

# Traditional vocations and modern professions among Tamil Brahmans in colonial and post-colonial south India

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*Since the nineteenth century, Tamil Brahmans have been very well represented in the educated professions, especially law and administration, medicine, engineering and nowadays, information technology. This is partly a continuation of the Brahmans' role as literate service people, owing to their traditions of education, learning and literacy, but the range of professions shows that any direct continuity is more apparent than real. Genealogical data are particularly used as evidence about changing patterns of employment, education and migration. Caste traditionalism was not a determining constraint, for Tamil Brahmans were predominant in medicine and engineering as well as law and administration in the colonial period, even though medicine is ritually polluting and engineering resembles low-status artisans' work. Crucially though, as modern, English-language, credential-based professions that are well-paid and prestigious, law, medicine and engineering were and are all deemed eminently suitable for Tamil Brahmans, who typically regard their professional success as a sign of their caste superiority in the modern world. In reality, though, it is mainly a product of how their old social and cultural capital and their economic capital in land were transformed as they seized new educational and employment opportunities by flexibly deploying their traditional, inherited skills and advantages.*

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One of the most prominent features of India's economic growth since the 1990s has been the rapid expansion of the information technology (IT) industry, especially its leading software and services companies. These companies—such as Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Infosys Technologies—have grown spectacularly in recent years and have become key players in the globalisation of services that is now so central to the world economy. At the time of writing in summer 2010, it looks as if the IT industry has withstood the global economic crisis and its importance for the Indian economy is continuing to grow.

In Chennai (formerly Madras) in 2003–05, we carried out ethnographic research among software engineers and IT professionals employed by the leading software companies, as well as among engineers working in the manufacturing industry. Since 2005, we have been studying Tamil Brahmins, focusing on members of a particular subcaste of Smarta Brahmins or Aiyars known as the 'Eighteen-Village Vattimas'. One of the main links between the two projects is that Brahmins, the traditional caste elite of Tamil Nadu, who make up no more than 2.5 per cent of its population, almost certainly are very well-represented in IT, as they have been in engineering. Actually, no figures exist to uphold this claim, but it is supported by a lot of circumstantial evidence.<sup>1</sup> Currently, the Tamil Brahmins' extensive participation in the IT industry appears to confirm them as among the leading mobile service people of today's global economy, which raises the question of whether this is actually a long-term continuation of the Brahmins' role as literate service people and, more generally, of their position in the pre-colonial economy and the division of labour defined by the caste system. In other words, are these 'service nomads' of the twenty-first century the direct descendants of the service people of the pre-modern era?<sup>2</sup> In this article, to anticipate our conclusion, we shall argue that in some respects they are, mainly because of the Brahmins' tradition of education and learning, but that in relation to the range of professional occupations taken up by Brahmins since the nineteenth century, any continuity is more apparent than real.

### Caste and the Modern Economy

The question just posed is of course part of a broader debate found in the sociology of India since Weber, who argued that other-worldly Hinduism and the caste system had prevented the development of modern, rational capitalism. In relation to caste—though he was mainly discussing low-caste artisans—Weber insisted that 'The net effect of the religious sanction of caste upon the spirit of economic activity

<sup>1</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Information Technology Professionals', p. 126 & *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'service nomads' comes from Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, who writes that: 'Modernity was about everyone becoming a service nomad: mobile, clever, articulate, occupationally flexible, and good at being a stranger', p. 30. For a brief comparison between Tamil Brahmins and Russian Jews, see Fuller and Narasimhan, 'From Landlords to Software Engineers', pp. 192–93.

is diametrically opposite to that of rationalism'.<sup>3</sup> The 'vocational ethic' of the caste system was said to be alien to rational economic organisation and impeded members of one caste from taking up the activities of another caste, although the system was sufficiently adaptable to allow them to take up new occupations closely related to their traditional ones.<sup>4</sup> Brahmins in colonial India illustrated this continuity between old and new occupations, according to Weber, because they 'were and are infiltrating occupations, particularly administrative posts which demand writing skill and education'. He specifically mentioned, too, that in early twentieth-century south India, 'the Brahmins have maintained a monopoly of administrative positions into modern times', but found it 'difficult' to become doctors for ritual reasons and 'are but sparsely represented in the field of engineering'.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see, the propositions about Brahmin administrators and doctors are overstated. Moreover, whether Weber meant that there were few Brahmin engineers compared with bureaucrats (which was true) or that Brahmins were under-represented compared with other groups in engineering (which was false) is unclear, but in either case his implication that caste 'traditionalism' would discourage Brahmins from becoming engineers is unsupported by the evidence.

In an incisive review of Weber's thesis and its influence published in 1996, Subrahmanyam observes that generalisations about the caste system and its associated 'traditional' values have been repeatedly advanced to explain India's economic stagnation and failure to 'modernise'.<sup>6</sup> Since the mid-1990s, some generalisers—turning old notions on their head—have switched their attention to India's rapid economic growth and looked for traditional traits, such as Brahminical philosophising, that might explain success in 'virtual' technology and hence in the development of an IT-based service economy. Needless to say, the new generalisations are as weak as the old ones, which persistently depended on uncritical assumptions about 'tradition' and 'modernity'. As Subrahmanyam comments, the old generalisations were also inconsistent with empirical research demonstrating that the economic action and values of particular groups of Indian workers, businessmen, traders or artisans—even those belonging to specific castes—never were determined by caste traditionalism. One basic aim of this article is to show that this negative conclusion also applies to Tamil Brahmins—whether they work as bureaucrats or software engineers—but more positively, it shall also explore the evolution of professional employment within the caste, particularly by using some genealogical material. Subsequently, we shall discuss some aspects of the development of the learned professions, especially engineering, whose importance for Tamil Brahmins (and indeed other Indians) has not received adequate scholarly attention.

<sup>3</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 436.

<sup>4</sup> Weber, *Religion of India*, pp. 111–17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Subrahmanyam, 'Institutions, Agency and Economic Change', pp. 22–6.

