

The writerly self: Literacy, discipline and codes of conduct in early modern western India

Prachi Deshpande

Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta

This article examines Marathi discourses of good writing from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Critical scholarship on literacy has highlighted reading and writing as historically situated practices, with complex interactions with orality. South Asian historiography on early modern scribal practices has also addressed the expansion of state power, regional historical imaginations, literary cultures and the sociology of scribal caste groups. Writing proliferated in seventeenth-century Maharashtra with the establishment of the independent Maratha state, and the spread of various religious movements, and generated diverse norms about ideal literate practices. This article closely reads a collection of accountancy manuals called 'mestak', alongside literate practices idealised by the poet-saint Ramdas in the Dāsabodha. While pointing to divergences across these bureaucratic and devotional contexts, the article teases out common emphases of moral conduct and self-fashioning between them. These overlaps, it suggests, are critical to understand the religio-political horizons of Maratha scribal communities; they also help trace a longer, complex history of language practices, history and community in western India.

Keywords: Scribes, reading and writing, literacy practice, Ramdas, Marathas, Marathi, scribal practice

*śuddha neṭake lyāhāve, lehona śuddha śodhāve
śodhūna śuddha vācāve, cuko naye*

Correct and neat be the writing, the written corrected,
Precise be the reading, errors avoided.¹

This couplet in the Ovi metre is well known to Marathi readers as a common-sense maxim about being appropriately literate. It appears in the seventeenth-century

¹ I am grateful to Dhananjay Vaidya for suggesting this interesting way to translate the Marathi imperative. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own. Thanks are due to Bhavani Raman and Eric Beverley and the anonymous referee for their generous and useful criticism. I also thank Sumit Guha for an incisive reading and important suggestions for improvements and corrections. Any remaining errors are mine alone.

***The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53, 4 (2016): 449–471**
SAGE Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC/Melbourne
DOI: 10.1177/0019464616662137

saint-poet Ramdas's magnum opus the *Dāsabodha*, which outlines a spiritual seeker's conduct through a wide-ranging set of guidelines from a guru to his disciple. Literate practice is a key component of such a disciple's conduct. Today, these lines pithily capture the essence of basic literacy goals, understood as being universal and timeless. Yet these lines were articulated in a specific space and time, within a particular culture of reading and writing and social context in early modern Maharashtra. These conceptions of literacy found expression in a variety of genres, ranging from religious texts to accountancy manuals. In this article, I aim to probe and historicise these conceptions, and the social and institutional worlds they emerged from. Overlaps and linkages between diverse spaces in the making of an early modern writerly self, I suggest, are critical to understand the making of Maratha scribal communities and their religio-political horizons during its expansion over the eighteenth century, as well as to the longer history of language practices, history and community in western India.

A rich body of work on diverse cultures of literacy has emphasised that reading and writing are not universal, uniform human skills; they are historically situated cultural practices embedded in particular social contexts and mentalities.² Instead of a teleological cognitive evolution from orality to writing to print, abundant evidence points to the interplay of manuscript, oral and print cultures.³ Rather than a benchmark of individual or national achievement, cultural history has also illuminated diverse levels and uses of literacy.⁴ If writing spans literary activity as composition, as well as inscription, reading ranges from the act of imbibing written material to taste, and access to books. Early modern literate practices in the Indian subcontinent have been the focus of a vigorous historiography over the last couple of decades, fed by currents as diverse as bureaucratic expansion, regional historical and literary imaginations, knowledge networks and the circulation of texts and people and the sociology of literate groups, especially scribal caste groups.⁵ These practices and processes continue to remain key to understanding the sociocultural changes, especially over the long transition to modernity.⁶ Instead of viewing them as markers of a generalised civilisational progress, however, scholars have effectively re-examined shifts in literate practices to understand institutional

² Briggs, 'Literacy, Reading, and Writing in the Medieval West', provides an excellent overview of the issues and arguments in the historiography of literacy.

³ Novetzke, 'Orality and Literacy: Performance and Permanence', 'Notes to Self'; Fuller, 'Orality, Literacy and Memorization'.

⁴ Wormald, 'The Uses of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England'; Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*; Collins and Blot, *Literacy and Literacies*; Street and Lefstein, *Literacy*.

⁵ Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire*; Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'Making of a Munshi'; Haider, 'Norms of Professional Excellence'; Green, 'The Uses of Books'; O'Hanlon, 'What Makes People Who They Are', 'Social Worth of Scribes'; Guha, 'Serving the Barbarian'; Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal'.

⁶ Narasimhan and Fuller, 'Traditional Vocations'; Washbrook, 'The Maratha Brahmin Model in South India'.

practices of empire,⁷ the rise of scribal classes and new exclusionary mechanisms, disciplinary apparatuses of state and education, and transformed conceptions of truth, attestation and authority, especially in colonial contexts.⁸ The diverse aspects, as well as impact, of print culture in these colonial–modern developments have received considerable attention. For the early modern manuscript era, however, the complexities of the everyday, material world of palm-leaf, stylus and ink have tended to take a back seat relative to scholarly examinations of the extent and circulation of manuscripts, and their content.⁹ This article examines some normative elaborations about writing practices from western India, in order to probe further this complex world of the cultivation and transmission of wide-ranging skills, notions and labour related to literacy.

The seventeenth century witnessed a surge in Marathi-language writing in western India, both as composition and as inscription. The establishment of an independent Maratha state under Shivaji Bhosale extended the Sultanat-era Persianate administrative reach deeper into rural areas with the establishment of village-level Marathi record-keeping, which only increased under the Peshwas and other Maratha chiefs in the eighteenth century. Poets such as Tukaram added to the already formidable corpus of Varkari devotional poetry. Although the oral, the written and the performative remained deeply imbricated into the contemporary era, the proliferation of written text had a deep impact on reading practices, on the pedagogy of literacy and language and strategies of memory and preservation; it also generated thoughts on writing practice and the ideal writer from diverse quarters. In the sections that follow, let us examine two such expressions: The first is the idea of a good *lekhak*, or writer, in a series of accountancy and record-keeping manuals generically known as ‘mestak’. The second is the practice of writing recommended by Ramdas in the *Dāsabodha*, as part of the qualities of the ideal disciple.

The Qualities of a Good *Lekhak*

The Molesworth dictionary defines mestak as a ‘book of arithmetic; tables or a table to facilitate calculations; a book of rules and sums; a book of directions and patterns for writing; a book generally of rules and instruction in business’.¹⁰ The texts available under this genre are dated from the mid-eighteenth through the early nineteenth century, although it is likely that they began to be composed at least a

⁷ Ogborn, *Indian Ink*.

⁸ Raman, *Document Raj*.

⁹ Pollock, ‘Literary Culture’.

¹⁰ Molesworth, *A Marathi-English Dictionary*, p. 666. Sumit Guha traces the term to the ‘archaic Persian’ word for summary or survey. Guha, ‘Serving the Barbarian,’ p. 513. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, however, suggests it may be traced to the Arabic *mustaktib*, the active participle of the form *istiktab*, ‘to dictate’. Personal communication.

century earlier, if not more, as scribal practices deepened across Maharashtra. Some, written in 'Moḍī' script on vertically joined rolls of paper, are direct, plain record-keeping instructions in heavily Persianised Marathi, usually detailing accounting heads and balancing methods, but also basic numeracy and arithmetic information. Insofar as they have full sentences at all, these are in prose.¹¹ Others, however, are more elaborate and narrative, in Ovi verses deploying a mix of Persianised and Sanskritised Marathi, and written in Balbodh script in the formal *pothī* format. These articulate a wider set of dos and don'ts for writers, variously glossed as *lekhaka*, *kārkun* or *śaṇavaī*, in the Maratha administrative establishments. Many of these were written for transmission within scribal families, but some hint at a wider circulation within the scribal world as well—for the *lekhakajana*, or 'community of writers', as one text puts it.¹² There is some evidence of separate manuals focused on epistolary writing, such as the seventeenth-century *lekhanaprasasti*, which detailed different forms of letters, and forms of appropriate address to be used depending on the social status of the correspondents. However, the unavailability of the actual manuscript of this manual and lack of any other details about it make it difficult to discuss substantially.¹³ For this article, of a total of ten available mestaks, I discuss the imagination of the ideal writer in three of the longer, eighteenth-century narrative texts: the *Hemādrīviracita piśāccalipikā* (henceforth *HP*), the *śāṇopaṇācī paddhatī* (*SP*)¹⁴ and the *Gaibatīlakṣaṇa grāmādhikāra* (*GG*).

