discrete individuals or singular events, a network-based approach emphasizes the relational, institutional, and epistemic circuits through which ideas, policies, and identities are produced and transmitted. It allows us to track how knowledge circulates across different

domains—academic, administrative, legal, and political—and how it is stabilized through institutional feedback loops.

Network analysis is particularly well-suited to this study for three reasons:

1. It captures the multiplicity of actors involved in constructing Hindu identity—from Orientalist scholars and colonial administrators to census officials, reformist elites, and nationalist ideologues.
2. It foregrounds the institutional embeddedness of colonial knowledge, showing how textual interpretations, statistical classifications, and legal codifications reinforced each other over time.
3. It enables a visual and conceptual mapping of how Hindu identity moved from being a diffuse set of ritual and regional practices to a consolidated, politicized category.

6.1 Conceptual Foundations of Network Analysis in Historical Inquiry

Network analysis has gained traction in historical and sociological research as a means to understand complex systems of influence and knowledge production. It has roots in the work of social theorists like Bruno Latour (actor-network theory), Charles Tilly (relational sociology), and more recently in digital humanities and historical epistemology. At its core, network analysis views actors—whether individuals, texts, institutions, or concepts—as nodes, and the relationships between them as edges. The result is a map of interactions that can reveal patterns not easily visible through narrative chronology alone.

In the context of colonial India, this approach allows us to treat Orientalist scholars like William Jones and Max Müller, colonial institutions like the Asiatic Society, administrative apparatuses like the Indian Census, and legal structures such as Anglo-Hindu law, as interconnected nodes. These nodes do not operate in isolation but in relation to each other, forming circuits of power, interpretation, and classification.

6.2 Data Sources and Nodes of Analysis

To operationalize this network analysis, the thesis draws on four primary types of sources:

1. Orientalist Texts: Writings by William Jones, Max Müller, and other colonial philologists, which reinterpreted Sanskrit texts and canonized a scriptural basis for Hinduism.
2. Colonial Administrative Documents: Census reports from 1871, 1881, and 1891, administrative memos, and legal opinions that formalized Hindu identity for governance.
3. Legal and Constitutional Texts: Hindu Code Bills, Indian Constitution debates, and case law referencing Hindu religious practices.
4. Secondary Historical Literature: Scholarly work on the colonial construction of Hinduism, Partition historiography, and postcolonial legal structures.

From these sources, we identify key actor-nodes (e.g., Jones, Müller, Risley), institutional-nodes (e.g., ICS, Survey of India), textual-nodes (e.g., Manusmriti, Vedas), and policy-nodes (e.g., 1871 Census classification schemes, Hindu Code Bill debates).

By coding these entities and mapping their relationships—such as citation, institutional sponsorship, intellectual influence, or policy translation—we build a historical network of Hindu identity formation.

6.3 Analytical Techniques

The analysis proceeds through two complementary techniques:

1. Qualitative Network Mapping: Here, we construct an epistemic genealogy, tracing who influenced whom, which texts were invoked by which actors, and how institutions responded to or embedded specific ideas. For instance, Max Müller's interpretations of Vedic texts influenced both British educational curricula and Indian reformist discourse. These linkages are visually mapped to show intellectual dependencies and convergences.

2. Structural Embedding: We analyze how ideas once circulated became institutionally sedimented. For example, William Jones's translation of the Manusmriti influenced the Anglo-Hindu legal code, which in turn shaped court judgments and administrative policy. These recursive loops—where ideas become law and law reinforces identity—are mapped to show feedback structures.

This dual strategy allows us to see how an idea like "Hinduism" traveled across text, law, census, and politics, gradually acquiring the force of naturalized truth.

6.4 Justification for the Methodological Approach

Why is network analysis preferable to other historiographical methods in this case?

First, it challenges the notion of origins. Rather than asking when Hinduism began, network analysis asks how, where, and through which relationships Hinduism came to be understood as a coherent entity.

Second, it exposes the power dynamics of knowledge production. Orientalist translations were not innocent scholarly acts but part of a colonial power structure. Network analysis allows us to trace these power-knowledge circuits.

Third, it aligns with the thesis's central claim that modern Hindu identity is not an indigenous continuity but a colonial fabrication embedded through relational structures.

