

Scribal service people in motion: Culture, power and the politics of mobility in India's long eighteenth century, c. 1680–1820

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A decade after IESHR's Special Issue of 2010, 'Munshis, Pandits and Record-Keepers: Scribal communities and historical change in India', we return again to the challenges and dilemmas that scribes, bureaucrats, intellectuals and literati of different kinds faced during the early modern centuries. Building on recent advances in our understanding of these key communities, this Special Issue turns the focus to the eighteenth century. We explore the strategies of individuals as they navigated new conditions of service, unexpected opportunities for personal advancement and the complexities of affiliation amid personal networks that extended across boundaries of region, language and religion. We investigate the important role of scribal people in the literary cultures of the eighteenth century, and the new meanings that their participation gave to literary syncretism and hybridity. We return again to questions of intellectual history and the reflections of scribal service people as they sought to find meaning in the collapse of old political formations and the rise of new ones. This Introduction surveys the recent scholarly literature in these connected fields, situates the essays here in the context of this new work, and identifies some of the key questions which remain to be answered in this critical era of transition between the India of 'early modernity' and the coming of the colonial world.

Keywords: scribe, writer, munshi, Persianate, record-keeper

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Introduction

It is a decade exactly since *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* last published a special issue on the history of scribal service communities in India. The special issue, 'Munshis, Pandits and Record-Keepers: Scribal communities and historical change in India', explored some of the challenges and dilemmas that scribes, bureaucrats, intellectuals and literati of different kinds faced during the early modern centuries (Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, eds., 'Munshis, Pandits and Record-Keepers: Scribal communities and historical change in India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* (Special issue), Vol. 47 (4), 2010, 441–615). The six essays brought together there explored some quite specific questions about the challenges that those with scribal expertise faced as early modern courts sought to attract prestigious intellectuals and literati, and their state bureaucracies to expand their personnel with skills in writing and recording, accountancy and the management of cash. The essays examined four particular and linked themes. These were the processes of cultural accommodation entailed as scribal people found employment in the service of Indo-Persian regimes, the play of caste rivalries among competing Hindu scribal communities, the circulation of new models for Brahman identity based in mundane bureaucratic and accounting skills, and the degree to which such older forms of cultural capital helped to shape the spectacular professional success of postcolonial south India's Brahman communities.

It hardly needs to be said that these explorations in 2010 emerged out of what were already very substantial bodies of scholarship. Many historians had explored the histories of the subcontinent's different communities whose principal occupation lay in scribal service functions: keeping records, maintaining paper files and registers, drafting letters, taking down the proceedings and judgements of judicial and other meetings, formulating petitions, copying manuscripts. Given the very large size of the pool of scribal labour that underpinned the operations of courts, states, local societies and economies across early modern India, 'scribal communities' occupying service roles encompassed a very heterogeneous population. This population included many ranks of lesser scribes and writers: petty copyists in local cutcherries, clerks who maintained the registers in revenue offices, scribes who took down court proceedings, writers of many kinds in the employ of the vakil agents who undertook business on behalf of their masters.¹ But it also included, at the other end of the social scale, skilled and trusted secretary-administrators or *munshi*, elites in the model of the Mughal state secretary and *munshi* part excellence, Abul Fazl, trained in Persianate epistolary and the arts of politics and diplomacy.

Indeed, one of the difficulties of attempting a clear definition of the scribal service communities of early modern India lies in the ubiquitous and captivating

¹ For an analysis of these many ranks of scribal servants, see Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 73–78.

figure of the *munshi* itself, at once idealised emblem of Persianate cultural accomplishment and yet a term covering in practice many different types and ranks of scribal labour. Most were schooled in elements of Persianate bureaucratic culture, the library of record-keeping and accounting techniques that a competent scribe might be expected to possess.² But much broader cultural accomplishments were expected of a successful secretary in the setting of court or lordly household. Hence, many were also minor, and occasionally major, literati and intellectuals in their own right. They were poets, collectors of commentaries, writers of digests and chronicles, narrators of travel accounts, authors of reflections on the flux of human and political affairs.³

The significance of this cultural range emerged most influentially in a series of path-breaking studies in the years before our explorations in 2010. In their 2002 study, *Textures of Time*, Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam explored the writings of South India's *karanam* clerkly class to reveal a new and distinctively 'early modern' historical sensibility, but one expressed across a range of literary genres. Regionally based record-keepers and chroniclers developed more mundane forms of vernacular history-writing as part of their roles in celebrating the achievements of prominent families. Their narratives in the heroic mode, in which kings, warriors and the gods all took a hand in human affairs, also served to document local property rights in the face of more intrusive state demands.⁴ Similar themes emerged in Deshpande's 2007 exploration of cultures of history-writing in the early modern Maratha country, and Chatterjee's 2009 study of Persianate service families in Mughal Bengal.⁵ Through such pursuits, political reflection also came naturally to the scribal servants of early modern states, as they contemplated the ethical basis on which the subcontinent's emerging sub-imperial polities could make claims on different classes of their subjects, and where exactly their own principal loyalties should lie.⁶

