3
SCRIBAL MIGRATIONS
IN EARLY MODERN INDIA

Rosalind O’Hanlon

Introduction
One of the most striking aspects of India’s recent history, and certainly a vital contributor to
India’s post-liberalisation economic growth, lies in the mobility of its skilled service communities,
above all those in the new communications technologies. Within India, students and young
professionals have gravitated to Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune and other expanding cities where
universities and IT companies now collaborate in productive alliance. Even more spectacularly,
this mobility takes the form of a diaspora in Europe and above all in the United States, where
skilled Indian professionals are in high demand in the IT and technology service industries of the
west coast, and in the IT and science departments of American universities. This modern diaspora
looks very different from many of the migrations that took place within and from India within
the British empire – those that drew from the humbler social strata of small business people and
traders, artisans, military men and indentured labourers. India’s modern diaspora of highly
qualified professional elites might be thought to bear little connection to India’s earlier history.

In fact, these modern professional migrations have an important historical precedent within
an earlier period of India’s history. India’s early modern centuries, when regional states and
courts flourished within the framework of the Mughal empire, saw the growth of exceptional
opportunities for skilled service people willing to travel in search of employment and patronage.
India itself was a magnet for such people, drawn from the states of central and west Asia
(Subrahmanyam 1992; Alam and Subrahmanyam 2007). Within India, communities of service
people – such as Brahmans, kayasthas, khatris, Muslim scribal specialists – developed very effec-
tive strategies for such migrations in search of opportunity, patronage and employment (S. Bayly
1999: 64–96; Guha 2004; Alam and Subrahmanyam 2004; O’Hanlon and Washbrook 2011). Key
to these strategies was a seemingly contradictory logic, but one which made their migration
particularly successful as a means of enhancing family security and opportunity. Scribal families
were able simultaneously to indigenise themselves successfully in new settings, while at the same
time preserving their own community identities and their links with their past histories.

Scribal specialists and ‘early modernity’
Economic, political, religious and intellectual developments intensified the demand for the skills
of scribal people of many different kinds in Mughal India. Mughal administration incorporated
military as well as economic and revenue dimensions. The shift to a money economy was already under way during the years of the Delhi Sultanate. However, it quickened as the emperor Akbar's government began to collect the imperial state’s revenue demand in cash, opening up new opportunities at every level of society and state for men adept in the movement of money and credit. The ‘mansabdars’ or elite administrative cadres of the Mughal empire, supported by military estates, had military obligations indicated by their rank, but also held a wide range of posts in military, civil, judicial and revenue administration. Biographies of Mughal elites often reveal their postings to different regions in the ever-expanding Mughal empire (Athar Ali 1997: 144–9). Mansabdars themselves also required and supported considerable administrative establishments, to oversee their households and collect revenues from their military estates. Beneath the Mughal imperial umbrella, the consolidation of regional states led to the further growth of state bureaucracies, as well as of ranks of skilled accountants and administrators employed to manage the affairs of substantial gentry and petty lords.

Other kinds of scribal expertise were in demand too. Most royal courts and great households supported men of letters in both of early modern India’s cosmopolitan literary traditions, Sanskrit and Persian: intellectuals, translators, poets, chroniclers, newswriters, skilled writers of royal eulogies, astrologers, experts in religious law and ritual specialists able to meet the growing demand of regional courts for more elaborate forms of royal ritual. These specialists were valued not only for their practical skills, but also for the prestige that their presence could confer. Great scholars guaranteed the judicial authority of royal courts, while the patronage of public disputations between leading intellectuals boosted the reputations of rulers for learning and culture (Deshpande 2011). Powerful merchant patrons, anxious to display their wealth and express their piety, found means to do this through the support of scholars and holy men.