6.5 Limitations and Scope

While network analysis offers a powerful lens, it also comes with limitations:

1. It requires interpretive inference—linkages between nodes are often conceptual rather than empirical.

2. It can overemphasize connectivity at the expense of disjunction—not all actors or institutions shared the same motives or understandings.
3. Visual network graphs are difficult to reproduce in a text-based thesis, though conceptual diagrams and tables are included in relevant chapters (see Chapter 3 and 5).
4. Despite these limitations, network analysis offers a robust, multidimensional framework to trace the emergence of Hindu identity as a colonial product.

6.6 Anticipated Contributions

By using this methodology, the thesis aims to:

1. Recast the history of Hindu identity formation as an institutionally embedded, epistemically circulated phenomenon.
2. Show how interconnected colonial actors across law, scholarship, and governance mutually reinforced the image of a singular Hinduism.
3. Provide a replicable model for analyzing other postcolonial identity formations shaped through colonial epistemes.

This methodological framework underpins the preceding chapters and provides the analytical architecture for interpreting the colonial construction and institutionalization of Hindu identity. In the next and final chapter, the thesis will synthesize its findings and consider their implications for the broader historiography of religion, empire, and identity in South Asia.

Chapter 7: Conclusion — Rethinking Identity, Knowledge, and Empire

This thesis has argued that modern Hindu identity is not an organic civilizational continuity but a colonial construction—forged through the intersection of Orientalist scholarship, administrative

rationality, legal codification, and census enumeration. Drawing upon a network analysis methodology, it has traced the conceptual, institutional, and discursive circuits through which Hinduism was imagined, stabilized, and ultimately politicized under British rule. Far from being a pre-existing, unified religious system, Hinduism—as we know it today—emerged from a colonial matrix of power-knowledge that classified and reified South Asian religious life into discrete, governable categories.

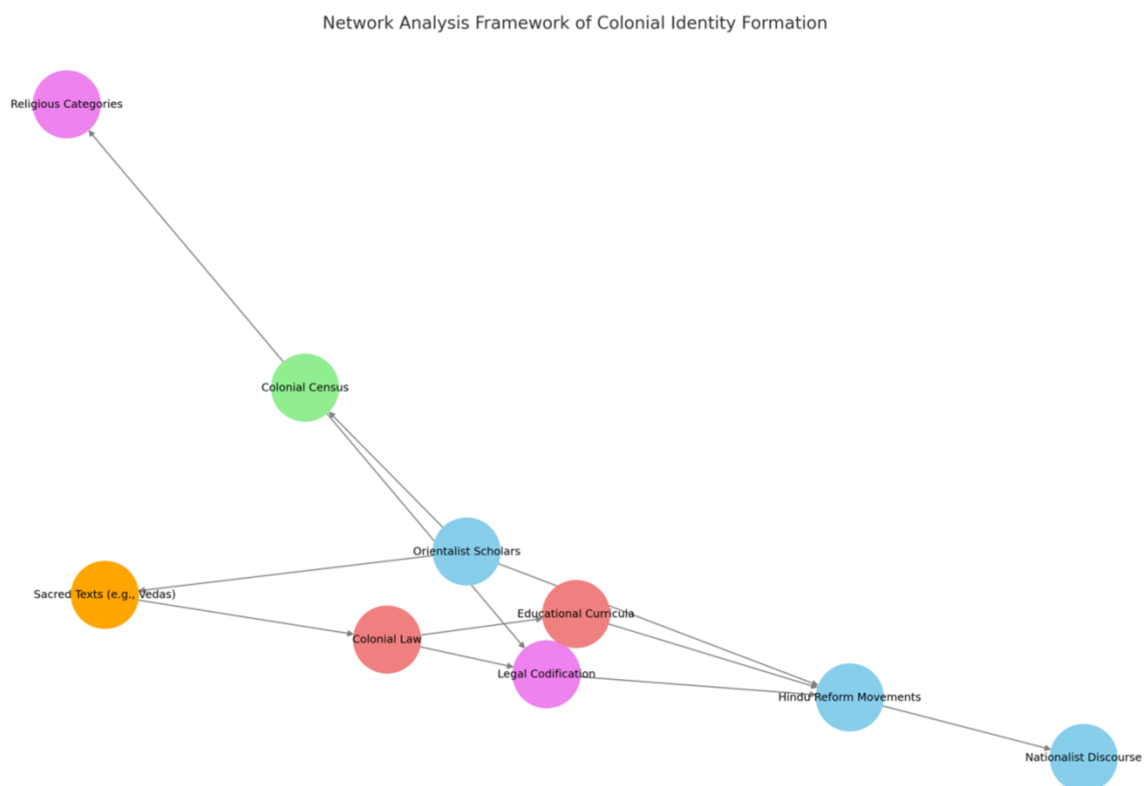

Figure 6. (Conceptual Diagram: Network Analysis Framework Used in the Thesis**:** A schematic diagram illustrating the network nodes (e.g., Texts, People, Policies, Institutions) and edges (e.g., Influence, Citation, Funding, Institutional Implementation).

