

LETTERS OF THE LABOURING POOR: THE ART OF LETTER WRITING IN COLONIAL INDIA*

It was 1915. The First World War was in full swing. Khan, one of the 138,608 Indian soldiers fighting for the British empire in the muddy trenches of France, was anxious about his fields and crops back in his village in Rawalpindi district, Punjab. He wrote a desperate letter to his father:

All the others get letters here. They come every week. But I get none. All the other men's letters say that this year famine has befallen. There has been no rain and there are no crops. You never wrote that there had been no crops, and that famine had befallen, or that you had need of money. If you do not write, how can I know?¹

Letters to other soldiers had informed him that it had not yet rained in the region and famine had become imminent. Khan, his companions in the trenches and the colonial government all knew that letters were critical in sustaining the mobility of people, ideas and information required by the war. It had produced an unprecedented moment in Indian history, with a large number of illiterate and newly literate peasants-turned-soldiers and their families learning to correspond for the first time in their lives. More than 1.3 million Indians fought for the British empire, and a constant exchange of letters was the only way to remain in touch. The Censor of Indian Mails in France was surprised by the volume of letters it had to process. Even though, it reported, soldiers and their families were new to letter writing and overseas

* I should like to express my special gratitude to Shahid Amin, Natalie Zemon Davis, Nitin Sinha and Ulrike Stark for offering their insightful comments on this article. Many thanks are also due to Sunil Kumar, Nida Sajid and Rupa Viswanath for their expert advice and comments, and to Soni for her intellectual companionship. I am also thankful to the German Historical Institute London and Max Weber Foundation, Germany for funding my research (2013–17), on which this article is based.

¹ The original letter was written in Urdu on 21 October 1915; it was translated into English by the Censor of Indian Mails: *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914–18*, ed. David Omissi (Basingstoke, 1999), letter 116. For a collection of letters written by Indian soldiers in the First World War, see British Library, London (hereafter BL), India Office Records (hereafter IOR), L/MIL/5/825/1–3 (Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, i–iii).

postal mechanisms, they wrote thousands of letters every day in various vernaculars including Gujarati, Gurmukhi, Urdu, Marathi and Hindi.² In 1915 the Indian contingent in France received between ten and twenty thousand letters per week, and at times they numbered more than twenty-three thousand in a single day.³

The British government was wary of soldiers' letters. It feared that letters from their families might carry 'seditious news' and that letters from the front might pass sensitive war-related information to the enemy. Also, any unpleasant news or rumours passed from the front to Indian villages might adversely affect recruitment.⁴ Furthermore, British imperial officials were concerned that letters from Indian soldiers might carry news that threatened the 'superior' political and moral order of the West.⁵ Soldiers were given detailed instructions on what to write and what not to, and their letters were subjected to a double layer of censorship by the regiment and the Mails Censor. Why was the writing of the 'illiterate' soldiers feared and considered so transgressive? If scribes did the majority of the letter writing for the lower ranks, as the current historiography stresses, then why did the British authorities not simply establish control over this handful of letter writers?⁶ Is it possible that more

² 'Report on Twelve Months' Working of the Indian Mail Censorship Dated 7th November 1915': BL, IOR/L/MIL/5/828/1 (Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France: Printed Reports and Abstracts, with Related Correspondence), 75–6.

³ Geoffrey Clarke, *The Post Office of India and its Story* (London, 1921), 171–2.

⁴ *Indian Voices of the Great War*, ed. Omissi, 6–10 (editor's intro.); Shahid Amin, *Some Considerations on Evidence, Language and History* (Delhi, 1994). On the recruitment of peasantry from India and suppression of rumours, see 'A Record of Continued Progress and Loyal Activity', *War League Journal* (Karachi), i, 3 (1916), 290–4, 280.

⁵ Letters from soldiers carrying tales of sexual encounters with white women were seen as damaging the supremacy of the white race and were suppressed by the regimental and postal censorship. Soldiers caught having affairs with local white women were stripped, flogged and demoted publicly. Officers were asked to read outgoing letters aloud to catch perpetrators. Sherwood Eddy, *With our Soldiers in France* (New York, 1917), 92; *Indian Voices of the Great War*, ed. Omissi, 7 (editor's intro.), letter 455.

⁶ For current historiography, see *Indian Voices of the Great War*, ed. Omissi, 4–5 (editor's intro.); Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922–1992* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), 36–7, 88, 119; Mark R. Frost, 'Pandora's Post Box: Empire and Information in India, 1854–1914', *English Historical Review*, cxxxi, 552 (2016); Heike Liebau *et al.*, 'Introduction', 7, and Claude Markovits, 'Indian Soldiers' Experiences in France during World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front', 37, both in Heike Liebau *et al.* (eds.), *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia* (Leiden, 2010).

soldiers wrote or learned to write letters for themselves than has been assumed?

This article argues that members of the labouring classes such as peasants, factory workers, coolies and domestic servants learned to read and write letters in order to negotiate the diverse regimes of (labour) mobility that emerged in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia. It contends that their experience of letter writing was far more direct, intimate and pervasive than has hitherto been suggested. Related to this, it also argues that a whole new market of vernacular letter-writing manuals and guidelines (in the case of the army at war) emerged as the elite's response in order to discipline the uncontrolled hands of the lower classes that threatened the social, political and economic hierarchies.

Throughout this article, I use interchangeably the terms 'labouring poor', 'non-elites', 'lower classes', 'the subordinated' and 'the marginalized'. These terms refer to the marginalized social groups who came primarily from a lower social caste and performed waged or unwaged labour at the site of the household (housewives and domestic servants), factory (industrial workers), farm or plantation (the peasantry and indentured coolies). While these groups faced a shared history of exclusion from the elite literary sphere and from formal schooling that allows me to use the above terms almost interchangeably, their experiences of letter writing, as we shall see, were heavily coloured by their caste, class and gender identities.

Outside the South Asian context, historians have discovered that the labouring poor wrote profusely to both the state authorities and family members. These letters provide an excellent source material to write their social history from below. Pauper letters, in the context of Europe and America, are now valuable resources that can be used to unravel the discourse of poverty, the dealings of the poor with the authorities, the ideologies of welfare states, the everyday lives of the labouring poor and the interaction of orality with the printed word.⁷ Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner's collection of letters

⁷ See *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837*, ed. Thomas Sokoll (Oxford, 2001); Andreas Gestrich and Steven A. King, 'Pauper Letters and Petitions for Poor Relief in Germany and Great Britain, 1770–1914', *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, xxxv, 2 (2013); Steven King and Peter Jones, 'Testifying for the Poor: Epistolary Advocates and the Negotiation of Parochial Relief in England, 1800–' (cont. on p. 5)

written by employed workers during the Depression years in the United States offers a nuanced view of the formation of subjectivity among the American working class. The letters show that, although economically insecure, these workers recognized their interest as a class against the capitalist employer and resorted to political democracy, instead of aligning with radical parties, for a solution.⁸ Personal correspondence from European migrant workers who travelled to America and to the European colonies shows that letters were crucial in producing and sustaining new transatlantic and transnational connections, bridging the emotional, familial, social and economic gap between the old and the new home.⁹ In relation to South Africa, Keith Breckenridge's work shows that South African mine workers during the first half of the twentieth century used letter writing to communicate their grievances to the authorities, to express romantic love, and to discuss household matters.¹⁰ These studies clearly show that migrant workers did

(n. 7 cont.)

1834', *Journal of Social History*, xlix, 4 (2016); Steven King and Peter Jones, 'From Petition to Pauper Letter: The Development of an Epistolary Form', in Peter Jones and Steven King (eds.), *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2015); Andreas Gestrich, 'German Pauper Letters and Petitions for Relief: New Perspectives on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Poor Relief', in Lutz Raphael (ed.), *Poverty and Welfare in Modern German History* (New York, 2017); Lex Heerma van Voss (ed.), *Petitions in Social History* (Cambridge, 2002); Tony Fairman, 'English Pauper Letters, 1800–34, and the English Language', in David Barton and Nigel Hall (eds.), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Amsterdam, 2000).

⁸ *Slaves of the Depression: Workers' Letters about Life on the Job*, ed. Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner (Ithaca, NY, 1987). On letter writing in America, see also William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill, 1998); Theresa Strouth Gaul and Sharon M. Harris (eds.), *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States, 1760–1860* (Farnham, 2009).

⁹ For an overview of historiographical studies on European migrants' letters, see Marcelo J. Borges and Sonia Cancian, 'Reconsidering the Migrant Letter: From the Experience of Migrants to the Language of Migrants', *History of the Family*, xxi, 3 (2016); Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber and Suzanne M. Sinke (eds.), *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York, 2006); David A. Gerber, *Authors of their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2006).

