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Indian Economic Social History Review 2010 47: 445

DOI: 10.1177/001946461004700402

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Scribal elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal

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This article studies the importance of scribal skills in sustaining political regimes and the function of scribal careers in shaping and creating social and ritual status with particular reference to Bengal from the thirteenth till the eighteenth centuries. Based on histories of landed families, middle period Bengali literature and the large genealogical corpus (kulagranthas) of this region, the article surveys the social geography of literate-scribal communities and their long association with a number of Indo-Islamic regimes which ruled over Bengal during these centuries. The article explores the social and cultural implications of scribal careers as well as the educational and linguistic proficiencies which undergirded them. Finally, the article notes the role played by polities in regulating jati hierarchies and boundaries and comments on its implications for the period studied here as also for the colonial/modern period.

Keywords: Bengal, Indo-Islamic rule, scribal skills, elites

Introduction

This article examines the emergence and shifting fortunes of literate and scribal groups in medieval Bengal in the context of the Sultanate and Mughal regimes in the region from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. It seeks primarily to reconstruct the social history of these scribal communities and to flesh out their patterns of migration, entrepreneurship and employment. The underlying goal of this social history is to explore the implications of scribal opportunities for social

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Rosalind O'Hanlon for suggestions on an earlier version of the article and for encouraging me to explore this topic of research. Thanks are also due to the anonymous referee of the article for some excellent and insightful comments.

***The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 47, 4 (2010): 445–72**
SAGE Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/001946461004700402

mobility, community formation and for patterns of hierarchy and flexibility in upper caste, Brahmanical society. The article also underscores the role of scribal elites in providing the technical and professional skills which necessarily undergirded state formation. Some of these issues have been fruitfully illuminated by the researches of C.A. Bayly, John F. Richards, Muzaffar Alam, Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Richard Eaton, Rosalind O'Hanlon, Christopher Minkowski and others with respect to Northern India, the Deccan, Southern India and Western India.¹ This article turns to these aspects of Bengal's pre-modern social history, which have yet to attract intensive scholarly attention, during the medieval and early modern periods.

The article is primarily based on accounts of Bengal's aristocratic and gentry families, local histories of various sub-regions within Bengal, Mangalkavya literature and particularly on this region's genre of genealogical literature known as kulagranthas or kulajis. The ideological environment and context in which these materials were produced indicates that they were composed with a clear cultural and political purpose—the preservation of the Brahmanical social order—through the policing of its boundaries and enforcement of a quotidian, everyday normativity which comprised the basic fabric of social life. The typical format of the kulajis took the form of inter-generational accounts of important Brahman lineages, with particular attention paid to the function of material careers and professional success in shaping social as well as ritual status. In the early twentieth century, these materials became the centre of a passionate controversy among Bengali scholars and intellectuals with regard to their value as sources for the reconstruction of Bengal's social history during the medieval period. At stake in this debate were contested understandings of history itself and the criteria to be deployed for writing it.² These materials, which had been produced under the conventions and conditions of a pre-print, manuscript culture, did not conform to modern protocols regarding authorship, citation of sources and their corroboration. These and other features of this manuscript corpus made it truly challenging to determine their chronology, provenance and factual accuracy, with the result that several professional historians and archeologists of the early twentieth century roundly rejected the kulagranthas as appropriate sources for writing history.

Medieval manuscript corporuses—including Bengal's kulaji literature—began to enter the world of print in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Richard Eaton and Prachi Deshpande have demonstrated, this process was associated with a range of ideological assumptions and premises deriving from colonialism, nationalism and caste politics, which framed and shaped the editorial, publishing and

¹ C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazzars*; Richards, 'Norms of Comportment' and 'The Formulation of Imperial Authority'; Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*; Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'The Making of a Munshi'.

² Chatterjee, 'The King of Controversy'.

printing efforts at this time.³ These are important issues and deserve substantive discussion. Unfortunately, constraints of space do not permit a comprehensive discussion of this issue here. However, the editing and publishing of pre-modern Bengali manuscripts was in full swing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and there are indications that editing practices were shaped by the type of ideological-political lenses discussed in greater detail by Eaton and Deshpande.⁴ I keep such conditions in mind while using this genealogical literature. From my perspective, the kulajis constitute an extremely important source for the social history of Bengal. The politics and conventions of pre-modern manuscript transmission do not permit us to 'fact-check' every detail of every individual and lineage mentioned in them, although this is possible in many cases. However, the most valuable function of the kulagranthas lies in the fact that they provide a panoramic view over the longue duree regarding patterns of educational accomplishments, job-related achievements, cultural practices, social and political affiliations of persons and lineages who fit the rubric of scribal elites. In addition, the fact that these genealogical accounts were maintained and disseminated over so many centuries by particular families and jatis points to their interest in representing themselves and their ancestors in the terms in which they are described—or, not described—in these materials. Insights gained about Bengal's medieval and early modern history from other types of materials, both contemporary materials as well as existing secondary literature, have been naturally used to provide a critical complement to kulaji narratives and to interrogate the latter, wherever possible.

As an extensive scholarly literature about the history and culture of medieval and early modern India has forcefully demonstrated, South Asian society hardly ever resembled completely the idealised samaj depicted in Brahmanical texts. Individuals and lineages constituted different types of communities or samajas, which were produced through social and economic transactions and interactions of many different kinds. The following section discusses Bengal's scribal communities.

Scribal Communities in Bengal

Typically in Bengal, as in northern India, scribes and those associated with other types of administrative work belonged to the Kayastha community. But in Bengal, certain other high-status jatis were also associated with scribal functions. Thus,

³ Deshpande, 'The Making of an Indian Nationalist Archive'; Eaton, 'Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States'.

⁴ Nagendranath Basu, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa*. The many volumes in this history provide details about how he tracked down old genealogies but does not offer many insights into the premises and assumptions he brought to bear upon this work. Other scholars, such as Sukumar Sen, refer to practices and problems in the editing and translating of Bengali manuscripts. See his classic, *Bangla Sahityer Itihasa*, vols 1–2, and Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*.

the references to scribal elites given here also include jatis other than Kayasthas. By the early medieval period, scribes and scribal communities were being referred to in contemporary literature, including inscriptions, as ubiquitous figures in administrative and governmental circles.⁵ Moreover, they occupied a range of elite positions in society on account of their educational achievements and their proximity to centres of political power.

A complex of social, cultural and political factors had stimulated a major programme of re-writing and recasting the kulagranthas of most higher jatis within Bengal's Brahmanical society during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The overview of Bengal's Brahman, Kayastha and Vaidya communities given in the next paragraphs is derived from this genealogical literature.

By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Brahmans of Bengal represented a multi-layered and relatively diverse community comprising a number of smaller sub-groups. By this period, most well-established Brahman jatis in Bengal associated themselves with a historic migration into the region from areas outside it. These communities traced their antecedents back to Northern India—the presumed heartland of Brahmanic culture—and specifically to Kanyakubja or Kanauj. The Pashchatya Vaidika Brahmins and the Dakshinaty Vaidika Brahmans of Bengal claimed that their origins were in Northern India but that their journey to Bengal had been mediated by detours of varying lengths of time in Orissa and Tirhut or northern Bihar respectively.⁶ A much more visible place was occupied in the region's Brahman hierarchy by the famed migration directly into Bengal from Kanauj of the famous *Panchabrahmana* or 'five Brahmanas' at the invitation of King Adisura. These Brahmans are believed to have been given handsome endowments of land by king Adisura and invited to settle down. In time, the descendants of the Kanaujiya Brahmans became divided into two sub-groups based on their place of residence: the Rarhi Brahmans from Rarh in western and Southern Bengal and the Barendra Brahmans from Barendra in north Bengal. These Brahmans saw themselves as the most superior among all other Brahman sub-groups. But even within these Kanaujiya Brahmans, the highest position was held by the so-called 'kulins', who supposedly represented the very purest level of Brahman virtue and descent. Even within kulin communities moreover, there were ever-changing hierarchies of status and rank. The system of kulinism, shaped by the Sena kings Ballala Sena and Lakshmana Sena in the twelfth century, endured as an institution right into the twentieth century, although the actual practices and customs associated with kulinism also changed periodically. The claims of these Brahman communities generally tend to place their arrival in this region prior to the Turkish conquest of Bengal by Bakhtiyar Khalji at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

⁵ Chitrarekha Gupta, *The Kayasthas*.