Very many different communities were drawn into providing this wide range of specialist scribal skills. Many Mughal scholar bureaucrats were drawn from migrant communities with homes in various parts of central Asia: Iranians, Turanis, Tajiks, Uzbegs, Afghans and Kashmiris. Others came from ashraf Muslim gentry families based in north India’s expanding urban centres, who worked also at lower levels of the system as judicial and revenue officers (Richards 1993: 58–78; Subrahmanyan 1992: 340–62; Athar Ali 1997: 136–53; Hasan 2004, Barnett 1987, Alam 1986). Brahman communities of many different kinds also participated. In the south, the worldly karanam classes of-clerky niyogi Brahmans predominated (Narayana Rao et al. 2001: 92–139). In the Marathi-speaking regions of western India, more conservative Brahman communities rooted in a longstanding Sanskrit culture had long provided the scribal expertise for the region’s states (Fukazawa 1991: 1–48; Wink 1986: 67–84). In Bengal, similar functions were discharged by more cosmopolitan and often Persianised Brahmans and Vaidyas (Chatterjee 2009: 445–72). In northern India and the Rajput states, Persian-assimilated kayasthas and khatris were the leading scribal people. These communities were not Brahmans, but had early in the second millennium developed as specialised scribes and clerks. Popular literatures reviled them for the influence they were able to command as royal scribes, but they also appear in inscriptional literature represented as pious donors and great men in their own right. Originally serving medieval ‘Hindu’ kings, the coming of the Muslim empires opened up new opportunities for them. In these new courtly contexts, their willingness to assimilate themselves to the Persianate language and culture of Muslim courts gave them enormous advantages – although often, in the process, attracting sharp hostility from Brahman scribal rivals (O’Hanlon 2010b: 563–95).

Early modern India’s scribal communities therefore comprised many different groups with different ethnic identities, religious cultures and service ethics. At the extremes, the imperial service ethic of Mughal scholar bureaucrats (Richards 1984: 255–89) contrasted sharply with
that of the south Indian karanams with whom they might serve on the Deccan fringes of the empire; and both contrasted again with that of the Maratha Brahman intellectuals who migrated to Banaras and different Indian courts. Many scribes exercised their skills only within their own local communities, finding new challenges as local accounting and revenue needs grew in complexity and local power-holders sought them out to help manage their household affairs in the face of growing pressures from the state. However, some were very willing to move, following opportunities for advancement through promotion via Mughal state administration, in the expansion of new regional courts and from the growth of urban and mercantile fortunes seeking outlets for artistic creation and piety. At the same time, movement was often followed by new settlement and local entrenchment. Very often office holders were given lands to support themselves, so offices became hereditary and families built new positions for themselves in new places. But the political fluidity of the epoch guaranteed that no locality would be permanently secure and that the need for movement would be constant. Many families developed long-term practices of sending out new branches to found new households in new places, even while their patriarchs remained firmly located over several generations in one.

Yet the pressures of mobility did not only affect scribal communities locally. In many ways, they reshaped society more broadly, especially favouring the development of forms of identity which could become ‘portable’ and recognisable across the sub-continent. Some groups, such as Brahmns, already possessed the lineaments from which to make such pan-Indian identities, which strengthened across the period. However, others – most notably kayasthas – had constantly to reinvent themselves to meet the task.

**Logics of migration**

Where skills were in demand, but the locus of demand fluctuated with the rise and fall of patrons and employers, it was important for service people to be mobile. Transfers were central to Mughal imperial administration, very often with families operating as units and sons inheriting some of the responsibilities of their fathers. The kayastha Bhimsen Saksena grew up in the central Indian town of Burhanpur in the 1650s. His father had been posted there from north India as an accounts officer attached to the artillery of the Mughal army. Bhimsen and his family then moved to the city of Aurangabad in 1658, where he took up work as his father’s deputy. He then went on to serve the Mughal officer Daud Khan and then Rao Dalpat, the Raja of Datia (Khobrekar 1972: 1–4).