¹⁰ Keith Breckenridge, 'Reasons for Writing: African Working-Class Letter-Writing in Early-Twentieth-Century South Africa', in Karin Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington, 2006); Keith Breckenridge, 'Love Letters and Amanuenses: Beginning the Cultural History of the Working Class Private Sphere in Southern Africa, 1900–1933', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, xxvi, 2 (2000).

not merely rely on literate intermediaries for reading and writing letters but also learned to read and write themselves.¹¹

With regard to India, not many complete letters from the poor have survived, although we have some correspondence from indentured coolies and petitions from the poor to the authorities, as well as extracts of letters from soldiers copied and translated by the Mails Censor.¹² Such a gap in the records, combined with the assumption that workers were generally illiterate during this period, reinforces the prevailing view among historians that the lower classes were predominantly relying on letter writers to read and write their letters.¹³ While this article does not completely challenge that proposition, it strongly suggests the need to treat workers as independent writing-subjects. The evidence is relatively sparser than it is for the West, but it is comprehensive enough to suggest that workers and their families in India, as elsewhere, relied significantly on letters to negotiate the distance that diverse regimes of employment and mobility (indentured labour, factory and plantation work, marriage and the army) had generated. This increase in letter writing among the poor was closely connected to the general spread of literacy among the

¹¹ Breckenridge, 'Love Letters and Amanuenses'; Laura Martínez Martín, 'Shared Letters: Writing and Reading Practices in the Correspondence of Migrant Families in Northern Spain', *History of the Family*, xxi, 3 (2016); Daiva Markelis, '“Every Person Like a Letter”: The Importance of Correspondence in Lithuanian Immigrant Life', in Elliott, Gerber and Sinke (eds.), *Letters across Borders*; Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860–1920* (Cambridge, 2013).

¹² Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* (London, 2014); Amin, *Some Considerations on Evidence, Language and History*; *Indian Voices of the Great War*, ed. Omissi; David Omissi, 'Europe through Indian Eyes: Indian Soldiers Encounter England and France, 1914–1918', *English Historical Review*, cxxii, 496 (2007); Markovits, 'Indian Soldiers' Experiences in France during World War I'; Santanu Das, *Indian Troops in Europe, 1914–1918* (Ahmedabad, 2015); Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London, 1996); Prabhu P. Mohapatra, *Longing and Belonging: The Dilemma of Return among Indian Immigrants in the West Indies, 1850–1950* (New Delhi, 1998); Hazi Ghulam Muhammad, *A Hundred Hindustani Petitions in Arabic-Persian and Devanagari Characters* (Bombay, 1882). See also Aparna Balachandran, 'The Many Pasts of Mamul: Law and Custom in Early Colonial Madras', in Anne Murphy (ed.), *Time, History and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia* (New York, 2011); Francis Cody, 'Inscribing Subjects to Citizenship: Petitions, Literacy Activism, and the Performativity of Signature in Rural Tamil India', *Cultural Anthropology*, xxiv, 3 (2009); Potukuchi Swarnalatha, 'Revolt, Testimony, Petition: Artisanal Protests in Colonial Andhra', in Heerma van Voss (ed.), *Petitions in Social History*.

¹³ See n. 6 above.

lower classes through rural schools, reformatory schools, literacy classes at the front, and working-class day and night schools run by paternalistic employers and social reformers. Besides this, the poor forged relationships with scribes and postmen that were not merely dependent but, as the article shows, were filled with experiment, emotional investment and failure. The transnational phenomenon of labour mobility was intimately negotiated on both sides through institutions such as post offices, letter writers and schools.

The study of workers' letters broadens our understanding of labour migration within social and labour history, where the focus has been predominantly on wages and the movement of labour. Recent research in Indian labour history suggests that histories of labour migration cannot be understood properly without integrating the experiences of non-migrant family members of the migrant workers, especially wives.¹⁴ And when we open ourselves up to such questions, we see that the lived world of labour was creative and responsive in ways than have been scantily explored by historians of India. Letters indicate that mobilities were experienced in the realm of the everyday, not merely through remittances and occasional visits to the homeland but also via regular correspondence and the exchange of objects, emotions, ideas and knowledge (trade, agricultural, medical, technical and environmental). In reading them we also become aware that the labouring poor were not averse to using letters at work to assert their human, political and intellectual selves, to complain about exploitation by headmen, and to build collective solidarities to protect their interests. What the study of workers' letter writing adds significantly to our understanding of social and labour history is that the low social position of workers was not limited to their workspace and their immediate employers but extended to the larger social arena, where caste elites constantly set new terms of power relations in an age of unprecedented labour mobility, expanding communications and increasing literacy. This line of argument connects us to my second theme of the article: vernacular letter-writing manuals.

¹⁴ Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (Cambridge, 2017); Nitin Sinha, 'The Idea of Home in a World of Circulation: Steam, Women and Migration through Bhojpur Folk songs', *International Review of Social History*, lxiii, 2 (2018).

Letter-writing practices among the poor as well as epistolary texts are absent as subjects from the pages of modern Indian history.¹⁵ In contrast to those of India, the letter-writing manuals of Europe and America have been very well explored and documented.¹⁶ Recent scholarship in the field highlights that the number of such manuals grew from the eighteenth century, and that they catered to the aspirations of women and middle- and lower-class readers such as apprentices and migrant workers.¹⁷ Led by historians and literary critiques, this new scholarship proposes that letter-writing manuals were crucial to the literary experience and self-formation of the middle and lower classes, the functioning of the family economy, transatlantic migration and larger socio-political-economic developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We shall see that in India these manuals conformed to these broader trends in a slightly later period, but interestingly that overseas migration among Indians did not capture the imagination of their authors.

¹⁵ There have been a few works on the medieval and early modern epistolary traditions: see Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (California, 2015); Emma Flatt, 'Practicing Friendship: Epistolary Constructions of Social Intimacy in the Bahmani Sultanate', *Studies in History*, xxxiii, 1 (2017); Gagan D. S. Sood, "'Correspondence Is Equal to Half a Meeting': The Composition and Comprehension of Letters in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Eurasia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 1, 2–3 (2007).

¹⁶ Janet Gurkin Altman, 'Epistolary Conduct: The Evolution of the Letter Manual in France in the Eighteenth Century', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, ccciv (1992), 866–9; Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Centuries* (Princeton, 1997); Decker, *Epistolary Practices*; Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600–1945* (Aldershot, 1999); Barton and Hall (eds.), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*; Martha Hanna, 'A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I', *American Historical Review*, cviii, 5 (2003); Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge, 2005); Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell (eds.), *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present: Historical and Bibliographic Studies* (Columbia, 2007); Terttu Nevalainen and Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen (eds.), *Letter Writing* (Amsterdam, 2007); Konstantin Dierks, *In my Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009); Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville, 2010); Marina Dossena and Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti (eds.), *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe* (Amsterdam, 2012); Simon Garfield, *To the Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing* (New York, 2013); Anita Auer, Daniel Schreier and Richard J. Watts (eds.), *Letter Writing and Language Change* (Cambridge, 2015).

¹⁷ Eve Tavor Bannet, 'Studies in British and American Epistolary Culture', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, xxxv, 3 (2011).

Eve Tavor Bannet shows that in the transatlantic context these correspondence manuals were never just about expanding and democratizing letter-writing culture; they were also about reproducing the dominant political and social norms.¹⁸ The democratization of the culture of writing letters during this period was not limited to Europe and America. Yuval Ben-Bassat and Fruma Zachs argue that new manuals were also written in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman empire and that the earlier ones were adapted to meet the growing demand for letter writing among the public and aspiring scribes.¹⁹

This article contributes to this newly emerging scholarship by highlighting the democratization of letter-writing practices in a casteist and gendered colonial society. By exploring various commercial-cum-educational Hindi letter-writing manuals, written by members of elite castes, found in the British Library's Hindi book collection, the article argues that these manuals were not simply reproducing existing social hierarchies but were closely involved in producing a new social order of the written world in which the lower classes had to learn and obey the rules of their own subordination. These manuals highlight the centrality of the emerging diverse labour regimes (factory, domestic, wage work) and mobilities (rural-urban, marriage). The fear among elite castes that the labouring castes would transgress and threaten the patriarchal socio-economic order was critical in shaping letter-writing manuals and the letter-writing experiences of the poor. However, what was prescribed by elite authors in these manuals was not always followed by their readers. Rather, they introduced their own styles, concerns and modes of writing letters that showed the creativity of their own class.

Section I explains how letters came to shape the labouring world and the emergent mobilities. It tells how a substantial section of the poor forged a new relationship with letter writing through the colonial postal system, postal officials, letter writers and non-elite schools. Building upon this, section II explores the contents of vernacular (Hindi) letter-writing manuals to see if the

¹⁸ Bannet, *Empire of Letters*; Eve Tavor Bannet, *British and American Letter Manuals, 1680–1810*, 4 vols. (London, 2008), i, p. xiv.

