The Maratha Brahmin model in south India: An afterword

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Many of the social groups who acquired scribal skills in the early modern period went on to acquire western education in the colonial period, and to lead the growth of the professions and the development of science and technology even into the postcolonial era. Yet, especially for Brahmins, the transition in both the early modern and modern epochs was never easy and raised awkward questions about the relationship between their 'religious' and 'secular' identities, about the nature of the different 'knowledges' which they possessed. This article argues that, for the transition in southern India, developments among Brahmin communities in Maharashtra from the fifteenth century were crucial. They established an acceptable model of secular Brahmin behaviour, which, if not without difficulty, eventually came to establish itself as normative across the South.

Keywords: Brahmin, Maratha, science, scribal, South India

One of the many consequences of the colonial intervention has been to make it difficult to grasp the degrees of continuity between India's pasts and its present. From some perspectives, it appears as if India were entirely remade at Britain's hands in the nineteenth century; from others it seems that elements in its modern history lead back directly into the centuries before the coming of colonialism. The theme of continuity is brought out in this collection by the inclusion of the essay by Chris Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan on the key role played by Tamil Brahmins in India's latter day advance towards modernity, especially in its scientific and technological aspects.[1] Tamil Brahmins dominate India's dynamic IT

[1] Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Traditional Vocations'. See also their 'From Landlords to Software Engineers', 170–96.

The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 47, 4 (2010): 597–615
SAGE Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/001946461004700407

industry—based in contemporary Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad (Cyberabad)—and are disproportionately represented in the classrooms and laboratories of the country, and much of the rest of the world. However, as Fuller and Narasimhan show, the pre-history of their surge towards the twenty-first century was their acquisition of 'scribal' skills in the nineteenth and, to some extent, earlier. It gave them the educational capital to succeed in the rapidly changing world of modernity.

Moreover, and in reverse, the scribal groups seen to form in the early modern period by the authors of the other essays in this collection were also to project themselves far across the subsequent centuries. For example, the Vaidyas, Kayasthas and Brahmins, whom Kumkum Chatterjee explores in the context of Mughal Bengal, were the progenitors of the celebrated Kolkata *bhadralok*, whose complex relationship with western education and colonialism would give rise to India's first modern 'national' culture.[2] And the Maratha Brahmins, whom both Polly O'Hanlon and Sumit Guha examine in the context of Sultanate and Mughal western India, would come to dominate the professions in what has grown into India's leading industrial and commercial state, and also to play a leading role in formulating its second modern national culture—or ideology—of *Hindutva*.[3]

Nor has this continuity been confined just to matters of genealogy and biological descent, where India's propensity for hereditary occupations might mask wider changes in outlook and culture across the generations. A no less striking feature of India's modernity, certainly in comparison to much of the world, is the extent to which it appears to embrace its past 'tradition'—even leading some scholars to suppose an intimate link between the two.[4] Nowhere is this clearer than in matters of religion, where the recent burgeoning of India's professional middle classes has by no means been attended by that move towards the secularisation of society anticipated in the classic neo-Weberian paradigm of modernity.[5] Rather, the faster pace of technical modernisation has been accompanied by a major religious revival, in which the role of the middle classes has been especially pronounced. More than 50 per cent of India's domestic tourist industry is now devoted to organising pilgrimages to religious sites. In 2008, the great Tirupati temple received no fewer 23 million pilgrims and collected upwards of 500 million US dollars in donations and fees.[6] Indeed, the nexus between religion and scientific modernity might be seen in the wider activities of the Tirupati temple itself, which uses a large part of its income to fund educational charities promoting the learning of science.

Indian modernity is deeply paradoxical. However, some of these paradoxes may become easier to unravel when placed against the background of the historical origins of India's 'modern' middle classes. Their scribal forbears were largely

[2] Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites'.
[3] O'Hanlon, 'The Social Worth of Scribes' and Guha, 'Serving the barbarian'.
[4] For example, Suzanne and Lloyd Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition*.
[5] For a recent discussion, Taylor, *The Modern Social Imaginary*.
[6] Nanda, *The God Market*, pp. 39–62.

drawn from its upper caste elites, especially its Brahmin priestly castes who, in making their adjustments to the new contexts brought about at that time by Islamic culture, even before the advent of the Europeans, showed no inclination to abandon their religious heritage while acquiring the new skills required for their work. As both Kumkum Chatterjee and Sumit Guha emphasise, they strengthened and re-asserted their religious identities in the course of their professional transition into 'scribes'.[7] Then, as now, engagement with a new world of learning did not necessarily mean the collapse of the old.