### Historical Background

The history of the Tamil Brahmins is familiar to scholars of south India and may be outlined briefly. Since the medieval period, the small Brahmin minority has constituted the core of the Tamil country's social, cultural and religious elite, and many of its scholars, teachers, bureaucrats and jurists were Brahmins. Although a lot of Brahmins, including many priests, were poor, numerous others were landowners and some were very wealthy landlords or *mirasidars* settled in the river-valley wet zones, especially the Kaveri delta region. A high proportion of Brahmin males, unlike members of other castes, have always been literate in vernacular languages and sometimes Sanskrit. When the British took control of the region that became the Madras Presidency in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they relied heavily on their predecessors' administrative systems, particularly for land settlement and revenue collection. Literate Brahmins—aptly called 'revenue Brahmins' by Conlon—alongside men from other high-ranking, landowning castes such as Vellalars were key personnel in the early colonial administration's offices (*kacceri*) as record-keepers, accountants and tax collectors, and also as village headmen where they were dominant landowners. In villages, although there were many Brahmin accountants, many others were non-Brahmins, known as *kanakkuppillais*.<sup>7</sup>

In the early colonial period in much of south India, the most powerful bureaucrats were Deshastha Brahmins, immigrants from Maharashtra, who had been particularly prominent in the Maratha kingdom of Tanjore in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Deshasthas had been both innovative and dominant in the bureaucracies of the Muslim states in western India and then in Shivaji's Maharashtrian Hindu kingdom in the seventeenth century. As Maratha power expanded in the west and south, so did the Deshasthas' sway. In the late eighteenth century, though, the smaller group of Chitpavan Brahmins rose at the Deshasthas' expense in Maharashtra and during the mid-nineteenth century, Deshasthas ceded their superiority in the south Indian bureaucracy to Telugu speaking Niyogi Brahmins from the Andhra country and later to Tamil Brahmins.<sup>8</sup> As the colonial government expanded, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, so too did the demand for educated, English-speaking 'natives'. Tamil and Telugu

<sup>7</sup> Conlon, *A Caste in a Changing World*, p. 54. See also Dharma Kumar, 'Agrarian Relations', pp. 209–11; Ludden, 'Who Really Ruled Madras?'; *idem.*, *Peasant History*, pp. 89–91, 102–7; Raman, 'Familial World'; *idem.*, 'Tamil *Munshis*', pp. 210–15.

<sup>8</sup> See S. Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*, pp. 66–68, and R. Kumar, *Western India*, pp. 37–38 for Deshasthas in Maharashtra; Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening*, pp. 18–20, 113–14, 125–26 for Deshasthas in Madras. The classic study of Deshastha local bureaucratic dominance in south India is Frykenberg, *Guntur District*. See also Raman, 'Familial World'; Washbrook, 'Maratha Brahmin Model'.

Brahmans in particular responded vigorously to this demand. By 1900, Tamil Brahmans, followed by Telugu Brahmans, had much higher literacy rates in English than other communities in Madras Presidency, and the two groups overwhelmingly dominated administration, law and education.<sup>9</sup> There was a significant difference between the two groups, however. Telugu Brahmans had long been divided into 'secular' Niyogis, who worked as bureaucrats, for example, and 'orthodox' Vaidikas, who did not. Tamil Brahmans were not divided in this way, which probably restrained them from turning to new kinds of employment in the early colonial period, as Washbrook suggests, although eventually it tended to promote rather more occupational flexibility among them than Telugu Brahmans.<sup>10</sup>

Brahman domination provoked a reaction among urban non-Brahmans, who issued their 'Non-Brahman Manifesto' in 1916 and for most of the rest of the twentieth century, the rise of the non-Brahman movement was at the heart of politics in Madras and Tamil Nadu.<sup>11</sup> Caste and community quotas for government posts were introduced in the 1920s and slowly began to reduce Brahman representation in the following decade; after Independence, the process accelerated. Brahman political power in Tamil Nadu also steadily ebbed away, until in 1967 the non-Brahman party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), was elected to power; since then, with only brief interruptions, the DMK and its rival, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), have ruled Tamil Nadu. In the 1970s and 1980s, DMK and AIADMK governments significantly expanded the reservations system, so that 50 per cent of posts are reserved for the non-Brahman, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), in addition to 18 per cent for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. As a result, Brahman numbers in state government and public sector employment have been drastically reduced over the last few decades.

Even before caste quotas began to bite in the 1930s, some Tamil Brahmans found employment in private industry and commerce, rather than government and the public sector, and some migrated to Bombay, Calcutta and other Indian cities. After Independence, emigration from Tamil Nadu increased and many Brahmans looked for jobs in the central government and public sector, where reservations were less extensive than in the state government; posts in banks were also a popular alternative to government bureaucracy, but a lot of Brahmans took

<sup>9</sup> See Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict*, pp. 12–19; Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening*, pp. 113–26.

<sup>10</sup> Wagoner, 'Pre-colonial Intellectuals', pp. 795–97; Washbrook, 'Maratha Brahmin Model'.

<sup>11</sup> From the large literature on the non-Brahman movement, see, e.g., Baker, *Politics of South India*; Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism*; Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*; Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict*; *idem*, *Tamil Revivalism*; Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*; Saraswathi, *Minorities in Madras State*; Washbrook, *Emergence of Provincial Politics*; *idem*, 'Caste, Class and Dominance'.

a wide variety of jobs in private companies. Within Tamil Nadu, some of these companies—such as the large industrial groups Amalgamations and TVS—were founded and are still largely controlled by Tamil Brahmans.<sup>12</sup> Of course, besides professional, middle-class occupations, many Brahmans did and do work as clerks, factory workers, shop assistants, cooks or priests, or in other low-status, low-salary jobs. A large number of Tamil Brahmans are therefore fairly poor. Nonetheless and in spite of the reservations system, all the admittedly circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that for the group as a whole, the Tamil Brahmans' economic position has strengthened, rather than weakened, since Independence and that they have not suffered any economic decline commensurate with their loss of political power.<sup>13</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, Tamil Brahmans in all economic strata have been continually migrating to Chennai and other urban areas, partly 'pulled' by new opportunities in education and employment, and partly 'pushed' by indebtedness and other economic or agricultural difficulties. Later in some regions than others, the majority of Brahman landlords, large and small, progressively sold their land and left their rural homes for good, to become part of a 'great exodus' of Brahmans that 'transformed a rural class into an urban class'.<sup>14</sup> Thus more and more Brahmans have abandoned their agraharams—the village quarters and streets once exclusively occupied by Brahmans—so that most agraharams today have numerous non-Brahman residents who often form the majority, as well as empty or decrepit houses.<sup>15</sup> As already mentioned, many Brahmans have also migrated from Tamil Nadu to cities throughout India during the last hundred years or so. More recently, they have been going overseas, especially to the United States—the favourite destination—but also to the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Europe. Once again, accurate statistics are non-existent, but the available evidence strongly suggests that Tamil Brahmans are more mobile than almost all other communities in south India and that they are disproportionately well represented among urban, educated, middle-class professionals. Indeed, as we have previously argued, Tamil Brahmans today tend to perceive themselves mainly as an urban, middle-class caste for whom migration, as well as urbanisation, have been formative for their success in the modern world.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On the importance of Brahman businesses in Tamil Nadu, see Harriss, 'The Great Tradition Globalizes'. The range of Brahman occupations is discussed with biographical sketches by Chuyen, *Who is a Brahmin?*, ch. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, 'Brahmins and Brahminical values', pp. 33–35; Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Information Technology Professionals', pp. 142–43.