⁶ Raychaudhuri, *The Brahmans of Bengal*, pp. 81–104.

The Brahman communities mentioned above eclipse the history and almost the very presence of other Brahman groups in the region. Among these were the 'Saptsahatis' or 'seven hundred' who are often represented as Bengal's 'indigenous' Brahmans. From the evidence of the genealogical corpus, this group slowly dwindled in number and become increasingly marginalised. In addition, there were other 'degraded' Brahmans who were positioned at the lower levels of the Brahman hierarchy of the region. The cause of their 'degradation' was usually associated with providing ritual services to low status populations, accepting 'forbidden' gifts or ministering as priests at cremations.⁷

The various regional communities and sub-communities who accepted the label of 'Kayastha' to describe themselves were scattered across Bengal, Central and Northern India, the Maratha country, Rajasthan, Assam and elsewhere. In Bengal, as in much of Northern India, traditions regarding the antecedents of Kayasthas are far from uniform or stable. This was in part because their rank in the four-fold varna system was difficult to determine. In certain times and places, they were deemed to be equal to Brahmans, sometimes considered to be Kshatriyas, or co-equal to them in varna ranking. In other contexts, however, they were deemed to be Sudras. By one mode of social categorisation, Kayasthas in Bengal were deemed to be 'clean' Sudras, as distinct from several jatis who were deemed to be 'unclean' Sudras.⁸ Understandably, other origin accounts were much more popular among Bengal's Kayasthas. Among these was one that maintained that they comprised a fifth varna, and another that posited their descent from a Kshatriya king and claimed that they were survivors of Parasurama's attempt to exterminate Kshatriyas from this world.⁹

Some Bengali Kayastha jatis linked their presence in this region to the same migration that had brought five 'superior' Brahmans from Kanauj to Bengal at the invitation of king Adisura. These Kayastha sub-groups held they had come to Bengal to serve their Brahman masters and, like them, had subsequently settled down in Bengal as an elite Kayastha community. By the sixteenth century, Bengali Kayasthas were organised into a number of region-based groups such as the Dakshin Rarhiya Kayasthas or Kayasthas living in the southern Rarh region, and the Bangaja Kayasthas who were from Eastern Bengal. By the same period, most Kayastha jatis in Bengal accommodated the system of kulinism within their communities.

The term 'vaidya', meaning a medical practitioner, has been in use in different parts of India. However, the presence of a specific jati designated 'Vaidya', or in the Bengali pronunciation, 'Baidya', is unique to Bengal. As in the case of the Kayasthas, the absence of a clear position within the four-fold varna hierarchy

⁷ Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, p. 118; Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*.

⁸ Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture*, p. 26.

⁹ Tagore, *The Caste System of the Hindus*, p. 17.

created overlapping and often mutually contradictory mythologies about their origin. Some posited an origin in the Karnataka region of Southern India and a migration to Bengal via Bihar. Bengali Vaidyas did not associate themselves with the persistent tradition about the migration from Kanauj as some Brahman and Kayastha jatis of the region did.¹⁰ By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they were generally known as a well-educated community, well placed in social and material terms. Overall, the defining feature of the Vaidya community in Bengal lay in the fact that they were traditionally practitioners of medicine. This dominant attribute of the community is manifest in accounts that describe them as descendants of Dhanvantari, the physician of the gods and the founder of 'Hindu medicine'. By the eighteenth century, Bengali Vaidyas were organised into several sub-regional communities or samajas such as Panchakot, Rarhi, Bangaja and Purva Bangaja and below these existed even smaller locality-based samajas.¹¹

It has been suggested that Kayasthas throughout India, as an ambiguously placed group in the four-fold varna scheme, may have crystallised into a caste community as a result of what J.F. Hewitt called a 'community of function'.¹² This slow crystallisation seems to have taken place over many centuries prior to the time period studied here. It is likely too that the Vaidya jati of Bengal had developed out of a common specialisation in medicine. However, definitely during the time period suggested here, as well as earlier, Vaidyas, while still associated with the practice of medicine and the study of medical shastras, seem to have branched out into the service of kings and princes and held important official posts in their governments. This made them very similar to the Kayasthas, also a literate community with traditions of scribal or clerical work. A degree of social interaction may have begun to develop between Kayasthas and Vaidyas, or at least among some segments of them.¹³ Similarities between Bengali Kayasthas and Vaidyas are further borne out by the apparent confusion in the application of the terms 'karana' or 'writer', and 'Ambasthya' to both Bengal's Kayasthas and Vaidyas on the one hand and to Kayasthas in adjoining Bihar, on the other.¹⁴

The kulagranthas depict a social geography of Bengal in which Brahmins were, of course, ritually superior to Kayasthas and Vaidyas. In matters relating to the regulation of the Brahmanical social order and in the adjudication of Brahmanical

¹⁰ Umesh Chandra Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

¹² Hewitt, review of H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vols. 1–2, pp. 237–300.

¹³ Umesh Chandra Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*, and K.M. Gupta, 'On Some Caste and Caste Origins in Sylhet', pp. 223–27.

¹⁴ For diverse accounts regarding the origin of the Ambasthyas, see, B.P. Sinha, *Kayasthas in the Making of Modern Bihar*, Umesh Chandra Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*, Vol. 1, 2nd edition, 'Introduction': no pp., Chitrarekha Gupta, *The Kayasthas*, Shashibhushana Nandy, *Kayastha Purana*, pp. 131–32.

social practices and norms, Brahmans, particularly those with material-political clout, clearly commanded the greatest respect and deference. However, by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Brahmans did not stand out in terms of material wealth, political influence, professional success and perhaps even educational achievements. They shared these with Kayasthas and Vaidyas who were equally well placed in these material and cultural registers. In this regard, the position of the Brahmans in Bengal during the late medieval and early modern periods contrasts with the much greater social and cultural dominance enjoyed by Brahmans in certain parts of Southern India or Western India and the Deccan, for example.¹⁵ Periodically, in fact, Bengali Kayasthas and Vaidyas, with their professional success, their educational accomplishments and material prosperity claimed complete or close parity with Brahmans. The direct support to Brahmans provided by ruling powers in polities such as the Maratha kingdom and the intervention by the regime of the Maratha peshwas to regulate Brahman social practice helps explain the striking rise of certain communities of Western Indian Brahmans. Chitpavan Brahmans represent the best known example, emerging from the later seventeenth century not only ritually and socially predominant, but also positioned at the forefront of professional and material success. In Bengal, by contrast, there is little evidence that the sultans of Bengal and subsequently the Mughal provincial administration or the nawabs of Murshidabad ever showed any interest in attempting to regulate internal norms, practices and status hierarchies within these well placed communities. This socially important task was instead carried out by various jati/kula based samajas under the leadership and guidance of their kulacharyas and various locally powerful 'little' rajas who belonged to those communities.

In Bengal, Kayasthas and Vaidyas, both highly literate and professionally successful communities and both with somewhat ambiguous jati statuses, seem to have been locked in some amount of rivalry and competitiveness with each other. One of the strongest manifestations of this rivalry was evident in mutual efforts to denigrate each other by reference to their origins. Interestingly though, their attempts to assert high origins took different forms. Vaidya sources tended to claim that they were actually a community of 'secondary' Brahmans or *gauna Brahman*—but Brahmans nevertheless—and heaped scorn on Kayasthas for having arrived in Bengal as menials in the employ of the 'original' Kanaujiya Brahmans. On the other hand, Kayasthas who attained material success and those who acquired the status of rajas (based on land control, wealth or sometimes, successful scribal careers), staked claims to Kshatriya identity as befitted their royal status.¹⁶

This discussion is not intended to suggest that the path towards upwards social and material mobility in Bengal had become foreclosed during these centuries to

¹⁵ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*; Rosalind O'Hanlon and Christopher Minkowski, 'What Makes People Who They Are?' pp. 381–416.