How does one explain this facility for combining multiple forms of learning and 'knowledge', perhaps of culture? In the 1950s, observing the ease with which Tamil Brahmins moved between the puja room and laboratory and business office, Milton Singer supposed them to operate a species of 'compartmentalisation' whereby they could keep the 'traditional' and the 'modern' aspects of their lives apart.[8] However, the more recent, and simultaneous, surge in both religious piety and scientific technology has led social theorists to seek a more direct link between the two. Jean Baechler has seen an elective affinity between the 'individualism' of the Brahmin's spiritual quest and the logic of capitalism and modernity.[9] Amartya Sen has drawn attention to the disciplines of Sanskrit learning and their implications for knowledge in the sciences.[10] Certainly, in the early days of the transition, many Indian actors themselves claimed inspiration from their religious traditions: S. Ramanujan, the celebrated mathematician who surmounted the obstacles posed by colonialism to become a Fellow of both the Royal Society and Trinity College, Cambridge, before the First World War, attributed his abilities to direct access to the divine;[11] and P.C. Ray, who pioneered the study of chemistry in India, saw himself as the heir to a 'Hindu' science.[12]

However, Fuller and Narasimhan are sceptical of this line of speculation, where they point to the very real disjunctions represented by the shift towards science and technology today. While the theoretical sciences might be unproblematic, the disciplines through which Tamil Brahmins, at least, approached scientific modernity were engineering and, to a lesser extent, medicine. But pursuing these vocations inevitably violated the norms of purity and pollution on which Brahmanic lifestyles were based, and which secured both their exclusivity and their status. Twentieth-century Tamil Brahmin civil engineers and doctors, servicing the sewers of Madras city and touching the body-parts of the 'lower orders', would hardly have qualified as Brahmins at all back in the Kaveri and Tambraparni valleys of

[7] Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites'; Guha, Serving the barbarian'.
[8] Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*, *passim*.
[9] Baechler, 'The Origins of Modernity', pp. 39–65.
[10] Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, p. 31.
[11] Kanigel, *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, p. 36.
[12] See Ray, *History of chemistry*.

yesteryear.[13] Rather, Fuller and Narasimhan prefer to emphasise the degree of social change involved in the move from the rural villages, where most of them used to dwell, to the cities and foreign locations, which are their homes today.[14] They see modernity as fundamentally re-constitutive, and Tamil Brahmins' own self-conscious orientation back towards their religious past as more a function of nostalgia than of meaningful cultural continuity.

Yet Fuller and Narasimhan do allow history a small part in the story. They point to the significance of an earlier phase of transition in the nineteenth century, when, albeit belatedly, Tamil Brahmins first began to leave their villages and their lives as priests and landlords to become 'scribes' under the colonial dispensation: attending schools and colleges, acquiring 'Western' education, working as government servants, lawyers and members of the 'polite' professions. By the early twentieth century, Tamil Brahmins had come to provide almost 80 per cent of the graduates of Madras University and to supply as a high a proportion of lawyers and holders of senior posts in the Madras colonial government.[15] This shift, at the time, to residence in caste-segregated hostels, habitation in caste-defined urban neighbourhoods and employment in respectable 'white-collar' jobs, involved a much less jarring contrast with previous lifestyles than that implied by engineering and medicine. However, it can be seen to have prepared the way for future change. It also may have involved direct continuities with several aspects of the past. In particular, the literate and numeracy skills which Brahmins acquired in their traditional roles, stood them in good stead in their new environment of western education and the professions—indeed, it may largely account for their success in a context where, as late as 1900, 90 per cent of the rest of society was illiterate.

Yet even the smaller step, from priest and landlord to colonial 'scribe', may also have been significantly disjunctive, and a re-examination of the circumstances of the nineteenth century and before suggests less seamlessness than issues and conflicts which were highly problematic. For example, the nature of the two learning traditions was very different. In 'traditional' learning, knowledge, whether of numeracy or sacred texts, was largely acquired through memory exercises.[16] Argument involved the search through texts for supporting authority rather than the use of inductive reasoning.[17] Admittedly, in fields such as arithmetic, technical competency could be high and could itself lead onto original mathematical speculation.[18] However, its principal ends were prophecy and astrology. The judgement

[13] Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power*, pp. 45–101.

[14] Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Traditional Vocations'.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] D. Senthil Babu, 'Memory and Mathematics', pp. 15–37.

[17] Pollock, 'Introduction: Working Papers on Sanskrit Knowledge Systems', pp. 431–39.

[18] Babu, 'Memory and Mathematics'; also D. Senthil Babu, 'Science and Tamil Society', pp. 321–36.

of Thomas Macaulay and subsequent generations of colonial authorities that Indian learning was bankrupt doubtless owed much to ethno-centricity, but the point that it did little to facilitate the building of steam engines was not wholly inaccurate. As Sheldon Pollock has argued with only perhaps a modicum of exaggeration, after the experience of the Navya Learning generated by contact with the Islamic world in the seventeenth century, Sanskrit tended to 'die' as a medium of intellectual creativity.[19] And the Navya Learning scarcely reached into the villages of the deep South anyway. In agraharam along the Kaveri delta, the leap from Manu to Mill was never going to be short.