<sup>14</sup> Dupuis, *Madras*, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, 'The Agraharam'.

<sup>16</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, 'From Landlords to Software Engineers'.

### **Three Tamil Brahman Genealogies**

In our research, we have collected genealogies from Vattimas and other Tamil Brahmans, which provide evidence about changing patterns of employment, education and migration across generations within particular families. For this article, we have selected two genealogies that include men who served as dewans (prime ministers) appointed by the British colonial government in 'princely states', and a third from a family whose members included some of the leading lawyers in Madras at the turn of the twentieth century. Obviously, powerful dewans and top lawyers are very unusual service people from the official elite, which is partly why these three genealogies are interesting; as we shall see, however, most other people in their families had or have more ordinary jobs that illustrate the variety and evolution of professional employment among a wider range of Tamil Brahmans.

In 1841, 16 years before Madras University was founded, Madras High School opened. It was 'the first serious attempt to disseminate Western education in South India' and, for the governor of Madras, one of the school's main objectives was to 'furnish a new generation of administrators capable of holding important positions in the government'.<sup>17</sup> Among the cohort of 36 men, including 20 Brahmans, who had graduated with a Proficient's degree by 1855, 25 joined the colonial bureaucracy.<sup>18</sup> One of them was Sir A. Seshia Sastri (1828–1903), who belonged to the Eighteen-Village Vattima subcaste. Seshia Sastri is constantly mentioned by Vattimas as one of their most distinguished ancestors, especially by his descendants who can share in the prestige still emanating from his name.

Seshia Sastri did not come from a family of traditional scholarly literati or service people acting as 'revenue Brahmans'. Instead, he was the son of a poor priest living in Amaravati, a village near Kumbakonam, a temple town in the Kaveri delta, but he had an uncle—a dealer in precious stones in Madras—who took him to the city.<sup>19</sup> With financial aid from Pachaiyappa's Trust, which was founded by a wealthy Vellalar merchant, Seshia Sastri attended Madras High School and graduated with first-class honours in 1848. His first post was as a clerk in the Board of Revenue, but he rose through the ranks until he became dewan of Travancore in 1872, succeeding his friend and classmate, Sir T. Madhava Rao. Madhava Rao was a Deshastha Brahman from Kumbakonam, whose father and uncle had both served as dewans of Travancore, and who won a reputation as 'the outstanding statesman of South India during the nineteenth century'.<sup>20</sup> Seshia Sastri left Travancore in 1877 and then served as regent and dewan of Pudukkottai from 1878 to 1894. In retirement, Seshia Sastri, who had become a rich man and acquired

<sup>17</sup> Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening*, pp. 58, 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Some of our information about Seshia Sastri's life derives from Aiyar, *Sashiah Sastri*.

<sup>20</sup> Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening*, p. 78.

land in Amaravati, lived in the mansion he built in Kumbakonam. Compared with Madhava Rao, whose reforming zeal transformed it, Seshia Sastri's impact on Travancore was slight, although it was much greater on Pudukkottai in both the palace and the state as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

Seshia Sastri was married in 1847 to Sundari, a girl from Konerirajapuram, the largest Vattima village and first in rank among the nominal 18 villages. Sundari, whose mother had died, was brought up by her uncle, who was engaged in business in Madras. She joined her husband (and the marriage was presumably consummated) in 1853, when Seshia Sastri was the tahsildar of Masulipatam revenue division (in coastal Andhra). Seshia Sastri and Sundari had no children, so he adopted his brother's son, who in turn had two sons, Kalyanasundara and Rajagopalan. An interesting feature of Seshia Sastri's descendants' genealogy is the pattern of intermarriage with other Vattima families, some belonging to the group of 'big families' that include the richest landlords in the subcaste's most important villages.<sup>22</sup> More relevant here (though the data are incomplete) are people's occupations. It is unclear whether Seshia Sastri's adoptive son had a job or only looked after his property, but his two grandsons, Kalyanasundara and Rajagopalan, were landlords resident in Kumbakonam and Rajagopalan married the sister of a big landlord in the richest Vattima village. In the dewan's family, a sort of regression to the norm occurred, so that after Seshia Sastri's rise to the top, his grandsons became conventional mirasidars just like many of their Vattima and other Brahman contemporaries in the early twentieth century. Why this occurred is not entirely certain, but because Seshia Sastri came from a poor priestly family and Sundari probably did not belong to one of Konerirajapuram's rich landed families, his son and grandsons may have wanted to secure their status as landlords at par with other big, wealthy Vattima families with whom they could intermarry. Unlike many other Tamil Brahmans, who were seeking urban employment by the 1930s, the majority of Vattimas remained rural landlords until after Independence.

In the next generation in the 1950s, however, change began. Kalyanasundara's son worked in the state-owned Life Insurance Company in Kumbakonam; of Rajagopalan's two sons, one was the property agent for the Kanchipuram monastery and the other a bank officer in Tiruchchirappalli. In the generation after that, there are or were (until recent retirements) two bank officers and among men marrying into the family, a leading engineer and industrialist who worked in both north and south India and a chemical engineer who worked in Kerala, as well as two more bank officers. Two of the four officers worked in local towns for the City Union Bank (CUB), which was founded and is still largely controlled by Vattimas. In the youngest generation of Seshia Sastri's descendants and their

<sup>21</sup> On Seshia Sastri in Pudukkottai, see Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, pp. 389–90; Waghorne, *Raja's Magic Clothes*, ch. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Companionate marriage', pp. 743–4.

spouses who are now working, there is a different mixture of occupations, including three bank officers (one in the CUB in Coimbatore and two in the multinational HSBC in Chennai), a couple who are doctors in Chennai and a woman who is a physiotherapist there, and two couples who are working as IT professionals in America. Today, only five acres of land in Amaravati still belong to Seshia Sastri's descendants, although they own property in Kumbakonam.

Seshia Sastri's status is exceptional, as one of the first Tamil Brahmins to receive a modern education and become a high-ranking official in the colonial government. Nonetheless, during the twentieth century, his descendants' destiny closely resembled that of many other Eighteen-Village Vattimas, whose genealogies display a comparable pattern of employment and migration, including young people now working in the US, particularly in IT.

The second genealogy belongs to a Sri Vaishnava or Aiyangar family from Vangal, a village near Karur in central Tamil Nadu. This very full family tree, available on a website, lists more than 1,200 individual men, women and children.<sup>23</sup> Thiruvengata Chari (1837–1934) was a big landlord, who had three daughters (all married to landlords) and four sons. The eldest son, Srinivasa, became a government civil engineer in Madras and his three sons all settled in Madras: the first son was also a government civil engineer and the other two were government officials. Thiruvengata Chari's second son, Satagopa, became a lawyer in Salem and had four sons: one was an income tax official in Tiruchchirappalli and two went to Madras, one becoming an oil company executive and the other working for the Reserve Bank of India; on the fourth son, there is no information. Thiruvengata Chari's third son, Rangunatha, married a wealthy contractor's daughter and lived without a job in Srirangam (near Tiruchchirappalli).