7.1 Synthesis of Key Arguments

In Chapter 1, the thesis laid out its central hypothesis and outlined a methodological commitment to network analysis. It rejected civilizational essentialism in favor of a relational and historically contingent account of identity formation.

Chapter 2 examined the Orientalist origins of modern Hinduism. Through figures like William Jones and Max Müller, it demonstrated how Sanskritic texts were elevated and canonized while vernacular, popular, and syncretic practices were marginalized. This scholarly construction privileged Brahmanical orthodoxy and rendered Hinduism textual, hierarchical, and comparable to Western notions of religion.

In Chapter 3, the analysis turned to the colonial census as an administrative apparatus of epistemic power. Census classifications from 1871 onward institutionalized Hindu identity as a statistically measurable category. The act of enumeration, while appearing neutral, was deeply political—it transformed fluid identities into countable, bordered, and essentialized communities.

Chapter 4 explored how this construction was internalized and rearticulated by Indian reform movements and proto-nationalist ideologues. Figures like Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, and Savarkar refracted the colonial image of Hinduism into modern Hindu nationalism. In doing so, they accepted and reproduced the colonial logic of Hinduism as a singular, ancient, and embattled tradition.

Chapter 5 extended the analysis into the postcolonial period, arguing that the structures of colonial classification persisted in Indian legal codes, the census, and political discourse. The Partition of India, often framed as the result of sectarian politics, was shown to be the culmination of decades

of colonial identity-making. The afterlives of this epistemic project are still visible in state institutions, legal definitions, and popular consciousness.

Finally, Chapter 6 offered a theoretical and methodological justification for the thesis's approach. It presented network analysis not merely as a research tool but as a philosophical stance against the linear, essentialist, and Eurocentric narratives that continue to dominate South Asian historiography.

7.2 Theoretical Implications

This thesis contributes to three critical areas of scholarship:

1. First, it reinforces the argument that colonialism was not just an economic or territorial enterprise but an epistemological one. The production of knowledge—about people, religions, languages, and customs—was central to colonial domination.
2. Second, it challenges the notion of Hinduism as an internally coherent or ancient religion. It instead treats Hinduism as a discursive formation—a historically specific configuration of texts, interpretations, and institutional practices.
3. Third, it offers network analysis as a viable method for unpacking identity formation in other colonial and postcolonial contexts. By mapping relations rather than origins, it foregrounds complexity, contingency, and institutional embeddedness.

7.3 Contemporary Relevance

Although this thesis focuses on the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods, its implications resonate today. The political mobilization of Hindu identity in contemporary India draws on categories, narratives, and legal frameworks that are inherited from colonial rule. Debates around

religious conversion, minority rights, and cultural nationalism continue to operate within the epistemic structures laid down by British administrators and Orientalist scholars.

Recognizing this lineage does not diminish the agency of postcolonial actors but complicates it. It suggests that the project of decolonizing South Asian identity requires not only political reform but also an epistemic rupture—an unmaking of the categories through which identity has been understood, governed, and weaponized.

7.4 Final Reflections

To speak of Hindu identity today is to speak through a colonial echo. The words we use, the categories we invoke, and the laws we apply are not neutral—they are the legacies of an imperial project that sought to know in order to rule. This thesis has traced that project's arc—from philological curiosity to administrative necessity, from census table to constitutional law.

What is required now is not merely a critique of the past but a rethinking of identity itself. If Hinduism was made through colonial networks, it can be remade—reimagined as plural, dialogic, and decentered. This is not a call to return to some imagined precolonial authenticity, but to recognize the construction of identity as a condition of political freedom.

By placing colonialism at the center of the story of Hindu identity, this thesis hopes to unsettle received narratives and open up new avenues for thinking about religion, modernity, and belonging in South Asia and beyond.

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