Also, there is strong evidence than many South Indian Brahmins (and especially Tamil Brahmins) bitterly resented having to take it. European rulers were *Yavana* and associating with them, coming within 'polluting' distance, provided a serious cause for concern. This might be seen, for example, in the case of the great Tirupati temple when the new East India Company government came to 'settle' its administration. Legendarily, the Jehangir (head priest) of the temple refused to meet the Collector in his tent for fear of pollution. In response, the Collector 'settled' the temple instead with the lowly Mahant of an attached monastery, who was an immigrant Bengali with little access to the temple's key rituals, but also far fewer qualms.[20] Extreme rules on 'distance pollution' also kept Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala firmly away from the many Europeans who operated out of its rich ports.[21] On the Coromandel coast too, the European trading companies found that their likeliest agents were members of the lower castes—Vellalas and even Idayans (shepherds), as in the case of the celebrated dubash of the French East India Company, Ananda Ranga Pillai.[22] Equally, they had problems recruiting anyone other than *paraiyans* (Untouchables) for their first armies or as house servants.[23] The hypersensitivity of many South Indian Brahmins to the dangers of pollution made the Europeans virtually Untouchable themselves.

No less, there were signs of Brahmin-inspired resentment at many aspects of the culture of the West brought by early colonial rule. It was, in the main, Tamil Brahmins who led the protests in the 1830s and 1840s at the proselytising activities of Christian missionaries, even within the confines of the latter's own schools.[24] It was also Tamil Brahmins who most vehemently protested against the opening of public space (on roads and highways) to the free passage of *paraiyans*, while in Princely Kerala (Travancore) Nambudiri Brahmin influence strongly sustained

[19] Pollock, 'New Intellectuals', pp. 3–31; 'The Death of Sanskrit', pp. 392–426.

[20] On the unsatisfactory nature of the Mahant's relationship to the rituals of the temple, see Madras High Court, Prayag Doss Ji Varu vs Srirangacharluvaru and Another, 10 February 1905. 15. Madras Law Journal, 133.

[21] Mencher, 'Namboodiri Brahmins', pp. 183–96.

[22] See Srinivasachari, *Ananda Ranga Pillai*.

[23] Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, esp. vols 1 and 2.

[24] Frykenberg, 'The Impact of Conversion', pp. 187–243.

public practices of caste discrimination into the twentieth century.[25] Indeed, disdain for *Yavana* ways extended even to diet. Some South Indian Brahmin communities steadfastly resisted the lure of the new crops—chilli, tomato, potato—brought from the Americas in the sixteenth century, and sustained their opposition into the twentieth. Others, more generally and ironically in view of later developments (where it became specifically associated with them) vehemently denounced the drinking of coffee, as A.R. Venkatachalapathy has recently seen in a brilliant vignette of Southern history.[26] Novel and 'foreign' ways were very far from welcomed in the agraharam of the South.

All of these facts make the happenings of the later nineteenth century even more remarkable. Not only did Tamil Brahmins, then, take to drinking coffee and to reformulating it into that sweet liquid for which South India has subsequently become famous, but they flooded into colleges of western education, colonial courts of law and government offices on such a scale that they virtually took them over. And eventually, they also began to approach the halls of modern science where, at least so far as engineering and medicine are concerned, they had to abandon even more of their prejudices.

It is difficult to see anything at the time that could have provoked a 'Damascene conversion' on this scale: a sudden recognition of the superiority of Western culture and learning at the expense of the 'old ways'. Indeed, by most accounts, Western culture appeared more attractive in Indian eyes earlier in the nineteenth century than later, when racial ideologies were hardening and the 'educated Indian' becoming an object of colonial suspicion and abuse.[27] Rather, the Tamil Brahmin case might point more to the importance of 'push' factors where previous form of livelihood were coming under painful pressure from economic, institutional and political change.

In many ways, the ability of Tamil Brahmins—at least in the rich valleys—to resist change so late into the nineteenth century reflected their occupation of some of the most agriculturally productive lands in India, and also their possession of major religious endowments given in previous ages. While the irrigation systems of the valleys had been badly affected by the wars and political disturbances of the eighteenth century,[28] the first half of the nineteenth century had seen a series of efforts to restore them, which enjoyed some success. But thereafter, as Christopher Baker has seen, the paddy-monoculture of the region began to involute and from the later nineteenth century, to lose many of its wider markets to the newly-opened Burma rice bowl. With population levels also trebling between 1800 and 1920, times became increasingly hard. The final straw was added by the

[25] Frykenberg, 'On Roads and Riots in Tinnevelly', pp. 34–52.
[26] Venkatachalapathy, *In Those Days There Was No Coffee*, pp. 11–31.
[27] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, pp. 14–115.
[28] Subrahmanyam, *Penumbral Visions*, pp. 143–85.

collapse of grain prices during the 1920s and 1930s in response to the post-War recession and global Depression.[29] Rural Tamil Brahmin families found it increasingly hard to make a living in their villages, and began to send members to Madras city and beyond for education and respectable employment. By the 1930s, they were abandoning the countryside for the towns in droves.[30]