¹¹ Two such mestaks are in manuscript form, preserved at the Rajwade Samshodhan Mandal (RSM), in Dhule: *Mestaka jamākharcāce*, No. 43/7–954, and *Varāvardīce gaṇita*, No. 47/4–955. The first is focused on accounting heads in *mahālanihāya* (mahal-level) revenue records, while the second is a much more elaborate discussion on measurements, subtraction and division. (A similar, albeit much shorter entry, titled *varāvācīcā śloka* is in the archives of the Ramdasi Sampradaya at the Samartha Vagdevata Mandir [SVM], Dhule, Bada No. 753.) A third such list-heavy mestak manuscript is also in the SVM archives, in Bada. No. 583. A fourth *Mestak* (*hemādapanthī*) of this kind is reprinted in Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya*, Vol. XI, pp. 157–67. A fifth is reprinted as Mestak No. 6 in Bendrey, *Mahārāṣṭrethihāsācī sādhanē*, pp. 63–68.

¹² This is the *Hemādrīviracita piśāccalipikā*, composed in 1745. It is available in print in Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya*, Vol. XI, pp. 167–93, p. 168. Rajwade titled it simply 'Mestak pustak', but this longer title appears at the end of two chapters, as well as at the end of the text. Another narrative mestak from 1789, reprinted as No. 2 in the Bendrey volume, is by Shankaratmaja Tryambak, who wrote it 'for reading in his own family tradition as well as for the use of others'. Bendrey, *Mahārāṣṭrethihāsācī sādhanē*, 7–13, p. 13. No. 4 in the same volume is a 1778 text from the collection of Bapuji Apaji Shekhdar Athanikar, by Shankaratmaja Narayen, and copied by Bhimasuta Gangadhare, pp. 55–61. Two other narrative mestaks are the *śāṇopaṇācī paddhatī*, one of whose copies was made as late as 1859, and the undated *gaibatīlakṣaṇa grāmādhikāra* by one Ramanand, a manuscript at the Marathi Manuscript Centre (MMC), Pune. This last mestak, whose title is one given by the MMC, is not only in Ovi but also has sections in Anushtub metre.

¹³ Rajwade summarised this text in the early twentieth century in a brief article. Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya*, Vol. XI, pp. 167–93. Later in the article, we shall briefly consider the much later *Lekhanakalpataru*, which was printed in the mid-nineteenth century, but clearly drew on earlier materials of epistolary practice.

¹⁴ Malshe, ed. *śāṇopaṇācī paddhatī*.

Most of these texts begin and end with an invocation of Hemadri or Hemadpant, the legendary thirteenth-century scholar and minister at the Yadava court at Deogiri, as the original author of this scribal knowledge. Nineteenth-century historians who first printed these texts took these invocations literally, and argued that the available mestaks were Persianised adaptations of existing Sanskritic manuals and pre-Sultanat writing practice in Maharashtra. Sumit Guha, however, has argued for a more ideological invocation of Hemadri on part of an overwhelmingly Brahman scribal class, which sought a non-Muslim origin for these scribal skills. He persuasively places the mestak genre squarely within Sultanat state expansion in the Deccan, when the use of Marathi, as well as paper, for local record-keeping spread in earnest.¹⁵

Indeed, explicating Persianate administrative vocabulary was a central concern of the mestaks; they were arguably the primary mode through which Perso-Arabic words for everything from lines and columns and accounting heads to types of taxation and landholding patterns were localised into Marathi. This linguistic elaboration formed part of broader instructions about the spatial representation of information and accounts on paper through specific numbers of columns and different lengths of lines drawn across them. One of the ways the term mestak itself is deployed is, in fact, as tabular organisation.¹⁶ It is probably this original meaning of the term that gradually expanded into a comprehensive guide on scribal practices and, as we shall see, scribal conduct more broadly. The 1678 text *Rājyavyavahārakośa*, commissioned by Shivaji to provide Sanskritised replacements for Persianate administrative vocabulary, translated mestak as *lekhapaddhati* (writing practices), but some of these texts themselves describe their content as *lekhanakauśalyavidhi* (rules, but also accomplishments of writing skills), or *lekhanādhikārakartavyavidhi* (writing responsibilities and duties).¹⁷

In describing these practices, the mestaks seamlessly blend basic information on reed pens, nibs and ink with commentary about more than just their material efficacy. The *SP* specifies yellow reed pens as ideal, but also underscores both white and yellow reeds as auspicious, with black and red reed pens as the bringers of bad fortune. It cautions against using something called *sārasel* reeds, since they are forbidden to Muslims, and would, presumably, offend the Muslim employers many scribes were serving under. Both texts prescribe an ash-gourd seed, spliced in the centre, as the ideal writing tip for the pen.¹⁸ The ink to be poured into this reed pen has some common recipes across texts, with minor variations: grains like rice or millets are either boiled in water and mixed with kajaḷ or first roasted black, then boiled and strained. In some others, lemon juice is mixed with myrrh

¹⁵ Guha, 'Serving the Barbarian', pp. 515–19.

¹⁶ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya, Vol. XI*, p. 175, verse 78; also Bendrey, *Mahārāṣṭrethāsācī sādhanē*, p. 61, verses 139–140; Malshe, ed. *Mestak*, p. 25, verse 168.

¹⁷ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya, Vol. XI*, p. 172.

¹⁸ Bendrey, *Maharashtraethasaci Sadhane*, p. 12; Malshe, ed. *Mestak*, p. 12.

and kajal for black, and with boiled lac or lodhra for red ink.¹⁹ These methods are followed by instructions on how to hold the reed pens (with three fingers, rather than four or five), to ensure speedy writing. If holding the inkstand with bare hands can stain fingers, walking over paper left on the ground, mixing ink from separate inkstands or even sleeping with books against the pillow can stain one's fortune.²⁰ In this way, the material act of writing is inseparable in the instructions from the scribe's administrative work and his overall personal conduct.

The *HP* begins with a description of various positions in the administration—the Amatya, the Majmu, the Suranisa, Hejib, Dabir, Sabnis, Kamavidar and others—and their responsibilities. While it extols broadly desirable qualities like intelligence or benevolence for each, the *mestak* also provides an interesting glimpse into the hierarchical tension between some of these posts. The Suranisa, who attested and stamped every formal document issued by the state, for instance, is described as the nemesis of all revenue-collecting Kamavidars, with rarely a good word for anybody. The Kamavidars, in their turn, also look down on petty scribes under them. A good Suranisa paternally protects these petty writers against them, but a stupid and inefficient Suranisa who imagines himself to be a good writer is the root of bad politics.²¹ In the *GG*, similarly, the Waknis, or the newswriter, has a prodigious memory; the Chitnis is a speedy writer, reader and composer; the Suranisa is a neat and careful writer who needs to be aware of different kinds of writing (before attesting documents); the Dabir is soft-spoken; the Nyayadhish is the fount of truth, but also a good, knowledgeable writer; the Mushrif has his eye on expenses and is a business-like writer; the Phadnis is an impressive writer, the very personification of writing materials; and the Daptaradhipati is not only in charge of the scribal office and papers but also someone who knows both ordinary scribal work and accounts himself.²² It is noteworthy that despite differences in actual administrative function (with variations in the actual duties of various offices across the Maratha states), the *mestaks* themselves gloss all these positions as *lekhak*, that is, marked by their work of writing. In foregrounding this actual, inscriptional aspect of their work, these narrative *mestaks* blur the difference between a high official with authority and a 'mere' scribe, underscoring the overarching importance of systematic written documentation itself to the expanding Maratha administration as it evolved outside the region over the eighteenth century.