¹⁹ Yuval Ben-Bassat and Fruma Zachs, 'Correspondence Manuals in Nineteenth-Century Greater Syria: Between the *Arzuhalci* and the Advent of Popular Letter Writing', *Turkish Historical Review*, iv, 1 (2013).

world of labour and labour mobilities caught the imagination of the authors, and if it did, in what ways. Section III examines contexts in which letter-writing manuals were read by the poor. By discussing the actual letter writing of the poor in the light of model letters in the manuals, this section will examine if the lower classes read the manuals and followed the guidelines proposed by their elite authors. I focus primarily on letters and correspondence manuals in the Hindi language from the region of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (NWPO, renamed the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh in 1902) in North India. Methodologically, this article brings together two types of closely connected writing — letters of the labouring poor and letter-writing manuals of the elite castes, one experiential and real and the other pedagogic and prescriptive — to analyse the emergence of mass letter writing and its social implications in late colonial India.

I

LETTERS IN THE WORLD OF THE LABOURING POOR

By the late nineteenth century, the Postal Department of the colonial government had linked remote villages to towns, industrial cities and offshore colonies. The total strength of postal stations, which included head post offices, sub-post offices, village branch offices and receiving houses, had increased from 27,671 in 1860 to 100,894 in 1919/20. The number of village postmen had increased from 1,695 in 1876 to 8,354 in 1919/20.²⁰ The historiography of postal communication in India, mainly focusing on its political, economic and disciplinary roles in consolidating the British empire, has begun to examine its effects on the indigenous social sphere.²¹ C. A. Bayly has argued that the colonial postal

²⁰ *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India, from 1860 to 1869 (as far as the Particulars Can Be Stated)*, Compiled from Official Records and Papers Presented to Parliament, Fourth Number (London, 1870); *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1910/11 to 1919/20, Fifty-Fifth Number* (London, 1922).

²¹ For the role of postal communication in consolidating the empire, see Devyani Gupta, 'Stamping Empire: Postal Standardization in Nineteenth-Century India', in Patrick Manning and Daniel Rood (eds.), *Global Scientific Practice in an Age of Revolutions, 1750–1850* (Pittsburgh, 2016); Michael H. Fisher, 'The East India Company's "Suppression of the Native Dak"', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, xxxi, 3 (1994).

system in the nineteenth century could not expand into the countryside owing to the unavailability of cheap paper, the absence of professional letter writers in villages, and high delivery charges.²² However, Mark R. Frost has suggested that Bayly's study, which is limited to the period ending in the 1860s, offers a very static view. Far from being a failure, the colonial postal system was deeply entrenched in the rural world with the introduction of the penny post (half an anna for a letter) in 1854, rural post offices and letterboxes in the 1870s, and a quarter-anna postcard in 1879.²³ I have found evidence that supports Frost's analysis. Half-anna postcards showing pictures of Hindu deities had become the 'rage all over India' in the 1870s.²⁴ Postal Department statistics reveal that the total number of letters and postcards that passed through it had risen from 347.1 million in 1894/5 to 891.9 million in 1912/13 and to 1.189 billion in 1919/20, an increase of nearly three and a half times in just twenty-five years.²⁵ However, like Bayly, Frost maintains that literate intermediaries facilitated the letter writing of the lower classes.²⁶ By the end of this section, we shall see that such a line of argument provides only a one-sided picture, given that letter writing became an integral part of the lived experience of many of the rural and urban poor during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before that, let me illustrate how workers forged a relationship with post offices, letter writers, schools, postmen and letters to traverse the new mobilities.

The emergence of global labour history has challenged the overtly European- and North Atlantic-centred studies of migration and has suggested that South Asia witnessed unprecedented internal and transnational labour mobility.²⁷

²² C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1999), 335.

²³ Frost, 'Pandora's Post Box', 1048–62. The denominations of Indian rupees were as follows: 1 rupee = 16 annas; 1 anna = 4 paise; 1 paisa = 3 pies: see Anirban Biswas, *Money and Markets from Pre-Colonial to Colonial India* (Delhi, 2007), 145–56.

²⁴ Clarke, *Post Office of India and its Story*, 9.

²⁵ *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1894/95 to 1903/04, Thirty-Ninth Number* (London, 1905), 91; *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India, Fifty-Fifth Number*, 91.

²⁶ Frost, 'Pandora's Post Box', 1061–2.

²⁷ Prabhu P. Mohapatra, 'Eurocentrism, Forced Labour, and Global Migration: A Critical Assessment', *International Review of Social History*, lii, 1 (2007); Ian J. Kerr, 'On the Move: Circulating Labor in Pre-Colonial, Colonial, and Post-Colonial India', *International Review of Social History*, li, S14 (2006).

While the dispossessed peasantry and poor artisans were on the move in search of a secure wage, diverse labour regimes (both government and private, Indian and non-Indian) had evolved elaborate recruitment mechanisms for the wage-seeking rural populace and used coercion, deception, offers of payment in advance, and contracts to lure and bind workers to the site of production.²⁸ Often leaving their friends and families behind, the circulating workers (often male) found work in the army; on the tea plantations of Assam and Ceylon; in the cotton mills of Bombay, Cawnpore and Madras; in the jute factories of Calcutta; on sugar plantations in offshore colonies; or on infrastructure projects of the colonial government (constructing roads, railways, bridges and canals). Letters connected the diasporic communities with their homeland as well as producing new sociabilities and sustaining existing ones. New sociabilities could range from workers writing to each other, to employers or to state authorities, while the existing sociabilities could mean correspondence between a worker and his mother, wife or brother. Letters force us to understand labour mobility, not merely in terms of a desire to return (either occasionally or permanently) and sending regular remittances, but more as a phenomenon that was lived and built every day by the worker and his or her family. The distance was negotiated by both sides through an exchange of letters, good and bad news, emotions and practical information. This creative and interactive world of workers was not pre-established or always successful, but it was constantly reconstructed, experimented with and abandoned by workers and their families. Letters did not always reach the recipient, and the recipient did not always reply.²⁹

Postal officials reported many intriguing events that took place as part of the labouring poor's interaction with the postal system. I discuss here an event from 1885.³⁰ A postal official noted that a

²⁸ Crispin Bates, *Coerced and Migrant Labourers in India: The Colonial Experience* (Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies, xiii, Edinburgh, 2000); Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton, 1951); Mohapatra, 'Eurocentrism, Forced Labour, and Global Migration'; Arun Kumar, 'Labour in your Cup: Global Histories of Labour, Commodities, and Capitalism', *International Review of Social History*, lxiii, 2 (2018).

²⁹ George A. Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency* (Calcutta, 1883), 37.

³⁰ *Report on the Operations of the Post Office of India for the Year 1885/86* (Calcutta, Feb. 1887), 25; National Archives of India, Delhi, Finance and Commerce Department, Separate Revenue, file 92-4A.

woman of the agricultural class went to a sub-post office in Gorakhpur district, NWPO, to post a letter to her son, an indentured coolie in Trinidad. Her letter had been written for her by a scribe, but she was worried that the scribe might not have written down the whole message. To ensure that it reached her son safely, she repeated the message in full to the postal official, who, she believed, would be carrying it in person. The surprised official wrote it in his report, which went like this: ‘She had been ill for some time, and the black cow of her husband’s brother was dead, and to desire him to come home as soon as possible, or to send some money for her expenses’.³¹ Her letter ensured that the lived realities of her son’s migration abroad (his wages, working conditions and return) and at home (his mother’s illness, the death of the black cow and the need for a remittance) were experienced by both parties. It brought the two worlds closer for her, allowing her to bridge the distance and to express intimate emotions. Prabhu Mohapatra’s research in the Trinidad archives shows that many mothers wrote similar letters to their indentured sons, asking them to return.³²

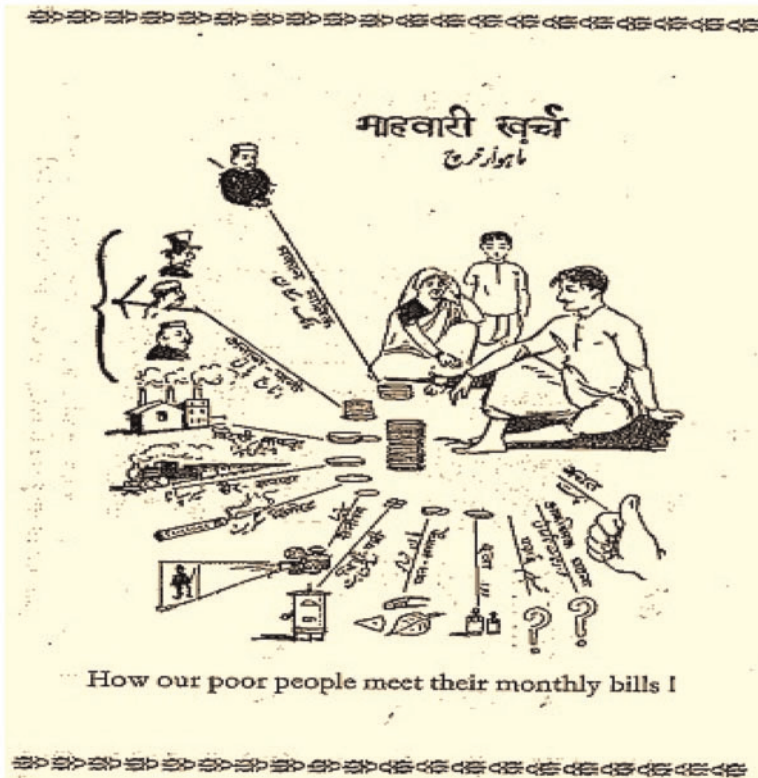
The evidence of this new relationship of the poor with the colonial postal machinery continues to pertain when we shift our attention from the rural (those who were left behind) to the urban and the global (those who migrated). Workers in Bombay constantly wrote letters and remitted money to their families back in the villages, using the thirteen or so post offices located in the neighbourhoods of the textile mills.³³ Postal expenses had become an intrinsic part of the working-class family budget. A cartoon published in 1938 beautifully illustrates the various outgoings of an urban working family (see Plate 1).

