

Introduction

Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook

University of Oxford and Trinity College, Cambridge

Historians largely access the past through the work of 'scribes', whose function is to record the actions of the powerful. Without written documents, our knowledge of the past would be confined to shadows and suggestions. Yet who were the scribes whose products we see? Until quite recently, they have been treated as anonymous, and their products the function of abstract conceptions of bureaucracy, state and economy. Now, however, a growing body of work has begun to investigate their social identities, their group histories and their important roles in the states, societies and cultures of South Asia.¹ The essays in this collection aim to contribute to these explorations, focusing particularly on the social identity of scribes and the nature of the state and economic operations which they assiduously recorded.

As is well known, the early modern centuries brought a series of dramatic changes to India. On the one hand, the introduction of sophisticated systems of paper administration developed originally in the Islamic world redefined the nature of the state and provided a new infrastructure of law and administration. On the other, commercialisation and monetisation related to the expansion of the global economy made accountancy and the management of money and resources increasingly complex. Scribes were set wholly new tasks, and were required both to extend their existing knowledge and skills and acquire new ones.

¹ See Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'Making of a Munshi'; Narayana Rao et al, *Textures of Time*, 93–139; Subrahmanyam, 'State Formation'; Alam, 'Culture and Politics'; Kumkum Chatterjee, 'History as self-representation'; Guha, 'Speaking Historically'; S. Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*, pp. 64–96.

Acknowledgements: These articles were originally presented at a workshop in Oxford in June 2008.

The editors are very grateful to all participants at that workshop for their contribution to the themes considered here, and to the Faculty of Oriental Studies, St Antony's College, the Fell Fund and the British Academy for their support.

***The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 47, 4 (2010): 441–43**
SAGE Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/001946461004700401

Yet this brought a range of tensions and conflicts. Many of the 'new' scribes were drawn from groups of religious specialists, both Muslim and Hindu, who had long developed writing skills in relation to their work in ritual and legal spheres. Tensions arose between their religious and mundane duties, since the new tasks that they were set frequently challenged their traditions of belief and social etiquette. The essays collected here explore four aspects of this tension. First, the worlds of the Persianised literati and of scribal people whose learning came out of Sanskrit religious and literary culture overlapped in some respects, but came sharply into collision in others. These relationships varied markedly across different regions of early modern India, shaped in important ways by local religious traditions, forms of the state and the nature of patronage and rewards available to service communities. The culture and social orientation of India's kayastha communities in particular were shaped by these different regional pressures.

Second, within the Sanskritic tradition, issues arose over the implications for religious status, especially of Brahmans, of serving 'unclean' powers: where the promise of material gain was set against the risk of displeasing the gods, as well as jeopardising ritual prestige and social reputation. Brahmans in different parts of India struggled to meet this challenge and produced markedly different solutions to it. Some repudiated these avenues to advancement altogether. Others found complex means of accommodating them, in the course of which they came to develop new and more worldly perspectives on state power and scribal service, as well as on the nature of the future and the past.

Third, some scribal communities derived their skills from practices of the state rather than ritual status and function, and emerged out of longer histories of service as intermediaries between kings and their clients and subjects. These communities were to find themselves subject to recurring questions about the nature of their social status and the worth of their skills. Were they mere servants to masters, whose skills could be bought and sold and whose prestige was a reflection only of the power of their masters? Or were they in fact the cultured guardians of the most precious resources of the state and indispensable to the practices of royalty? This ambiguity was less acute within Indo-Persian political culture, where the role of the chronicler had long secured its prestige. However, it continued to plague scribal people lodged within a Sanskrit-derived political culture, where the drive to establish local prestige brought clashes with existing high caste elites and promoted the formation of new genealogies, histories and claims to ritual entitlement.

The fourth theme considered here concerns the scribal traditions established in the early modern period and their role in shaping the 'service' groups who emerged in the colonial period and have carried India forward into its postcolonial modernity. These later transitions required the acquisition of yet newer forms of 'knowledge', not least science and technology, and promoted yet further forms of

tension and conflict. However, the way in which the latter were resolved may have drawn heavily on the 'models' established in earlier periods, which continue to guide Indian society—and particularly its 'professional' classes—towards its own very distinctive modernity today.

India's traditions of historical investigation have tended to locate the dynamics of change either in the activities of royal and ruling groups, or else in those of agrarian economies and the way that they consolidated new social classes. The essays presented here suggest that it may also be worthwhile looking at India's varied scribal communities during the early modern period, whose accumulated intellectual skills and cultural capital also served as powerful drivers of historical transformation.

References

- Alam, Muzaffar. 'The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan,' in Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, Berkeley, 2003, pp. 159–71.
- Alam, Muzaffar and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. 'The Making of a Munshi,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 24 (2), 2004, pp. 61–72.
- Bayly, Susan. *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge, 1999.
- Chatterjee, Kumkum. 'History as Self-representation: The Recasting of a Political Tradition in Late Eighteenth Century Eastern India', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 32(4), 1998, pp. 913–48.
- Guha, Sumit. 'Speaking Historically: The Changing Voices of Historical Narration in Western India, 1400–1900', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 109 (4), 2004, pp. 1084–1103.
- Narayana Rao, Velcheru, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800*, New Delhi, 2003.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. 'Aspects of State Formation in South India and Southeast Asia', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 23, 1986, pp. 357–77.