Equally, institutional change generated other further 'push' factors. While the colonial state proclaimed a strategy of non-intervention in religious affairs, in fact it altered the entire institutional structure within which Hinduism operated. In the first half of the nineteenth century, it attacked the principle of inam (tax-free endowment) which supported temples, Brahmins and holy men.[31] Also, in the name of religious neutrality, it withdrew the state authority over the administration of the temples and passed it instead to the courts of law. However, the courts found it a difficult burden to undertake, where rules and precedents were uncertain and prevarication easy. Litigation surrounding the possession of temple assets could be locked up in the courts for years, even decades.[32] In the meantime, by common acknowledgement, the temples suffered severely—with endowments embezzled, fabrics decayed and rituals unperformed.[33] Not only did this further undermine the 'sacred' economy supporting large parts of the Tamil Brahmin community, but it also provided an incentive for them to learn the ways of the 'foreign' courts and government in order to rescue religion. One of the South's first 'modern' political movements was a 'sacred ash' society, in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, aimed at challenging the colonial state's interference in the temples. By the turn of the twentieth century, a Dharmarakshena Sabha had formed among Tamil Brahmin lawyers in Madras city to reform the law and bring the temples back under their own control once again.[34] New skills and 'knowledges', here, were acquired precisely to prevent the past from disappearing.

Also, the circumstances of that second shift in Tamil Brahmin occupations, from the professions to science and technology, can be seen as a response to yet further problems. It strengthened appreciably in the inter-war years, when the niche that Tamil Brahmins had created for themselves in the 'polite' professions also started to cave in. As Fuller and Narasimhan note, in reaction to the sudden dominance of South Indian public life achieved by Tamil Brahmins, non-Brahmin and radical Dravidian movements arose to challenge their 'privileges' and to reduce their access to colleges and government employment.[35] Supported first by a colonial

[29] Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy*, pp. 168–200.
[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 185–200.
[31] Washbrook, 'Law, State and Agrarian Society', pp. 649–721.
[32] Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics*, pp. 185–90.
[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 184–90.
[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 324–36.
[35] Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Traditional Vocations'.

state which increasingly identified Brahmins with the advance guard of Indian nationalism, and then by the weight of democratic numbers, these movements progressively limited the scope for Brahmins in the public sphere, directing them towards a private sector then beginning the process of industrialisation (and also towards other regions of India and abroad).[36] Many Tamil Brahmins found themselves driven into even more questionable forms of employment, not least in medicine and engineering, less by choice than by an ever more difficult struggle to make a living. As, perhaps, in the case of most transitions to modernity, insecurities and instabilities in the present played at least as important a role as the promise of 'progress' and freedoms yet to come.

Yet transitions can still be resisted and deprivations endured. A few South Indian Brahmin communities tried to resist this one considerably longer than Tamil Brahmins. In Kerala, some Nambudiri Brahmins continued to reject any engagement with modernity until the mid- twentieth century, paying a far higher price.[37] Moreover, especially in view of the threats and pressures that lay behind it, a striking feature of modern Brahmin culture in the South is how little modernity continued to be resented after it had been accommodated—in sharp contrast, say, to the *angst* of the Kolkata bhadralok.[38] The South produced no Bankim Chatterjee to revive a mythical past on which to lay foundations for an alternative future.[39] Rather, leading South Indian Brahmin novelists—R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, U.R. Ananthamurthy—conceded the inevitability of change, but nonetheless insisted on an effort to maintain contact with established values.[40] Indeed, in their work, the past and the present blend together in complex ways, implying possibilities which would allow even 'modern' man to keep in touch with his 'traditional' roots. Modernity here is not conceived as an outrage and an unmitigable violation of the past.

The 'ease of landing' of Tamil Brahmins in modernity, in spite of the painful circumstances actually driving them towards it, may suggest the importance of particular facilitating mechanisms smoothing their path. One such mechanism, in the later nineteenth century, can be seen in the changing meanings—or reference points—of caste under the colonial dispensation. While the attribution of caste status always seems to have involved reference to both birth/descent and 'lifestyle' criteria, there is much to indicate that the former now came to take increasing precedent over the latter. This followed, for example, from the logic of the Anglo–Hindu law, which was designed to establish general rules and criteria by which the communities of Indian society—with their different customs, rights and

[36] Fuller and Narasimhan, 'From Landlords to Software Engineers'; Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*.

[37] Mencher, 'Namboodiri Brahmins', pp. 183–96.

[38] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, pp. 14–115.

[39] Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness*, passim.

[40] For examples, Narayan, *The Guide*; Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*; Ananthamurthy, *Samskara*.

privileges—could be known and adjudicated. In practice and over time, as Arjun Appadurai particularly has seen, the interpretations of the courts promoted a subtle transformation in the meanings of caste, whereby the fluidity associated in the past with the application of changing lifestyle criteria became reduced and caste status was fixed more rigidly and permanently by the application of criteria of birth and descent.[41] Brahmins would receive their ritual privileges and entitlements if they could show that their fathers and grandfathers had received them before. The quality of their individual 'lifestyles' was much less important.