¹⁶ N. Basu, *Rajanyakanda*; Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*.

jatis other than Brahmans, Kayasthas and Vaidyas. We know, for example, of the remarkable upward mobility in social, cultural and ritual terms of many trading and artisan communities in western Bengal from the fifteenth century onwards and of the gradual climb up the social scale for other communities during the same period.¹⁷ The point here is that in general, scribal elites in Bengal during the late medieval and early modern periods tended to be drawn largely from Brahman, Vaidya and Kayastha jatis even though socio-economic advancement via other routes was indeed possible.

The next section discusses specific cases of professional interaction between Bengali scribal elites on the one hand and various Indo-Islamic ruling regimes which ruled Bengal from about the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on the other.

Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal

One of the most important political developments in Eastern India was the Turkish conquest of large parts of Bihar and Bengal at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and the emergence of a kingdom which was ruled for more than three centuries by a series of Indo-Islamic dynasties. From about the mid-fourteenth century, the Bengal sultanate achieved more or less complete independence from the control of Delhi—a status that would continue until the Mughal conquest of Bihar and Bengal in the late sixteenth century.¹⁸ From this time in particular, the autonomous posture adopted by the Bengal sultans made it more imperative for them to culturally indigenise their style of governance and to build closer links with regional communities who were well established and possessed the requisite skills needed in various branches of government. The investments of the Bengal sultans in the vernacular culture of the region in terms of architecture, styles of coinage and the patronage of popular literature in Bengali are well known and do not merit repetition here. The point, however, is that the expansion in the participation and collaboration of local scribal elites with the local sultanate's government needs to be situated within this context.¹⁹

The process of close professional interaction between the rulers of Bengal and the high-status educated communities of the region grew stronger, particularly from the time of Raja Ganesh (CE 1409–18), a local landed chieftain who seized power following the death of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (CE 1389–1409). Among Bengal's Brahmanical elites, the Barendra Brahmins in particular

¹⁷ See, for example, Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* and A.K. Bhattacharya, *A Corpus of Dedicatory Inscriptions*.

¹⁸ Sarkar, *History of Bengal*.

¹⁹ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*.

benefitted substantially from the favours and high offices granted to them by Raja Ganesh. In the post-Raja Ganesh era, it almost became a feature of the Bengal sultanate for its Muslim rulers to recruit and promote literate, high-status jatis to practically all types of administrative offices. A variety of textual sources and the kulagranthas in particular, contain rich information about the professional association of Bengali scribal elites with the later Bengal sultanate. Many among them received titles such as 'Roy', 'Khan', 'Majumdar', 'Sarkar' or 'Mallik' from the administrations of the sultans they served, sometimes successively for several generations. These titles are still in use by Bengali Hindu families who identify themselves as Brahmans, Kayasthas and Vaidyas and by others as well.

One of the most striking examples of inter-generational service to the Bengal sultanate by a single lineage of Kayasthas is provided by the family of one Purandar Khan. In the later fifteenth century, Mahipati Basu of this family secured a very high position in the government of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah (CE 1493–1519) and was given the honorific title of 'Subuddhi Khan'. This inaugurated a relationship between this family and the Sultans of Bengal which was to last for several generations. Mahipati's son, Srimanta or Ishan Khan and several grandsons all acquired prestigious jobs and titles from the Hussain Shahi regime. But it was Ishan Khan's son, Gopinath Basu, who as Purandar Khan reached the highest possible peak of success and fame in the service of the sultanate. The genealogical chronicles of the Dakshin Rarhiya Kayasthas associate Gopinath Basu, alias Purandar Khan, with civilian as well as military offices in the sultanate's administration. By some accounts, he started out as an official who was entrusted with the affairs of the treasury department, then became a naval commander and eventually rose to be the sultan's chief minister.

After Purandar Khan, his son and grandson, Keshab Basu Khan and Srikrishna Biswas Khan, continued to be important office holders in the government of the sultanate together with their relatives and to acquire titles of honour which they used proudly. Keshab Khan was the personal body guard (Chatra Nazir) of the sultan and was also responsible for the treasury department. The same office was held after him by his son Chakrapani Basu. The prestige and power of this family were closely tied to their professional and political linkages. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the precipitous decline in the fame, fortune and influence of this lineage following the end of sultanate rule in Bengal and the advent of Mughal power. The incoming Mughal regime showed a marked preference to recruit other local families with clerical and administrative skills rather than deal with families such as that of the Basus with their long-enduring connections to the now defunct sultanate. The Kayastha family whose star was now in the ascendant was that of Dayaram Pal, who was employed in the Mughal administrative establishment in Saptagram. Anantaram Basu, the son of Srikrishna Biswas Khan,

actually had to cede ceremonially to Dayaram Pal the leadership position of the Dakshin Rarhiya Kayastha community, which had been vested in his family for centuries.²⁰

A very similar pattern became evident in Bengal with the establishment of the Mughal regime in the late sixteenth century. The Mughals again recruited persons of similar backgrounds to staff various levels of the provincial administration in Bengal. There was a remarkable continuity too in terms of high-status scribal elite families who had once served the Bengal sultans and were subsequently recruited to serve the administrative needs of the Mughal regime.

The meteoric rise of Raja Rajballabh, a Bengali Baidya, to the highest level of political power in eighteenth century Bengal and the entrenchment of his relatives and acquaintances within various levels of the nawabi government underscores the extent to which bureaucratic service had almost become a tradition for certain segments of Bengal's literate gentry during the early modern period. His life also illustrates the potential for political and professional advancement via such a career path. Born in 1707, Raja Rajballabh emerged as one of the most powerful officials of nawabi Bengal in the eighteenth century. His family's association with lower to middle level jobs in the nawabi government had become part of its career-related tradition. For two generations prior to Rajballabh, his family had held such jobs in the Mughal government's revenue department at Dhaka.²¹ Rajballabh's family contacts enabled him, as a young man, to get a job in the revenue section of the navarra mahal. By dint of his competence, Rajballabh rose through the ranks of this department and by 1740 he had become its head. This was followed by his additional appointment to the office of Diwan in the naib-niabat of Dhaka as well as to a military command.²² By 1743, in tandem with these offices in Dhaka, he won a very high position in the Nizamat department at Murshidabad and established close relationships with some of the most powerful people in the Murshidabad darbar, such as Navazish Mohammed Khan and the banking family of Jagat Seth.²³ During the 1750s and 1760s, Rajballabh and his family were intimately involved in the tangled politics that followed the death of the Nawab Ali Vardi Khan.²⁴ Rajballabh continued to occupy an important position in the nawabi administration following the battle of Plassey.²⁵ In 1760, Rajballabh, by now Maharaja Rajballabh, attained the pinnacle of his professional career: he was appointed to the naib-niabat of Bihar, one of the most important and prestigious

²⁰ N. Basu, *Dakshin Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda*; Debendra Chandra Mullik, *Pataldanga Basu Mullik Vamsar Itihasa*.

²¹ Rasiklal Gupta, *Maharaj Rajballabh*.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 114–16.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

offices in the kingdom of Bengal. Rajballabh had firmly attached his loyalty to the English following the latter's victory at Plassey and was executed by Nawab Meer Kasim for this in 1763.