The 'cultural turn' in Mughal history most associated with the work of Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Muzaffar Alam had also brought scribal people of many different kinds to the fore. In the individual lives of diarists, professional travellers, diplomatic emissaries, princely intellectuals and secretary-chroniclers could be observed the challenges and changes of their times, and their journeys across

² Very many scholars have engaged with this theme, but see in particular Mohiuddin, *The Chancellery and Persian Epistolography*; Richards, *Power, Administration and Finance in Mughal India*; Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 73–78; Alam, 'The Culture and Politics of Persian'; Perlin, *The Invisible City*.

³ See, for example, Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'Witnesses and Agents of Empire'; *idem*, 'The Making of a Munshi'; Chandra, *Letters of a Kingmaker*; Khobreakar, *Tarikh-i Dilkasha*.

⁴ Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*; see also the critique by Pollock and others in 'Pretextures of Time', pp. 366–427.

⁵ Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*; Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*.

⁶ Chatterjee, 'History as Self-Representation'; Narayana Rao and Subrahmanyam, 'Notes on Political Thought'.

literary, intellectual and bureaucratic domains illustrated the porousness of the boundaries between them.⁷ These studies of the diverse professional roles and cultural sensibilities of scribal communities also pointed in different ways to a distinctive 'early modern' moment in India's history, which very much framed our modest explorations in 2010.

Looking back over the last decade, what new trends and directions of research have emerged? Many scholars have continued to explore the same themes in Persianate scribal service culture. Some have worked from the perspective of the Mughal court looking outwards, such as Kinra's portrayal of the Mughal state secretary Chandar Bhan Brahman or Sharma's account of the striving of ambitious and mobile émigrés looking for positions in state service to equip themselves with Persianate literary and epistolary skills.⁸ In a welcome move, other scholars have shifted focus to look at scribal service people at the Sultanate courts of the Deccan. Fischel, Eaton, Wagoner and Flatt have looked at the administrative skills, political imagination and social tastes displayed by the multi-ethnic scribal communities who served the states of the Deccan Sultanate.⁹

The wider and integrated world of Persianate culture has also drawn much scholarly attention, some of it focused largely on India, and some presenting a trans-regional history of this culture over many centuries.¹⁰ A key contribution of this new work lies in exploring in much more social detail what exactly 'Persianate' norms and competencies meant in the lives of those who lived in different parts of the Persephone world. Flatt's work, for example, offers a detailed illustration of the modes of bodily and ethical comportment that elite scribal servants of the Bijapur court developed as they adapted Persianate cultural norms to the social world of the Deccan.¹¹ Most pertinent to the concerns of this volume, however, is Mana Kia's path-breaking study of the multi-layered 'Persianate selves' of many eighteenth-century scribal people. Kia's work suggests that laying claim to plural affiliations of origin, family, place, patronage, language and culture, continued to be central to the identities and social strategies of many Persianate scribal service groups during the eighteenth century. These affiliations were often 'aporetic', contradictory or discontinuous in nature, but capable of reconciliation through the continuous interplay between individual experience and collective memory through which the 'Persianate selves' of the eighteenth century were constructed. From this perspective, the rise of regional states in the subcontinent seems to have deepened and intensified the reach of Persianate scribal culture and its associated

⁷ Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World*.

⁸ Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire*; Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia*, pp. 16–62.

⁹ Fischel, *Local States in an Imperial World*, pp. 149–91; Eaton and Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture*, pp. 208–14; Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan*.

¹⁰ See Amanat and Ashraf, *The Persianate World*; Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*; Green, *The Persianate World*.