Ritual and religious specialists also looked to migration for expanded opportunities. Some did so within the framework of religious sects and orders, such as those Muslim sufi orders who had developed a close relation to the Mughal court (Alam 2009: 135–74), or the Hindu monastic organisations who received substantial support from rulers in this period (Minkowski 2011: 127–31). Others could be individual scholars who combined expertise in law with ritual skills. For pandit households in particular, migration for education was built into their traditions of learning. The fame of any pandit household depended not just on sons, but on the numbers of students it was known to have trained, and who went on themselves not only to perpetuate the traditions of learning imbibed in the households of their teachers, but to spread the reputations of those teachers to new centres of learning and patronage (Kelkar 1915: 29–34).

When the famous Banaras scholar Kamalakara Bhatta described the achievements of his father Narayana Bhatta, he listed all of those students from different parts of India ‘from Dravida, Gurjara, Kanyakubja, Malwa, Braja, Mithila, the Himalayan regions, Karnata, Utkala, the Konkan, Gauda, Andhra, Mathura, Kamarupa and other parts of India’ (Shastri 1912: 12). This gives us
some idea of the journeys that these scholar families undertook and the intellectual networks they established.

Particularly remarkable was the scholarly diaspora of Maratha Brahmans from western India, which reached up to Banaras and Rajasthan in the north and to Thanjavur, deep in southern India. The old religious centres of western India’s Konkan littoral, and the shrine towns that clustered along the Godavari, Bhima and Krishna rivers as they flowed eastward across the plains of central and southern India, clearly offered an environment in which the learned and the pious could flourish. Outside these centres, the relatively poor and famine-prone agrarian economy of the Deccan plateau meant that it was imperative for Brahman families to diversify, to spread their risks beyond the precarious livelihoods to be earned as petty teachers, village priests, astrologers or small farmers. With their skills of literacy and numeracy, it was a natural strategy for Brahman families to send some of their sons to pursue the worldly opportunities in state service and revenue administration as these expanded under the Bahmani kings and their successors in the states of the Deccan Sultanate. The aim was to disperse the family and spread risk. Thus families would often combine continued landholding at their point of origin, but send family members off to different places where they could find employment and patronage. Indeed, these skills applied in the service of states carried them far into central and southern India too, and it became almost a cliché for seventeenth-century observers that what Maratha Brahmans prized above all was secure positions in state service (Sastri 1963: 111–17).

These pressures were intensified by particular events, which precipitated specific waves of migration. It is likely that the fall to Muslim incomers of the central India Yadava court of Devagiri in 1294, and consequent decline of nearby Paithan as an old centre of Brahman piety and learning, was one such stimulus. The fourteenth century saw two catastrophic famines in the Deccan region, in 1346 and again in 1390–1410, which resulted in the very widespread depopulation of Deccan villages. Episodes of temple destruction and forced proselytisation that accompanied the expansion of Portuguese power in the Konkan littoral also resulted in the migration of many Brahman families outside the Portuguese regions, although many also stayed on and prospered (Axelrod and Fuerch 2008).

But scribal families did not only migrate because they were ‘pushed’. The emergence of Banaras as a great centre of learning and piety in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries functioned as a special ‘pull’ factor, too. Very many pandit families migrated there (O’Hanlon 2011) to meet wealthy patrons who would support their lives as pious scholars. Some had close connections with Mughal courtiers; others with the wealthy monastic institution in the city; others served in judicial assemblies acting as courts of last appeal in religious disputes originating in many other parts of India, dispensing justice to Brahman communities out in the localities. Banares also became a base from which scholars could go to regional courts and display their learning. It is likely that some at least also became involved in Banaras’s burgeoning banking and money-lending activities, which expanded with the population of the city and particularly with the growth of the pilgrim trade. When the great Maratha warrior king Sivaji sought refuge in the city in 1666 having escaped from captivity at the Mughal court, he was able to raise an enormous loan from the city’s bankers (Sen 1920: 71–2).

Other ‘pull’ factors included the recruitment needs of states for secular administrators and accountants. Kayasthas provide a prime example here, frequently migrating from northern India to central and western regions, most notably Hyderabad (Leonard 1971). They were encouraged by the preference of many rulers for appointing some outsiders deliberately to provide balance against locals, who otherwise might gain too much control. In Sivaji’s Maratha state, contemporaries reported a deliberate policy of appointing a kayastha and a Brahman
jointly to head up particular departments, thus limiting the power and influence enjoyed by each (Sen 1920: 29–30).