Both in the sultanate period as well as in Mughal and Nawabi Bengal, persons drawn from high-status Brahman, Vaidya and Kayastha backgrounds also held military offices in the service of the ruling regimes under which they lived. Actually, military service and the usual bureaucratic services such as scribal work, accounting and the management of revenue collection often constituted a composite 'portfolio', since all these proficiencies were indispensable for the smooth functioning of government and the preservation of its power. The example of a Kayastha individual named Bhabeshwar Simha illustrates this point. In the late seventeenth century, Bhabeshwar secured a military post under the Mughal subahdar of Bengal and distinguished himself in the Mughal military action against Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore. As reward, he acquired four parganas as well as the title of 'chowdhury'. His territorial acquisitions laid the foundations of what later came to be known as the Chanchra zamindari. Bhabeshwar's descendants in successive generations continued to be associated in various capacities with the Mughal and then its Murshidabad successor regime.²⁶

Brahman lineages also possessed martial skills. Utilised strategically, such skills often led to careers in the service of the government which included civilian scribal talents and led to the acquisition and sometimes also the expansion of control over land and the revenues generated from it. There is much evidence of extensive military-professional interactions between well-placed Brahmin lineages on the one hand and the Sultanate, Mughal and Nawabi governments on the other. Rosalind O'Hanlon and Christopher Minkowski have explored the social and cultural tensions generated by the worldly avocations followed by the Konkani Saraswat Brahmins in the early modern period.²⁷ A somewhat similar situation was also to develop in Bengal. A number of Brahmin military-cum-revenue entrepreneurs aided the efforts of the Mughals to consolidate their position in Bengal. Some examples are Bhavananda Majumdar, the founder of the Nadia raj family and Lakshmikanta Majumdar, who was given zamindari rights over a large tract of land in lower Bengal which included the area that later become the metropolis of Calcutta. These Rarhiya Brahman entrepreneurs reaped rich benefits for collaborating with the Mughals. They acquired official positions, titles such as Majumdar and incrementally, more honorific titles such as Chowdhury and Roy.²⁸ In the eighteenth century, Raghunandan, the Barendra Brahman founder of the zamindari of Natore, acceded to this position by dint of both civilian scribal talents and

²⁶ N. Basu, *Uttar Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda*, pp. 195–97.

²⁷ O'Hanlon and Minkowski, 'What Makes People Who They Are?'. .

²⁸ Pertsch, 'Kshitish-Vamsavali-Charitam'; Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyaya, *Krishnachandra Roysya Charitram*; A.K. Roy, *Lakshmikanta*; Bhabani Roy Chowdhury, *Bangiya Sabarna Katha*.

military prowess.²⁹ Some families of Brahman entrepreneurs associated themselves with the Mughals even before the conquest of the region by Akbar's armies in the late sixteenth century. According to the family traditions of the Sabarna Chowdhury family (descendants of Lakshmikanta Majumdar), one of their ancestors, named Panchanan, had offered his military services to Humayun, in the latter's conflict against Sher Shah. As a reward, Panchanan was awarded some land and given the title of 'Panchu Satya Khan'.³⁰

These examples show that pre-existing high-status communities with long traditions of literacy were involving themselves in service to the sultanate, Mughal and Nawabi governments. However, other types of lineages were also being drawn into the orbit of scribal and military service during the same centuries. All along the forested frontiers or outer margins of Bengal, usually situated away from the Ganges valley (which was the cradle of this region's Brahmanical society), families of chieftains—usually of very low-status backgrounds and according to some, of adivasi or tribal backgrounds—were carving out small territorial principalities. Even as they consolidated their rule over these, they were at the same time entering processes of political integration (the degree of political integration varied considerably) with much more established political regimes such as those of the Mughals or the Murshidabad Nawabs.³¹ This phenomenon was definitely occurring during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and may well have begun prior to 1500. Good examples of such frontier chieftaincies are provided by the famous Malla dynasty of the Bishnupur kingdom who became vassals of the imperial Mughals, as well as many smaller chieftaincies in the forested western tracts of Midnapur district, such as the rajas of Karnagarh, as well as the rajas of Cooch Bihar.³² Political vassalage and integration with stronger regional and sub-continental imperial powers such as the Mughals was associated with both military and civilian administrative responsibilities such as the collection and management of revenue. Many of these chieftain families complemented their contacts with more settled, established political regimes with endeavours to integrate themselves into the Brahmanical social order. The latter aim was accomplished by the assumption of Rajput and Kshatriya status. The cases of the Malla rajas of Bishnupur, the rajas of Karnagarh in Midnapur and others fit this general scenario. Origin accounts of the rajas of Karnagarh suggest low-status antecedents, but subsequently, these magnates identified themselves as Rajputs and attached the title Simha (Singh) to their names.³³

²⁹ Chowdhury, *Barendra Anchaler Itihasa*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³¹ Surajit Sinha, *Tribal Politics and State Systems*; B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, pp. 57–88; Chatterjee, 'Cultural Flows'.

³² Abhaypada Mallik, *History of the Bishnupur Raj*; Chatterjee, 'Cultural Flows'; Jogeshchandra Basu, *Medinipur Itihasa*; Biswanath Das (ed.), *Jayanath Munshir Rajopakhyana*.

³³ Chatterjee, 'Cultural Flows'; Basu, *Medinipur Itihasa*, pp. 127–28, 130, 312, 521–24, 549, 571.

In general, the picture that emerges of scribal and service lineages in Bengal from the fifteenth through to the eighteenth centuries suggests that the elite status of the gentry and aristocracy associated with such careers reflected a combination of superior landed rights, material wealth, successful bureaucratic/military careers and typically, high *jati/kula* status. This was certainly true of the famous family of Purandar Khan referred to above. The material possessions of this lineage followed the upward trajectories of their careers. Purandar Khan and his brothers expanded their landed resources and acquired gardens, orchards, tanks, palaces, mansions and a fortress in and around their ancestral base in Southwestern Bengal. Many settlements and villages bearing names such as Purandarpur and Mullikpur were founded by this family. The high-profile career of Raja Rajballabh was also accompanied by the accumulation of considerable landed assets and wealth by his family. The ancestral seat of this family at Rajnagar, near Dhaka, was enriched with elaborate mansions, temples, tanks and the like.

It is evident that these successful lineages embodied an extraordinarily high degree of 'occupational adaptability' and were able to seize opportunities in military, managerial, scribal and other types of professions with considerable adeptness. The persistent trope of the migration from Kanauj, which continued to be adhered to with considerable tenacity for centuries by many of the high-profile *jatis* of Bengal, may in fact reflect the mobile, adaptable, enterprising attributes of such groups.³⁴ Examples from other parts of the South Asian sub-continent show that similar mythologies about migration from outside the region also figure in the histories of professionally and entrepreneurially successful Brahman *jatis* who were dominant in their regional societies. This is true, for example, of a particular sub-sect of the Konkani Saraswat Brahmins studied by O'Hanlon and Minkowski in a recent essay.³⁵

Given the enterprise and adaptability of scribal elites, it is not at all surprising that such elites should also have branched out into trade and other types of commercial activities. Many of the literate and versatile entrepreneurial types who served the needs of the English East India Company and came to be called 'banians' were indeed often from respectable high-status backgrounds. People of this kind, such as the famous Cantoo babu, otherwise known as Krishnakanta Nandy (later to be zamindar of Kasimbazar in Murshidabad district), had started amassing wealth as a trader. Subsequently, his commercial acumen among other things made his services invaluable in the eyes of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal from 1773–85 and paved the way for a further ascendancy in his material fortunes.³⁶ Yet neither the *kulagaranthas* nor histories of distinguished Bengali

³⁴ I am indebted to Rosalind O'Hanlon for this suggestion.

³⁵ O'Hanlon and Minkowski, 'What Makes People Who They are?'