¹⁹ Curiously, alongside these detailed ink recipes, the texts do not provide any details about types of paper or procedures for preparing paper. This is possibly because this was because ink was locally produced in individual *daftars* by scribes, whereas paper was externally supplied. The lack of reliable sources on paper production and supply, beyond general information on types of 'deshi', 'Portuguese' or 'junnari' paper hampers a more specific argument.

²⁰ Malshe, ed. *Mestak*, p. 13.

²¹ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya, Vol. XI*, pp. 170–71.

²² *GG*, pp. 5–7.

The texts also describe types of employment, such as the desirable ‘huzurātī’, where the writer is resident with his superior, followed by ‘gaibatī’, in which the writer is on deputation in the field. They emphasise the deeply paternalist idiom in which this hierarchical relationship and the surveillance and control it necessitated were expressed.²³ As the interface between the state and its sources of revenue, the Kamavisdar’s comportment while on gaibatī, in effect, revenue-collecting, receives particular attention. Some of the instructions, and even the language, are remarkably similar across texts. Right after detailing the names of columns and lines on the accounting sheet, the *HP* recommends that the Kamavisdar must reach the mahal early and meet the necessary mahal-level officers. He must remember who they are when they introduce themselves and inquire after local village scribes at the smaller settlements along the way. He should offer paan to those who come to greet him and have the desh mukh alert him as to the important people. He should get to know the karkuns, who should already be seated at their stations, have all seals and stamps ready and inquire about remainders from past years. He must write down the pay he receives from the mahal in kind (usually some grain) under expenses against his name, and he must not distribute it, as that will bring bad luck. Theft is apt to increase when officials change; the Kamavisdar must make an example of a couple of thieves to demonstrate his authority to all, and maintain proper guards at the place he is staying.²⁴

Both the *SP* and the *GG* echo this general tone about the writer’s preparedness, including cracking the whip through selective punishment.²⁵ The *SP* is much more elaborate about a writer’s overall comportment, blending politic behaviour, moral conduct and superstitious implications of everyday practice at the daftar. It frowns on writers who sing or sleep at their desks or drag their feet. When on huzurati service, it recommends that the writer get to know his employer well through regular meetings and asking questions, and making friends with his attendants. If they reveal that he is violent towards them, the writer best look for another position. He must practice thrift and engage in diplomacy; when other chiefs visit his employer, he must sit in the daftar, but oversee all proceedings. The *GG* adds that when on gaibatī service, the writer must not indulge in politicking at the huzurātī daftar. Best stay quiet, but abreast of affairs.²⁶

As mentioned above, details of what is taxable, how to organise different accounting heads, calculate revenue estimates and earnings from year to year, cross-check village records and documents and the proper way to document the *roz kird* or daybook so as to enable a smooth balancing of accounts later, make up the bulk of the mestaks. Although a good memory is often invoked as a

²³ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya, Vol. XI*, p. 171, verses 18–21; 80; Malshe, ed. *Mestak*, pp. 19–20; verses 97–101, 155.

²⁴ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya, Vol. XI*, pp. 174–75.

²⁵ Malshe, ed. *Mestak*, p. 16; *GG*, p. 3.

²⁶ Ramanand, *Gaibatīlakṣaṇa Grāmādhikāra*, p. 3.

desirable skill, detailed and comprehensive written documentation is key, unlike the contemporary recourse to writing more as a mnemonic aid to the oral rehearsal of records as described for Tamil Nadu by Bhavani Raman.²⁷ Since writing, in effect, is recording and documentation, reading as a practice or skill finds no place in this discussion, except as the ability to recall written information, for which (as noted below) legibility is crucial. The writer's conduct and skills have an immediate impact on his personal reputation and future, but they also reflect on the wider administration; indeed, his writing skills are entirely geared towards materially producing and renewing the 'textual polity'²⁸ on and through paper. His acumen in keeping this paperwork in order, in effect, keeps the state in order as well. As the *HP*, the most eloquent of these texts, puts it, it is this careful work that ensures 'the foundation of prosperity, winning the support of society, bringing the karkun popularity, and the king's indulgence'.²⁹ This bureaucratic, writerly self is imagined in the *SP* through an intimate relationship with various accounting documents: the *khatāvaṇī*, which contains abstracted and categorised documentation of all accounts, is the writer's mother; it provides and nourishes, in a sense, his answers to all inquiries. The *tumāra*, a long overview of accounts and rents, is like his brother, a supportive friend at hand. The *dasta-amala* is like the Shanavai's son; this document of the taxes owed by a village is proof of the writer's hard work. The *mahālazhaḍatī*, an overview paper, is like a sister to him, helping explain the different accounts of the mahal to the public at large. Finally, the *bākī*, or remainder, is like a stepmother; she will surely land her stepson in trouble.³⁰

Who then was the ideal writer of the *mestaks*? The author of the *HP* describes himself as having served in the position of *Majmu* for over two decades; he familiarises the reader of the *mestak* with the administrative hierarchy and emphasises the textual base of the state itself.³¹ In his words, the *Amatya*, *Majmu* and other

²⁷ Raman, *Document Raj*. This oral rehearsal of records, measurements and calculations, as Raman describes it, also operated in a multilingual environment where village-level Tamil accountants interacted with district-level Modī/Marathi supervisors in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We still know little about the orality–writing continuum in other multilingual settings, such as northern Karnataka, where Maratha revenue officials encountered local, Kannada village-level records over the eighteenth century. The Athanikar *mestak* was found in Athani in northern Karnataka, and it is possible that many such texts still lie undiscovered, under different names, in various uncatalogued archives. Given the focus in the genre on the nodal, supervisory position of the *Kamavisdar*, from checking village records, estimating the variety of revenues to actually collecting them, it is worth exploring the degree to which an increase, or shift, in comprehensive documentation emerged as a Maratha bureaucratic response to problems of attestation in these new, multilingual settings across the eighteenth century.

²⁸ Messick, *The Calligraphic State*.

²⁹ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya*, Vol. XI, p. 176, Verse 117.

³⁰ Malshe, ed. *Mestak*, pp. 19–20, verses 97–100. Although not explicit in the text, this remainder was not merely a mistake in balancing the accounts, but uncollected taxes, for which the *Kamavisdar* could be liable. I thank Sumit Guha for clarifying this point, and for helping me think through my arguments throughout the piece, with valuable discussion and feedback on an earlier draft.

³¹ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya*, Vol. XI, p. 192.

literate officials shored up the king's courage, brought the kingdom lustre and ensured its expansion. They were the roots of the tree that was the king, with the military its branches and the people its fruit. Without these roots, the tree could scarcely hope to survive the cyclone of invasion.³² The *SP* summarises all its detailed instructions into eight principal qualities of a writer: as one who was seasoned in logic, discreet, tight-lipped and held his counsel, was a good archivist, knew his mind, controlled his emotions and acted accordingly. He was also someone who was not lazy and did not harbour false pride, and who did not get his own writing done by someone else.³³

Although this assertion of scribal authority appears similar at first to Telugu *karanam* narratives' depictions of high officials and ministers as mediators between king and populace, and makers of policy and power,³⁴ the narrative *mestaks*, it would appear, were more concerned with the streamlining of the Maratha bureaucracy, setting ideal expectations for a comparatively lower, yet crucial nodal level of the state as it expanded.³⁵ If the basic *mestaks* captured *mahālanihāya* information, with a list-wise categorisation of the taxable landscape at a middling level between the village and the central establishment of the Peshwa or other Maratha chiefs, the longer texts narrativised and blended it into a wider manual about everyday norms for the revenue-collectors, even as they asserted the broader scribal backbone of the state. Thus, the actual guidelines of calculation, inventorying, accounting and compartment were aimed at the middling-level Kamavisdar, who had to deal with both superiors and people below him in this set-up, as well as interact with the broader population in the revenue-collecting and documenting process. Indeed, the *HP* describes a writer as someone who skilfully navigates various local sources of authority while asserting outside authority.³⁶

Yet, this middling, roving location of the writer also produced him as someone constantly under supervision, underappreciated and liable to be misunderstood and get into trouble. The *mestaks* recognise this predicament, and the everyday, pragmatic advice about his compartment is geared somewhat defensively towards dealing with it. The middling scribe's answerability to his superiors meant it was paramount for him to be able to defend the information collected and written down, and all the *mestaks* insist on this ability to respond quickly to queries and explain all paperwork as a key skill. It is for this reason that the clarity of the writing itself, in terms of both legibility and proper organisation, is another indispensable skill.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 172, verses 94–100.