¹¹ Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan*, pp. 210–267.

cultural norms across the subcontinent, as the states sought to develop their own supra-regional political connections, and to articulate their political ambitions in what continued to be India's common language for the expression of claims to royal power. For mobile scribal service communities themselves, Kia argues, Persianate culture, and particularly the norms surrounding *adab* or ideal personal comportment, allowed communities both to participate in a common and prestigious form of cultural affiliation, while also accommodating difference and cultural particularity.¹²

Other scholars have focused less on shared Persianate identities, and more on the practical bureaucratic, legal and pedagogical practices on which these identities often rested. Nandini Chatterjee's recent exploration of the forms of history written by Kayasthas in Mughal Malwa reminds us that many Kayastha scribal families were able over time to establish themselves as landed lineages who celebrated their military as well as their scribal accomplishments.¹³ Dudney reveals the unexpected shaping of eighteenth-century Persian pedagogy by a remarkably influential small-town North Indian educator.¹⁴ Other recent research has explored the more specific routines of documentation that attended the work of a competent scribe in settings outside the royal court: the offices of the qazi, the caste assembly, the regional *majalis* or council convened to adjudicate disputes of many kinds, the Brahman *dharmasabha* or convocation of religious scholars, the registers of local cutcherries or revenue offices, and the *daftar* archives of elite households.¹⁵

What has emerged from this new research is the remarkably consistent set of practical norms that often governed the mundane work of lesser scribes in early modern bureaucratic settings. This work, particularly well illustrated in Guha's closely observed study of the ecology of local judicial and administrative institutions in early modern western India, included the taking of oral evidence, the authentication of documents through signs and seals, the proper conduct and scrutiny of ordeals where these were part of the proceedings, the recording of judgements, their dissemination to interested parties and their storage within the *daftar* of state or lordly household.¹⁶ As Deshpande has recently described, these norms about ideal practices in writing, recording and accounting also extended into the personal lives of Marathi scribes in western India. The mundane routines of a scribe's work, his careful use of instruments for preparing paper, pen and ink, his hours of labour at *escritoire* or writing table, the accuracy and legibility of his writing and his conscientious management of documents entrusted to him could also constitute a form

¹² Kia, *Persianate Selves*. We thank Purnima Dhavan for drawing this very recent work to our attention.

¹³ Chatterjee, *Negotiating Mughal Law*.

¹⁴ Dudney, 'Persian-Language Education in Mughal India'.

¹⁵ Hasan, 'Property and Social Relations in Mughal India'; Guha, 'The *Qazi*, the *Dharmadhikari* and the Judge'; Chatterjee, 'Mahzar-namas in the Mughal and British Empires'.

¹⁶ For examples of these practices in the context of Maharashtra, see particularly Guha, *History and Collective Memory*, pp. 83–117.

of religious service.¹⁷ Within such routines, Marathi scribes were able to fashion a sense of themselves and of the ideal ethical as well as bodily comportment that they might strive to realise in their lives, very much in parallel with the ideal of personal *adab* that Kia has described for service scribal communities more rooted in Persianate culture.

One further consequence of this new research has been a much better appreciation of the local procedures of the bureaucratic state in the pre-colonial era, and their changing forms over the course of the eighteenth century and into the colonial era. As Raman, Deshpande, Bellenoit and others have suggested, the colonial state entered a world in which many different kinds of bureaucratic and documentary procedure were already very well developed. What the East India Company state and successive colonial governments did was to dismantle some of these procedures, allow others to wither through neglect and introduce its own routines in a series of often botched experiments, which ultimately limited and distorted popular access to the bureaucratic and judicial procedures of the state.¹⁸

At the other end of the scale, the local work of scribes in early modern India has attracted the attention of scholars interested in wider Islamic and Arabic, as well as Persianate routines of bureaucratic recording and documentation. These routines, emerging out of the great expansion of paper use that took place from early in the second millennium, were developed and localised in India in the course of many centuries of engagement with the Islamic and Persian worlds. The routines offer us unique insights into the mundane local work of skilled writers, recorders and copyists of many kinds. They also illustrate the many different ways in which state institutions across these worlds were beginning to make demands on their local populations and the opportunities these institutions opened up for mobile scribal labour. Where mobile scribal labour went, there often followed scholars, intellectuals and literati, likewise attracted by state-building activities and the patronage likely to be on offer. The networks so created often connected courtly and sectarian centres right across the Persianate and Islamic world.¹⁹

The study of scribal service people has also contributed to recent scholarship in the field of literary cultures, and the study of literary cultures has in turn amplified our appreciation of the wider cultural pursuits of many of those employed in scribal service. The landmark publication in 2003 of *Literary Cultures in History: Reflections from South Asia*, under the editorship of Sheldon Pollock, explored continuities and ruptures ranging over the whole of the subcontinent's second

¹⁷ Deshpande, 'The Writerly Self'.

¹⁸ Raman, *Document Raj*; Deshpande, 'Scripting the Cultural History of Language'; Bellenoit, *The Formation of the Colonial State*; De and Travers, 'Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia'.