³⁶ N.K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal*; Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes.*, pp. 44–46, 267–68; Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Life and times of Cantoo Baboo.*

lineages typically identify commercial enterprise as a socially and culturally prestigious path to social status and material wealth and instead magnify other facets and achievements of such individuals and lineages. Such 'silence' about the cultural prestige (or lack of it) attached to careers in trade and other types of commercial enterprise merits further investigation and might yield valuable insights into Bengal's late medieval–early modern social environment. However, such an investigation lies beyond the principal scope and focus of this article. Nonetheless, it is extremely likely that some successful scribal careers were implicated with commercial enterprise. A rare reference to one such lineage is provided by the case of an Uttar Rarhiya Kayastha family which claimed descent from 'karan guru' Lakshmidhar Simha and had settled in the Chandrakona area of Midnapur district and subsequently in Raipur in Birbhum. This family's fortunes were built on the basis of their involvement in the cotton textiles trade.³⁷

Persian Literacy and Scribal Careers

As noted in the foregoing sections, literacy and educational achievements constituted one of the most basic prerequisites for what are described here as scribal professions. Basic education and literacy were provided in village schools and may have been a lot more widespread than is conventionally supposed.³⁸ However, higher levels of education and literacy generally tended to be more prevalent among the usual high-status jatis. Brahman families dedicated to teaching and 'high' scholarship maintained a near-monopoly of Sanskritic and Shastric learning.³⁹ The need to study Sanskrit medical texts and treatises created an inevitable connection between the Vaidya community and Sanskritic learning. Vaidyas also acquired reputations for their great proficiency in Sanskrit in general. Vaidya scholars held titles such as 'Vachaspati' and 'Alamkaravagisha', and well-known Vaidya kulagranthas such as the Yashoranjini and the Ratnaprabha provide abundant details about the erudition and scholarly achievements of many Vaidya individuals and families.⁴⁰ Bengali Kayasthas were also well known for the quotidian, but critically important work of administration and governance. While this conventional picture is not inaccurate at a general level, the strong tradition of Brahman, Kayastha and Vaidya involvement in scribal careers meant that significant segments of these communities chose to acquire proficiency not just in the traditional shastras, but also in more material and worldly languages and skills which could open up career opportunities in different kinds of bureaucracies for

³⁷ N. Basu, *Uttar Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda*, pp. 208–09.

³⁸ Juthika Basu Bhowmik, *Bangla Punthir Pushpika*.

³⁹ Samita Sinha, *Pandits in a Changing Environment*.

⁴⁰ J. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Gupta, *Jati Tatva Baridhi*; K.M. Gupta, 'On Some Castes and Caste Origins in Sylhet'.

them. During the period under survey here, proficiency in the Persian language became one of the most important prerequisites for a scribal career.

The coming of Mughal rule to Bengal saw not only a continuation, but an expansion in the association of the scribal elites of these regions with the imperial administration. It is likely that Mughal provincial administration was much more elaborate than that of the Bengal sultans. Although Mughal Bengal is conventionally supposed to have been 'under-administered', my view is that this regime maintained a sufficient presence and offered more than enough incentives for high-status Brahman, Baidya and Kayastha communities to offer their services to it in significant numbers. The factors which had created conditions for the association of Hindu scribal lineages with a variety of Indo-Islamic political regimes—traditions of literacy, clerical, accounting, management and other administrative skills, combined with military prowess—were the same as before. One factor whose importance rose sharply in Mughal Bengal was literacy and proficiency in the Persian language.

Persian and Arabic had indeed been used in the Bengal sultanate: the former, particularly in governmental and courtly circles and the latter particularly for religious and theological purposes. Persianised etiquette and manners were current in the *darbar* of the sultans.⁴¹ In Mughal Bengal, however, Persian attained a depth and breadth of currency that was unprecedented. Persian, the language of political circles and elite culture in the 'eastern' Islamic world, emerged during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a prestige language, particularly in political and secular contexts, in the Islamic world that stretched from Iran through Afghanistan, Central Asia, the South Asian sub-continent and parts of South-East Asia.⁴² The Sultans of Delhi were unstinting in their support for the Persian language and Persian literature. Sultan Sikandar Lodi ordered administrative records to be maintained in Persian. However, the emperor Akbar's order to this same effect produced a greater impact over large areas of the sub-continent due to the much greater territorial spread and deeper administrative penetration by the Mughals in comparison to the Delhi sultanate. Muzaffar Alam has pointed out the critical role played by Persian in defining the non-sectarian nature of the Mughal state as formulated by Akbar.⁴³ The stronger link that now emerged between Persian and careers in government opened the doors for large numbers of Northern Indian scribal communities—mostly Kayasthas—to take to the study of Persian.

The establishment of Mughal rule in Bengal also enshrined the Persian language as the sole language of government and administration. The use, however limited,

⁴¹ Tarafdar, *Hussain Shahi Bengal*; Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*; Subrahmanyam, 'Iranians Abroad'; *idem*. 'Persianization and Mercantilism'; Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History*.

⁴² Hovhannisian and Sabagh, *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*; Subrahmanyam, 'Persianization and Mercantilism'.

⁴³ Alam, 'The Culture and Politics of Persian'.

of Persian in the pre-Mughal Bengal sultanate meant that literate high-status Hindus who were involved in the administration of the kingdom probably had some proficiency in Persian.⁴⁴ With the expansion of Persian use in Mughal Bengal, there was a significant expansion in the extent to which lineages and communities, engaged in scribal, clerical and administrative work for the Mughal provincial government as well as the bureaucracies maintained by various zamindars, turned to the acquisition of Persian. This situation continued under Mughal rule in Bengal, through the emergence of a Mughal successor state in this region under the nawabs of Murshidabad, and persisted into the first few decades of the East India Company's governance over these areas.

High-status Hindu communities of Bengal and Bihar with traditions of government service now made the achievement of Persian proficiency a necessary requisite for professional and material success. There is an abundance of evidence for this process. There are many concrete examples to illustrate the almost inseparable connection between Persian literacy and career-related successes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The family of Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore provides a suitable example. Pratapaditya's grandfather, a Kayastha named Ramchandra, left his ancestral home and travelled to southern Bengal where he secured a modest job in the qanungo daftar of Sarkar Saptagram. He also made sure that his sons received an education in Persian, and upon reaching adulthood at least one of them also became an employee of the same qanungo daftar. Subsequently, this family moved to Gauda, the capital of Bengal. There, the proficiency in Persian and prior experience of clerical work made it relatively easy for the adult men of the family to be recruited into various government daftars. One of them, named Shibananda, developed very close personal relations with the reigning sultan Suleiman Karrani (1565–72), and was appointed head of the qanungo daftar at Gauda. Shibananda and his brothers made sure that their sons too received an education befitting a Kayastha, with a heavy emphasis on Persian. The generation of the family that grew up in Gauda was more successful than their predecessors. On reaching adulthood, two of them, Srihari and Janakiballabh (father and uncle respectively of Pratapaditya) secured two of the most responsible and highest offices in the government of Sultan Daud Khan Karrani (1572–75). When a conflict between Daud Khan and the Mughal emperor Akbar seemed imminent, these brothers took advantage of the currently prevailing situation of uncertainty and confusion to create a territorial base for themselves in the marshy wilderness of Jessore. On the defeat and death of Daud Khan Karrani, the incoming Mughal administration realised the need to recover the land revenue records of Bengal. The brothers Srihari and Janakiballabh apparently held these records and they traded them with the Mughal administration in return for formal recognition of their zamindari status over large areas of Jessore and lower Bengal which they

⁴⁴ Mukhopadhyaya and Rana (eds), *Chaitanyamangal*, p. 135.

had brought under their own control. Thus, Persian proficiency, experience with the sultanate's administration and some amount of luck elevated a family of Kayastha clerks and writers into the ranks of Bengal's landed aristocracy in the later sixteenth century.⁴⁵ Proficiency in Persian had been a critically important factor in shaping the career trajectory of Rajballabh's family and it was critical in facilitating his own impressive rise as well.⁴⁶ There are many other similar examples.