³³ Malshe, ed. *Mestak*, pp. 23, verses 145–51, 169–70.

³⁴ Narayana Rao and Subrahmanyam, 'Notes on Political Thought'.

³⁵ A closer, textual reading, however, although outside the scope of the present article, may well indicate a greater intertextuality between the longer, narrative *mestaks* and the more formal and well-known Maratha political treatise *Ajnapatra*, on the one hand, and the political commentary, survey of resources and foregrounding of scribal personnel in the Marathi *bakhar* narratives.

³⁶ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade*, pp. 177–78, verses 27–30.

All the mestaks uniformly condemn stealing, the taking of bribes and cheating on one's employer as the worst offence; the *HP* adds that a man who steals despite having the skills of writing is truly a pitiable beggar.³⁷ If the procedures of documentation and authentication inherently bore anxieties of obscurity and falsification, the very skill of writing, the mestaks seem to urge, ought to come forth and fortify the official's overall moral comportment. This intertwining of the material with the moral, and personal with the 'public' in the production of bureaucratic, writerly selfhood resonated with another, distinct, articulation of literate conduct and discipline in the contemporaneous Ramdasi sampradaya. Let us now turn to examining it in some detail.

Writing, Devotion and Discipline in the Ramdasi Sampradaya

The Ramdasi sampradaya, founded by Sant 'Samartha' Ramdas, flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through a dense network of disciples, mathas and temples across Maharashtra, and beyond, in places, such as Gwalior, Indore and Tanjore. The sampradaya's objective was more explicitly pedagogical and top-down than the comparatively inclusive Varkari sampradaya, and his followers were largely Brahman and male.³⁸ Ramdas was concerned about the impact of Sultanat and Mughal power on regional religious life. The voluntary drift of people, especially Brahmans, towards Muslim pirs and gurus of non-Brahman castes was of special concern to him, as was the popularity of bodily mortification, miracles and other beliefs. Ramdas's writings, especially the *Dāsabodha* composed in the later seventeenth century, provide thick descriptions of this spiritual smorgasbord before setting them aside in favour of an avowedly moderate, this-worldly religiosity, based on an amalgam of Vedantic thought, saguna devotion to Rama and minute advice on daily discipline. At the core of a series of mirror-image chapters that sketch desirable and undesirable qualities in a man are two idealised seekers: a general householder with family responsibilities and employment and a more serious, full-time disciple who might go on to become a *mahant* in charge of a matha.³⁹ These broad didactic and sectarian contexts form the basis for the *Dāsabodha*'s discussions of literacy.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 173–74, verses 80–97; p. 191, verses 185–91.

³⁸ Examining the *Dāsabodha*'s philosophy in detail and its position vis-à-vis the traditions of Marathi Bhakti, especially the Varkaris, will take us too far away from the main scope of this article. There are two broad points on which Ramdas's thought diverged from Varkari bhakti—his devotion to Rama rather than Vitthal, and his endorsement of jati hierarchies. Despite these important differences, however, scholarship has pointed to critical overlaps in his writings, especially with regard to Vedantic thought, with Dnyaneshwar and Eknath. See Phatak, *Ramdas: Vangmaya ani Karya*. Moreover, as we shall see below, in everyday practice Ramdasi and Varkari poetry were more intertwined than their doctrinal approaches suggest.

³⁹ Ramdas himself famously refused the bond of marriage, but Ramdasi mahants were often men with families, rather than monks with vows of celibacy.

Ramdas emphasises the inadequacy of the self-study of books, and the necessity of the right Brahman guru for explaining the meaning of words and texts (5.1; 4.2.). This implies a dialogical, vocalised form of reading, but the detailed instructions also include individual reflection and analysis of written texts. It is also incomplete without *vivarana*, or revision and analysis (18.3.18–20).⁴⁰ Reading, both aloud and in silence, is part of a daily regimen that includes early rising, regular bodily functions and habits (11.3.15–17; 12.9.9–11). The young, restless mind cannot sit still and channel itself towards study. It must force itself to concentrate and read different kinds of texts, of varied types of poetry and metre. Revision and memorisation are integral to reading, as is solitude (18.3.7–8; 12–20). The ideal man is one who writes beautifully, who reads smoothly and correctly and can explain all aspects of a text (19.4.3). Recitative reading and memorisation of texts is also critical to the Ramdasi kirtankar, who has to go out and preach to the public. Reading, for him, is akin to capturing the essence of a book in the throat, as it were, to allow for seamless narration. Ultimately, the accomplished mahant is one who can draw upon a variety of rhythms, tunes and texts. He first learns the texts by heart in solitude and then analyses them carefully. He is one who achieves beautiful writing, reading, speech, gait, devotion, knowledge and dedication (4.2).⁴¹

While the individual reading of texts is open to the literate seeker at large, writing instructions in particular are aimed at the sect's mahants. *Lekhanakriyānirūpaṇa*, the survey of the craft of writing, is the first theme in the chapter detailing the *mahaṃtalakṣaṇa*, or the different qualities of a Ramdasi mahant. Write, indeed fashion, the Balbodh script so beautifully, Ramdas tells the Brahman disciple, that the intelligent be satisfied simply upon glancing at it. Pour the black ink into a straight, hollow cylinder and proceed with bright black lines in the style of a string of pearls. The letters must be neat, with all the different strokes of adequate size. All the letters from the very first to the last must look the same, as if written in one go with one pen, with the blackness of the ink, the sharpness of the pen tip and the incline of the letters uniform throughout. Lines must not touch, strokes must not cross, letters must not be longer than others and touch the line below. You must first draw a line across the page, then write neatly upon it, keeping uniform distance between the lines. Checking for errors must be smooth, but the writer must also render this unnecessary. A young writer must aim to entrance his readers. The letters must be of middling size and not too narrow in order to prevent problems for older readers. With sizeable margins, the writing must proceed clearly in the middle of the page, so that even if the edges of the paper wear out, the letters are not affected. So carefully must you write the book that man and creature alike

⁴⁰ Since there are several different editions of the *Dāsabodha*, I have cited content from the text in the following way: 18 (dashak/chapter).3 (samās/section).18–20 (verse number). All subsequent citations to the text follow this pattern and are in the main text.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the differences between Ramdasi and Varkari kirtan styles, see Schultz, *Singing a Hindu Nation*.

must feel envy and curiosity about the writer. Your hard work should well outlive you, and leave readers hankering for more. A writer must keep varieties of paper, pen and ink at hand, and take care in binding and storing manuscripts in wooden frames, cloth wraps and trunks (19.1).

These writing guidelines, with their emphasis on middling letters, adequate margins and uniformity of hand, are a reflection of Ramdas's overall philosophy of avoiding extremes in all walks of life. They materialise, as it were, his moderate, upright religiosity. Elsewhere, he cautions the mahant: 'Don't write an illegible manuscript, you can't do without one, don't read incoherently, but don't think you can get away without reading either.' Another indicates the codependence of memory and manuscript to the mahant's discussions with people: 'a visual memory is not necessary, but don't forget the text altogether, don't engage in any odd discussions, but don't shy away from debate either' (14.1.74–80).

The middle of the road, in effect, is the mark of a Ramdasi disciple, and to be reflected in his literacy practice.

At one point, Ramdas uses the metaphor of black ink on white paper to indicate consciousness itself. Black ink emerges from a yellow seed; how else can consciousness spread if not from this substance? Ordinary as it may be, yet this ink contains all, good and bad. Mahisuta, son of the earth, is the primal reed pen, who surges forth from within the earth; split in two, the two pieces then carry on the business of the world. Pen meets paper, mixed with ink, making being in this world worthwhile; pondering what is written allows fools to become wise and even contemplate the world beyond (15.6.1–9). This is quite a remarkable take on writing as originary creation, since Ramdas surely was aware of the ideological privileging of orality and the primal sound in Brahminical discourse. It indicates both the proliferation of writing in this period and its harnessing for a range of ideological tasks beyond the 'mere' and imperfect inscription of a purer orality.