Later in the nineteenth century, these principles were yet more firmly fixed: in part, by the practices of the Census and in part, by the 'racialisation' of caste ideology, as Susan Bayly has pointed out. The colonial Census, introduced in 1871, counted castes as supposedly bounded social communities (or ethnicities) whose numbers could rise and fall only by natural increase, not by voluntary expulsion or election in relation to how they behaved. Also, under the influence of colonial sociologists such as H.H. Risley, caste became understood as a proxy system of race where, again, lifestyle choice would not necessarily undermine accredited caste status.[42] Brahminism, in effect, was re-defined as an attribute of blood and inheritance; Brahmins were a separate 'Aryan' race.

While, in most contexts, 'racism' might properly be considered an instrument of social oppression (as, no doubt, it was meant to be by the colonial authorities), in the context of South India, and for Brahmins in particular, its implications were liberating.[43] At least so far as the law and the state (and the modern segments of urban society influenced by them) were concerned, Brahmins would remain Brahmins no matter what employment they chose to follow or lifestyle they came to adopt. Under the new dispensation, 'a Brahmin was a Brahmin for all that'. Many of the social disabilities that would have been associated with Brahmins taking demeaning forms of employment progressively disappeared, and they were 'free' to work as engineers or doctors or in any other capacity that they chose.

However, the practices of the law and of the colonial government, while doubtless influential, never provided more than a distant guide to the realities of Indian social life; and it would have been a brave or foolish Tamil Brahmin, indeed, who would have based his claims to status in society solely on his possession of the order of a law court or an entry in a census. Rather, when Tamil Brahmins began to make their—very belated—exit from their villages in the later nineteenth century, at least as important may have been the availability of concrete models of social conduct, which foretold where they might be going and hinted at how potentially great rewards might be balanced against no less great penalties and risks.

[41] Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*, pp. 105–64.
[42] Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, pp. 97–143.
[43] Mencher, 'The Caste System Upside Down', pp. 469–93.

For, of course, outside the rich river valleys, many other South Indian Brahmins (including some Tamil-speakers) had never enjoyed the same privileges and protections which enabled a comfortable life of devotion to religion and the arts. From centuries before, they had been obliged to direct their literate and numeracy skills towards the profane activities of accountancy and service to the region's pre-colonial rulers, especially in support of its complex revenue and irrigation systems. Noticeably, this was something which most river-valley Tamil Brahmins had assiduously refused to do, leaving such work (as *kanakkuppillai*) to Vellalas and the lower castes.[44] However, during the early modern period, it began to cost them considerably more than petty perquisites. As commercialisation and monetisation of the economy deepened, state service pointed the way to increasing fortune and political power.

Looking around South India in the mid-nineteenth century, river-valley Tamil Brahmins cannot but have been aware of the histories of many Telugu and Kannada Brahmins (as well as some upland Tamil cousins) who had followed this path in previous centuries. In Andhra Pradesh, Telugu Niyogi Brahmins had long honed accountancy skills as *karanams* in the villages, and had moved on to become prominent administrators in the Vijayanagar Empire and the Sultanates and Nayak kingdoms that succeeded it.[45] In Kannada country, many other Brahmins (especially Madhwas) had followed suit, as had some Tamil Brahmins in the poorer upland areas. Also, immigrant Brahmins, who had no obvious access to 'local' religious endowments in their new homes, frequently took on such roles: for instance, Niyogis in Tamil country and Tamil Brahmins across the Palghat in Kerala. Southern history was loaded with examples of Brahmin diwans who had enjoyed great wealth and exercised great political influence, but also used both to advance the cause of religion and to propitiate the gods. Not least among these would be Madanna and Venkanna, the Brahmin diwans of the last Sultan of Golconda in the late seventeenth century, who had founded important temples.[46] Profit and power could be used to achieve eternal fame and earn spiritual merit.

However, such examples are also likely to have carried warnings about the possible costs and debilities involved. Madanna and Venkanna, for example, ultimately faced execution at the hands of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.[47] Also, the respectability of 'secular' Brahmins continued to be in doubt. They were often obliged to associate with Muslim *Yavana* and to apply their god-given skills to unworthy purposes. In Andhra, a caste bifurcation took place within the Brahmin community between Niyogi and Vaidiki families who sustained the exclusivity of their religious profession.[48] The two did not intermarry and betimes expressed

[44] Raman, 'The Familial World of the Company', np.
[45] Narayana Rao, et al., *Textures of Time*; Wagoner, 'Precolonial Intellectuals', pp. 783–810.
[46] Kruijtzer, *Xenophobia in Seventeenth Century India*, pp. 224–55.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 220.
[48] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. 5.

overt rivalry, where the figure of the 'unholy' or irreligious Brahmin was the object of public satire.[49] In Kerala, conservative Nambudiri Brahmins would not even allow Tamil Brahmins, who crossed the Palghat to take up administrative positions, access to their temples. Indeed, 'immigrant' Brahmins following the secular path generally had a difficult time. While it was by no means uncommon for 'holy men' from outside to be absorbed and married into Tamil Brahmin lineages, the same clearly did not apply to those who wielded the scribe's pen.[50] Niyogi Brahmins remained distinctive in Tamil country into the twentieth century, and some Maratha Brahmin groups were left stranded there for three hundred years—still speaking their own tongue which, by the twentieth century, nobody 'back home' in Maharashtra could understand any more.[51]