Such a career path, however, was not exclusive to the Kayasthas and Baidyas of Bengal. There are instances of enterprising Brahman families whose expertise in Persian and bureaucratic work also paved the way for the acquisition of higher and higher official ranks accompanied by various other types of material perquisites and opportunities. The Sanskrit genealogy entitled the *Kshitish-Vamsavali-Charitam* sketches out such a career trajectory for the ancestors of Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy of this family through the course of the seventeenth century, perhaps even earlier.⁴⁷ The family histories of other Brahman rajas such as Lakshmikanta Majumdar and the (infamous) Raja Nandakumar also attest to their Persian proficiency and in the case of the latter, to his calligraphic and *insha*-writing skills as well.⁴⁸ Muslim gentry families with traditions of scribal and clerical work followed similar career paths and were often close colleagues, friends and professional rivals of the Hindu scribal lineages discussed here. A good example is provided by the family of Ghulam Hussain Khan Tabatabai, author of the celebrated *Seir Mutaqherin*, a comprehensive narrative account of the history of the later Mughal Empire and its lineal descendant in Bengal, the state founded and ruled by the nawabs of Murhidabad.⁴⁹

The strong association between Persian and Mughal imperial culture led Mughal mansabdars and other officials to provide support and patronage to seminaries attached to mosques and khanqahs. These institutions became important centres of religious learning and literary activity, including the dissemination of the Persian language. One of the best known seminaries was the famous madrasa in Patna built by Saif Khan, the subahdar of Bihar from 1628–32. Nawab Zainuddin Ahmad Khan, Naib-Nazim of Bihar from 1740–48, enriched it further by adding a library to it. More typical perhaps were the schools maintained by gentry and zamindars (both Hindu and Muslim) where Persian was taught.⁵⁰ It is difficult to get a sense of what kind of curriculum was followed by schools where Persian was taught to boys of Hindu and Muslim gentry families between the fifteenth and the eighteenth

⁴⁵ Ramram Basu, *Pratapaditya Charitra*.

⁴⁶ Rasiklal Gupta, *Rajballabh Sen*.

⁴⁷ Pertsch, 'Kshitish-Vamsavali-Charitam'.

⁴⁸ Nabinkrishna Bandyopadhyaya, *Bhadrapurer Itibritta*; Roy Chowdhury, *Bangiya Sabarna Katha*, p. 37.

⁴⁹ Chatterjee, 'History as Self Representation'.

⁵⁰ Ramram Basu, *Pratapaditya Charitra*.

centuries. However, the detailed reports of William Ward and William Adam in the early nineteenth century help us to reconstruct some features associated with it.⁵¹ Persian schools imparted instruction primarily in order to teach the reading and writing of Persian. The commonest materials used for pedagogic purposes included the *Pandnameh* of Saadi and the *Gulistan* and *Bustan* by the same author. William Adam reported that students continued this type of basic education until they acquired sufficient proficiency to compose letters in Persian. Indeed, the curriculum of study in Persian schools seems to have contained a heavy emphasis on studying the arts of correspondence. Among epistolary models used in such schools were the correspondence of Abu'l Fazl, the *Ruqaat-i-Alamgiri* consisting of the correspondence of the emperor Aurangzeb as well as other insha collections such as the *Insha-i-Madho Ram*, *Insha-i-Brahman*, *Insha-i-Munid* and others.⁵² The classics of Persian and Indo-Persian historiography—*tarikh* literature—was read by Persian-knowing literati in Bengal and Bihar as part of the intellectual and cultural repertoire of educated and cultivated gentlemen.⁵³

By the eighteenth century, Hindu literati were serving as teachers of Persian as well. Many of them held titles such as 'lala' and 'munshi'. A branch of the family of Raja Rajballabh were so well-versed in Persian that they founded a school where they taught Persian. This family was well known as the Lala babus of Japsa. The celebrated poet Bharatchandra Roy, the author of the *Annadamangalkabya*, studied Persian with a certain Ramchandra Munshi.⁵⁴ The examples of Persian proficiency among scribal elites have so far been mostly about eminent landed families. There are, however, plenty of examples of humbler, small-town and rural literati for whom Persian proficiency and administrative service had become family traditions.⁵⁵

Social, Cultural Implications of Scribal Careers

The currency of Persian among the literati of Bengal and Bihar—especially among lineages with scribal/clerical traditions—has been acknowledged by scholars. However, it is a cursory acknowledgement and the full implications of the close association of these scribal elites with Indo-Islamic governments and the currency of Persian among them have not received either their due weight or a full analysis.⁵⁶ The strong tradition of Persian proficiency within these communities for many centuries is attributed entirely to utilitarian and career-related considerations. This

⁵¹ Ward, *A View of the History, Mythology and Literature*; Adam, *Reports on the State of Education*.

⁵² Adam, *Reports on the State of Education*, pp. 149–51, 277–81, 284, 287, etc.

⁵³ Purnachandra Mazumdar, *The Musnud of Murshidabad: List of Arabic and Persian Manuscripts, 1908–10*.

⁵⁴ Bandyopadhyaya and Das (eds), *Bharatchandra Granthabali*, p. 396.

⁵⁵ Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihasa*, Vol. 2, p. 155.

⁵⁶ Sarkar, *History of Bengal*, pp. 223–24; Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihasa*, Vol. 2, pp. 1–6.

was undoubtedly one of the most important reasons behind this phenomenon. Bharatchandra Roy, the son of a recently dispossessed landed family, reported in his *Annadamangalkabya* that his family had been most displeased with him for having studied Sanskrit. The cause of this displeasure lay in the fact that in the view of the latter, specialisation in Sanskrit was unlikely to help Bharatchandra to find a job. Chided and rebuked by his family, Bharatchandra now turned to the study of Persian. What usually gets overlooked is the fact that Persian had also come to be associated with cultural refinement, sophistication and civility. It had come to be recognised as the necessary qualification for a job such as that of *qanungo* in the Mughal provincial bureaucracy, and was also a necessary hallmark of a territorial *raja*. All descriptions of the educational attainments of Bengali aristocrats of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries emphasise their proficiency in Persian. Persian was also being accorded the status of a ‘*shastra*’—not just a practical medium to be used for keeping revenue accounts or composing a petition to government, but a formal intellectual discipline.⁵⁷ This is evident from the fact that libraries of the gentry and aristocracy were stocked with classics of Indo-Persian literature, including *tarikhs*. Various kinds of historiographic narratives composed in Bengal during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were inflected with features derived from the *tarikhs* tradition.⁵⁸ For the gentry and aristocracy of Bengal, the Persian language and adherence to a Persianised culture also signaled their eagerness to assimilate aspects of a culture which was associated with Mughal courtly and aristocratic circles. It allowed them to take their place in elevated circles and to be part of a broader trans-regional, cosmopolitan, elite culture in the same way that court circles in Vijaynagar sought to assimilate aspects of an Islamicate culture.⁵⁹ The ability to interact and share in an overarching Persianised courtly culture also had the potential to provide provincial elites with the opportunity to exploit these contacts to further their own professional, political and material interests.⁶⁰ Thus, together with proficiency in the use of Persian, these scribal communities also adopted Persianised attire, literary and scholarly tastes, manners and etiquette. This too was not a phenomenon that developed exclusively under Mughal rule over Bihar and Bengal.⁶¹ However, the assimilation of a Persianised culture became stronger and far more widespread among high-status lineages with traditions of government service during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

What makes this cultural formation even more interesting is the fact that the strand of cultural Persianisation evident among segments of the gentry and aristocracy of Bihar and Bengal co-existed with regional Brahmanical traditions and

⁵⁷ Chatterjee, ‘The Persianization of Itihasa’; *idem.*, *The Cultures of History*.

⁵⁸ Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History*.

⁵⁹ Philip Waggoner, ‘A Sultan Among Hindu Kings’.

⁶⁰ See Ramram Basu, *Pratapaditya Charitra*, for several examples of this.