Thiruvengata Chari's youngest son was Sir V.T. Krishnamachari (1881–1964), who studied law in Madras before entering government service. During his career, he was successively dewan of Baroda, an Indian delegate to the League of Nations and United Nations and deputy chairman of the Indian government's Planning Commission. Krishnamachari had three sons: the eldest became Advocate-General for Madras, the second joined the railways in southern India and the youngest, V.K. Ramaswami, became a distinguished economist and a senior economic advisor to the Indian government. Krishnamachari's two daughters lived in Madras and respectively married an engineer and a railway officer.

In this Vangal family, three sons of the landlord Thiruvengata Chari entered government service or the law, but one of them worked in the new profession of engineering. Srinivasa kept a residence in Vangal, but his two brothers—and all their sons—settled in towns or cities and apart from Rangunatha in Srirangam, this

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.vangalheritage.com/index.htm>. We thank V.L. Vijayaraghavan, compiler of the website, for his assistance.

family's menfolk all moved into urban employment within one generation. The majority of the numerous descendants of Thiruvengata Chari's professional sons had or have similar jobs, and today many of them—women now, as well as men—work in IT, banking or other private-sector industries, either in India or overseas (mostly in America), while some are employed by the government or public sector in India. Krishnamachari's descendants, however, display a wider range of occupations and probably more upward social mobility than those of his brothers, and they certainly do so when compared with the descendants of Seshia Sastri, who was actually buying land at much the same time as Thiruvengata Chari was investing in his sons' education and future professional employment.

The third genealogy belongs to an Aiyangar family from Varahakulam, a village near Kumbakonam, which intermarried with the Vembakkam family, originally from Chingelput, near Madras. Vembakkam family members had been prominent in the city since the early 1800s and among their number were several lawyers and two dewans; by the end of the century, the family 'possessed an enormous presence in the local bureaucracy of the capital and its surrounding district'.<sup>24</sup> The family produced a series of legal luminaries, including Sir V. Bashyam Aiyangar (1844–1908), the leading lawyer of his day, who became a Madras High Court judge; he was also immensely rich and a key member of the 'Mylapore group' prominent in provincial politics at the time.<sup>25</sup>

One of Bashyam Aiyangar's daughters married C. R. Thiruvenkatachari (1865–1935), eldest son of Rangaswami Aiyangar, a wealthy landlord from Varahakulam; in addition, one of Bashyam's sons married Rangaswami's eldest daughter. Thiruvenkatachari also became a High Court judge. His wife Sittammal bore him 12 children, of whom 11 survived. The eldest son had a BA degree, but we do not know if he had a job, and one son died young. The other three sons were respectively a lawyer, who may have attained a high position in Kerala, an insurance company agent in Madras and an army doctor killed during World War II. Five of Thiruvenkatachari's daughters' husbands were lawyers who variously practised in Madras, Chidambaram and Kumbakonam; two of them became judges in lower courts. The sixth daughter's husband was an engineer in the central government's Public Works Department in Madras.

Thiruvenkatachari had 34 grandchildren and we shall refer only to the descendants of his eldest son, Gopalsamy, and second daughter, Rajalakshmi, whose husband was a subordinate court judge in Madras (the eldest daughter, who married a lawyer in Kumbakonam, had no children). Gopalsamy's son worked for the railways in Calcutta; his two daughters respectively married a doctor in Thanjavur and a landlord in the Chidambaram area. Their children and grandchildren, and

<sup>24</sup> Washbrook, *Emergence of Provincial Politics*, p. 235.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239. See also Price, 'Ideology and Ethnicity', on Bashyam Aiyangar and other leading Brahman lawyers in Madras.

their spouses, include a central government officer; two doctors (one in Pondicherry and one in the US); two men with unspecified positions in private companies (probably in Chennai), one of whom is married to a teacher; and one couple and another man who all have PhD degrees in science and technology and work in the US. Rajalakshmi had one son, Vasudevan, who worked as a newspaper editor in Chennai and another who died young. Vasudevan had five sons: an accountant in Bombay and another in Chennai, two bank officers mainly posted in Chennai and an engineer in a private company in Chennai. His elder daughter married an engineer in another private company in the city and his younger daughter, a psychology graduate, worked in insurance. Among Vasudevan's grandchildren and their spouses, there is an IT company manager in Chennai whose husband is an engineer, a woman who is a journalist, two men working as IT professionals in Bangalore, a third as an executive in a multinational bank and another who is an engineer in the US; two of these men also have MBAs. It is notable that none of Gopalsamy's or Rajalakshmi's children—or indeed any of Thiruvengkatachari's grandchildren—became lawyers; this was almost certainly because after Independence growing competition from non-Brahmans made the law less attractive and other occupations looked more secure or better paid.

Thiruvengkatachari's descendants, who often mention Bashyam Aiyangar as well, wistfully acknowledge that they have come down in the world. One of his late granddaughters, in her nineties when she talked to us, reminisced about the governors and judges, Indian and British, who visited Thiruvengkatachari's home; she amusingly remembered, too, that her grandmother used to play tennis at the elite ladies' Willingdon Club clad in a nine-yard sari, then obligatory dress for respectable Brahman women. Elderly family members often remember, too, the mansions on Luz Church Road in Mylapore where the city's richest lawyers lived.<sup>26</sup> Thiruvengkatachari's home on this road, like Bashyam's vast mansion opposite, have now been replaced by nondescript buildings. Much the same fate befell almost all the great houses of Mylapore, which were sold for redevelopment after property partition. Especially from Bashyam Aiyangar's lofty position, downward social mobility was almost inevitable, but it has been limited, for nearly all Thiruvengkatachari's descendants on whom we have information—like members of the Vangal family—were or are educated professionals employed as government officials, bank officers, accountants, company managers, doctors, engineers, academics and IT professionals in Chennai, other Indian cities or America.

Seshia Sastri and Krishnamachari, as dewans, both occupied positions that had regularly been held by Brahmans. Indeed, according to classical authorities, righteous Hindu kings invariably depended on Brahman ministers, counsellors and jurists.<sup>27</sup> Hence for these Tamil Brahman dewans, as well as the judges, there

<sup>26</sup> Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>27</sup> Lingat, *Classical Law*, pp. 207–23. Cf. S. Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*, ch. 2 ('The "Brahman raj": kings and service people, c. 1700–1830').

were ancient precedents. More humbly, the same applies to the multitude of lower-ranking Brahman bureaucrats and lawyers, and to some extent the accountants as well, whose predecessors were the ordinary literate (and numerate) service people of the pre-colonial period. Hence in relation to caste occupations and roles, there is some continuity from the past, but in the case of our particular families, discontinuity is more in evidence. Bashyam Aiyangar's forebears included lawyers and administrators, but as far as we know, their predecessors did not belong to the old service elite, although the ancestors of some other leading lawyers in Madras did.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the two dewans had fathers who were respectively a priest and a big landlord, and they had no family traditions of service. Varahakulam and Vembakkam were, of course, major landowning families as well. Furthermore, within one or two generations, members of all these families entered other educated professions—including in particular engineering and medicine—that have no real continuity at all with old Brahman service roles.