¹⁹ Pickett and Sartori, *Islamic Cultures of Documentation*; Nandini Chatterjee, 'Forms of Law in the Early Modern Persianate World', available at <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/history/research/projects/forms-of-law/>, accessed on 15 July 2020; Bahl, 'Transoceanic Arabic Historiography'.

‘vernacular’ millennium. However, the focus of the volume lay less in identifying a distinctive ‘early modern’ moment, and more in exploring the great complexity of South Asia’s multilingual literary cultures across many centuries, and the different ‘modes of temporality’ that structured these literary cultures for their participants. Research in the last decade, reflecting our broadened understanding of the multiple cultural engagements and literary sensibilities of scribal service communities, has focussed rather more on their late medieval and early modern histories. As noted above, many were also scholars, poets and connoisseurs of literature and language in their own right. Royal courts, lordly and merchant households and sectarian centres offered them and their peers spaces of performance and knowledgeable audiences, as they experimented with the mixing of genres, with the play of new and often multivocal meanings, images and sounds as they moved between Persian and the vernaculars, between oral and textual modes of communication, and between texts capable of expression in different scripts.²⁰ With their education in Persianate and vernacular forms of literary expression, lesser scribes may very well have been part of the wider penumbra of appreciative consumers of this literary virtuosity, carried beyond the world of the court and elite household into traditions of oral and popular performance.²¹

What has also become clear, from the path-breaking work of Francesca Orsini, Samira Sheikh and others, is the degree to which these reserves of literary inventiveness and experimentation were very much in the making before the great sixteenth-century expansion of Mughal patronage for Persian and Sanskrit literary endeavour.²² The recent remarkable work of Pankaj Jha in particular excavates for us the considerable reserves of scholarly expertise, literary virtuosity and technical scribal skills that were accumulating across North India during the fifteenth century.²³ Jha’s study of the great scholar, poet, exponent of political ethics and Saivite devotee Vidyapati prompts us to consider how far the Mughal expansion of scribal service labour actually rested on these earlier foundations. The study also reveals how far Vidyapati’s Sanskrit work on political ethics and norms for ideal manhood resonated strongly with parallel Persian ideas about virtue in the ideal polity, in ways we usually associated more with the Mughal era. At the same time, Jha’s work points up the very distinctiveness of fifteenth-century literary and intellectual culture. For this greatest figure of fifteenth-century intellectual culture was writing not from the imperial centre of the Delhi Sultanate, or from the nearby powerful Sharqi kingdom, but rather from an obscure kingdom near

²⁰ See, for example, Orsini and Bulter Schofield, *Tellings and Texts*; Williams, ‘Reflecting in the Vernacular’; and Dudney, ‘Going Native’.

²¹ See in particular the essays in Orsini and Butler Schofield, *Tellings and Texts*; de Bruijn and Busch, *Culture and Circulation*; Burger and Catoni, *Early Modern India*; and Korangy, *Urdu and Indo-Persian Thought*.

²² See the path-breaking collection of essays in Orsini and Sheikh, *After Timur Left*.

²³ Jha, *A Political History of Literature*.

Tirhut in Mithila. For a 'local cosmopolitan' like Vidyapati, this was not a place of obscurity or cultural isolation, but rather an important node in the very active translocal networks that traversed the literary landscape of North India. Unlike the Mughal period—and perhaps anticipating the eighteenth-century world explored in this volume—literary and intellectual endeavour in the fifteenth century were dispersed across many and often small centres, whose intellectuals and emergent scribal service communities were able to offer their own sharp-eyed critique of the power and pomp of imperial courts.

As the example of Vidyapati demonstrates, scholars exploring the history of these communities have found that the boundaries between 'literary' and religious endeavour also turned out to be almost infinitely porous. Bhakti poets, Sufi saints and other sectarian figures have emerged as the focus of research for scholars of literature as much as they did for scholars of religion, given the importance of literary genres for religious expression, and of literary virtuosity as part of the repertoire of many religious preceptors. Gentry literati, poets, musicians and performers, often including elite scribal servants among their number, were able to travel and find new followings across what had been assumed to be fixed boundaries of region, religion, language and culture. Far from being counterposed, Sufi and bhakti cultures contained commonalities which promoted this mobility.²⁴ Novel ideas about the imagination itself as a distinctive and autonomous human faculty, with parallels in the Renaissance and early modern Europe, also emerged from this period of literary and devotional cross-fertilisation in India of the same era.²⁵

One of the many impressive features of this new research lies in the nuanced way in which scholars have explored the nature of hybridity and syncretism. Cultural crossings here did not emerge as an undifferentiated mixing, but was often observable as a world of parallel enjoyments made possible by the multiple meanings that a knowledgeable audience could discern and appreciate in works of literature, religion, music or art.²⁶ Much of this new research has emphasised how important it is that we move beyond simplistic dichotomies between cosmopolitan and vernacular, or easy characterisations of 'Indo-Persian' literary culture. That many different kinds of literary hybridity emerged during the early modern centuries is demonstrated nowhere more clearly than in recent important work which explores the geographical frontiers of Indo-Persian literary culture. In examining the work

²⁴ See, for example, the essays in Dalmia and Faruqi, *Religious Interactions in Mughal India*. Also Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*.