A large number of Indian coolies who worked as indentured labourers in the offshore plantation colonies, such as Trinidad, Demerara (British Guiana), Jamaica and Fiji, wrote letters to their families in India; sending money orders was not enough to

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Mohapatra, *Longing and Belonging*.

³³ G. Findlay Shirras, *Report on an Enquiry into Working Class Budgets in Bombay* (Bombay, 1928), 36. On remittances, see Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, 2009), 162–3; Chinmay Tumber, ‘Towards Financial Inclusion: The Post Office of India as a Financial Institution, 1880–2010’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, lii, 4 (2015).



1. A working-class family budget showing accommodation costs, groceries, clothing manufactured abroad, rail travel, cinema tickets, postage, tobacco, medicine, education and incidental expenses (with a question mark); savings are indicated with a thumbs-up sign. From *Cartoon Booklet: Containing 50 Interesting Cartoons on Swadeshi* (Allahabad, 1938), 32. British Library, P/T 2978. © The British Library Board

maintain kinship ties. For some years, the labour recruiting agency for British Guiana in Calcutta kept a record of the number of coolies' letters home. According to these records, the figures gradually increased from twenty-four in 1874, to thirty-four in 1875, thirty-five in 1876, fifty-three in 1877, ninety-five in 1878, 335 in 1879, 509 in 1880, 546 in 1881 and 702 in 1882 (in this last year there were eighty-eight thousand coolies in Demerara).³⁴ However, these figures do not represent

³⁴ Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency*, 37.

the total as the agency counted only those letters that passed through it.

Aside from personal letters, workers also wrote political and work-related letters.³⁵ These were drafted by a literate worker or a scribe, or by a group of workers.³⁶ In the working-class neighbourhoods of Madras, Bombay and Cawnpore, letter and petition writing had emerged as a thriving business. F. B. Wathen, the agent for the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railways, reported to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1930: 'It is a sort of custom here to make appeals or applications in writing. Letter writing is a regular trade in Madras'.³⁷ Letters from indentured coolies also discussed and generated anti-indentured labour politics. A proscribed drama-book entitled *Coolie Pratha* (The Coolie Custom) depicted a scenario in which letters were crucial to the integration of migrant coolie politics abroad with the nationalist movement at home.³⁸ It is not surprising that in its earliest phase the campaign by Indian nationalist leaders against indentured labour centred around a letter alleging that a Dalit woman named Kunti, an indentured labourer in Fiji, had been raped by a white overseer.³⁹

Evidence such as this clearly suggests that the labouring poor often interacted through letters, post offices, postmen and letter writers to make sense of their reconfiguring world. Though not versed in the precise workings of the colonial post office machinery, the poor were open to experiment; but they took time to trust the postal mechanisms and professional letter writers. A postman's relationship with village life was unique

³⁵ See the statement of A. A. Alwe (a labour leader in Bombay), Meerut Conspiracy Case 1929–32: Defence Statements, P 933–, pdf file GIPE-024101_957, <<https://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/handle/10973/22824>> (accessed 15 June 2019).

³⁶ On a letter written collectively by three migrant Tamil railway workers in Malaya, see Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), 177.

³⁷ *Royal Commission on Labour in India: Evidence*, 11 vols. (London, 1931), viii/2: *Railways*, 498.

³⁸ *Indentured Indian Labour: Summary of the Hindi Book Coolie Pratha, Prohibited in the UP under the Press Act* (Mar. 1917): BL, IOR/L/PJ/6/1479, file 1109.

³⁹ Ashutosh Kumar, 'Songs of Abolition: Anti-Indentured Campaign in Early Twentieth Century India', in P. Pratap Kumar (ed.), *Indian Diaspora: Socio-Cultural and Religious Worlds* (Leiden, 2015), 42–7; Charu Gupta, "'Innocent' Victims/'Guilty' Migrants: Hindi Public Sphere, Caste and Indentured Women in Colonial North India', *Modern Asian Studies*, xlix, 5 (2015); Brij V. Lal, 'Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, xxii, 1 (1985).

and was built up gradually. He not only delivered and received letters, parcels and money orders, but also read and wrote letters for illiterate folks, sold postage stamps, brought news of the outside world, and educated villagers on letter writing and money orders. Unlike other government officials, whose arrival in the village was hated and avoided by the poor as they were often forced to perform labour (*begār*) for the official, the periodic visits of a postman (usually a male) were welcomed. Villagers celebrated their timely arrival and complained to the local authorities if they were absent for long.⁴⁰ Because of the intricate local knowledge required for the job, the postman in a rural area was usually the village schoolmaster or the literate shopkeeper. This cost-effective system of appointing locals for the job was formalized in the 1880s.⁴¹ When the government took over the postal system and introduced regular salaries, the upper and middle castes were also drawn to the profession, which, until now, according to William Crooke, was primarily a job for the lower castes. Crooke, a colonial official interested in collecting material on indigenous customs, found that letters conveying happy messages, such as the birth of a male child or a marriage proposal, were carried by a low-caste barber, whereas letters containing unfortunate news were delivered by Chamars, who were among those formerly called ‘untouchables’.⁴²

Professional letter writers were crucial to the letter writing of the migrant poor, not just because workers were illiterate but also because letter writers possessed pen, paper and ink and knew how to write a proper letter, petition, application or address. However, the relationship between the illiterate and semi-illiterate lower classes and letter writers was not always straightforward. The incident from 1885 mentioned above, relating to the agricultural-class woman who wanted her son to return home, suggests that trust and time were needed to mediate the relationship between the poor and professional letter writers: she was not sure if the letter writer had written all she wanted to

⁴⁰ Clarke, *Post Office of India and its Story*, 88. A resident of Shahpur in North India complained to a local Hindi newspaper that the postman for his area did not deliver the post on time: *Sainik*, 23 June 1936, 25.

⁴¹ *Report on the Progress of Education in the Province of Oudh* (Lucknow, 1869–76), Report for the Year 1871/2, 77–8: BL, IOR/V/24/993; Frost, ‘Pandora’s Post Box’, 1058.

⁴² *North India Notes and Queries*, v (July 1895), 71, note 156; i (June 1891), 44, note 334.

say. A current example of this relationship of trust is that of Rekha Kumari, an illiterate worker in Delhi who for postal-related matters still goes to her trusted letter writer, Jagdish Chandra Sharma, who can be found sitting outside the post office by the Kashmiri Gate in Delhi. While Kumari also sends messages to her family using a mobile phone, for parcels she still relies on the services of Sharma, who stitches them and writes the details of sender and recipient on them. Apparently one of the last surviving professional letter writers in India, he once wrote letters for migrant workers, fruit and vegetable vendors, sex workers and domestic servants, but for the last ten years he has had no clients.⁴³ Back in the late nineteenth century, cities were full of letter writers, professional and amateur. Like Sharma, they sat outside post offices and courts, worked for specific clients, and established a business in working-class neighbourhoods.⁴⁴

But the prevailing view that professional letter writers were crucial to the letter writing of the poor gives a one-sided picture. It does not consider the educational history of the poor, the letter-writing experiences of educated workers, or the efforts of the lower classes to learn letter writing. Various official and non-official inquiries into the conditions of workers confirm that the picture of the labouring poor as an illiterate group is a myth. For example, a study carried out in 1930 on the family budgets of 168 workers employed at the railway workshop in Gorakhpur revealed that 36.6 per cent were literate. The reason given for the high literacy rates was migration. The report noted: 'the Gorakhpur worker with a large number of relatives at home has an incentive to learn to read and write to correspond with the people'.⁴⁵ The same inquiry into the family budgets of 729 factory workers in the city of Cawnpore discovered that 23.2 per cent were able to read and write a letter.⁴⁶ Similarly, in Bombay the research of R. G. Gokhale found that the average literacy rate among Bombay mill workers in 1940 was 29.7

⁴³ Geeta Pandey, 'The Disappearing Tribe of India's Letter Writers', *BBC News* (20 Mar. 2014), India section, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-26379747>> (accessed 16 June 2019).