Before expanding on the question of continuity and discontinuity, we should emphasise that today as in the past, parents or other senior kin are always involved in decisions about young people's education and employment, and the latter have always normally taken full account of advice given to them. Many informants told us that their fathers or uncles had guided, encouraged, persuaded or even forced them to take a particular kind of professional training and then an appropriate job. Thus some men said that their own personal preferences had been overruled within the family, so that they had ended up as engineers or accountants, for example, even though they never wanted to. We can reasonably assume that parental direction of sons was at least as strong among our informants' forebears. In the case of women, working outside the home has become commoner over the last two or three decades, so that professional employment is now the norm among younger women (at least until they marry and have children), whereas it was not so a generation ago. For women, 'respectability' and its implications for their marriage prospects affect employment choices far more powerfully than they do for men; in particular, engineering has usually been regarded as unsuitable for women, because it may involve working in dirty factories or remote construction sites alongside low-status, male manual workers. For this article, though, the key point is that the occupations of the men and women who have been discussed were the outcome of sets of family decisions, not just individual aspirations, so that the genealogies illustrate the partially planned evolution of Tamil Brahman employment over the last century or so. In some cases, family members tend to

<sup>28</sup> Two examples (contemporaries of Thiruvengkatachari), who were both sons of lawyers, are C.V. Kumaraswami Sastri, whose ancestors included Sanskrit scholars, and V. Krishnaswami Aiyar, whose ancestor was a minister in the Tanjore kingdom; see Price, 'Ideology and Ethnicity', pp. 164–65.

cluster in particular professions, such as law or engineering, for one or more generations, and shifts over time sometimes occur, such as the decline in lawyers and the growth of IT professionals; in other cases, though, occupations were and are fairly diverse, which often reflects families' attempts to respond to changing educational and employment opportunities, as well as personal choice.<sup>29</sup>

### Old and New Professions

As we have just seen, administration and law were old service professions in which Brahmans had always been prominent throughout India, and much the same applies to teaching. Yet, as Bayly shows, 'the spirit of Western administration wrought subtle changes'. The more rationalised colonial bureaucracy staffed by trained civil servants and operating at higher levels in English—the system in which colonial dewans like Seshia Sastri and Krishnamachari served—ensured that 'the mystique of the old scribal order was slowly undermined'.<sup>30</sup> Parallel changes took place in the law as the colonial legal system developed, especially after the High Courts were established in 1861 and the Hindu pandits formerly advising the courts were dismissed in 1864. To some extent, the law was a particularly attractive field for Brahmans (or indeed men of other castes) simply because it was prestigious and remunerative, and there was a strong demand for the services of lawyers, especially after 1861.<sup>31</sup> Many posts in the colonial bureaucracy were also open to men with legal qualifications. During the same period, a modern educational system was progressively established as well and in Madras it employed large numbers of Brahman teachers.

A crucial aspect of all these modernising changes was, of course, that formal qualifications, not caste status, became the requirement for any professional position. Certainly, around 1900, Brahman lawyers and bureaucrats, many with law degrees, were very numerous and made up much of Madras's rich and powerful elite, which might suggest that Brahmans had an inherited affinity for law and administration. After all, the court pandits in Madras had all been Brahmans and many members of the caste probably saw the law as their rightful domain.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in some families legal service was a tradition. In general, though, Brahmans dominated these professions not because they were constrained to pursue occupations traditionally associated with their caste, but because so many of them had

<sup>29</sup> The evolution of occupations among Tamil Brahmans resembles that found among other Brahmans, such as the north Indian Kanya-Kubja Brahmans, or indeed among some high-status non-Brahmans, such as the Kayasths of Hyderabad; see Khare, *Changing Brahmans*, pp. 4–5, 116–28, 174–90; Leonard, *Social History*, pp. 161–76, 230–50. In many respects, therefore, the Tamil Brahmans are not unique and this article is not intended to imply that they are.

<sup>30</sup> C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society*, pp. 153–54.

<sup>31</sup> Misra, *Indian Middle Classes*, pp. 324–32; Seal, *Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, pp. 123–30.

<sup>32</sup> On south Indian pandits, see Derrett, *Religion, Law and the State*, pp. 230, 257–59.

good connections with men already in place and had gained the requisite qualifications. The latter attainment was plainly linked to their caste traditions of education, learning and literacy and—like the Konkani Brahmans who earlier moved into the service of Shivaji's kingdom—the Tamil Brahmans 'carried their skills and advantages with them' as they moved into the service of the colonial state.<sup>33</sup> Yet the Brahmans' skills were quite flexible and their inheritance was advantageous primarily because it enabled them to seize new opportunities, rather than to continue in their old ways, as the other two principal learned professions, medicine and engineering, best illustrate.<sup>34</sup>

When Madras High School was founded in 1841, proposals to establish medical and civil engineering colleges were put forward too, but in the following year they were rejected by the Court of Directors in London which declared them 'unwarranted by the state of preparation in the native community', so that very few 'native pupils' would benefit.<sup>35</sup> Whether this rejection was justified is far from clear, as a medical school and a survey school providing lower-level training already existed. In any case, medical and civil engineering colleges did open in Madras in the 1850s and after the university was founded in 1857, legal, medical and engineering education was regulated and improved; law students were taught in the university's Presidency College before the Law College was founded in 1891.

Figures for the community background of students in the three professional colleges were published intermittently in annual reports between the early 1880s and 1904/5. After a gap of several years, the figures were then provided systematically from 1916/7 to 1938/9.<sup>36</sup> The number of students in the three colleges fluctuated considerably from year to year. Between the 1880s and 1904/5, there were always far more students enrolled in law than medicine or engineering, but the excess reduced thereafter. Between 1916/7 and 1938/9, the average enrolments were 665 students in law, 524 in medicine and 342 in engineering, but law student numbers peaked at just over 1,000 in 1923/4 and then declined to around 500, whereas medical student numbers rose steadily from under 300 to around 800, and engineering student numbers went up and down erratically, between 200 and 500 approximately. Here, though, the Brahman proportion of students is

<sup>33</sup> Cf. O'Hanlon and Minkowski, 'What Makes People Who They Are?' p. 387.