There is also evidence of a continuing intellectual disdain for the application of learning and writing to 'profane' objectives rather than to religion, astrology, poetry and the arts. Paper was introduced into South India at least from the time of the Muslim Sultanates and the Portuguese arrival in the sixteenth century, and was widespread in most state administrations by the seventeenth. However, it was reserved almost exclusively for the keeping of revenue accounts—or else for thoughts expressed in 'foreign' languages, such as Persian, Urdu and Marathi. Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu theology, drama and poetry continued to be inscribed exclusively on palm leaf, the 'proper' medium for serious intellectual endeavour. In the Sarasvati Mahal Library, built around the collections of the great Maratha Thanjavur court (founded in 1674), the distinction still remains palpable in the carefully preserved and catalogued palm leaf manuscripts containing the classics of southern and Sanskrit literature, and the undifferentiated 'bundles' and 'sacks' of administrative *papers*, which have remained discarded and unopened in some cases for two hundred years.

In the river valleys of the South, the model of the scribal Brahmin represented anything but a preferred way of life. Nonetheless, it existed and persisted for five hundred years offering a species of alternative if other means of 'sacred' livelihood failed. Moreover, and importantly, it was clearly seen as a possibility within the fold of Brahminical practice rather than outside it. There is little to suggest that the status of scribal Brahmins as Brahmins-at-all was challenged, at least after the sixteenth century. While shifts to other forms of economic activity—for example, manual labour—could bring imputations of loss of Brahminical status,

[49] Narayana Rao and Shulman, 'The Powers of Parody', 428–66.

[50] For example, the Tamil Smartha Brahmin family of Sir C.P. Ramawasami Iyer, a leading political figure in the late colonial age, claimed descent from a Maratha Brahmin 'holy man' who had migrated to Thanjavur in the thirteenth century. However, the family did not intermarry with the Maratha Brahmin scribes who arrived in profusion during the seventeenth century. Sundarajan, *Ramaswami Aiyar Remembered.*

[51] Kachru et al. (eds), *Language in South Asia*, pp. 1–28.

scribal Brahmins were generally seen as Brahmins nonetheless, if not particularly 'good' ones.[52] In adverse circumstances, the scribal path could still be followed.

For this position, much may have been owed to the developments in Maharashtra discussed in this collection by Sumit Guha and Polly O'Hanlon, which came to have a far wider remit than just the Maratha country. At least from the fifteenth century, Maratha Brahmins began to pour out across the South, offering local rulers the special scribal skills which they were honing at home and which enabled the much more sophisticated administration of government and management of money. There can be little doubt that they set the model for Telugu Niyogi and Kannada Brahmins during the early modern period: the former adopting their naming system and becoming virtually indistinguishable in public life; the latter even adapting the Marathi Modi script to inscribe the Kannada language.[53] Their influence continued into the early colonial period where, as late as 1850, they still provided a majority of the *sheristidars* (head clerks) in the revenue offices of the Madras Presidency.[54] Moreover, in the later nineteenth century, their members were among the first whom colonial rulers permitted to aspire to high government office: T. Madhwa Rao and R. Ragunatha Rao, whose families had long been resident in Thanjavur, becoming diwans of the Mysore princely state where their achievements in developing education and promoting economic growth were legendary.[55] Maratha Brahmins laid foundations for the new kind of modern, 'secular' Brahminism, which river valley Tamil Brahmins would eventually come to follow.

In their essays here (and elsewhere), O'Hanlon and Guha explore the circumstances lying behind this highly significant development in Maharashtra, and the means by which it was achieved. O'Hanlon, in particular, stresses the poverty of large parts of the region, which forced Brahmin households into village-level administration from an early period. Even more, however, she emphasises the threat posed from the fifteenth century by the arrival of more advanced forms of 'Persian' government in the Muslim Sultanates of the period, and by the influx of immigrant scribal groups from the North (especially Kayasthas) possessing expertise in it. The introduction of field survey techniques revolutionised the revenue system, while the Kayathas' command of a fast-written Persian-derived *shikasta* script put them at a major advantage in practices of accountancy. Maratha Brahmins faced displacement from their village offices and eclipse from the influence which

[52] The charge of having indulged in 'manual labour' appears to have been particularly potent in determining the status of different sub-sects of Brahmins in Maharashtra. O'Hanlon, 'Letters Home', pp. 202–40.

[53] For example, some surviving records of Purniya, the famous diwan to both Tipu Sultan and the incoming East India Company government that replaced him, are in Kannada written in the Modi script. Subrahmanyam, 'A Note on some early nineteenth century inam records', pp. 435–43.

[54] Frykenberg, *Guntur District 1788–1848*, ch. 1.