⁴⁴ North-Western Provinces, Oudh, Central Provinces and Rajputana, Newspaper Reports, 1893, 49: BL, IOR/L/R/5/70.

⁴⁵ *Report on the Enquiry into the Family Budgets of Certain Factory Workers in the United Provinces* (Allahabad, 1930), 22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

per cent; this increased to 42.5 per cent in 1955.⁴⁷ The evidence for literate, educated and autodidactic workers is plentiful once we shift our gaze from the colonial literacy census to various non-elite schools: government village schools, industrial and technical schools, factory schools, workers' night schools, reformatory schools, 'untouchable' (*acchūt*) schools, prison schools and orphanage schools.⁴⁸

The poor who attended these schools intermittently were taught not only reading and writing but also letter writing, which emerged as an independent subject in the school curriculum in the late nineteenth century. It formed an essential exercise in reading and composition. In the rural schools in the NWPO, peasant students were able to write a proper personal letter in class III and a business letter in class IV.⁴⁹ The first reading primer for students, *Varnaprakāshikā* (The Light on Alphabets, 1875), contained six model letters.⁵⁰ As students mastered the skill of reading and writing, they moved on to more advanced letter-writing manuals such as *Maktūb-i-Ahmadī* (The Letter-Book of Ahmadi, 1876) in Urdu classrooms and, in Hindi classrooms, Pandit Sheonarain's *Patra hiteshinī* (The Well-Wisher of Letters, 1870). The same textbooks were also used in the Chunar Reformatory School (previously located in the Bareilly district), where juvenile 'delinquents', predominantly belonging to labouring and vagrant classes, were punished and reformed.⁵¹ Here students, mainly convicted of petty theft, were given compulsory elementary education and training in hard manual labour.⁵²

Letter writing was also an important subject in the schools established by benevolent capitalists for their workers. The British India Corporation, based in Cawnpore, which maintained two housing colonies for its cotton, woollen and leather factory workers in the 1920s and 1930s (one in Allenganj and the other in MacRobertganj) ran many day and night schools for workers and their children. These schools

⁴⁷ Morris David Morris, 'New Data on Cotton Mill Workers of Bombay', *Economic Weekly*, 21 Sept. 1957, 1225.

⁴⁸ Arun Kumar, 'Learning to Dream: Education, Aspiration, and Working Lives in Colonial India, 1880s–1940s' (University of Göttingen Ph.D. thesis, 2017).

⁴⁹ *Report on Public Instruction in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh for the Year 1883* (Allahabad, 1883), 91–3; BL, IOR/V/24/914.

⁵⁰ *Varnaprakāshikā* (The Light on Alphabets; Lucknow, 1875), pt 1, 13–15.

⁵¹ *Annual Report on the Reformatory School at Chunar, 1894* (Bareilly, 1894): BL, IOR/V/24/3601. Chunar is located in the Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 24.

provided elementary education for workers and also taught them letter writing. Evidence for this appears in the propaganda newspaper of the corporation's housing complex, *Parosī bāt-chīt*, which in 1929 highlighted the usefulness to workers of writing letters. An article entitled 'Am ke am aur guthliyon ke dam' (Enjoy Mangoes at the Price of a Kernel) urged workers to attend school and learn the art of letter writing. To establish his point, the author discussed a tantalizing story of an illiterate woman whose husband had gone to the city to earn wages; thus, a need arose for correspondence. While the husband could read and write, the wife relied on a close friend to read and write for her. On one occasion the friend was not available, and a letter containing private information had arrived. The woman, having no one to read the letter to her, asked a stranger to do so for 1 rupee on condition that he put cotton in his ears to block them. The man obligingly read the letter and took the money. However, he later began to blackmail the husband, threatening to reveal the private information if he did not pay a further amount; the husband had no option but to pay for the illiteracy of his wife. Through this story the author made his plea to workers, saying that there could be no excuse since 'the [British India Corporation] has made it possible for all your children to attend the settlement schools free of all cost . . . encourage your children and especially your daughters to get a good education'.⁵³ Thus, letters acquired a role within the strategies of capitalism in settling the male migrant workforce at the work site. While such endeavours were very sporadic, working-class schools, in the form of night schools, were widespread in both Bombay and Cawnpore.⁵⁴

It appears that the labouring poor went on to use, later in life, the letter-writing skills they had learned at school. Ram Ghulam and Ganga Charan, who had been students at the Chunar Reformatory School and were now indentured labourers, wrote to their friends. Ghulam, a Muslim from the barber (Nāi) caste, wrote a letter to a schoolfriend in 1897 telling him where he was, and about his new job on a sugar plantation in Trinidad and his monthly wage of 28 rupees. Similarly, Charan, a member of the Brahman caste, wrote to a schoolfriend informing him of his migration to Natal and his job working for a European with a

⁵³ *Parosī bāt-chīt*, iii, 4 (Apr. 1929), 4: BL, MS Eur. F221/45.

⁵⁴ Kumar, 'Learning to Dream'.

monthly salary of 9 rupees.⁵⁵ In another example from a different context, Behramji Malabari, a Parsee social reformer and writer, recalled that, when he failed as a carpenter's apprentice, his mother had sent him to a free Gujarati-language school in the 1860s. Here he excelled in dictating letters. In his autobiographical accounts, Behramji wrote:

What splendid letters I dictated to my seniors, myself ignorant of the art of writing! Letters from wife at Surat to husband at Mumbai Bunder, now gushing, now whining, now asking for remittance, now threatening to go to the parents' house. Letters from the principal of a firm at Cambay to his factotum at Karachi, advising the departure of the good ship *Ruparel*, laden with pearls and precious stones. Letters from father at Broach to his son at Delhi, with the love of the distracted mother and with basketfuls of advice as to how to live in 'this remote and foreign country'.⁵⁶

Behramji's account provides a fascinating window into the world of mobilities (a husband gone to the city, a wife threatening to go to her parents' house, a son gone to the 'remote and foreign country' of Delhi), and how this world, and the worlds of expanding commercial and trade networks, were negotiated and articulated through letters. Such accounts reinforce the agency and experiences of subjects (wives, fathers and mothers who remained at home) in labour history.

Schools again feature in letters from soldiers during the First World War as a place where illiterate family members could have their letters written. On 3 December 1916, Jawan Singh wrote from France to his family in Punjab: 'What you say about there being no letter-writer handy is no doubt correct . . . The point is that the school is not more than ten paces distant from you, and yet you say you cannot find anyone to write a letter!'⁵⁷ On 2 January 1917, Abdul Ghafur wrote to his brother Abdul Hakim Khan in France: 'You must be loyal to the Sirkar [government] . . . I am always thinking of serving Government, but what can I do — a schoolboy of six years old?'⁵⁸

The point is that letter writing was a pervasive activity among the labouring poor that allowed labouring families to construct

⁵⁵ *Annual Report on the Reformatory School at Chunar, 1898* (Bareilly, 1898), statement E: BL, IOR/V/24/3601.

⁵⁶ Dayaram Gidumal, *The Life and Life-Work of Behramji M. Malabari: Being a Biographical Sketch, with Selections from his Writings and Speeches on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood, and also his Rambles of a Pilgrim Reformer* (Bombay, 1888), pp. xi–xii.

⁵⁷ *Indian Voices of the Great War*, ed. Omissi, letter 452.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, letter 459.

their social world, which had been generated by the newly emerging local and global mobilities. Non-elite schools, cheaper postal services, and the desire of the poor to learn to read and write were critical to the expansion of the letter-writing culture. Had postal charges not been lowered from the 1850s, or correspondence not been made free for soldiers and their families during the war, or the poor not been opened up to literacy, their engagement with letters would have been tenuous.⁵⁹ The fact that the labouring poor emerged as ardent writers is explained by the massive production of vernacular letter-writing manuals and their changing content. Through examination of these manuals, we shall see that, as much as this period was about the democratization of letter-writing practices, it was also about controlling and disciplining letter writing among the poorer classes.

II

PUBLISHING LETTER-WRITING MANUALS FOR THE LABOURING POOR

From the late nineteenth century, a large number of commercial and pedagogic vernacular letter-writing manuals appeared on the book market throughout North India. These manuals prescribed norms, rituals and styles of letter writing, and explained the functioning of the colonial postal system. They were both pedagogic and commercial in nature as they catered to the demands not only of students but also of aspiring professional letter writers and the general public. Hindi letter-writing manuals can be classified into four types: those that focused on personal letters; those containing model letters and specimens of court applications, property papers, commercial documents and petitions; primers that included model letters; and manuals specifically targeting women.