²⁵ Shulman, *More than Real*. For the role of imagination and emotion in constructing a sense of intellectual community amongst Sanskrit scholars of logic in seventeenth-century Bengal, see Wright, *A Time of Novelty*.

²⁶ Orsini's path-breaking explorations in this field have in the past decade both set the terms for research on the subcontinent's multilingual literary cultures, and drawn together research communities with the language skills needed to investigate them. See in particular Orsini, 'How to Do Multilingual Literary History?'

of Ālāol, Bengali poet of seventeenth-century Arakan, d'Hubert opens up for us the world of mercantile Bengali Muslims who acted as intermediaries between the Dutch VOC and the Arakanese nobility of the court city of Mrauk-U. Writing for these Bengali audiences, Ālāol drew freely on the Sanskrit literary themes which formed a shared frame of reference within Arakanese court culture. With the growth of Mughal dominance in Arakan from the 1660s, however, Ālāol gravitated towards Persian, reflecting the wider weakening of the multilingual culture of the early seventeenth century. At the same time, d'Hubert shows how Ālāol's reading of Persian poetry was permeated by his appreciation of older traditions of Avadhi poetics.²⁷ While seventeenth-century Arakan demonstrated complexity in the construction of local Indo-Persian poetics, Indo-Persian travellers in the Burmese kingdom at the turn of the nineteenth century revealed the potentialities of Indo-Persian prose. Khazeni's study of the narratives of travellers in the Burmese kingdom shows how they drew on simultaneously on Indo-Persian travel genres and early colonial Orientalism to construct the kingdom as an extraordinary Buddhist realm within a deeply forested landscape.²⁸

If the plural cultural engagements of many service scribes have added to our understanding of the likely wider audiences for the literary and religious experimentation of the early modern centuries, has the same been true of the field of intellectual history? Many scholars over the last decade have noted the new opportunities for intellectual expansion and enrichment that took place as Mughal and other early modern courts promoted conversations between European visitors and their own Sanskrit and Persian intellectuals, and those intellectuals themselves took up challenges from Sufi, bhakti and more heterodox popular movements within their own traditions.²⁹ Particularly in the realm of Sanskrit intellectual culture, the city of Banaras acted as a major node and meeting place for intellectuals traversing the networks that came to link the Mughal and Rajput courts, and the courts and sectarian centres of Bengal, the Deccan and southern India. As communities of Sanskrit intellectuals in different parts of India were drawn into closer connection and found themselves competing within the same intellectual arenas, many sought to strengthen the foundations of their own disciplines, and to display their individual virtuosity within them. Out of these processes emerged some of the marks of the 'early modern' moment in India's intellectual life noted above: a sense of newness, of the importance of individual intellectual striving as against the pull of family and community, of the historicity of received tradition itself, and of the challenge of the vernacular and the popular across all areas of religious and literary life.³⁰

²⁷ d'Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace*.

²⁸ Khazeni, *The City and the Wilderness*.

²⁹ See in particular Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, and Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India*.

³⁰ There is a very large literature here, where the path-breaking work of Sheldon Pollock and his students has done so much to define the field. See the essays in Bronner, Cox, and McCrea, *South Asian Texts in History*; Pollock, *Forms of Knowledge*; and Minkowski, O'Hanlon, and Venkatkrishnan, 'Discipline, Sect, Lineage and Community'.

How far have studies of service scribal people in particular over the last decade helped inform our understanding of this era within Sanskrit intellectual culture? As noted above, a number of historians had already noted the facility for political reflection demonstrated by Hindu scribal communities, both those embedded in Persianate cultures of bureaucratic state service and those familiar with the traditions of statecraft based in Sanskrit textual tradition. It is therefore very likely that service scribal people with Sanskrit skills constituted part of the broader constituency that took an interest in new developments in Sanskrit intellectual culture. In some cases, rivalries between scribal service communities prompted a close interest in dharmaśāstra, and could drive very conservative interpretations of the śāstric texts governing the nature of different castes in the age of the Kaliyuga, and their rights to practice different professions. This was certainly the case for many Kayastha communities in western India, who fought a long drawn-out battle with their Brahman scribal rivals for the ritual prestige of twice-born status.³¹