From the later seventeenth century, several factors promoted even larger flows of scribal specialists with religious expertise. Under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, the older flow of Mughal patronage to Brahman scholars in Banaras dried up, as Aurangzeb suspected the city’s Brahmins of having aided Sivaji in his escape and developed his own more assertive Islamic religiosity. In this changing climate, ritual specialists and experts in religious law sought alternative patronage in the courts of the southern Maratha country and in the courts of Rajasthan (Horstmann 2009). From the early eighteenth century, the establishment of a Brahman court at Pune in western India further accentuated this regionalisation of migration patterns for ambitious and skilled Brahman scribal specialists.

**Paths and patterns of mobility**

In the case of Banares, while we know that different families arrived at different times from the early sixteenth century (and even earlier), we have rather less appreciation of the mechanics of their migration. Migration to Banaras was often undertaken through a series of smaller and more local moves. Once a family was established in Banaras, there was commonly a series of comings and goings over several generations, in which family ties and ties of property rights were maintained with natal locations for many decades or longer, before a distinctive ‘Banaras’ branch of the family emerged as a settled part of the city’s population. In addition, Banaras was commonly only one destination for such migrant families, who might despatch further members to establish themselves at other promising courtly or religious centres.

The eminent Sesa family, who emerged in the late sixteenth century as leading grammarians in the city, provides a good example. The family traced their origins back to a thirteenth-century ancestor, Ramakrsna, who held lands in Nanded, an important centre of learning and pilgrimage within the Marathi-speaking regions of the Godaveri river in central India. He had three sons, Ganesapant, Vitthalpant and Bopajipant. Ganesapant and his descendants remained in Nanded, but some at least of Vitthalpant’s family left the town for other destinations (Kanole 1950: 58). One Visnu Sesa had moved to Banaras for his education in the later fifteenth century, where he excelled as a grammarian, winning the title of sabha-pati, ‘lord of the assembly’, for his outstanding performances in debate (Kanole 1950: 60–1). Other descendants of Vitthalpant left Nanded for the court of Bijapur, where the family clearly flourished in a range of different avocations. In 1567, one Vaman, the son of Anant Sesa, was appointed royal librarian to Ali Adil Shah I (1558–80) of Bijapur, with the substantial salary of 1,000 gold hon per annum. Vaman clearly impressed his royal patron, for his appointment was renewed in 1575 (Joshi 1956–7: 10). Vaman’s contemporary Narasimha Sesa also received patronage at the court, not for his library skills, but for his expertise in the family tradition of learning in Sanskrit grammar, for which his Brahman scholar peers at Bijapur rewarded him with the title of bhatta-bhattārākar, ‘revered among scholars’ (Aryavaraguru 1912: 248).

Not long afterwards, however, the attractions of Mughal Banaras began to eclipse those of the provincial court of Bijapur. Narasimha’s son Krsna Sesa inherited both his father’s skills as a grammarian and the family’s talent for mobilising social networks in the quest for opportunity and reputation. By the 1580s, Krsna Sesa had moved to Banaras and established himself not only as a formidable grammarian, but as the leader of the growing community of Maharashtrian Brahmins in the city (O’Hanlon 2009: 221). His success may have been attributable, in part at least, to the fact that he had ready-made family contacts in the city, in the descendants of the grammarian Visnu Sesa. Other Sesas from Bijapur followed, although their talents took different
forms. The royal librarian Vaman’s grandson, also Vaman pandit (1608–95), spent his youth in Bijapur, but then left to pursue his Sanskrit education in Banaras, where he emerged as an outstandingly successful poet (Kanhere 1926: 305–14).