This deepening engagement with textuality can be seen in the actual writing practices of the sampradaya. Apart from Ramdas's own voluminous compositions, the sampradaya generated an archive that ranges from spiritual commentaries and poetry in verse by his disciples to kirtankar's jottings in ordinary 'bāḍa' (notebooks), accounts, fragments of historical narratives and everyday prose correspondence with the Maratha administration. Many of these notebooks contain small sections of the *Dāsabodha* in different handwritings. Mathas in places like Tanjore often housed pilgrims on their way to holy sites such as Rameshwar. In return for the hospitality, these pilgrims would write out a couple of *Dāsabodha* sections.⁴² My suspicion is that these bāḍas in different hands are the result of this practice. The bāḍas also contain a very sizeable collection of Marathi Varkari poetry, from Dnyaneshwar in the thirteenth century to Tukaram in the seventeenth. Ramdas's theological and political differences from the Varkaris are clear, and in modern times, these sects

⁴² Personal communication with Shri Bhimswami of the Tanjavur matha, July 2008.

have been seen as clearly divergent, if not opposed to each other. Yet, these differences appear to be blurred in the everyday written materials of the mahants, who clearly drew on a very wide swathe of Marathi poetry in their kirtan performances. The *bāḍas* also contain Gujarati, Braj, Hindi, Kannada or Tamil poetry, but all in Balbodh or Moḍī script. The Kannada poet Purandara Dasa, who is by far the most popular poet in these notebooks, was undoubtedly incorporated into Ramdasi kirtans in Tanjore and its environs; the Ramdasi kirtankar might well have some Kannada-speaking skills, but probably learned the lyrics from a Kannada proficient, and copied them down in Moḍī or Balbodh in his notebook.⁴³

Memorisation and recitation continued; among the disciple Giridharswami's papers is a small manuscript barely an inch wide and six inches long, big enough to carry in one hand. It contains the first word, in sequence, of every verse in the *Dāsabodha*, a handy trigger for the memory.⁴⁴ Variations in spelling between two manuscripts of the same text are also usually homonyms, words that sound the same but mean something else, and make it clear that one of the copies written down as the other was being read aloud. But increasingly, Ramdas worked to spread the message of a set of ideas already elaborated in written form. Moreover, although Ramdas himself tried to differentiate between the physical book and its content, the importance of the *Dāsabodha* as the *grantharāja*, a material artefact, only grew in the century following his death in 1681.⁴⁵ The book forms a temporal hook for the sampradaya's sectarian memory; each biographer of Ramdas locates the writing of the *Dāsabodha* within his own local environs and indexes various events by when a particular chapter or subsection was written.⁴⁶ Writing, therefore, continued as a mnemonic aid, but expanded as devotional labour, both creative and physical, and as the materialisation of an everyday religiosity.

The cultivation of the body as a practical vehicle for spiritual realisation is a central theme in the *Dāsabodha*. Strongly condemning bodily mortification, Ramdas described several activities aimed at shoring up this precious resource, among which are prominent the learning of different scripts and the writing of books. And yet, he also carefully distinguishes between literacy, especially multilingual or scriptural literacy as skill, from a literate practice that cultivates an inner realisation and knowledge (5.5.32–33; 18.4.3, 21–22). Although Ramdas himself invoked a future reader's ease in mind when advising his disciples on clear, beautiful writing in formal pothis, everyday literacy was emphatically a grammar of bodily discipline, premised on the daily, devotional labours of writing. Central in this story is the figure of Kalyanswami, one of Ramdas's earliest followers, as the ideal disciple and scribe. Born in a petty scribal family as Ambaji Deshpande, it was his beautiful

⁴³ SVM, Bada nos. 1173, 1211, 1503.

⁴⁴ Deo, ed. *SriSamarthapratap*, pp. 61–62. I was unfortunately unable to view this document at the SVM in Dhule.

⁴⁵ cf. Green, *The Uses of Books*.

⁴⁶ Phatak, *Ramdas: Vangmaya ani Karya*, p. 51.

handwriting that first attracted him to Ramdas. Kalyanswami is most remembered as the dutiful scribe who wrote down the *Dāsabodha* as Ramdas composed and dictated it to him. A well-built man otherwise known for his physical prowess, an extraordinary ability to write was the peak of Kalyan's bodily discipline and devotion to his guru.⁴⁷ Sectarian tradition is full of stories of Kalyan's writing skills; indeed, the materiality and grandeur of the *Dāsabodha* is deeply intertwined with his writing abilities. Several stories describe Kalyanswami writing out the entire text overnight, exhausted but dedicated. One text argues that it is this exhaustion from writing that eventually killed him.⁴⁸ If the Varkari guru and disciple relationship between Namdev and Janabai was enabled through the rapturous listening of kirtan and the emphatic eschewing of literacy,⁴⁹ by contrast, Ramdas and Kalyan are bound by writing, as the ultimate, bodily commitment of a disciple to his guru and his teachings. The Ramdasi public was consciously fashioned and extended through writing practice, in addition to the physical mathas and temples, and, as we shall see, through the specific social group of scribal practitioners.

Between Matha and Daftar; between Balbodh and Moḍī

Two conceptions of the ideal writer, thus, emerged in the world of Marathi letters by the later seventeenth century. One was located in the daftar and the world of bureaucratic record-keeping in Moḍī, while the site for the other was the Ramdasi matha, focused primarily on religious manuscripts in Balbodh. One extolled the virtues of the skilled writer, the other the literate disciple. Both conceptions articulated ideal writing practice within a broader discourse of bodily comportment and upright conduct in which legibility, but also loyalty to one's superior, discretion, diplomacy and daily discipline were central. The mestaks laid out guidelines on documenting a wide diversity of information into order, categories and stability on paper, while Ramdas formulated a distinct everyday practice out of diverse spiritual streams. If the ultimate goal of this writerly discipline in the scribal context was comprehensive documentation of empirical detail, in the Ramdasi context it was preservation of key teachings. Both writing practices, moreover, engaged both a personal and a community-driven domain for the writer, albeit in different ways. Ramdas emphasised a mahant's individual bodily development in his writing practice as well as his use of his literate skills for communicating the sampradaya's ideas among the public. The mestaks, for their part, underscored the writer's personal integrity and industry in his writing practice as inseparable from his wider administrative responsibility and persona.

Despite these distinct contexts and emphases, there were many overlaps and resonances between these two spheres of literate activity, both in their

⁴⁷ Deo, ed. *SriSamarthapratapa*, p. 59.

⁴⁸ Phatak, *Ramdas: Vangmaya ani Karya*, p. 52.

⁴⁹ Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory*.

normative elaborations and in everyday writing practice. Ramdas emphasised writing in Balbodh by Brahmans, and contrasted the lowly position of the scribal office with the purer literacy of the devotee. Stories about true devotees rising above the grubbing and humiliation of scribal service, usually to a Muslim official, were also told within the Varkari tradition, from Eknath in the sixteenth to Mahipati in the eighteenth century. This critique of scribal service found its clearest expression in Ramdas's teachings; as part of a wider lament about the overall decline of Brahmans in society, he appears to hold scribal work directly responsible, perhaps even citing his own father's ruin due to his hereditary writing position (14.7.37–38). Yet, for all the critique of scribal employment as petty or secondary to spiritual realisation, Ramdasi sectarian practice bore a contradictory relationship with this administrative network. Its principal following was drawn from these very Brahman groups, many among them petty scribes across the towns and villages of western Maharashtra, including some luminaries, such as Ramchandra Pant Amatya, author of the famous text on statecraft, the *Ajñāpatra*, in the early eighteenth century, and the famous official and bakhār author Malhar Ramrao Chitnis at the Satara court in the early nineteenth century. Thus, throughout the *Dāsabodha*, Ramdas emphasised literacy skills for his followers, but consciously deployed away from their usual scribal context, in the service of a more didactic, devotional everyday life.