Scribal service people affected Sanskrit intellectual culture in other ways. The site for intellectual production in Sanskrit was very often the extended Brahman scholar household. Different brothers of the family contributed to its collective fortunes in ways that suited their individual talents: some as intellectuals, some as local educators and some again as copyists or in local administrative service roles. Scholar families defined their membership, and their reputations, both in terms of the biological sons who contributed to their resources, and the wider quasi-filial relations established through teaching. This concentration of scholarly and scribal talent within the same family could in some settings provide the basis for remarkable intellectual advances.³² In others, as Madhav Deshpande has suggested, a sense of obligation to the family as a scholarly enterprise could sometimes make for intellectual conservatism and a reluctance, often deeply conflicted, to challenge the authority of seniors who were either fathers or teachers, or more distantly admired models for literary emulation.³³

There were also wider consequences for the interplay between Persianate and Sanskrit intellectual cultures. Many Brahman scholars and intellectuals, including those whose main livelihoods lay in service scribal work, did not accommodate themselves straightforwardly to Persianate literary or administrative culture. As Ganeri has noted, developments in Sanskrit philosophy and metaphysics, as opposed to the exact sciences, did not take place in close conversation with Persianate and

³¹ Deshpande, 'Ksatriyas in the Kali Age?'

³² See, for example, Minkowski's analysis of the achievements of families of astrologers in Mughal Delhi and Banaras, and of scholar lineages committed to the study of Advaita Vedānta, or Venkatkrishnan's exploration of the remarkable intellectual and religious history of the Deva family of Banaras. Minkowski, 'Learned Brahmins and the Mughal Court'; *idem*, 'Advaita Vedānta in Early Modern History'; Venkatkrishnan, 'Are There Atheists in Potholes?'

³³ Deshpande, 'Disagreement without Disrespect'; O'Hanlon, 'Speaking from Siva's Temple'; Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason*, p. 81.

Islamic forms of learning.³⁴ Minkowski has also described the ambivalence with which some Brahman scholars regarded the seeking of livelihoods in the service of the yavana or Muslim foreigner.³⁵ For many lesser scribes from within the Sanskrit tradition, Persianate learning was a regrettable necessity, a matter of, as Sumit Guha has put it, ‘serving the barbarian to preserve the dharma’.³⁶ In other cases, men of religion such as the bhakti poet Eknath may have worked periodically in the service of the Nizam Shahi state, as suggested by his familiarity with Persian bureaucratic terminology. If he did, though, the followers who later preserved the memory of his tradition made no direct mention of it.³⁷ In other cases again, as in that of the conservative fifteenth-century Sanskrit scholar Gopinath, writing in the later years of the Bahmani Sultanate, learning the language of the *mleccha*, or ‘barbarians’, was a matter for vituperative condemnation.³⁸

Scholars over the last decade have thus developed a much better sense of the real breadth of early scribal communities’ engagements and accomplishments and of the social and professional heterogeneity of those communities themselves. The essays in the present volume, which originated in another conference in Oxford in 2017, reflect this sense of breadth, but seek to address two new questions. First, we seek to build on existing work on scribal communities in India’s eighteenth century. What did the new conditions of the period mean for them and what consequences, in turn, did their careers and aspirations have for the making and the unmaking of the ‘successor’ states of the eighteenth century? Second, what can we know of their networks, including those forged by kinship, professional work or affective association, the conditions of their mobility, their sense of themselves as ‘professionals’ of a kind in the service of new regional powers, including those of the European trading companies?

As is well known, India’s ‘long eighteenth century’ has in recent decades been the subject of wide-ranging scholarly reinterpretation. Older narratives of political challenge and waning glory at the Mughal centre have given way to a focus on the flourishing of regional power at the Mughal centre have given way to a focus on the flourishing of regional successor states, as commercial forces that were global in nature penetrated regional economies. Alongside forms of the state, scholars have also explored the intermediate corporate institutions, from banking and merchant families to military entrepreneurs, revenue farmers and sectarian leaders, ‘men of power’ whose skills and diverse portfolios of interests came to underpin the power of regional states. New military technologies have equally drawn scholarly attention, as they came to shape the ‘military fiscalism’ of regional power-holders as well as of the European trading companies.

³⁴ Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason*, pp. 6–7.

³⁵ Minkowski, ‘Learned Brahmins and the Mughal Court’, pp. 104–08.

³⁶ Guha, ‘Serving the Barbarian’.