Dispersed as the family became, however, the links with Sesas back in Nanded remained active. When Krsna moved to Banaras, his father Narasimha had clearly gone back to Nanded, for Krsna recorded that he wrote his play Murārīvijaya when he himself was in Banaras and his father living on the Godaveri. Sesas, who had left Nanded, clearly continued to share in the extended family’s rights in land. In a family deed confirming the division of a plot of land in Nanded, dated to 1629, one Vasudeva Pant Sesa, ‘resident of Kasi’ is mentioned as a party to the document (Kanole 1950: 62). In addition, there was clearly some family tradition whereby important family documents were returned for safekeeping to Nanded. When Kanole, the historian of the Sesa family, was exploring the family’s archives in the 1940s, it was here that he found copies of the royal librarian’s documents of appointment, dating back to the 1560s and 1570s (Kanole 1950: 64).

The Mahasabde family of scholars and priests offer another example of early modern scribal mobility. They were a Maratha Brahman family who had by the middle of the seventeenth century established themselves sufficiently successfully in Banaras for Devabhatta and Jotirvid Mahasabde to appear in the city’s important judicial assembly in 1657. Devabhatta had three sons, Dinkara, Prabhakar and Ratnakar, who grew very close to the royal family of the Rajput court of Amer and came to serve the family as gurus and spiritual guides. Dinkara stayed in Banaras, where his son Vidyadhar grew so wealthy that he was called ‘Kuber’ after the treasurer to the gods in the Hindu pantheon. The second son, Prabhakar, migrated to the holy city of Mathura, where he was a teacher in the city’s great Vaishnava temple. The names he gave his sons – Vrajinatha and Gokulnatha – reflect this influence and the family’s adaptation to the local religious culture. These sons became very influential at the Jaipur court of Jaisingh (1688–1743), who was himself a major Vaishavite patron (Gode 1943: 292–306). Adapting themselves to their new religious setting, these Brahman scholars and ritualists became central to what Monika Horstmann has described as the reinvention and revival of Hindu kingship during the course of the eighteenth century (Horstmann 2009).

Migration and the household

The principal institution through which the skills of scribal migrants were transmitted, and their migration translated into active strategy, was the household. Here, skills were learned and transmitted and human capital preserved and concentrated. Young scholars often lived as part of their teacher’s household, receiving education alongside his sons, and often for periods of many years, and the relationship between teacher or guru and student seems often to have assumed a quasi-filial form (O’Hanlon 2011: 181–9). This strategy made excellent sense from the point of view of an expanding scholar household, developing its range of potentially valuable social and intellectual connections far beyond the sons of the family.

It was often this extended household that undertook journeys of migration. For example, Ramesvara Bhatta, of the eminent Banaras Bhatta family of scholars, left Paithan in the first decade of the sixteenth century. The family moved some 80 miles west to Sangamner, where Ramesvara set up his own successful establishment as a teacher. His students travelled with Ramesvara and his wife in their subsequent journeys: to Kolhapur to worship the family deity, in the hope of getting a son for the family; and to the Vijayanagar court of Krsnadevaraya, to see its wealth of learning and, perhaps, to explore the opportunities there for suitable patronage. For reasons that are obscure, Ramesvara did not find Vijayanagar congenial. The family left, now with
Rosalind O'Hanlon

a different purpose – to go to the sacred city of Dwarka in the hope of curing his baby son Narayana, born in 1513, of consumption. Here, to alleviate his worries about his son, Ramesvara spent some time training a local student, and set him up there to carry on his intellectual traditions in that city. From there he returned to Paithan, but not to stay: he left shortly afterwards for Banaras, where he settled, and where his wife bore him the further sons that went on to establish the intellectual pre-eminence of the family in that city (Benson 2001: 105–17). But the Bhatta family continued to maintain its links with the Deccan: by writing works on Hindu law as it applied to the Deccan, by serving in the pandit assemblies to which cases from the Maratha regions were brought, by coming down to advise pandit assemblies within the Maratha country (O’Hanlon 2009: 59) and by visiting the Deccan court itself, most notably when the great ritual specialist Gagabhatta came down to consecrate the Maratha ruler Sivaji at his Raigad court in 1674 (Bendrey 1960).

