

Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India

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Recent historiography on the ascendance of colonial rule in India has shifted from a mode of investigating the contours of colonial power to looking at the fissures of imperial governance. By turning to examining these fissures, how do we as historians of colonial India make sense of the declarations of a confident empire such as what we find in the oft-cited writings on British colonial policy in India by James Mill or by Thomas Babington Macaulay, and reconcile them with other revelations of anxiety and contradiction at the heart of imperial governance? While the self-confident declarations of colonial rule as bringing enlightenment rationality and efficiency to colonial spaces appear unadulterated in the writings of prominent Utilitarians and theorists of empire, on the ground or in the everyday of colonial governance we witness something completely different. That imperial self-confidence is replaced by hesitation and contradiction. When we as historians shift from exploring political ideologies (as if they were formulated in the metropole and seamlessly applied in the colonies) to the everyday practices of empire, we inevitably encounter a more complex field of governance, one that reveals glaring contradictions in, and produces insights into, the nature and particularities of British colonial rule in India. Bhavani Raman's nuanced and novel study of the culture of early colonial bureaucracy in South India moves us in this productive direction of exploring the everyday practice of empire through the institution of modern bureaucratic culture.

The most durable legacy of colonial India, suggests Raman's fascinating new monograph *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*, is its bureaucratic forms: manifested in the revenue office, the cutcherry (office of administration) and the courtroom. Specifically, Raman suggests, the idea of bureaucratic work as a moral vocation began to take root in the early colonial period. These broad sweeping changes encompassed the emergence of what she calls the micro-practices of writing elaborated through bureaucratic forms, which gave credence to an idea of what Raman calls 'papereality', or the reliance on written documents to represent the world (p. 3). Furthermore, this new bureaucratic culture viewed writing as a tool of political accountability. She elaborates that the moral regeneration of the British Empire at the end of the 18th century relied on writing as a tool of political accountability (p. 10). However, in the process of instituting paper accountability, the burgeoning colonial bureaucracy appropriated the existing knowledge systems of native scribes and attempted to 'convert them into a genre that was accessible to means of verification concurrently emerging in metropolitan domains' (p. 54). In the process of appropriation, the colonial record became a testament to 'a material submission to colonial power' (p. 55) and the concomitant

effacement of the subordinated labor of the scribal world it depended on and oversaw. In other words, colonial modes of governance as they were being fashioned at this stage depended on the subordination of native labor and a racialized hierarchy. These were the contradictions and tensions built into the bureaucracy propping up the early colonial government in South India, starting in the last decades of the 18th century and continuing into the 19th.

Raman provides rich descriptions of the social world of the scribes at the district offices. The scribes themselves were recruited from a variety of social backgrounds depending on the particular office and the region they were working in. They were generally from upper-caste backgrounds. Even while the scribal world was appropriated and converted in order to institute paper accountability, the English East India Company curiously adhered to the idea of hereditary skills and hereditary knowledge, thereby reifying 'the hereditary monopoly over village recordkeeping' (p. 49). This reinforcement was based on an idea held by the early colonial state that they should be seeking out or recruiting natural leaders in India who would act as mediators between the colonial officers and the native population which was 'extensive' and where the 'habits and manners of the people [are] so different from our own' (p. 49). This is a quote from a letter by the Court of Directors to the Madras government in 1814. The supposed rational government that the colonial state attempted to bring about did not find hereditary recruitment a contradiction and in fact reinforced / reinvigorated caste affiliation. This is critical in understanding the salience that the category of caste took on under colonial modes of governance.(1) Raman explores these contradictions in the practices of colonial recruitment, in the fashioning of a rational government through the colonial disciplining of bureaucratic work, recruitment and training of scribes, and finally in the new investments in writing and practices of attestation.

Document Raj argues that documents became the only way to seek the English East India Company's favor as they became the new mode of sociality. Documentary transactions, Raman writes, were part of the everyday of paternal governance of the Company. The petitioner became the writing/thinking subject of the Raj. Or at least that was what was attempted. The idea was to replace older modes with the rational governance of the Company. Precolonial governmental transactions as embedded in *kaifiyats*, or village records, were replaced with newer methods of attestation and facticity. Raman argues that the *kaifiyat* and other similar documents were delegitimized because they did not follow the protocols of attestation. I have argued in my own work that *kaifiyats* were reduced to document status, taken out of their context of circulation, and subsequently require new interpretative practices.(2) While I argued that *kaifiyats* were reduced to fact, Raman rightly points out that *kaifiyats* were not readily accepted as credible narratives. The idea of credibility is central to Raman's study of the document Raj as this is at the heart of the shift from precolonial practices of governance to those being forged under early colonial rule. The shift to new methods of attestation not only relied on credible narratives but importantly instituted paper accountability and a reliance on written documents.