Works on medieval and early modern Persian epistolary (*inshā*) literature suggest that letter writing was the domain of the ruling elite and the upper and middle castes. This epistolary literature

⁵⁹ *Annual Report on the Posts and Telegraphs of India for the Year 1914/15* (Nov. 1915), nos. 1–6, 2–3: National Archives of India, Delhi, Department of Commerce and Industry, Post Office Branch, file 160.

was written by and for upper-caste scribes.⁶⁰ Neither peasants nor artisans figured as subjects in these texts. While they continued to be published in the nineteenth century, the contents of epistolary texts were significantly transformed for the clerks and scribes of the East India Company, which relied on these public servants to draft official correspondence, to translate Persian texts, and to interpret the norms and rituals of the 'native' political culture. Early modern epistolary texts, such as *Ruqaāt-i-Abulfazal* (Abulfazal's Letter Book) and *Inshā-i-Madhorām* (The Letter Book of Madhorām), became standard textbooks of the indigenous schools that trained scribes during the Company Raj.⁶¹

Hindi letter-writing manuals that appeared on the book market from the late nineteenth century were significantly different from the earlier epistolary texts in three respects. First, these vernacular manuals were produced in bulk for the masses. Secondly, they saw the rural populace, petty traders, students, peasants, housewives, migrant workers and menial servants as their intended audience. Thirdly, they included model letters on day-to-day matters. Such shifts in content, audience, pattern and publication were already visible in the English-language letter-writing manuals that were being published from the eighteenth century.⁶² Before we discuss how these manuals

⁶⁰ Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Making of a Munshi', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, xxiv, 2 (2004), 62; Rajeev Kinra, 'Master and Munshī: A Brahman Secretary's Guide to Mughal Governance', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, xlvii, 4 (2010); *Inshā-yi Harkaran: The Forms of Herkern*, ed. and trans. Francis Balfour (Calcutta, 1781). For a collection of Persian letters, see *Original Persian Letters, and Other Documents, with Fac-Similes*, ed. and trans. Charles Stewart (1825; London, 2013); C. A. Storey, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey*, 5 vols. (London, 1970–97), ii/3; Kumkum Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, xlvii, 4 (2010).

⁶¹ William Adam, *Adam's Reports on Vernacular Education in Bengal and Bihar: Submitted to Government in 1835, 1836 and 1838* (Calcutta, 1868), 208, 210. Other textbooks on the forms of correspondence in Persian schools included *Māfid-ul-inshā*, *Fyz baksh* and *Mubarik neme*. A Sanskrit letter-writing manual entitled *Lekha darpan* (The Mirror of Writing) was written by Raghunandan Goswami of Patna police station. He also wrote *Patra prakasā* (The Light of Letters), a letter-writing manual sixteen pages long in Sanskrit with an explanation in Bengali: pp. 187–9. For a brief discussion on Persian school textbooks, see Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal', 462.

⁶² Bannet, *Empire of Letters*, pp. xiii–xiv; Konstantin Dierks, 'The Familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750–1800', in Barton and Hall (eds.), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*.

constructed a hierarchical social order of the written world, let me elaborate the above three points to show how the labouring poor shaped the content and publication of letter-writing manuals.

The *Quarterly List* of publications for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, which kept a record of all books published in the region under the Press and Registration of Books Act 1867, provides a rough estimate of how many letter-writing manuals were published.⁶³ For example, in 1868, the year of their first editions, the combined print run of two prominent Hindi manuals, *Patra dipikā* (The Light of Letters) by Ramchandrar Sen and Kali Charan and *Patrī mala* (Letter Series) by Pandit Kali Charan, was 22,000. According to Christopher R. King, in that year 851,304 books and periodicals were registered in the NWPO, with only nine texts having a print run of 10,000 or more; of these nine, three were in Hindi.⁶⁴ If these figures represent the total publication of texts in the region, two of these texts in Hindi were letter-writing manuals. Sold cheaply at 2 annas and published by the Newal Kishor Press, Lucknow, the two texts suggest a growing demand for letter-writing manuals among the Hindi reading public. Take the case of another popular Hindi letter-writing manual, *Patra malikā* (The Queen of Letters, 1850) by Pandit Sree Lal. For the ninth edition, which appeared in June 1873, 50,000 copies were printed.⁶⁵ Just two other books were printed with a similar number of copies between 1867 and 1881.⁶⁶ Of the other Hindi letter-writing manuals that were published in several editions with thousands of copies, three were *Patra hiteshini* (mentioned above), *Gyān darpan* (The Mirror of Knowledge, 1886) and *Byohār patra sangrah* (The Collection of Business Letters, 1905).

⁶³ My calculations are based on the *Quarterly List* (hereafter *QL*, variously titled), catalogues by province of Indian books published between 1867 and 1947, specifically in our case the NWPO: BL, IOR/SV 412/38–42. The *Quarterly List* could never map all the titles published in a given year because many new titles were never sent for registration and many old titles were registered as new books.

⁶⁴ Christopher R. King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India* (Delhi, 1999), 38–9, 41.

⁶⁵ *QL* (1867–81), 142, table for third quarter ending Sept. 1873, entry 135: BL, IOR/SV 412/38. The book was used as a textbook in the rural schools of the North Western Provinces Region.

⁶⁶ These books were Raja Siva Prasad, *Varnāmālā* (The Garland of Letters), and Christian Vernacular Education Society, *Nāsi rasnā* (The Dangerous Tongue).

The new letter-writing manuals anticipated a wide range of social relations, subjects and events in their model letters. Let us look closely at the model letters in *Patra hiteshinī*. This was a Hindi translation of an Urdu letter-writing manual, *Mūfid-ul-inshā*, by Pandit Sheonarain, in his time a well-known Kashmiri intellectual and educational official in Lucknow. Sheonarain himself translated the text into the spoken language of the people of Oudh, which included Persian, Hindi, Urdu and Sanskrit words.⁶⁷ The curriculum of the rural schools in Oudh indicates that the text was used in class III.⁶⁸ The existence of simultaneous multiple editions from the Newal Kishor Press implies that the book was highly sought after by aspiring writers. From the *Quarterly List*, we know of its first edition with 3,300 copies in June 1870, the third edition with 2,400 copies in July 1887, the nineteenth edition with 2,000 copies in July 1888, the twenty-first edition with 1,500 copies in June 1889, and the twenty-second edition with 5,000 copies in February 1890, after which it disappears from the list.⁶⁹ The big jump from the third to the nineteenth edition in just one year suggests that the Newal Kishor Press had to print several editions at the same time to meet the growing readership of the book. In the list there appears a second Hindi translation of *Mūfid-ul-inshā*, by Pandit Mahes Datt and Pandit Ganesa Prasad Trivedi. This translation was also entitled *Patra hiteshinī* and published by the Newal Kishor Press. In January 1889 it was in its twelfth edition, with a print run of 2,400.⁷⁰ All this suggests the book's growing popularity in the period, and that there was a widespread demand for letter-writing manuals.

Patra hiteshinī contained lessons on how to write to family members (parents, siblings, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, maternal grandmothers, maternal grandfathers, grandsons, uncles, nephews, nieces and sons-in-law), to government officials and authorities (district magistrates, schoolmasters,

⁶⁷ Pandit Sheonarain, *Patra hiteshinī* (The Well-Wisher of Letters, 1870; 5th edn, Lucknow, 1875), preface.

⁶⁸ *Report on Public Instruction in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh for the Year 1883*, 91–3.

⁶⁹ *QL* (1867–81, 1888–93): BL, IOR/SV 412/38.

⁷⁰ *QL* (1888–93), table for first quarter ending Mar. 1889, entry 11, Hindi books section.

employers), to friends and to domestic servants. The sample range included the following:

- a son residing in Lucknow writing to his father back home in his village asking if he should accept the job that an English sahib has offered;
- an urban working-class son sending his savings to his family through a hundi (a remittance instrument);
- a zamindar (landlord) asking his son to finish his studies, return home and manage the family agricultural business, and not to run after petty government jobs but to acquire the new technical knowledge that could maximize cotton production back home;
- a domestic servant who is looking after his master's property in the city writing to his master about a court matter concerning the illegal takeover of the property by one of the master's idle sons;
- a master writing to his servants: to the housekeeper, a Kahar (low-caste), about his return home, instructing him to make the house ready for his arrival, to the cook, a Brahman (highest-caste), to have the food ready, and to the messenger (a low-caste barber) to invite all his friends for a feast;
- a domestic servant writing to his master to request financial help for his son's marriage and asking him to clear his debts;
- an unemployed man writing to someone of high status to ask for a job and telling the tale of his hard life;
- a man asking a friend for money to pay his medical expenses and his resulting debts;
- a younger brother informing his family of the arrival of his migrant (*bidesiya*) brother from Calcutta on a month's leave to attend a wedding;
- a student seeking leave from school to arrange and attend his brother's wedding.⁷¹

We see that the author had anticipated various imaginary situations that highlighted the emerging mobilities (the migration of villagers to cities), labour regimes (housework, work in the city), sociabilities (cross-caste and cross-class interaction, friendship networks, encounters with Europeans in the city).