³⁷ Keune, ‘Eknath in Context’, pp. 80–81.

³⁸ O’Hanlon, Hidas, and Kiss, ‘Discourses of Caste’, p. 111.

As many scholars have observed, a key feature of these histories lay in the growing interdependence between royal, military and commercial power. Commercial and military forces that were global as well as European in origin helped to weaken the older underpinnings of state power and to open new opportunities for the mobile, the ambitious, those willing to explore new modes of warfare and who knew how to move and manage cash. To support their operations in the increasingly fluid and competitive environment that emerged in India from the late seventeenth century, rulers of new states turned to bankers, military contractors and revenue farmers, and revenue managers themselves took on military and political roles to consolidate their power and protect their investments. Across these fields, there is broad agreement that it is difficult to separate the histories of global flows of commerce, the expansion of the European trading companies and the 'indigenous' histories of the states and societies of the subcontinent.³⁹

The new states of the eighteenth century developed their institutions in hesitant and often makeshift ways in this context. States were routinely understood to be extensions of the royal household, branches of state administration were conducted as family enterprises and offices within them, along with the skills required to exercise them, were passed down within families of professional administrators. As the roles of revenue manager and military governor coalesced, new hereditary elites emerged, who quickly associated themselves with older forms of royal and aristocratic culture even as they mobilised kinship ties and offered cash grants and pensions to wider circles of their dependents. Histories of politics, financial and military power have likewise come to seem inseparable from the history of religious and sectarian cultures, with the rise of warrior monks as a key military resource for eighteenth-century states and merchant communities, the sponsorship by administrators and revenue-managers-turned-kings of new religious festivals and performances as a means of consolidating their public support and the appropriation of religious idioms and ideologies for new forms of populist politics.⁴⁰

The scribal service communities of the eighteenth century were key enablers of these powerful and interpenetrating currents of change. Unprecedented regional state-building opened new arenas for their energies. Their skills were at a premium in the European trading companies as much as in regional states, placing many at key intersections between political, diplomatic, commercial and military power across the subcontinent. As opportunities for scribal service in Mughal state administration and the households of great nobles declined, these new opportunities beckoned for those willing to travel. As their new patrons rewarded them with offices and cash, many also developed profitable sidelines in some of the key commercial drivers of eighteenth-century change, revenue farming, the provision of cash and credit and the acquisition of local landed rights and privileges held more independently of Mughal authority.

³⁹ For an excellent overview, see Travers, 'The Eighteenth Century in Indian History'.

⁴⁰ Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*; Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*; Kaicker, *The King and the People*.

This very flexibility created challenges as well as opportunities. The scribal service communities of the eighteenth century often found themselves working within regional state institutions that were less well developed than those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sparser and more sporadic in their ability to police their scribal servants, and less certain of the latter's service obligations to them. Scribes themselves frequently found themselves in sharp competition with their peers and uncertain of the limits of free enterprise. They often struggled to articulate an ethic of solidarity and service appropriate to the competitiveness of their times, competitiveness focused as much around patronage and service opportunities as around public displays of intellectual or literary virtuosity.

The six essays in this volume pursue a number of different, but connected themes in the history of eighteenth-century service people thus defined. The essays acknowledge the frequent breadth of their education and diversity of accomplishment across many fields of literature and scholarship, whilst seeking to maintain a focus on the core of administrative and service scribal skills that were their distinctive asset. What did 'service' mean to them, as some remained within, and others moved beyond, the older models of Mughal administrative employment? How did they negotiate the demands of individual patrons alongside their performance of broader obligations to the new states of the eighteenth century? Our knowledge of the complex ways in which they supported themselves remains fragmentary. What were the networks—of political patronage, sectarian connection, caste and family relationships—along which they moved in search of opportunity or to escape local warfare and political disorder? How far did their individual aspirations envisage something like the trajectory of a 'career'? We need to know more about the way in which their experience of migration, either recent or as an earlier event enshrined and explained in family memory, shaped their mental worlds. How did travel affect their sense of themselves, and what forms of historical, literary and artistic reflection did they employ to express these changes? Many also sought prestige by associating themselves with forms of lordly and royal authority, with caste-based ritual dignities, or with ideals of martial prowess. How far did they cherish personal aspirations beyond the sphere of scribal and bureaucratic competence, and how far did the sphere of scribal accomplishment remain a sufficient horizon for personal and family aspiration?