This critique of scribal service also went hand in hand with an emphasis on mahants to diplomatically maintain good relations with sites of political power and petty state functionaries (6.1.2–12). Land grants and concessions to the mathas from the Maratha state generated considerable correspondence with different levels of state authority. The voluminous materials published by S.S. Deo in the journal *Ramdas ani Ramdasi* over the early twentieth century make it clear that petty kulkarnis and karkuns formed a sizeable following. Ramdas himself occasionally invoked the tasks of accountancy and record-keeping while detailing contrasting qualities of intelligence and foolishness (18.6.17–18). The mahants' notebooks contain sundry information in Balbodh as well as Moḍī. Jottings of poetry from a variety of poets and sects and languages, as we have seen, are mixed in these notebooks with various kinds of accounts, copies of correspondence with Maratha officials and scraps of bakhars. There are, interestingly, a couple of mestaks among them as well. There are also accounts and letters written on long rolls of paper in Moḍī much as would be found in any contemporary daftar. All of this archival material makes it clear that mundane scribal skills were much in evidence in the mathas, alongside the normative Balbodh practice prescribed for the mahant.⁵⁰ Ramdasi ideas about a moderate, upright everyday conduct rooted in the mundane world but transcended through literate discipline, thus, definitely resonated with, and attracted, petty officials and scribes, both as general devotees and as serious disciples.

⁵⁰ Deo describes a series of compositions by Giridharswami in the frame of a *vaka*, or newsletter, addressed to Ramdas. Deo, ed. *SriSamarthapratapa*, pp. 26–27.

We as yet know little about the precise social networks, individuals and everyday links—like those scholars have identified between Sufi centres of learning and the Mughal and Sultanat bureaucracies in different regions⁵¹—through which this transaction of ideas and practices between matha and daftār might have taken place, or how the socialisation or time spent in one influenced or eased a young writer's path in the other. For the time being, however, let us outline some of these resonances between the two domains here. Some key, recurrent terms throughout the *HP* as it painstakingly goes over category after category of agricultural produce, trees, fabric, occupations, types of labour, jatis, administrative positions, coinage, taxes, documents and more are *nanāvidha*, meaning variety or different types, along with *anukrame*, or *yathānukrame*, meaning sequence, or proper order of succession. The repeated instruction to the writer is to recognise, arrange and write down the variety of items in these categories according to their proper order, even though the text itself does not specify the actual ordering.⁵² In a couple of places, the *HP* compares itself to the Sanskrit *sūtra* texts—just as they are the reference for determining correct dharmic behaviour, so also is the *mestak* the touchstone for Brahmins to navigate the Kaliyuga, with its Yavana kings and disturbance in the Varna order.⁵³ Its interest in ordering the social world for revenue, thus, dovetails neatly with its interest in restoring the social world from a Brahmanical perspective; as we have seen, this restoration of Brahman leadership in the face of a disturbed social order is a central concern for Ramdas as well.

The guidelines about overcoming laziness, the cultivation of circumspect behaviour, intelligence, indeed, cleverness in social relations in the later, more elaborate *mestaks* available from the later eighteenth century also resonate strongly with those in the *Dāsabodha*, especially the *śikavaṇa* and *mahaṃtalakṣaṇa* sections. Even the practical instructions on legibility and beautiful writing are very similar. The *Dāsabodha*'s description of a mahant is '[someone who has] beautiful letters, beautiful reading, beautiful speech, beautiful gait, beautiful devotion, knowledge and asceticism, teaches by example' (11.6.11). About the beautiful writing itself, it elaborates: 'The Brahman must write the Balbodh letter, work to fashion it better, upon seeing it the clever, are at once satisfied', and later, 'He who is still youthful, must be ever so careful, write so as to make people, spellbound' (19.1.1–9). The No. 1 *mestak* in the Bendrey volume emphasises similar letters, but in Moḍī, 'Letters evenly thick and precise, of round shape and size, with the knowledge of Moḍī, the clever become wise'.⁵⁴ The *SP* assures the writer, 'If the letters please, all difficulties cease, replying to queries is of ease, as and when needed.'⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ernst, *Eternal Garden*, pp. 191–200; Eaton, 'Court and the Dargah'; Green, *Sufis since the Seventeenth Century*.

⁵² Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade*, pp. 182–89, Verses 148, 180–81, 198, 207, 18, 83, 88, 138.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Verses 5–13; p. 65.

⁵⁴ Bendrey, *Maharastretihasachi Sadhane*, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Malshe, ed. *Mestak*, p. 32.

To be sure, pre-print manuscript culture generally emphasised a ‘grammar of legibility’⁵⁶ above orthographic standardisation. Some of the similarities are also due to the particular style of the Ovi metre common to both textual forms, which lends itself easily to almost prosaic didactic content. Yet, some of the couplets of the *HP*, in particular, are also reminiscent of the *Dāsabodha*’s well-known rhythmic style of repeating certain words in couplets while providing diverse examples:

But one act of theft, with lifelong misery you were left, of all good sense bereft,
due to greed

Avoid it completely, reply on your living only, serve your master honestly, as
is right

Manage your household regime, through a daily routine, people will hold you
in esteem, why ask for more?

...

And so the Guru instructed, time and again repeated, his speech directed, to
the disciple

Infinite talk about infinite norms, infinite skills and infinite minds, infinite
strengths and infinite forms, whither knowledge?

Finish the task at hand, accordingly your disciples command, the rest may stand,
even if seemingly useful.⁵⁷

Finally, let us consider a handwritten prose note in the archives of the Rajwade Samshodhan Mandala at Dhule, which details guidelines of conduct ‘prescribed by Hemadpant’ for successfully balancing *prapañca paramārtha* or seek salvation while remaining a worldly householder. The gift of the human body, and in particular birth as a Brahmin, it emphasises must be put to meaningful use through the right guru. Once the guru has been found, a man must

first learn the basic introduction to writing letters in the sand [*dhuḷākṣare*], then multiplication, division, techniques of summing up [*terajā-berajā*], methods of bookkeeping entry [*kardana bastana*], measurements and accounts, drafts. Some introduction to memorization, singing, hymns, aphorisms, the shastras, vedas is desirable. If possible, learn Persian; it may be of use. Learn to write different kinds of petitions [*puravañī*]. Follow the karma mārga. Once all this is done, with the Guru’s blessings, seek out the company of holy men. Learn different languages and arguments... consult books and collect them. Do not speak without

⁵⁶ Parkes, ‘Scribes, Scripts and Readers’, p. 2, quoted in Briggs, ‘Literacy, Reading and Writing in the Medieval West’, p. 412.

⁵⁷ Shah, ed. *Itihasacarya Rajwade*, p. 192.

necessity to superiors. Follow your daily routine... Do not laugh without reason, keep desire, anger and greed in moderation... write your accounts with caution.⁵⁸

The note is in modern Balbodh on thin paper, certainly from the colonial period, and it is not clear who wrote it. Explanations in the margins for Persian terms like *kardana bastana* and the suggestion about learning Persian, however, suggest that it was copied, or most likely summarised, from an earlier text or texts;⁵⁹ the short sentences also hint at the conversion of Ovi verses into prose. What is remarkable about the note, however, is that in effect, it merges the *Dāsabodha*'s core teachings about balancing *prapañca* and *paramārtha* to the householder and the guidelines on politic behaviour, with the basic education and dos and don'ts of a Brahman scribe and most importantly, ascribes them not to Ramdas, but to the original scribe, Hemadpant. It thus neatly brings together the ideas and guidelines on moral and politic conduct in both the matha and daftar into one seamless statement.