An even more peripatetic dramatic history lay behind the eventual appointment of the kayastha Balaji Avaji as the principal scribe at Sivaji’s court. Balaji Avaji came from a family of writers, the Gholkar family of Gholavadi village in the Konkan. Originally part of the kayastha migration from northern India, they had come down to the Konkan to serve the Siddhis of Janjira as scribes. They then became ministers to a local great household in the Konkan, where Balaji Avaji’s father was executed because of suspicions that he had helped cause the death of his patron. He, his mother and his brothers were then sent to the nearby town of Rajapur to be sold as slaves. However, his mother’s brother at that time was employed as a writer in the coastal town Rajapur. He rescued the family, putting the boys to work as writers, just at the time that Sivaji’s power began to spread into the region. Balaji Avaji’s talents were recognised at the rising court and he was offered a post in Sivaji’s revenue administration (O’Hanlon 2010b: 578).

Culture and identity

Culture and identity also represented key aspects of the strategy of migrant scribal communities, although their logic could seem at first paradoxical. On the one hand, it was important that identities should be recognisable across different locations and thus ‘portable’. But, on the other, it was also important for ‘prestige’ that identities should remain connected to particular households and places of origin associated with eminence. This twin logic affected the way that, especially, Brahmans and kayasthas came to conceive themselves during the early modern period and actually worked in tandem to enable these communities to maximise their positions.

As Susan Bayly especially has noted, Brahmans in early modern India drew particular advantage from the fact that they were able to tap into subcontinent-wide networks and that, as ‘Brahmans’, they had a status and employability which was meaningful everywhere (Bayly 1999: 70). To enhance this advantage, Brahman intellectuals further developed at this time a comprehensive ‘grid’ through which to convey and classify Brahman identities across the subcontinent. This grid divided all Brahmans into ‘gauda’, or northern Brahmans and ‘dravida’, or southern Brahmans, and laid out five further subdivisions within each. These subdivisions were derived in part from the lines of regional vernacular language communities then also consolidating themselves during this period (O’Hanlon 2011: 191–4). This grid allowed all Brahmans in theory at least to map themselves and their histories within an all-India frame, which would be comprehensible wherever families moved and needed to establish themselves as skilled and reputable members of the Brahman caste category at large.

Kayasthas also tried to develop this kind of portable identity but, lacking the Brahman religious inheritance, it required a greater modification of history. In the early part of the second
millennium, and as they moved from being an occupational to a caste-like grouping, kayastha communities in northern India had strong affiliations to tantric forms of Hindu religious culture. However, their migration south and westwards as servants of expanding Muslim states from the fourteenth century onwards brought them into conflict with long-settled Brahman communities in these regions, who had hitherto enjoyed very much a monopoly of scribal occupations and expertise. These Brahmans sought to portray kayasthas not as accomplished men of culture and close confidants of kings, but rather as low-born servants affiliated with disreputable forms of worship. Under these pressures, kayasthas distanced themselves from tantric ritual. Instead, they ‘indigenised’ themselves by describing their origins in relation to the god Parashuram, sixth incarnation of Vishnu and everywhere in western India understood to be the creator of its lands and the patron of its indigenous communities. These new identities travelled back to Banaras, where local Brahmans accepted them even while their sometime brothers in western India disputed them and continued to sustain anti-kayastha feuds (O’Hanlon 2010b). Mobility both stretched the need for identity and the means by which it could be constantly reinvented.