⁶¹ Mukhopadhyaya and Rana (eds), *Chaitanyamangal*, p. 135.

culture. As Kunal Chakrabarty has shown, in the absence of a strong Hindu monarchy or a regional cult comparable to that of Jagannath in Orissa, Bengal's own variant of Brahmanism had by default come to function as its indigenous regional tradition.⁶² Thus, the same rajas and zamindars who studied Persian and carefully cultivated Persianised tastes in literature, music and formal attire, also functioned in very public ways as the upholders and adherents of Brahmanism. They supported Brahmans, Brahmanical scholarship, built temples, consecrated deities and some among them even held Vedic sacrifices. Almost all of them were educated in Persian, but also in Sanskrit, Bengali and Nagri. The network of Persian schools they supported was supplemented by a co-existing network of Sanskrit tols.⁶³

One of the best examples of the value that continued to be given to Brahmanical culture and values is to be seen in the remarkable longevity and persistence of the 'myth' regarding the migration of many of the well-established Brahman and Kayastha jatis of Bengal from Kanauj in Northern India. As a variety of epigraphic, textual and other sources show, there were fairly well-established communities of Brahmans and Kayasthas in Bengal dating back to the period of the rule of the Gupta emperors and continuing into the reign of the Pala dynasty.⁶⁴ As noted already, the migration story may indeed point to the scribal talents and occupational versatility and mobility of many of the jatis among whom this trope continued to circulate for many centuries. At the same time though, there is no doubt that the dogged adherence to it underscores the deep anxiety among high-status lineages and jatis to demonstrate that their origin lay in the heartland of Aryavarta. As is well known, the prevalence of Buddhism and Tantra in Bengal for many centuries and the tenacious survival, particularly of the latter, even into the time period being studied in this article, rendered this region's Brahmanism somewhat less robust—maybe even somewhat dubious.⁶⁵ The desire to emphasise a 'purer' origin in Aryavarta makes sense in the light of such concerns.

The occupational trajectories of Bengal's scribal elites thus generated a complex cultural environment which was predicated upon a critical balance between Persianisation on the one hand and adherence to forms of what had come to represent the region's mainstream Brahmanical tradition on the other. The need for the Bengali gentry and aristocracy to walk what must literally be described as a cultural tightrope generated considerable tension over the centuries. The close interactions of high status Brahman jatis—among others—with late sultanate regimes in Bengal clearly led to various forms of social, cultural and personal interactions which were deemed undesirable and potentially threatening to the Brahmanical social order by authorities such as kulacharyas and others. There is evidence of deep

⁶² Kunal Chakrabarty, *Religious Process*.

⁶³ Pertsch, 'Kshitish-Vamsavali-Charitam'; Rasiklal Gupta, *Raja Rajballabh*; David Curley, 'Maharaja Krishnachandra'; Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History*, pp. 218–38.

⁶⁴ See e.g., R.C. Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra* and Pushpa Niyogi, *Brahmanic Settlements*.

⁶⁵ Kunal Chakrabarty, *Religious Process*.

anxiety about this situation in the genealogical corpus.⁶⁶ Efforts to assuage this situation found expression in two landmark social reform programmes, the first initiated in the fifteenth century for kulin Barendra Brahmans and the second, probably in the sixteenth, for kulin Rarhi Brahmans. The aim of both reform programmes was to devise ways of containing the ritual 'pollution' accruing to families and individuals whose behaviour patterns included unacceptable levels of interaction and closeness with Muslims and other 'untouchables' (e.g., the Portuguese). But even as they were attempting to devise new principles of identifying what they saw as 'polluting' behaviour, the kulagurus drew back from demoting such clans from kulin status. The types of lineages whose material success under Indo-Muslim regimes was the cause of such consternation to some segments of Brahmanical society were, ironically enough, the very people whose wealth, patronage and leadership supported kulacharyas and ghataks and made possible the continuing currency of some form of dharmic social order.⁶⁷ There is also, in my view, reason to think that such scribal elite families suffered little in terms of material-political power and not even in terms of social prestige because of such developments. In some Brahmanical circles, clans such as the Srimanta Khanis, Sher Khanis and Pir Alis (clans especially prominent for their close professional, social and personal interactions with Muslims) were characterised over the centuries as 'polluted' or 'degraded' Brahmans. They may have had to confine their marital relations in some cases to similar other 'polluted' or 'degraded' families as mandated in the reform programmes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it is difficult to accept that they were socially ostracised and humiliated and materially humbled by such measures.⁶⁸

Typically, most forms of upper-class, high-status Hindu-Muslim interaction in late medieval and early modern Bengal were apparent in terms of public deportment, cultural tastes in literature, clothes and food as well as personal and social relationships. There also exist traditions about the romantic, sexual and occasionally marital relationships of high-status, Brahmanical families and individuals on the one hand and aristocratic and royal Muslim women on the other. The references to marriages between socially and economically well-placed men from high-status

⁶⁶ N. Basu, *Brahmankanda*, pp. 187–88, footnote 4.

⁶⁷ N. Basu, *Brahmankand*; *idem*. *Barendra Barhman Bibaran*; Chatterjee, 'Communities, Kings and Chronicles'.

⁶⁸ This is borne out, for example, by the best known Piral Brahman family of Bengal, the Tagore family of Calcutta which produced Rabindranath Tagore and other cultural luminaries of the nineteenth century. Their antecedents in Jessore do not suggest that they were in dire straits economically and socially. The migration of two members of this family to Calcutta in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is sometimes portrayed as their attempt to escape the social taint that clung to them in their native Jessore. It is equally likely that this enterprising Brahman lineage, which was linked to land and revenue management in Jessore, moved to Calcutta to exploit opportunities of material ascendancy available in the growing English settlement of Calcutta. See J. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 119–21; Thakur, *Dwarakanath Thakurer Jivani*, pp. 11–18.

jatis to Muslim noblewomen that I have found so far, relate to the Barendra Brahman clan of the rajas of Bhaduria (also known as Ektakia) in Northern Bengal. But there remained considerable ambivalence—at least in some segments of Brahmanical society—towards eminent jatis and families who exhibited degrees of acculturation vis-à-vis the Islamic political and cultural presence in Bengal.

Such ambivalence is manifest in the deployment of persistent tropes to explain and often to rationalise marriages or sexual co-habitation between men of high jati and kula backgrounds and high-born Muslim princesses and noblewomen. In these cases, the men in question are depicted as having entered into such relationships because of noble, compassionate and humane considerations. A recurring trope is that the Muslim princess or queen threatened to kill herself unless the man who was of high jati status agreed to marry her or enter into an extra-marital but intimate relationship with her.⁶⁹ These representations are paralleled by accounts of how well-placed Brahman families—such as the ancestors of the Tagore family of Pathuriaghata and Jorasanko—became ritually ‘polluted’ by having smelled the aroma of beef or having been tricked into consuming beef.⁷⁰ I take such references to allude to the fact that from the point of view of the Brahmanical authorities, a large volume of such interactions were actually occurring between high-status Brahmanical lineages and Muslim ruling circles and second, these were impossible to control. However, the point to consider is that despite such close interactions over the centuries, there appear to have been relatively few outright religious conversions to Islam by high-status lineages belonging to Brahman, Kayastha and Vaidya jatis. Raja Ganesh’s son, Jadu or Jadunaryan, who ruled as Sultan Jalaluddin (1418–31 A.D.) is supposed to have converted to Islam, and the explanations in Brahmanical sources fall back on the usual tropes referred to above. Some accounts state that he had to become a Muslim because he had unknowingly smoked tobacco from a pipe which had previously been used by a Muslim; others posit that his romantic and sexual involvement with the princess Asmantara who belonged to the Ilyas Shahi royal family made it necessary for him to marry her. Since Brahmanical society would on no account accept a ‘yavani’, Jadunaryan was left with no alternative but to become a Muslim.⁷¹ One wonders though, if and to what extent such ambivalence might be due to the nature of the materials—mainly the kulagranthas with their obviously Brahmanical preoccupations—through which such concerns were voiced.⁷²

⁶⁹ Durgachandra Sanyal, *Banglar Samajika Itihasa*, pp. 52–85.

⁷⁰ Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, pp. 119–22; Thakur, *Dwarakanath Thakurer Jivani*, pp. 11–18.

⁷¹ Sanyal, *Banglar Samajika Itihasa*.

⁷² I have found scattered references to the existence of Persian biographies of some of the scribal elites discussed in this article but have not had much success yet in locating them. It would be interesting to see how these Persian biographies represented cases of Hindu–Muslim interaction, particularly marital and romantic involvements.