Conclusions

In an important recent special issue of the *IESHR*, Sumit Guha, Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook have examined the turn to *laukika*, or non-sacral, scribal service in large numbers by Brahmans in the Maratha regions under the expanding medieval Sultanat kingdoms. They explore wider implications of the consolidation of such scribal communities on debates over ritual status and the varna social order. While O'Hanlon details the growing competition for scribal positions between Brahmans and Kayastha Prabhū, and consequent conflict over the ritual status of the Kayasthas, Guha emphasises Brahman efforts to rationalise and even 'sacralise' Brahman participation in lowly scribal occupations under Muslim rulers without losing their own position as leaders and arbiters of the traditional ritual hierarchy. Washbrook, with a much longer perspective, views this successful move by Maratha Brahmans to non-sacral domains as providing a model of secularisation for Brahmans across the peninsula over the early modern era, and subsequent colonial one as well.⁶⁰ This move included, first, harnessing script and language to keep sacral and profane spheres separate; while Balbodh remained the domain of the Sanskritic, literary and religious, the *piśācca* or demonic script, Moḍī, eased participation in the lowly scribal and Persianate domain of the Mleccha.⁶¹ Second, continuous recourse to and control over the Dharmasastras, on the other hand, enabled Brahmans to field off challenges to the varna order from groups like the

⁵⁸ RSM, Mss. 49–134 (893). Although not in the text itself, the note is catalogued under the title *Hemadpantachi Niti*.

⁵⁹ Guha, 'Serving the Barbarian'.

⁶⁰ *IESHR* Special Issue: Vol. 47 (4), 2010.

⁶¹ Guha, 'Serving the Barbarian'.

Kayasthas or other scribal groups⁶² and retain the authority to adjudicate ritual status, political claims and control social mobility in the tumultuous early modern era. One crucial implication of this process, as O'Hanlon argues, was that the Dharmasastras continued to provide the vocabulary for political–social discourse, preventing *nīti* discourses of pragmatic political theory from emerging in the region as a secular alternative for political thought.

How does one insert Ramdas, and the interpellation of Ramdasi and scribal discourses of literate-moral conduct, into this history and set of arguments? The task is muddled by the raucous twentieth-century debates among Brahmans and non-Brahmans over the extent to which Ramdas may or may not have influenced Shivaji's project. Important in these debates is Ramdas's formulation of the concept of *rājakāraṇa*. Glossed in modern Marathi as politics, *rājakāraṇa* appears as shorthand for concerted political activity. For many, this term has served as incontrovertible proof of the political underpinnings of Ramdas's teachings and goals, especially when seen together with his other writings on *rājadharmā* and *kṣātradharmā* and letters to Shivaji and Sambhaji about the need to fight Mughal power; Brahman historians have further used it as proof of his being Shivaji's guru. Others are apt to treat the concept as a mere neologism for a generalised shrewdness in the service of religious preaching, which they view as Ramdas's priority.⁶³ These interpretive polarisations have hindered closer attention to the wider practices of the sampradaya, or an exploration of the complexities of the teachings themselves. I should emphasise here that my intention is not to resurrect this old debate, and certainly not to argue that Ramdas was Shivaji's guru. Based on the resonances outlined above between the mestaks and Ramdasi teachings, I suggest, instead, that it is more fruitful to explore how the fairly capacious ideas of *rājakāraṇa* and *cāturya* were adapted within Maratha state practices as they evolved over the eighteenth century, and the ways in which the emphasis on literate practice and the elaboration of the ideal disciple may have informed that of the ideal scribe.

The *Dāsabodha*'s elaboration of the *rājakāraṇa* concept is layered. After the performative preaching of kirtan, *rājakāraṇa* was emphasised as the most important aspect of self-aware social comportment for the Ramdasi mahant to cultivate. It is interpellated with *harikathānirūpaṇa*, the practice of kirtan, but also with *sāvadhapaṇā*, or caution, preparedness (11.5.5; 11.6.4; 12.2.29). It was to be measured (11.5.12; 18.6.4), done quietly, even secretly (11.5.19) and realised from within, and yet also had to do with the communicative skills for disciples to cultivate. It thus encompasses *cāturya* in the sense of cleverness and tact (19.2.6–8; 2.8.28; 19.10) as well as *dhūrtapaṇā* (18.2.29), as adroitness and discretion, while conducting a debate with interlocutors. Nationalist historians, especially Brahman

⁶² O'Hanlon, 'What Makes People Who They Are'.

⁶³ For a detailed discussion of this debate among colonial-era historians over Ramdas, see Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*, chapter seven.

historians of the early twentieth century, simplistically read a full-fledged political programme for the Maratha fight against the Mughals in these elaborations. While rejecting these ahistorical interpretations, however, it is clear that Ramdas recognised this range of interactions as *political* in a wider, pragmatic sense, and to that end, part of *nīti* discourse (18.2). It was within this political awareness of the contemporary world, rather than through recourse to Dharmasastric arguments, that Ramdas sought to secure Brahman social leadership, by preaching a this-worldly ethic of pragmatic, moral and everyday literate discipline to Brahman petty literati that harnessed both their scribal skills and their concerns about losing ritual status because of scribal employment.

This opens up a field for further exploration in two ways. The first has to do with the ways in which this ethic may have influenced historical, ideological elaborations of the Maratha state. On the one hand, the social network of mathas and scribal followers likely cemented Brahman jati consolidation in the face of challenges to scribal positions, and ritual status, from groups like the Kayastha Prabhus. Certainly, the need to secure Brahmanical superiority appears to have preoccupied some later Ramdasi disciples.⁶⁴ At the same time, however, the writerly moral ethic may also have, on occasion, transcended these narrow jati solidarities in favour of a larger communitarian solidarity: Despite the clear emphasis on Brahmans, the Ramdasi archive also suggests that some Kayastha Prabhu scribes also gravitated towards the sect in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,⁶⁵ most notably the senior official Malhar Ramrao Chitnis at the Satara court, whose historical analysis of the Maratha state had a strong sense of its Hindu basis.⁶⁶ These traces prompt further exploration of how everyday scribal practice and sociality absorbed and negotiated these normative elaborations, and reshaped scribal communities across the Maratha world along as well as beyond the lines of jati and sampradaya.

The second has to do with the ways in which these early modern discourses of literate discipline help shed light on later, colonial-era debates over literacy,

⁶⁴ Deo, ed. *SriSvanubhava Dinkar*, by Dinkarswami, a late-eighteenth-century text, is one such that strongly emphasises Brahman dominance in all walks of life. Deo also mentions a composition by Giridharswami called ‘Rajashasani [“related to state administration”] Vaka’, which addressed itself to Ramdas to advocate the cause of Brahmans. I was unfortunately unable to see the original in Dhule.

⁶⁵ SVM, Badas 25–26. One Moro Bhagwant Sabnis copied the *Hanumantswaminchi Bakhar* in this notebook in Sake 1711 [1789 CE]. The name Sabnis is usually a Kayastha surname. Bada 18 contains sections of Mukteshwar’s *Hanumantanatak*, copied in Sake 1692 [1770 CE] by ‘Sivaji Madhaji Prabhu Kayasth jnyati Mahimkar’. Bada 342 mentions a text belonging to members of the Khopkar family (also usually a Kayastha surname).

⁶⁶ Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*. Although well out of the scope of the present article, it is also worth exploring to what extent Ramdas’s emphasis on Advaita Vedanta may have served to cement this Hindu solidarity amongst a wider scribal network within the Maratha state, to get a sense of what Christopher Minkowski has called ‘a social history of Advaita’. Minkowski, ‘Advaita Vedanta in Early Modern History’. Chitnis is also credited with expanding the original, short, *Hanumantswaminchi Bakhar*, one of the main prose historical narratives of the sect, in Sake 1739 [1817 CE].

language and community in western India. Under colonial modernity, literacy itself emerged as a matter of universal progress and state policy. The question of writing skills moved away from devotional discipline and scribal legibility and engaged a new constellation of speed and publicity, efficacy and authenticity.⁶⁷ Under colonial education, literacy also became part of a language pedagogy focused on orthography and grammar, which developed in turn out of a new historical sensibility in linguistic discourse; conceptions of good writing, consequently, moved from various, flexible and multiscriptual ways of writing in Marathi to fixing the accurate writing of Marathi in general.⁶⁸ Yet, these transformations also turned repeatedly on the question of caste. Issues of the long Sanskrit linguistic heritage in Marathi, as well as the deep social history of Marathi and the Marathas, got imbricated with those of Brahman social and political dominance, from ancient times right down to the contemporary era, as groups long excluded from literacy staked claims to the new public sphere.⁶⁹ While modern historians printed the mestaks, without commentary, as mere sources of a mundane aspect of Maratha administrative history, Ramdas's writing guidelines were adapted to a generic, universal desirability of literacy, and a generalised narrative of Brahman intellectual leadership, which non-Brahman historians hotly contested, and continue to, from the late nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Yet, traces of the early modern writerly self, at home with Balbodh and Moḍī, peripatetic, disciplined and devoted to documents, certainly informed the historiographical practice and social outlook of modern historians, such as V.K. Rajwade and S.S. Deo, who deployed the reams of paper this literate discipline had left behind, but within changed 'disciplinary', political and communitarian imaginations.⁷¹ Excavating this long history of the discourses of normative writing and their everyday expressions, therefore, allows us to track how complex relationships between language practices, history and community changed from the early modern era into the colonial, and to understand the changing, yet enduring nature of Brahman dominance over the discursive and social-political domains in which these ideas were expressed and transformed.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Gunjekar, *Laghavi Lipi*, pp. 442–43, and Vaidya, Gajananbhau *Laghulekhanapaddhati*. These were two of many efforts to develop shorthand scripts for Marathi to speedily notate public speeches for quick and accurate reporting in newspapers.