New practices of attestation and new investments in writing and written evidence lead Raman to explore broad transformations in schooling and in the training of native scribal recruits. There have been some important and productive discussions on the culture of scholarly practices in South India as distinct from the preoccupations of Orientalists in Calcutta. Thomas Trautmann's edited volume on *The Madras School of Orientalism* demonstrates the complex set of scholarly practices at work in the Madras Presidency that gave rise to the philological discoveries of the Dravidian group of languages, which Raman points out inspired Dravidian nationalism in the latter part of the 19th century.(3) Within this scholarly milieu, Raman makes some important contributions to the field of colonial philology and Orientalist scholarship. Particularly, her exploration of the 'grammar factory', or practices and ideologies of colonial philology, provides a refreshing look at colonial governmental initiatives to transform vernacular languages for practical uses, to make them legible, grammatical, and able to articulate facts and capable of the attestation of truth. This is considerably different from the preoccupations with the literary dimensions of the shift to prose in scholarship on South Asian languages and literatures. The focus on the literary dimensions of the the rise of prose in 19th-century India may inadvertently lead one to conclude that it was a direct consequence of the imitation of English textual and literary practices by the new educated classes of Indians. That approach, however, risks ignoring

the institutional pressures that led to the burgeoning of prose in colonial South India. This is where Raman's 'grammar factory' concept comes in, as her examination of the history of institutional pressures leads her to propose that unintended consequences ensued from new expectations of textual skills and the privileging of written grammar in pedagogical practices. Interestingly, Raman points out an oft-forgotten part of this history of colonial philology, that grammar was something that even natives insisted on because they too were aware of the importance of gaining competency in reading and writing skills for their own advancement within the colonial bureaucracy. There were different institutional pressures shaping a grammatical approach to language learning: on the one hand from the British who were learning vernaculars to improve their communication skills, and on the native side from scribes and other petty officers who were being recruited into the bureaucracy. For instance, Vennelakanti Subba Rao, a native recruit who worked as translator and interpreter in the record keeping offices of the English East India Company, wrote a critique of native schooling practices. Raman points out rightly that Subba Rao was critical of these schooling practices because they inadequately trained natives. The native recruits then had to rely on acquiring writing skills when apprenticed on the job. Subba Rao's critique also demonstrates the shift to what Raman identifies as a 'new norm of being the master of a language' (p. 127). Since apprentices on the job did not learn grammar and composition they did not 'master' the language. Because Subba Rao himself was a product of the haphazard training he received from native veranda schools, he pushed for pedagogical reforms, specifically singling out the teaching of grammar as critical for language training to better equip native recruits so they could easily advance in the bureaucracy. However, there were few official attempts to improve language training for natives.

Finally, Raman offers a cautionary note on recent efforts which represent intellectual encounters as examples of exchange in the early colonial era. If we simply characterize encounters under the conditions of colonial rule as exchange, we disregard the incredibly hierarchical relationships between natives and European officers. Raman writes the following with regard to the idea of encounters as exchange in the realm of scientific knowledge: 'Such a view presents European scientific knowledge as exchange driven and ecumenical by erasing the shadow of violence and inserting in its place an eager exploration of the stimulation of learning and knowledge offered by global interconnections' (p. 8). This attempt to present the colonial intermediary as agential, she argues, comes at the 'cost of critiquing the modern relationship of expertise and power' (p. 8). These are important points she makes, and points I subscribe to, especially her stress on not downplaying or erasing the workings of modern power instituted in the colonial state and bureaucracy, that manifests itself in this context in the asymmetrical social relations between the British and Indians who manned the bureaucracy. This, alongside the denigration of Indian forms of knowledge and everyday practices of governance.

All in all, Bhavani Raman's *Document Raj* offers fresh insights into the early colonial history in South India, specifically a rethinking of the colonial state, colonial modes of governance and the relations forged between native recruits and European officials. A few questions that linger after an engaged reading of Raman's book: I wonder if in focusing on the everyday practices of governance through the institution of a colonial bureaucracy, are we neglecting to address adequately the dimensions of colonial power in not only structuring social relations along racial lines but also in the diminution of embedded native forms of knowledge? This certainly gets us away from studies of imperial ideologies of rule as possessing a coherently seamless history. However, in focusing on the contradictions and anxieties of rule by turning to the everyday practices of colonial governance, are we avoiding the more difficult question of analyzing colonial power and the structuring of hierarchies under colonialism alongside the everyday practice of empire? Does our current generation of scholars' preoccupation with the micro-practices of empire indicate a shift away from a focus on the workings of modern / colonial power? What does this shift mean for the deepening of our understanding of colonial societies? This is not directed solely at Raman's work on governance as conditioned by colonial bureaucracy but more generally at the state of historical scholarship on the early colonial state and the culture and practice of governance. However, in conclusion, Raman's compelling story of colonial bureaucracy whets the reader's appetite for more on the legacies of the institution of colonial bureaucracy in post-colonial India.

Notes

1. Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind* (Princeton, NJ, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Rama Sundari Mantena, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India: Antiquarianism and Philology, 1780–1880* (New York, NY, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *The Madras School of Orientalism*, ed. Thomas Trautmann (New Delhi, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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