<sup>34</sup> On medicine and engineering, see Misra, *Indian Middle Classes*, pp. 333–37; Seal, *Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, pp. 120–22. On the history of engineering education in Madras, see Ambirajan, 'Science and Technology Education'.

<sup>35</sup> *Selections from the Records of the Madras Government, II, Papers Relating to Public Instruction*, 1855, p. 82; Appendix L.L., pp. ccxviii–ccxxii.

<sup>36</sup> See annual *Report on Public Instruction in the Madras Presidency (RPIMad.)*. In the reports from 1916/7 to 1921/2 and 1923/4, consistent student statistics appeared in vol. I, General Tables, Table 3(a); in 1922/3 and 1924/5 to 1938/9, they appeared in vol. II, part 2, A-Subsidiary Tables for Indians, Table 1(b).

also relevant; Brahmans, it should be noted, formed about 3 per cent of the enumerated population in this period. Among law students, the Brahman proportion varied between 70 and 80 per cent in the two decades from the mid-1880s; between 1916/7 and 1938/9, it peaked at 78 per cent in 1920/1 and then fell to 49 per cent in 1938/9. Among engineering students, Brahmans were also preponderant by the late nineteenth century; they were 74 per cent of the total in 1920/1, but down to 40 per cent in 1938/9 along a path similar to the law students'. The graph for medical students is slightly different; the Brahman proportion grew slowly from a low base, reaching nearly 30 per cent in 1900 and a maximum of 60 per cent in 1921/2, before falling to 30 per cent in 1938/9. In all three colleges, the decline in Brahman numbers reflected the progressive impact of official measures to reduce their domination, which started in 1921 with the introduction of community quotas for government jobs. Incidentally, from the 1890s, the reports also noted regularly, as one would expect, that the majority of students in all three disciplines were the sons of landholders or officials, and belonged to the 'richer and middle' classes. In the Bombay Presidency, we may note, Brahmans were also greatly over-represented among students in the professional colleges, though less extremely than in Madras.<sup>37</sup>

As is well known, Hindus, especially Brahmans, have or had a traditional antipathy to medicine, owing to pollution from corpses and bodily fluids; dissection, a key part of medical education, was particularly problematic. In Bombay and Calcutta, as well as Madras, these problems arose. But in Bombay, for instance, 'if such an antipathy did exist it was not long in being surmounted'; 'By the mid-1880s nearly a third of students at Grant Medical College were Hindus, drawn mainly from the higher castes, especially Brahmans'.<sup>38</sup> The negative attitude of the 'higher classes of the native community' was commented on in a couple of medical college reports from Madras (and one from Bombay) in the 1850s.<sup>39</sup> By 1884, however, the increasing number of Brahmans was described as 'indicating the growing decline of the prejudice of the highest caste of Hindus' to modern medicine, although a dip in numbers occurred a few years later. In 1896, however, the report again noted 'the gradual disappearance of the difficulties arising from

<sup>37</sup> In the annual *Report on Public Instruction in the Bombay Presidency (RPiBom.)*, consistent student statistics appeared in the reports from 1923/4 to 1942/3 in Appendix I. Law student numbers fluctuated considerably during this period from under 400 to over 700; medical student numbers increased from around 200 to 400; engineering student numbers stayed below 100 and averaged around 80. The Brahman proportion of students fluctuated with no noticeable trend (unlike Madras); the median proportions were 46, 35 and 41 per cent for law, medicine and engineering respectively. In 1931, Brahmans were 3.5 per cent of Bombay Presidency's population. No caste breakdown of students was provided by Bengal's public instruction reports.

<sup>38</sup> Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine*, p. 64; see also Deepak Kumar, *Science and the Raj*, pp. 114, 134; Seal, *Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, pp. 120.

<sup>39</sup> *RPiMad.*, 1854/5, p. 42; 1858/9, pp. 77–78; *RPiBom.*, 1857/8, p. 70.

caste or custom' that deterred Brahmans from entering medicine and its expression of satisfaction was probably justified, as the continuing growth in Brahman enrolment up to 60 per cent shows.<sup>40</sup>

Engineering student numbers remained relatively low, mainly because employment prospects were worse than in law or medicine, but proportionately Brahmans studied engineering almost as readily as law. Early engineering college reports from Madras noted Brahman preponderance several times between 1884 and 1905, and regretted that there were no students from the 'artisan classes [which] should have the greatest natural aptitude' for engineering, or from non-Brahmans as a whole.<sup>41</sup> The Public Works Department was the main employer for engineering college graduates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although prejudice against Indians being promoted to senior positions was widespread throughout the country, typically on the pretext that they 'were not fit to take responsibility or independent charge'.<sup>42</sup> In the PWD in Madras, Brahmans were almost inevitably prominent among Indian engineers and notwithstanding racial discrimination, when the first Indians took up senior positions in the 1890s, several Brahmans were included among them. In 1900, in all the senior grades, there were 67 engineers, of whom 58 (87 per cent) were Europeans, eight (12 per cent) were Brahmans and one (1.5 per cent) was a non-Brahman. Until 1940, the total complement of senior engineers remained fairly steady, and between 1925 and 1940, in spite of community quotas, Brahmans made up over 20 per cent of the complement.<sup>43</sup> The PWD was not of course the only employer in Madras. Engineers, including many Brahmans, also worked in other government departments or public sector undertakings, as well as some private firms, although many engineers migrated to other places in India to find work, for example in Bombay, Calcutta or Jamshedpur, where the Tata company built its steel plant.

These statistics, as well as genealogical and other evidence that we have collected, show that even in the early years Tamil Brahmans were very well represented in engineering. Unlike medicine, engineering provokes no concern about ritual pollution, but it still lacks any traditional occupational precedent for Brahmans, in ostensible contrast to members of the artisan castes, as the report just quoted implied. Nevertheless, like medicine after initial reluctance, engineering was hardly ever seen as degrading by Brahmans; instead, both of them were esteemed as learned professions like the law.

<sup>40</sup> *RPIMad.*, 1883/4, p. 57; 1887/8, p. 63; 1895/6, pp. 40–41.

<sup>41</sup> *RPIMad.*, 1883/4, p. 59; 1901/2, p. 20; 1902/3, p. 14; 1904/5, p. 12 (Brahmans preponderant); 1887/8, p. 66 (lack of artisan classes); 1897/8, p. 50 (lack of non-Brahmans).

<sup>42</sup> A. Kumar, 'Colonial Requirements', p. 228.

<sup>43</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, 'From Landlords to Software Engineers', p. 180, n. 5; cf. Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism*; p. 69, citing different data.