⁶⁸ This debate over Marathi orthography and the deep social history of the Marathas is examined in Deshpande, 'Shuddhalekhan: Orthography, Community and the Marathi Public Sphere'.

⁶⁹ Chavan, *Language Politics under Colonialism*; Naregal, *Language Politics and the Public Sphere*; More, *Garja Maharashtra*.

⁷⁰ Even non-Brahman historians such as K.S. 'Prabodhankar' Thackeray, who focused on the scribal pasts of communities like the Kayastha Prabhus, however, did so in a wider framework of their 'contributions' to the Maratha project, and insisting that the pen, much like the sword, guaranteed their Kshatriya ritual status. Thackeray, *Gramanyaca sadyanta itihasa*.

⁷¹ Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History*, examines the making of this modern discipline in both senses of the term in the career and practice of the historian Jadunath Sarkar and his colleague Govind Sakharam Sardesai.

References

- Alam, Muzaffar and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Making of a Munshi', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 24 (2), 2004, pp. 61–72.
- Bendrey, V. S. *Mahārāṣṭreṭihāsācī sādhanē*, Vol. 1, Bombay, 1967.
- Briggs, Charles. F. 'Literacy, Reading, and Writing in the Medieval West', *Journal of Medieval History*, Vol. 26 (4), 2000, pp. 397–420.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Calling of History: Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth*, Chicago, 2016.
- Chatterjee, Kumkum. 'Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter *IESHR*), Vol. 47 (4), 2010, pp. 445–72.
- Chavan, Dilip. *Language Politics under Colonialism: Caste, Class and Language Pedagogy in Western India*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2013.
- Collins, James and Richard Blot. *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power and Identity*, Cambridge, 2003.
- Deo, Shrikrishna Shankar, ed., *SriSvanubhava Dinkar: Ramdas ani Ramdasi, Bhag Sahava*, Dhule, 1911.
- . *SriSamarthapratapa: Ramdas ani Ramdasi, Bhag Athava*, Dhule, 1912.
- Deshpande, Prachi. *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960*, Delhi, 2007.
- . 'Shuddhalekhan: Orthography, Community and the Marathi Public Sphere', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. LI (6), 2016, pp. 72–82.
- Ernst, Carl W. *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*, Minneapolis, 2003.
- Eaton, Richard M. 'The Court and the Dargah in the Seventeenth-century Deccan', *IESHR*, Vol. 10 (1), 1973, pp. 50–63.
- Fuller, C. J. 'Orality, Literacy and Memorization: Priestly Education in Contemporary South India', *Modern Asian Studies* (hereafter *MAS*), Vol. 35(1), Feb 2001, pp. 1–31.
- Green, Nile. *Indian Sufism since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books and Empires in the Muslim Deccan*, London, 2006.
- . 'The Uses of Books in a Late Mughal Takiyya: Persianate Knowledge between Person and Paper', *MAS*, Vol. 44(2), 2010, pp. 241–265.
- Guha, Sumit. 'Serving the Barbarian to Preserve the Dharma: The Ideology and Training of a Clerical Elite in Peninsular India, c. 1300–1800', *IESHR*, Vol. 47 (4), 2010, pp. 497–525.
- Gunjekar, R. B. *Laghavi Lipi va Ati Tvarene Lihinyaci Yukti*, Bombay, 1874.
- Haider, Najaf. 'Norms of Professional Excellence and Good Conduct in Accountancy Manuals of the Mughal Empire', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 56, Special issue, 2011, pp. 263–74.
- Hoggart, Richard. *The Uses of Literacy*, London, 1957.
- Kinra, Rajeev. *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary*, Berkeley, 2015.
- Malshe, S. G. ed., *Śāṅṅapanācī paddhaṭī*, Bombay, 1966.
- Mestaka Jamākharcāce*, ms, Rajwade Samshodhan Mandal, Dhule, No. 43/7–954.
- Messick, Brinkley. *The Calligraphic State*, Berkeley, 1993.
- Minkowski, Christopher. 'Advaita Vedanta in Early Modern History', in Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, eds, *Religious Cultures in Early Modern India: New Perspectives*, London, 2011, pp. 105–42.
- Molesworth, John. T. *A Dictionary, Marathi and English*, 2nd ed., Bombay, 1857.
- More, Sadanand. *Garja Maharashtra*, Pune, 2013.
- Narasimhan, Haripriya and C. J. Fuller. 'Traditional Vocations and Modern Professions among Tamil Brahmans in Colonial and Post-colonial South India', *IESHR*, Vol. 47 (4), 2010, pp. 473–96.
- Narayana Rao, V. and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. 'Notes on Political Thought in Medieval and Early Modern South India', *MAS*, Vol. 43 (1), January 2010, pp. 175–210.
- Naregal, Veena. *Language Politics and the Public Sphere: Western India under Colonialism*, Delhi, 2001.

- Novetzke, Christian L. *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India*, New York, 2008.
- . 'Note to Self: What Marathi Kirtankars' Notebooks Suggest about Literacy, Performance and the Travelling Performer in Pre-colonial Maharashtra', in Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler-Schofield, eds, *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, London, 2015, pp. 169–184.
- Ogborn, Miles. *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company*, Chicago, 2007.
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind. 'Social Worth of Scribes: Brahmins, Kayasthas and the Social Order in Early Modern India', *IESHR*, Vol. 47 (4), 2010, pp. 563–95.
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind and Christopher Minkowski. 'What Makes People Who They Are: Pandit Networks and the Problems of Livelihood in Early Modern Western India', *IESHR*, Vol. 45 (3), 2008, pp. 381–416.
- Parkes, Malcolm. *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts*, London, 1991.
- Phatak, N.R. *Ramdas: Vangmaya ani Karya*, Bombay, 1952.
- Pollock, Sheldon. 'Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India', in Simon Eliot, Andrew Nash and Ian Willison, eds, *Literary Cultures and the Material Book*, London, 2007, 77–94.
- Raman, Bhavani. *Document Raj: Scribes and Writing in Early Colonial South India*, Chicago, 2014.
- Ramanand, *Gaibatīlakṣaṇa Grāmādhikāra*, ms, Marathi Manuscript Centre (MMC), Pune, Bada. No. 1, MMC/371.
- Shah, M. B. ed., *Itihasacarya Rajwade Samagra Sahitya*, 13 Vols, Dhule, 1996–2000.
- Schultz, Anna. *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism*, New York, 2013.
- Street, Brian and Adam Lefstein, *Literacy: An Advanced Resource Book*, London, 2007.
- Thackeray, K. S. *Gramanyanca Sadyanta Itihasa Arthat Nokarsahice Banda*, Bombay, 1919.
- Vaidya, Gajananbhau *Laghulekhanapaddhati*, Bombay, 1881.
- Varāvardīce Gaṇīta*, ms, Rajwade Samshodhan Mandal, Dhule, No. 47/4–955.
- Wormald, C. P. 'The Uses of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and Its Neighbours', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 27, 1977, pp. 95–114.
- Washbrook, David. 'The Maratha Brahmin Model in South India: An Afterword', *IESHR*, Vol. 47 (4), 2010, pp. 597–615.