⁷¹ Sheonarain, *Patra hiteshinī*.

Anxieties of social hierarchy

Letter-writing manuals prescribed a social order of the letter-writing world in which users were to familiarize themselves with the rules of the prevailing hierarchies of class, caste, gender and age. It gave instructions on how domestic servants should respond to a letter from a master; how a member of a lower caste should abide by the rules of her own subordination in written speech; and how employers, caste elites and state authorities should exert their dominant status in the writing. Some rules were meant to be followed by everyone. For example, *Patra hiteshini* instructed all readers to:

1. Write clearly and simply. Avoid any ornamentation, art or design in letters, especially in petitions.
2. Use only words found in everyday speech even if they are of Persian, Arabic or Sanskrit origin.
3. Follow and respect the norms of caste, class, age, intellect and blood relations while addressing a letter.
4. Avoid phrases like 'I am obliged to you' or 'I am indebted to you' in letters addressed to parents as such phrases develop a feeling of indifference in relations.⁷²

Since people on a lower social level were becoming involved in letter writing for the first time, either as writers or as recipients, upper-caste authors of letter-writing manuals stressed that writers on both sides of the social divide should know how to address one other. They feared that cross-caste and cross-class letter writing, if untutored, could collapse the established social order and respect for hierarchies. Fear of the uncontrolled hands of new writers was profound. Until the mid nineteenth century, letter writing had been a very tightly regulated activity and was carried out among elites. Members of the lower castes were their messengers, not their correspondents. However, expanding postal communication, the entry of the lowest castes into schools, and the enthusiasm of the labouring classes for letter writing, as discussed in section I, had changed the equation. The instructions contained in letter-writing manuals should be seen both as a commercial response to this mass turn to letter writing and as a means of ensuring the continued dominance of the elite.

⁷² *Ibid.*, preface.

Letter-writing manuals provided templates for opening and closing different types of letter. Their readers, including less skilled letter writers, were advised to follow the fixed templates and then use their imagination and literary skills to write the message. The most crucial element was their stress on the proper use of the opening salutation. The term *Shrī* (an honorific auspicious title), symbolizing the power structures of kinship, age, class, caste and intellect, was to be used precisely. *Patra hiteshinī* advised readers to use the *Shrī* salutation six times for parents, schoolteachers and grandparents; five times for an employer and other elderly relatives; four times for an enemy; three times for a friend or a brother; twice for a son; and once for a wife.⁷³ Further, a letter addressed to an elder should use the prefix *Siddhī* ('the Enlightened') before the word *Shrī*. And if the recipient was younger than the writer, *Shrī* was to be preceded by another term, *Swasti Shrī* ('Source of all Auspiciousness').⁷⁴ Therefore, writing to his mother, a son was to greet her thus: 'To *Siddhī Shrī* [six times] mother, may your auspicious presence receive the respectful greetings of [son's name]'.⁷⁵ In return, the mother should reply: 'I hope my wishes reach my beloved and eternally blessed auspicious son'.⁷⁶

Although the wife of an elite middle-caste man occupied the lowest place in the elite patriarchal social ladder of letter writing, her status was higher than that of a lower-caste person in the overall social hierarchy. The advice on how the lower castes should address upper and middle castes was sharp. The author of *Patra hiteshinī*, who was himself an upper-caste government education officer, insisted that signs of submission and forms of oral salutation should figure prominently in the written speech of the lowest castes. He advocated that a Shudra (a member of the lowest caste) should begin her letter with these phrases: 'Dandavat pranām' ('Greetings by prostrating the body in submission') or 'Pālāgan' ('I touch your feet in respect').

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁴ However, it was equally possible that letter-writing manuals were borrowing their styles from real letters. A letter written in Devanāgarī script, dated 17 April 1876 and published in a letter-book collection of a postmaster general, shows that phrases like *Swasti Shrī* were already in use: *Specimens of Various Vernacular Characters Passing through the Post Office in India*, comp. C. W. Hutchinson (Calcutta, 1877), 15.

⁷⁵ 'Siddhī Shrī [six times] sarva-shubhōpamā-yogya mātājī ko Shivdutta ka pranām pahunche'.

⁷⁶ 'Swasti Shrī chiranjivi putra Rāmdin ko merā bahut tarah se ashīrvād pahunche'.

However, when writing to someone of the same caste, a Shudra, the author instructed, should use a different phrase: 'Rām-Rām Sītārām' ('Greetings in the name of God').⁷⁷

While 'Dandavat pranām' could be used by anyone writing to an older person, in the context of cross-caste interaction the symbolic meaning was that the whole lower-caste community of the writer was subordinated to the upper-caste community of the recipient. Forms of subordination and domination in a letter were not merely an individual expression: they spoke for the collective. These marks of submission were very much part of everyday oral interaction between the lower- and upper-caste groups of North India. An Indian Christian, Baboo Ishuree Dass, writing on the domestic manners and customs of North India, found that similar forms of salutation were prevalent in everyday speech.⁷⁸ Upper-caste elites were anxious to preserve the marks of respect shown for their higher status which the advent of mass letter writing threatened. Charu Gupta's research into the representation of domestic servants in popular Hindi literature suggests that upper- and middle-caste authors were very wary of cross-caste interaction. She shows that the trope of subordinating and controlling low-caste servants within the literary representation of upper- and middle-caste households was crucial to the perpetuation of caste, class, gender and community difference in colonial North India.⁷⁹

Patriarchal anxieties

It was not uncommon for letter-writing manuals to anticipate women (wives, mothers, sisters, daughters) as readers of their manuals. Historians have shown that both male and female Hindi writers wrote texts for the consumption of female readers.⁸⁰ However, much of this writing was intended for high-

⁷⁷ Sheonarain, *Patra hiteshinī*, 6.

⁷⁸ Baboo Ishuree Dass, *Domestic Manners and Customs of the Hindoos of Northern India, or More Strictly Speaking, of the North West Provinces of India* (Benares, 1860), 130–1.

⁷⁹ Charu Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies: Representation of Servants in Hindi Print Culture of Colonial India', *Studies in History*, xxxiv, 2 (2018).

⁸⁰ Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York, 2002); Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi, 2002); Shobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India* (New Delhi, 2012).

caste women in order to train them to be ideal housewives. Popular Hindi literature portrayed lower-caste women as overtly sexual, immoral, uneducated, loud, dishonest and everything that was 'other' in relation to higher-caste women, who were seen as cultured, honest, soft and chaste.⁸¹ While letter-writing manuals reproduced these dominant representations, low-caste females were also their readers, and their subjectivities needed to be aligned to the social order of the written world. Model letters meant for the consumption of female readers anticipated various mobilities that affected a woman's life, such as the move of the bride from the parental home to that of the in-laws, migration of the labouring husband to the city, and so on.

Sheonarain, the author of the manual *Patra hiteshinī*, also wrote a Hindi manual for female readers. Published by the Newal Kishor Press in 1873, it was entitled *Strīyon kī hitopatrikā: arthāt, Hindī me khata patra ādī sikhāne kī pustak* (The Well-Wisher Book for Women: or, The Hindi Letter Writing Guide).⁸² It provides templates for letters between a girl student and her teacher; a teacher-wife and her 'foolish' sister-in-law; a granddaughter and her maternal grandfather; a daughter and her father; a daughter and her mother; a sister and her brother; a woman and her mother-in-law; a woman and her son-in-law; a wife and her husband; and a mistress and her domestic servants. Sociabilities addressed in these model letters highlight the varying degrees of subordinated and labouring life that a woman lived. In these letters, her world is underpinned by patriarchal male dominance, caste relations and paid or unpaid work. Let us look at a letter from a mother to her married daughter:

Blessings to the beloved *Swasti Shriv* daughter. I have heard a rumour that you are not getting along with your husband, and the reason for this is rumoured to be that you deliberately do not work hard in the household. And neither do you pay attention to the boys' childhood and studies. If this is true, this is not a good thing, my girl! Think and understand that men earn wages from agriculture, trade, service and daily labour with hard work and give their wages to the woman of the household. And if the woman spends it extravagantly, they will feel bad about it and will not

⁸¹ Charu Gupta, '(Mis)Representing the Dalit Woman: Reification of Caste and Gender Stereotypes in the Hindi Didactic Literature of Colonial India', *Indian Historical Review*, xxxv, 2 (2008); Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies'.