Yet reinvention was not without boundaries. While migrating families or communities might ‘imagine’ themselves in ways which flattered their status and raised their prospects, their respectability continued partly to depend on their places of origin – and these were not necessarily easy to invent. A delicate balance between truth and fiction often needed to be maintained. We can see how delicate, for example, in the case of the Devarukhe community of Maratha Brahmans. They were a rather marginal community back in the Maratha country, with some association with labour on the land and with whom other local Brahman communities often refused to dine. However, Devarukhe families that had moved to Banaras were able to establish impressive reputations for themselves as respectable scholars and ritualists. They also changed their community name slightly, taking advantage of the soft pronunciation of the ‘kh’ in the local Hindvi dialect, calling themselves ‘Devarshi’ Brahmans, a much more dignified title implying that they were godly seers. On this basis, other Brahman communities in Banaras accepted them as Brahmans of repute and worthy marriage partners. However, when hints at their true origins belatedly came to light, these produced a major crisis in local relations, with the respectable Banaras families into which they had married facing acute embarrassment. To overcome the problem, large numbers of Banaras’s more eminent pandit families found themselves obliged to gather publicly and specifically to declare the ‘Devarshis’ to be respectable Brahmans – the protests and complaints of critics notwithstanding – and thus to be fit marriage partners for themselves (O’Hanlon 2010a: 220–34).

Whether or not migration was used to improve status and construct new identities, it was often very important for a migratory community also to be able to demonstrate its origins. This could take a variety of forms. Sometimes, it might take the form of family memory relayed via a combination of oral tradition and documents of property right. For example, and remarkably, the kayastha brothers Govind Ramji and Rango Atmaji were living near the western Indian town of Pune during the 1720s. When asked for details of their lineage by a visiting kayastha dignitary, they were able to reconstruct their family history from the first migration of their ancestor, Konda Prabhu, who had come from the north Indian province of Awadh southwards to the Deccan with Muhammad bin Tughlaq in the middle of the fourteenth century, right down to the 1720s. This, they said, was on the basis of a history ‘taken from original papers, and heard from the mouths of our fathers and forefathers’ (Bendrey 1966, vol. 2: 400). Memory of a community’s origins might also take the form of distinctive practices maintained in a new place. As evidence of their family origins in Awadh, the two kayastha brothers pointed to the continued tradition of worship in their family of the goddess Vinzai,

**Scribal migrations: legacies**

How far this culture of scribal mobility continued after the onset of colonial rule remains debatable. By no means all the old sources of patronage and employment were lost: the princely states maintained old features of their royal gloss (especially in the Indian arts) until late into the nineteenth century, and temples and mosques continued to dispense significant endowments. Also, in its early days, the East India Company state drew heavily on inherited practices and spread pockets of Bengali scribes across much of northern India.

Nonetheless, change became progressively radical. Even the Company state was thin on largesse and its patronage activities were heavily constrained. Also, the watchwords of its governance were ‘sedentarisation’ and ‘peasantisation’ as it treated mobility within the Indian population with suspicion, fearful that its processes lay beyond state control. Further, as the culture of power became increasingly Anglicised, references to the Indian past and to the etiquettes of Indian religion lost much of their force – at least in creating criteria of respectability and employability. Moreover, in the twentieth century, the vernacularisation of both society and state undermined the practical utility of all-India networks of community and family. Much of the world constituted around the mobility of early modern scribal groups faded away.

But perhaps not all of it. The revival of scribal (or, more properly these days, ‘professional’) migration in the ‘global’ twentieth and twenty-first centuries poses many of the individuals and families involved with many of the same dilemmas. How to make host societies aware of one’s ‘special’ abilities and qualities? How both to fit into the society of new locales and to maintain links with one’s own distinctive past and identity? The family strategies adopted, and the strains on values and aspirations which they cause, can look very much the same, albeit at a level that is global and now conducted with the aid of air travel and internet connections. It is arguable as to how far these earlier histories of migration may actively have shaped South Asia’s global diasporas in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Fuller and Narasimhan 2010). Nonetheless, these communities do at least have a very long history of migration and mobility on which they can call.

**References**


Scribal migrations in early modern India

O’Hanlon, Rosalind and David Washbrook. (2011) ‘Munshis, Pandits and Record Keepers: Scribal Communities and Historical Change in India’. Special Issue of The Indian Economic and Social History Review XLVII (4) October–December 2012.