### **Engineering, Caste and the 'Indian Mind'**

Engineering in India has attracted little academic discussion among historians, but it does raise some significant issues pertinent to our discussion of Tamil Brahmans.<sup>44</sup> As we saw above, Weber implied that caste 'traditionalism' would discourage Brahmans from becoming engineers and in a more prejudicial version, British engineers in India mostly shared his view. The received wisdom was that Indians made poor engineers, primarily because the 'Indian mind' was too inclined to subjective abstraction instead of objective practicality, although an engineering college report from Bombay still hoped that the profession would 'correct the dreamy and impractical tendencies of Indian students'.<sup>45</sup>

A couple of illustrations will suffice. Alfred Chatterton started his career as an engineering professor in Madras in 1889 and was later a member of the Indian Industrial Commission in 1916–18.<sup>46</sup> Chatterton, who admired Indian historical achievements in science and technology, was undoubtedly better informed than many other British engineers. Nevertheless, he was sceptical about Indians' engineering ability. Thus Chatterton believed that a combination of factors, such as caste restrictions, over-reliance on memorisation in learning and the 'subtle mind of the Hindu [which] delights in philosophic speculations', seriously impeded progress and ensured, among other things, a vast excess of lawyers over useful engineers.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the failure to make the colonial education system more practical is 'largely due to the characteristics of the people themselves' and Indians in general 'do not possess in any very large measure the grit and common sense which mark the engineer'.<sup>48</sup> Blunter than Chatterton was Francis Spring, president and chief engineer of the Port Trust of Madras from 1904 to 1919, who told the Indian Industrial Commission that the only Indians studying engineering were 'young men who do not see much prospect of succeeding in law' and furthermore, that 'the intense internal desire for accuracy' was lacking in the Indian soul.<sup>49</sup>

Orientalist prejudices of this kind were widespread among British engineers and another Indian Industrial Commission member, the prominent nationalist Madan Mohan Malaviya, emphatically criticised 'the often repeated stereotype that Europeans were superior in the "outer" domain of technology', as opposed to

<sup>44</sup> On engineering in India, see Ambirajan, 'Science and Technology Education'; Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine*, pp. 105–24; A. Kumar, 'Colonial Requirements'; Deepak Kumar, *Science and the Raj*, pp. 136–43.

<sup>45</sup> *RPIBom.*, 1870/1, p. 70.

<sup>46</sup> On the Indian Industrial Commission, see Dewey, 'Government of India's "New Industrial Policy", 1900–25'; Visvanathan, *Organizing for Science*, ch. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Chatterton, *Industrial Evolution*, pp. 13–14, 19, 26.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>49</sup> Visvanathan, *Organizing for Science*, p. 44.

the 'inner', spiritual domain.<sup>50</sup> Such prejudices had a real effect on engineering employment, because they rationalised discrimination against Indians in the PWD and other organisations, which is mainly why engineering was a less attractive career than law. Yet it is also apparent that although the prejudices were expressed about Indians and the Indian mind in general, they were mainly shaped by assumptions about Brahmans or other high-caste Hindus inclined to the habit of 'philosophic speculations', rather than artisans or other lower-caste people engaged in practical work or agriculture. Moreover, in a positive form, similar views were also widely expressed by Indians emphasising their 'spirituality' in contrast to western materialism and with more or less conviction, proclaiming the unity of modern science and ancient religion. Tamil Brahmans, especially those influenced by Theosophy, were prominent in making these arguments in Madras around 1900.<sup>51</sup> Yet there is little or no evidence that Tamil Brahmans, or any other Indians, whatever their religious beliefs and practices may have been, ever subscribed to the notion that they lacked the right qualities for engineering owing to mental deficiencies, spiritual preoccupations or anything else.

On the other hand, the discontinuity between engineering and earlier Brahman vocations is neither illusory nor trivial. Even if relatively few Brahmans in Tamil Nadu ever fully devoted themselves to religion, Sanskrit and scholarship in the dharmashastra, these did define an ideal way of life and Brahmans in general saw their role as traditional literati as an essential aspect of their cultural refinement and caste superiority. None of this Brahmanical learning was primarily focused on the natural world and material reality. Certainly, many Brahman literate service people did possess skills in accounting, record-keeping, map-making or indeed astrology that required numeracy and practical techniques. All the same, Brahman landowners were almost always patronal lords of the land, not agriculturalists with practical knowledge, let alone direct experience of work in the fields.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, technical work, notably fabrication in wood, metal or stone—and the *savoir-faire* that goes with it—has been the traditional monopoly of the low-status artisan castes and Brahmans regarded the artisans' work, along with other kinds of manual labour, with disdain or even contempt. Of course, as one Brahman engineer put it to us, a civil engineer is not a mason cutting stones, for he is engaged in intellectual, not manual work. Yet no engineer could do his job properly if he held manual work in contempt, or put intellectual theory above applied knowledge. During his apprenticeship, moreover, a professional engineer must undergo practical as well as theoretical training, so that he knows how the manual work is actually done, even if it is mostly carried out by subordinates. To put it bluntly, an engineer who never got his hands dirty could never succeed, just as a doctor who

<sup>50</sup> Prakash, *Another Reason*, p. 189; cf. Visvanathan, *Organizing for Science*, p. 45.

<sup>51</sup> Prakash, *Another Reason*, pp. 75–85; van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, pp. 80–82.

<sup>52</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, 'From Landlords to Software Engineers', pp. 171–72.

never became polluted could not. Nonetheless, since the turn of the last century, numerous Tamil Brahmins whose fathers and other forebears were rural landlords or priests, pandits or record-keepers, or indeed lawyers or bureaucrats, have become engineers who have had to acquire a practical, hands-on knowledge, albeit informed by college education, that more resembles the work traditionally done by artisans than Brahmins.

In the modern era, many Tamil Brahmins have become skilled engineers working throughout India and overseas. The most famous pioneering engineer in India, however, was undoubtedly Sir Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya (1860–1962), a Telugu Brahmin from present-day Karnataka. He became Mysore's Chief Engineer in 1909 and then its dewan from 1912 to 1918, and laid much of the foundation for the modern technological city of Bangalore.<sup>53</sup>

To recapitulate, there is a real discontinuity between engineering or medicine and the Brahmins' old roles and vocations, even the most practical and numerical of them, which contrasts with the relative continuity evident for law or administration. For Brahmins themselves, however, unlike sociologists such as Weber, the parallel between engineering and low-status artisans' work has rarely, if ever, been seen as salient and after a short period of hesitancy, nor has the ritual pollution attendant on medicine been a major impediment. Instead—for this is the crucial point—as modern, English-language, credential-based professions that are well-paid and prestigious, law, medicine and engineering belong to the same category and all three learned professions were and are deemed eminently suitable for south Indian Brahmins, who have typically regarded themselves as intellectually superior to other communities. Indeed, among Tamil Brahmins today, their presumptive success in these modern professions is much more commonly invoked than ritual purity or Vedic scholarship as a sign of their superiority over people from other castes.<sup>54</sup>

### **Engineering and Information Technology**

The Tamil Brahmins' prominence in engineering since its early days is salient for understanding their prominence in IT today, although our discussion will be very brief. Engineering rapidly grew in popularity as a career for Tamil Brahmins—and many other Indians as well—after Independence, especially because the dams, power stations, steel plants and heavy engineering factories built as the centrepieces

<sup>53</sup> For Visvesvaraya's career, see his autobiography, *Memoirs*; on Visvesvaraya and Bangalore, see Heitzman, *Network City*, pp. 36–39, 60–62, 222–24, 278–79; cf. also Prakash, *Another Reason*, pp. 195–98; Visvanathan, *Organizing for Science*, pp. 107–09.