As several essays here describe, most scribal service people worked very much within the setting of family, household and kinship, and households themselves operated as corporate enterprises.⁴¹ How did the family make possible the concentration of skills and social capital, and enable service people to consolidate their careers? In turn, how did service people balance their individual ambitions with the collective needs and demands of family? How did migration of different kinds shape practical as well as affective conditions within the family? What other kinds

⁴¹ For an example that takes in the multiple social dimensions of a scribal Indo-Persian household that included slaves amongst its membership, see Chatterjee, 'A Slave's Quest for Self-hood'.

of corporate support, particularly that of sectarian institutions, were available to mobile professionals who did not work within such family arrangements?

Questions of identity were also at the heart of these processes. We know relatively little about how the service people of the eighteenth century saw themselves as they moved between locales and occupations. Families with traditions of lordship and military prowess developed administrative roles within the successor states. Courtly cities in decline saw an outflow of skilled literati moving from Delhi to Awadh and the Deccan, and to the new port cities and other centres of the East India Company's operations. Religious scholars moved to the regional states and new literary pursuits as Mughal sources of patronage for religious learning dwindled. Regional states' efforts to stitch together new empires out of formal Mughal territories also drove the recruitment of scribal service people. How were histories, memoirs, travel journals and other genres developed to express the loss of old identities and relationships that these changes prompted? As indicated above, Kia's recent work suggests that the maintenance of diverse Persianate affiliations, accompanied by a shared ideal of personal comportment, enabled the scribal service communities of the eighteenth century to navigate its complex political and social landscape.⁴² However, this observation in turn raises important questions, addressed in several of the essays here, as to how tensions between old and new affiliations, or overlapping existing ones, were negotiated.

Following on from this, some of the essays here explore the realm of political ideas and imagination. Much recent research suggests that the circumstances of the eighteenth century prompted contemporaries to reflect on forms of the states they saw around them, and the conduct of political relationships between them. The failures of Mughal power, and the emergence of a new regional political order which was itself then very quickly under challenge from the East India Company, made questions about the past and the future very difficult to avoid. How did the people studied here think about the causes of instability and decline, and what cultural resources did they imagine might support a recovery yet over the horizon?

Scribal specialists travelled across devotional as well as literary networks, some in support of their spiritual commitments, others in search of opportunity. Scholars and poets with administrative skills as well as ties to devotional cultures often moved across the networks of monastery, temple and shrine. They found shelter and support as they travelled, renewing their connections and sometimes lending their scribal and literary services. For the devout with literary skills, mobility could be many things: a means to defend themselves against the regulatory demands of regional states, a form of spiritual journey to witness the fallen state of a world apparently abandoned by the gods, a necessary part of the search for new patrons, or simply a response to the violence of local warfare in which sectarian institutions were easy targets. In these and other instances, how far did the worlds of shrine

⁴² Kia, *Persianate Selves*, 181–94.

and sect offer their own distinctive separate milieus for the skills of service people, distinct from those of states and great households?

Across all of these fields, service people contributed in major ways to the making, and the unmaking, of eighteenth-century states. Their skills underpinned key operations, from politics and diplomacy to revenue collection. Their extended families lent continuity and stability to key offices and functions. Their mastery of the languages of politics contributed to ideas about political loyalty in action, and their writings from history to literature were repositories of meaning for identity and ethics. In some instances, the portfolios of offices, property and interests that many possessed made them efficient and flexible servants of states. In others, these competing involvements made them ready targets for competitors, including the European trading companies. What role did such conflicts play in the later eighteenth-century crises of the successor states?

Finally, some of the essays here also explore the colonial legacy of these social histories. The princely states of the nineteenth century often continued to employ later generations of the administrative families who had served them in the eighteenth, now coming to terms with the new colonial milieu. Their political reflections about the proper nature of state service and the causes of its decline fed into the intellectual resources of their colonial successors. Many of the histories and memoirs they wrote came to feature within later community identities, as well as contributing to the information gathering and knowledge production of the colonial state. Literati of the early eighteenth century were decisive in the shaping of the languages and literatures of the nineteenth, from Urdu poetry to experiments in the writing of vernacular prose. Through these and other routes, the long eighteenth century saw the emergence and consolidation of the scribal and professional classes who came to staff the lower reaches of colonial state administration, and, in time, to make up a significant element in India's emerging 'nationalist' bourgeoisie.

It is hoped that this framework for discussion might give us insights into some of the wider questions that have preoccupied historians of late pre- and early colonial India. Many have suggested a remarkable 'newness' in Indian intellectual and literary life of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But what happened to these energies in the generations that followed, as skilled service people traversed the networks connecting the new regional states of the eighteenth century, and the expanding power of the European trading companies? Might their experience offer us new ways to understand the balance of subcontinental forces during the long eighteenth century transition to colonialism?

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