The issues discussed so far reiterate the importance attached to the preservation of boundaries between Brahmanical society and its many 'others' during the late medieval and early modern periods.⁷³ Brahmanism was equally vigilant about policing boundaries that separated multiple jatis and sub-jatis within the regional social order. Here too, scribal elites with material power and prestige were able to test the strength of jati and kula based boundaries. A particularly good example of this comes from the sixteenth century and is associated with Purandar Basu Khan, one of the most eminent nobles and officials of the Bengal sultanate in the sixteenth century. According to Maladhar Ghatak's chronicle of the Datta family of Raina, two Kshatriya Rajput chieftains named Surasimha and Rudrasimha had accompanied Sultan Bahlul Lodi to Bengal. The two Rajput chieftains were apparently given the titles of 'dalapati' and 'gajapati' by the sultan of Bengal and this stimulated their interest in settling down in Bengal, but only if they could be inducted into one of Bengal's kayastha samajas. According to Maladhar Ghatak's genealogy, the desire of Surasimha and Rudrasimha to integrate with the Kayastha samaj arose first from the great power and prestige enjoyed by Purandar Basu Khan who was himself a Kayastha and second, from the general prosperity and high standing that Kayasthas of the time enjoyed in Bengali society as well as within the sultanate's government.⁷⁴ Purandar Khan used his clout to persuade kulin Kayasthas and other socially eminent groups gathered at a great assembly at Raina to accommodate the two Rajput sardars into the Kayastha samaj of Western Bengal (Dakshin Rarh). Henceforth, they came to be known as the Datta family of Raina. This incident is significant at multiple levels. First, it reconfirms the great political-material power and social prestige of Purandar Khan and provides concrete illustration of how it permitted him to engage in social engineering. Second, it demonstrates the high level of professional, material and social success attained by Bengali Kayasthas during the period of the later Bengal sultanate. Finally, this episode sheds important light on the nature of jati and kula based society and demonstrates the assimilative porous nature of its Brahmanical communities in sixteenth century Bengal. This was also incidentally the period when certain successful forest adventurers were carving out kingdoms for themselves and claiming Rajput and Kshatriya status. A body of excellent but slightly older literature on the Kayasthas and other jatis in different parts of India had depicted jati-based samajas as self-evident communities.⁷⁵ Relatively more recent scholarship recognises the much more porous nature of jati-based communities and the critical role of contingent material circumstances in stretching jati-based community

⁷³ Chatterjee, 'Communities, Kings and Chronicles'.

⁷⁴ Excerpt from Maladhar Ghatak's 'Rainar Datta Vamsa' cited in Debendra Chandra Mullik, *Pataldanga Basu Mullik Vamser Itihasa*, pp. 71–73.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture*; Lucy Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society'; and Karen Leonard, *The Kayasths of Hyderabad*.

boundaries and allowing for the integration of newer families and individuals within it.⁷⁶ Moreover, this process was not evident only in the period following the decline of the Mughal Empire, as Susan Bayly, for instance, suggests.⁷⁷ The case of the induction of two Rajput sardars into the Dakshin Rarhiya Kayastha community of Bengal underscores the point that such processes had been current for a much longer period of time. The ambiguity regarding the exact ranking of Kayasthas within the four-fold varna scheme has been mentioned in the first section of the article as has the proclivity of successful Kayasthas who assumed the attributes of 'rajas' (control over land, possession of wealth, social eminence and the performance of certain culturally approved acts) to claim Kshatriyahood. The fact that the Rajput sardars claimed to be Kshatriyas made it easier and more desirable to integrate them into a local Kayastha samaj. As the work of Dirk Kolff, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, Surajit Sinha and others has shown, the Rajput–Kshatriya label had become a much coveted badge for the politically powerful landed magnates over many parts of the sub-continent and it was being claimed by landed chieftains with political clout, both during the Mughal period and in the centuries that preceded it. This process was certainly in operation in fifteenth and sixteenth century Bengal.⁷⁸

Apart from the formal induction of 'outsiders' into a specific jati-based samaj as in the case described here, marriages across apparently 'prohibited' jati boundaries could also become occasions for the re-adjustment of jati boundaries. Once again, a combination of political and professional power and high social status was an essential prerequisite for such actions. Gopikanta Roy, from an eminent Barendra Kayastha family, was appointed qanungo of Bengal during the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries. At that time, the Chaki lineage was apparently very highly regarded within the Barendra Kayastha community. Gopikanta Roy married the daughter of a man named Chatur, who was not of the much-respected Chaki lineage. Gopikanta Roy, however, wished to elevate the status of his father-in-law and therefore used his power over his samaj and compelled it to accept that henceforth, Chatur would be recognised as a Chaki.⁷⁹

The aforementioned examples underscore the ability of professionally and politically powerful persons to modify current rules of normative behaviour within the jati and kula based samaj and illuminate the role of material occupations and wealth in mediating shifts in social status, hierarchy and even membership within these units. But it would be inaccurate to leave the impression that worldly power

⁷⁶ See, for example, Barrier, *The Census in British India*; Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*; Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*.

⁷⁷ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*.

⁷⁸ Binoy Ghosh, *Pashchim Banger Samskriti*; Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, Sepoy*; Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*; Surajit Sinha, *Tribal Politics and State Systems*.

⁷⁹ N. Basu, *Barendra Kayastha Bibaran*, p. 148, footnote 7.

was always able to override the norms which were believed to comprise the very foundation of the Brahmanical social order. That clearly was not always the case.

It appears from the kulaji literature that kulacharyas typically tried to fragment jati-based communities into successively smaller units and to formulate rules of social interaction which were to be performed only within these small local units. Presumably, the motivation behind the successive fragmentation of jati units served the interests of kulacharyas who could more easily police and enforce 'rules' created by them within small local units of various jatis. It also served the ambitions of local rajas up to a point, since these samajas crystallised around their seats of power and they typically assumed the social leadership (goshthipati, samajpati) of such communities.⁸⁰ However, rajas and royal officials who attained extraordinary power and eminence seem to have made periodic efforts to knock down the boundaries separating the smaller jati-based samajas from one another and to expand the territorial horizon of their social, professional and material opportunities. Marriage alliances were typically used to expand kinship networks and widen community boundaries. Purandar Basu Khan had deployed his great political and social authority to achieve such a result for his own Dakshin Rarhiya Kayastha community in the sixteenth century as did Raja Rajballabh for his own jati-based community in the eighteenth.⁸¹

Rajballabh is known to have tested the social and cultural configuration of early modern Bengal in other ways as well. He suggested that Vaidyas of his own immediate samaj should henceforth wear the sacred thread.⁸² Thus, professional and material ascendancy was paralleled by Rajballabh's endeavour to leverage upwards his own social-ritual status as well as that of his immediate locality-based samaj. This move, paralleled by his performance of Vedic sacrifices such as the Vajapeyi, was certainly interpreted by some powerful Brahman leaders of Bengal's Brahmanical society, such as Raja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia, as a challenge to the existing pattern of social hierarchy and social status.⁸³ It was also of course a challenge which would not have been possible without the great political and material ascendancy of Rajballabh.

Conclusion

At the most general level, this article highlights the close relationship between scribal careers, the functioning of governmental regimes and social status and underscores the very significant extent to which social and ritual status was produced by political and material power. The article also provides important insights

⁸⁰ N. Basu, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa*, all vols.; J. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*; Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*; Chatterjee, 'Communities, Kings and Chronicles'.

⁸¹ Rasiklal Gupta, *Maharaj Rajballabh Sen*, pp. 122–26.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Majumdar and Goswami, *Rajavijaya Natakam*.

into contemporary as well as later consequences deriving from the intervention and/or non-intervention of early modern states in regulating jati hierarchies and boundaries. The picture presented here of the relatively broad-based, upper-caste nature of literate-scribal communities in Bengal gives us a valuable long-term glimpse into why caste differences along sharply Brahman/non-Brahman lines did not emerge in colonial Bengal in the quite the same manner as they did, for example, in western and southern India. At a more specific level, the article compels a modification of the view that Bengal's Brahmanical society was alienated or unaffected by Indo-Islamic rule, particularly Mughal rule. Finally, the article shows that Bengal's Brahmanical social order and culture had been sustained for many centuries by its connections with a series of Indo-Islamic regimes which had ruled this region since the thirteenth century.

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