<sup>54</sup> Hence self-definitions of 'Brahminhood' among Tamil Brahmins have been changing, as they comparably did among Konkani Brahmins in the early modern period; see O'Hanlon and Minkowski, 'What Makes People Who They Are?'

of India's industrialisation programme all required sizeable cohorts of civil, mechanical and electrical engineers. By the end of the twentieth century, computer and software engineering had become more attractive than the old, core disciplines of engineering, and the IT sector was recruiting far more graduate engineers than the construction or manufacturing industry.<sup>55</sup> Noteworthy, too, is that by 2009 around one-third of software engineers employed in the leading Indian software and services companies were women, whereas very few women ever worked in the older engineering industries.

The Indian IT industry has emerged on the world stage dramatically, which may be why some fanciful explanations for its development have been proposed. For instance, several prominent commentators, as well as some Brahman IT professionals themselves, claim that ancient Indian or Brahmanical traditions of abstract thought and pure mathematics have directly contributed to both Indian success in this field and the Brahmans' leading role in it.<sup>56</sup> In this context, Tamil Brahmans themselves quite often invoke one of their culture heroes, Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887–1920), as if his mathematical genius were part of their hereditary birthright and thereby explained their prowess in IT.

Claims like these are intriguing but unfounded. It is true that high scores in maths exams are required for admission to leading engineering colleges and mathematics does provide a good basis for the logical skills desirable in IT professionals. Nonetheless, complex mathematics is irrelevant to the vast majority of the routine business done by software and services companies in India or elsewhere. More generally, theories postulating a link between the ancient past and the immediate present ignore the IT industry's development over thirty or forty years, with foundations resting firmly on India's scientific, technological and industrial manufacturing base.<sup>57</sup> One critical condition for IT's growth has been the supply of engineering graduates and expertise and training in computer and software engineering have developed from and alongside the older engineering disciplines. Hence engineering is crucial in the IT professionals' pre-history and their direct vocational ancestors are civil, mechanical and electrical engineers. Seated in front

<sup>55</sup> In 1949/50, India produced about 5,500 graduates in engineering and technology; see Misra, *Indian Middle Classes*, p. 334. By 1970, the annual output of engineering graduates was around 20,000 and by 1990, 60,000; see World Bank, *India: Scientific and Technical Manpower Development in India*, Report no. 20416-I, 2000, p. 46, Fig. 1.2. According to the All India Council for Technical Education, the output was nearly 465,000 in 2004/5; see report on <http://search.rediff.com/money/2006/jun/09bspec.htm>, 2006. The accuracy and international comparability of AICTE data have been questioned, e.g., by the World Bank report.

<sup>56</sup> For example, Amartya Sen, in a keynote address to the National Association of Software and Services Companies in Mumbai in 2007, traced connections between the IT industry's success and the traditional Indian 'love of mathematics', as well as 'a tradition of being thrilled by intellectual altercations'; see *The Hindu*, e-paper, 16 February 2007; <http://www.hindu.com/nic/itindia.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> See Upadhyaya and Vasavi, *Work, Culture, and Sociality*, pp. 9–12; *idem.*, 'Outposts', pp. 13–14, and p. 41, n. 1, for further references on the IT industry's development.

of computers in offices, IT professionals may look like bureaucrats and therefore like contemporary reincarnations of traditional literate service people, but this is an illusion produced by a misunderstanding of their training and work. The relatively high proportion of Tamil Brahmins among IT professionals is not a direct product of their old roles and vocations, for example as numerate record-keepers; rather it is a prolongation of their general over-representation in the modern educated professions, most especially engineering.

### Conclusion

In his article in this collection, Washbrook notes that owing to the Deshasthas' pre-eminence, Tamil Brahmins were poorly represented in leading positions in the principal kingdoms' bureaucracies immediately before and after south India came under British rule. He also persuasively argues that Deshasthas may have been an important model for emulation for Tamil Brahmins, who then proceeded to displace them so successfully that they came to dominate colonial administration in Madras in the later nineteenth century. As Suntharalingam observed earlier, when Brahmins 'flocked to the colleges' in the nineteenth century, 'the pace was initially set by the Mahratta Brahmins ... and their example stimulated' the Tamil Brahmins.<sup>58</sup> Maybe the Deshastha Madhava Rao personally inspired his friend Seshia Sastri. But this is just a speculative gloss on the main argument that the Deshasthas, who had been historically more innovative, were the catalyst inspiring the conservative Tamil Brahmins to exploit the advantages given by their extant education and literacy to invest in modern education, take up new forms of professional employment and migrate to urban areas in order to do so.

As we have seen, the Tamil Brahmins' longstanding traditions of education, literacy and scholarship mean that their caste's leading presence in the modern learned professions does have ancient roots. Yet there is no simple line of continuity between the past and present, as if caste traditionalism were determinant. Most probably, the Deshasthas were a modernising catalyst for the Tamil Brahmins, but in any case the latter group's prominence in the modern professions is mainly a product of how their old social and cultural capital, as well as their economic capital in land, was transformed through migration and urbanisation as they seized new educational and employment opportunities. Often, as already mentioned, this transformation was the outcome of loss of land, indebtedness or economic privation, for many Brahmins were poor, not rich. Moreover, many Brahmins—in towns and cities, as well as those remaining in villages—are still poor and have experienced little upward economic or occupational mobility. Nonetheless, during the twentieth century, Tamil Brahmins collectively came to be disproportionately dominant in many of the professions that are most critical for a modern economy

<sup>58</sup> Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening*, pp. 113–14.

and society, and they increasingly turned into a predominantly urban middle-class caste. By the end of the century, Brahman dominance had been much reduced and certainly the vast majority of the urban, educated, professional middle class in south India is now non-Brahman. Brahmans, however, are still over-represented in the middle class and are very numerous in some employment sectors, including the IT industry that is so crucial in the contemporary global economy. One fundamental reason for this state of affairs is that from the nineteenth century onwards—and more fully than any other social group in south India—the Tamil Brahmans converted their old assets into new ones so that they could enter the modern, learned professions, and they have continued to build upon this lead until the present day.

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