[55] Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Traditional Vocations'.

they had enjoyed at rulers' courts. In response, she details how they sought to raise issues of caste status—especially of the 'non-Brahmin' character of Kayasthas—to cut the latter out and also to dispute their claims to another twice-born status, that of membership of the Kshatriya varna. Change and novelty were strongly opposed.[56]

Yet, as Sumit Guha demonstrates, Maratha Brahmin responses were not only negative. Rather, they came also to involve taking on—and over—the new skills brought from outside, and adopting them even at the expense of becoming more closely associated with Muslim *Yavana*. Maratha Brahmins became expert at applying Mughal revenue field survey techniques, which they virtually introduced into the southern peninsula.[57] Guha also emphasises the importance of their adaptation of a semi-secret Modi script to accountancy and the business of administration: no less fast-written than *shikasta*, it was derived from Marathi characters and gave Marathi speakers a counter-advantage against 'foreign' scribes.[58] Also, it enabled the storing of records and the building up of centralised government archives, previously little known in western or southern India. Elsewhere, Guha has connected this facility to the emergence of a distinctive consciousness of history, seen also by other historians as a feature of the writings of Telugu Niyogi *karanams* at about the same time.[59]

With the deepening commercialisation and monetisation of the economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Maratha Brahmin mastery of these scribal 'technologies' brought increasing material rewards and access to political power. As Frank Perlin, particularly, has shown, these forces led to the growth of a market in rights, privileges and properties: where Maratha Brahmin 'great households' could use their skills to accumulate 'bundles' of claims on the land and its produce.[60] Even more dramatically, they also promoted the increasing dominance of 'the pen' over 'the sword': where those with command of cash could buy military power, displacing the importance of the hereditary warriors who, previously, had supplied the majority of India's rulers. Notoriously, at the turn of the eighteenth century, the Chitpavan Brahmin Peshwas, who had been the administrators of the Rajas of Satara—heirs to Shivaji's first, expansive Maratha kingdom—swept aside their erstwhile masters to take over effective leadership of the Maratha Confederacy for themselves.[61] For a rare moment in India's history, Brahmins enjoyed the powers of kings.

[56] O'Hanlon, 'The Social Worth of Scribes'.

[57] Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818*, pp. 132–53.

[58] Guha, 'Serving the barbarian'.

[59] Guha, 'Speaking Historically', pp. 1084–1103 and Guha, 'Wrongs and Rights', pp. 14–29; Narayana Rao et al, *Textures of Time*.

[60] Perlin, 'Of White Whale', pp. 172–237.

[61] Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818*, pp. 146–48.

Moreover, by this period, it was not only Persian 'knowledges' which were being grafted onto Brahmanic roots, but also the 'knowledges' brought by the Europeans who were already starting to contend for political authority in the subcontinent. In the eighteenth century, the Maratha confederacy represented the most likely alternative to European power and sustained itself, not least, by acquiring many of the 'technologies' possessed by its opponents. For example, the Peshwa's armies adopted and adapted European armaments to considerable effect: they were widely regarded to possess the best field artillery in India, as Arthur Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington) initially discovered to his cost.[62] Indeed, the Peshwa state even began to adopt that key 'technology' which—since Matthew Edney[63]—has been seen as the cutting edge of European 'superiority' in the subcontinent, hallmarking the modernity which it claimed to bring. As P. Gogate and B. Arunachalam have noted, the later Maratha Empire began to produce its own very distinctive cartography: drawing maps which combined features taken from small-scale Mughal revenue field surveys with the topographical information more common to European productions.[64] The resulting maps covered large regions but also highlighted significant and recognisable details, making them at least as 'useful' for the purposes of territorial definition and the direction of movement as those which, more famously, James Rennall was drawing for the English East India Company at much the same time—and which Edney has associated with the dawn of colonial modernity.

Moreover, and most critically, the adoption and adaptation of these 'foreign' technologies, and the associations which they inevitably brought with *Yavana* (of various kinds), do not appear to have been at the expense of the accredited caste status—at least generically—of Maratha Brahmins, and certainly of the Peshwa state. While, as Guha notes here, questions were raised among Maratha Brahmins themselves about the status of those who followed the scribal path (and as O'Hanlon has shown elsewhere, status contest between different groups of Maratha Brahmins could be fierce), there are few signs that communities outside, and in other parts of India, doubted the basic Brahminism of those Mahashtrians who practised as scribes.[65] Indeed, if there were doubts, the behaviour of the Peshwa state came eventually to allay them. It used its novel 'technologies' of administrative power to enforce a rule of *dharma* as, perhaps, it had never been enforced before: a centralised rule which sustained the order of caste and protected Brahmanic privilege.[66] It also, along with many of the 'great households' in the Maratha Brahmin community, devoted a significant part of its wealth to the celebration and support of the gods.

[62] Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns*, pp. 15–61.
[63] See Edney, *Mapping an Empire*.
[64] Gogate and Arunachalam, 'Area Maps in Maratha Cartography', pp. 126–40.
[65] Guha, 'Serving the barbarian'; O'Hanlon, 'Letters Home'.
[66] Guha, 'Wrongs and Rights'; O'Hanlon, 'Narratives of penance and purification'.

In effect, the Maratha Brahmin experience during the early modern period, culminating in the rise of the Peshwa state, can be seen to have set that model which, a hundred and more years later, river valley Tamil Brahmins would follow along their own path towards modernity. The model offered means of acquiring and utilising 'foreign' knowledges and skills, while still self-consciously serving religion and maintaining contact with Brahminical tradition. It overcame the barriers posed to participation in a multi-cultural society by Brahmin needs for exclusivity and 'purity', yet still preserved a strong sense of Brahmanic distinction. Its paradigm of 'secular' Brahminism pre-figured that paradoxical combination of modern technologism and traditional religious piety, which has come to characterise so much of Indian 'middle-class' society today.

Yet how, exactly, was this done and the circle improbably squared? Here, three aspects of the historical context in which the Maratha Brahmin experience took place may be especially worth emphasising. First, there was the prevalence of multi-lingualism, which hints at the 'compartmentalisation' of activities seen by Milton Singer. Early modern India was highly polyglot with different 'tongues' used by the same people but for different purposes. Communication with Muslim rulers often took place through Persian or Urdu, with 'the gods' through Sanskrit, with 'the people' through Marathi or other vernaculars. Similarly, different scripts (and even writing materials) were used for different functions. To an extent, 'sacred' and 'profane' activities might subsist together under the rubric that they belonged in different contexts and did not overlap. Indeed, problems could occur when/if they collided—with the insistence of *bhakti* movements on using the vernaculars for worship, for example, periodically incurring Brahmin offence.

'Compartmentalisation', however, could go only so far, as much in the early modern period as in Singer's case of the 1950s. Different 'knowledges' and 'technologies' were inclined to inform each other: especially for administrative purposes, Marathi in the Modi script plainly drew on the precedent of Persian-derived *shikastha*; at least in the Maratha country (if not Tamil Nadu), the paper introduced by Persians and Europeans became the regular medium on which Sanskrit religious and philosophical literature was inscribed. In response, it is possible to see in Maratha Brahmin scribal culture a studied effort to 'indigenise' new practices, draw them under rubrics which made them appear to be old and continuous with tradition. For example, the maps noted by Gogate and Arunachalam may have been replete with signs and symbols drawn from European and Mughal survey cartography, but their direction was oriented towards the East, the rising sun, as in classic Hindu cosmology.[67] Equally, administrative Modi may have borrowed from *shikastha*, but it was written in characters approximating much more to vernacular Marathi (and Devnagri) than to Persian. 'Foreign' knowledges', here,

[67] Gogate and Arunachalam, 'Area Maps in Maratha Cartography'.

were transformed in ways which disguised their novelty and their origins: they were ingested into Maratha Brahmin culture as if they had always been there.

Moreover, history also gave Maratha Brahmins unique qualities to preside over this transformation. Even at the dawn of the early modern epoch, they had already established themselves as the arbiters, if not legislators, of Brahmanic culture across large areas of Indian society much beyond Maharashtra. As O'Hanlon and Christopher Minkowski have noted elsewhere, Maratha Brahmin scholars had long wandered far and wide from their poverty-stricken home bases in the Deccan to establish reputations for their Sanskritic learning in most of the richer river valleys wherein the bulk of medieval society dwelled. By the sixteenth century, members of the same extended scholarly families could be found at sacred centres on the Ganges, the Godavari, the Kaveri and the Tambraparni—drawing disciples, producing commentaries, refining sacred knowledges. Some such families, for example the Bhatta, enjoyed pan-continental reputations as learned authorities.[68]

While their learning stretched across many disciplines, particularly significant here may have been their knowledge of the dharmasastra, where their adjudications on caste law and etiquette were sought by kings and emperors, as well as Brahmin communities in many other regions.[69] Indeed, they appear to have made use of the novel conditions emerging in the early modern period—the availability of paper, the freer and faster circulation of information, the growth of cash fees—to further extend their legal activities and renown. When, in the eighteenth century, the Peshwas of Pune put their novel centralising administrative powers behind the enforcement of dharmasastra, they were doing no more than adding another dimension to the penchant for legalism for which Maratha Brahmins had long been known.

It is particularly in relation to this feature that the Maratha Brahmin absorption of new 'knowledges' and 'technologies' takes on significance. It put them in the ideal position to face down potential challenges to the status and appropriateness of such novel and 'profane' activities. As premier guardians of the law, their interpretation of its conventions carried enormous weight—and who dared gainsay their judgement that such activities fell legitimately within the remit of Brahminism? Ultimately, the significance of the Maratha Brahmin experience may have been not only that it pioneered a model of 'secular' Brahminism, which came to be widely followed, at least across southern India, into the twenty-first century. Instead, the important fact is that given their authority in *dharmasastra*, it was Maratha Brahmins—and they alone—who could have pioneered such a model and especially, secured its authority with other Brahmin communities. The

[68] O'Hanlon and Minkowski, 'What makes people who they are?' pp. 381–416.
[69] O'Hanlon, 'Letters Home'; *idem.*, 'Narratives of penance and purification'.

essays on scribalism in the early modern period, gathered in this collection, are of much more than antiquarian interest. They speak to the conditions making possible India's passage towards its own, very distinctive modernity today.

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