⁸² Pandit Sheonarain, *Strīyon kī hitopatrikā: arthāt, Hindī me khata patra ādī sikhāne kī pustak* (The Well-Wisher Book for Girls: or, The Hindi Letter Writing Guide; Lucknow, 1873).

allow this. Do you not know that the house of a woman who does not know how to manage it never prospers? However hard the husband tries to earn, the stupidity of the woman will fail [him]. Never think that God has made men to earn money and women to eat and rest on the bed. With such thoughts, women become lazy . . .⁸³

The letter goes on to instruct the daughter to look after the household, educate the boys and encourage them to socialize with other good boys. Model letters usually pictured women from middle- and labouring-class families who drew their income from agriculture, service and daily wage labour. These letters operated within the patriarchal norms, idealizing the domestic duties of wives as the caretaker of the house, children and domestic work, and of the husband as the wage earner. The image of a productive housewife was constructed in opposition to that of a careless, indolent and unproductive wife.

Part III of *Nāri sudashā pravartak* (The Foundation of Women's Welfare, 1896), written by a female advocate of the Hindu social reform movement Arya Samaj, Shrimati Buddhimati, includes fifty-one model letters, but all reinforce the domestic and moral boundaries of female life.⁸⁴ Only one is addressed to a stranger or a government official, and that one is to a schoolmistress. Women are portrayed in their traditional roles as virtuous, hardworking wives, mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law.

The patriarchal authors of these manuals challenged the conservative view that regarded the education of girls as a threat to the integrity of the social and household order. The fear that educated girls would start writing love letters was one of the most persuasive reasons why patriarchs and matriarchs did not send their daughters to school.⁸⁵ In contrast, these manuals told their readers to educate their daughters, wives and sisters. Buddhimati asked girls to learn not only to read and write but also to write letters, a skill they would require after marriage in order to remain connected with their parents, siblings and childhood friends. Buddhimati told girls that the skill would keep them happy

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 29–31 (letter 13).

⁸⁴ Shrimati Buddhimati, *Nāri sudashā pravartak* (The Foundation of Women's Welfare; Ajmer, 1896). At least five editions of the text with 1,100 copies each were produced. The book was meant to be used as a prize for bright female students. On Arya Samaj and female education in colonial India, see Madhu Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj and Women's Education: Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, xxi, 17 (1986).

⁸⁵ Pandit Badrī Lal, *Striyon kī shikshā nimitt* (A Lecture on Female Education; Mirzapur, 1862), 241.

when their husbands migrated to cities for work. Like the British India Corporation propaganda magazine mentioned above, *Buddhimati* advised girls that secrecy was crucial to a successful marriage, and letters provided that. Not knowing how to read and write letters was to reveal secrets of married life and feelings of love to strangers. She summed up her views in these lines:

पाती आधा मिलन है जिहि दर्शन के प्यास
देखत ही सुख उपजैईय बहुरि मिलन की आस ॥

(‘A letter is half a meeting where there is longing for a sight; the coming of a letter brings happiness and hopes of a reunion.’⁸⁶)

Women labouring in fields and factories are missing from letter-writing manuals written for women. The only female waged labourers to appear as intended readers in these letter-writing manuals are domestic servants. Thus, one type of non-waged household worker, the idealized middle-caste wife, might write to a wage-earning household worker (the low-caste female domestic servant). In such letters, the grid of gender, class and caste operated in a complicated way. In one model letter, a *thakurānī* (the female head of an upper-caste household) asks an elderly former family domestic servant to send for a young domestic help. The old domestic servant, who wishes to recommend her daughter for the new job, writes the following petition-style letter:

May the *Siddhī Shrī* [six times] *mahārānī*, the defender and bread-giver, be always happy. In response to [your] letter dated 5th Magh [Hindu calendar month], the request is that this slave girl (*dāsi*) always wished to serve the remainder of her little life at the feet of the *mahārānī*. Because of my shameful acts, I never had the opportunity. Now that you have summoned my girl (*laundī*), she will appear for the job according to your command. But your subordinate (*adheenā*) wonders why the *mahārānī* has asked for a security bond of Rs 10 because the *mahārānī* knows well that the subject [that is, the writer] has served for ten years in the household of your aunt Jagat Rani. Then, at her recommendation, in the house of your elder sister Radha Kunbari for five years. Neither was I accused of any wrongdoing nor of theft. The girl will act according to your command. May the glory of the sun and fate always be bestowed upon you.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Bhuddimati, *Nāri sudashā pravartak*, pt iii, preface.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 123–4.

In the manual, the senior domestic servant is being taught not only to express complete submission to the upper-caste mistress but also to see herself as inferior to her mistress and to use derogatory language when referring to her class.

What is even more interesting is the ability of these authors of model letters to weave in the emerging realities of the labouring world, for example, the reference above to the contract between mistress and servant with a security bond of Rs 10, at which the domestic servant expresses surprise. In her understanding, servants were employed simply on the basis of recommendation, loyalty and honest performance. We see that the content of these manuals, as well as the instructions of their authors, attempted to reinforce a social world in which the labouring poor and lower castes were subordinated to the elite classes. But were these manuals bought, read and adopted by the lower classes?

III

LOWER-CLASS READERS OF LETTER-WRITING MANUALS

The scale of production of letter-writing manuals in the late nineteenth century, in regard to the number of both titles and copies printed, indicates that there was public demand for such guides, but no direct evidence exists on the precise nature of the readership. In the context of European and American letter-writing manuals, Linda C. Mitchell and Sarah Pearsall both argue that these manuals did have a substantial readership.⁸⁸ In contrast, Susan Whyman, who has examined the letters of working- and middle-class British families in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and David Fitzpatrick, who has studied the letters of Irish emigrants in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, maintain that manuals did not figure as a tool in their letter writing.⁸⁹ Whyman contends that letter-writing skills were learned through informal education

⁸⁸ Linda C. Mitchell, 'Letter-Writing Instruction Manuals in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century England', in Poster and Mitchell (eds.), *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present*; Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2008).

⁸⁹ Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 2011); David Fitzpatrick, 'Irish Emigration and the Art of Letter-Writing', in Elliott, Gerber and Sinke (eds.), *Letters across Borders*.

imparted by parents and other literate individuals. With regard to French letter-writing manuals, Roger Chartier suggests that the style of model letters could not be taken as an indication of what people wrote in their real lives, but they did provide templates and guidance for the labouring poor.⁹⁰ In the context of India, to answer this question is even more difficult as not many letters of the labouring poor have survived. However, the sources that I have found indicate that they did have access to letter-writing manuals and, in some cases, followed them. We also have an instance in which a lower-class writer transgressed the sacred boundaries of social norms instructed by letter-writing manuals and evolved what appears to have been his own style. This case, discussed at the end of this section, also reinforces the notion that some letter writing by the poor took place without the help of a scribe.

Let me begin by indicating how and why letter-writing manuals were being read by the labouring poor in India. We return to the letters of indentured coolies (ex-students of the Bareilly, later Chunar, Reformatory School) and the Indian soldiers of the First World War discussed at the beginning of the article. There I argued that schools were one of the places where the labouring poor were exposed to letter-writing manuals. In section II, I demonstrated the nature of a few letter-writing manuals used in these schools. In the reformatory school, letter writing between inmates and their families came to be encouraged as a mechanism to inspire the former to become socially responsible beings.⁹¹ Hundreds of students who passed through the reformatory school and later became skilled or unskilled manual workers read the letter-writing textbook *Maktūb-i-Ahmadī*, mentioned above. Examining the intellectual progress of the boys, T. J. Scott, the principal of Bareilly Theological College, wrote in his report for 1894: 'some lads advanced to *Maktūb-i-Ahmadī* [and] read fairly well to page 16'.⁹² The continuous production of this manual suggests that it had a considerable circulation and readership in North India. The Newal Kishor Press brought out the first edition in 1876 with 1,125 copies. Over the next

⁹⁰ Roger Chartier, 'Introduction: An Ordinary Kind of Writing. Model Letters and Letter-Writing in Ancien Régime France', in Chartier, Boureau and Dauphin, *Correspondence*.

⁹¹ J. W. Coombes, *The Making of Men* (London, 1920), 271.

⁹² *Annual Report on the Reformatory School at Chunar, United Provinces, 1894*, 24.

seven years, it published twelve more editions and increased the print run to 5,000 in its twelfth edition in 1883.⁹³ The price of the book was also reduced from 6 annas to 1 anna, between a quarter and a third of a labourer's daily wage.⁹⁴ Its author, Sayyid Ahmad Hussain Khan, was a leading official in the government Education Department and held positions as the headmaster of the Normal Tahsil School and deputy inspector of schools in Pratapgarh district, NWPO. Seeing the increasing popularity of the text, Ambikaprasad, the deputy inspector of schools in Lucknow, translated it into Kaithī script in 1880 and entitled it *Kaithī patramālā* (Kaithī Letter Writer). The index of Hindi books at the British Library suggests that no fewer than ten editions of this version were printed by the Newal Kishor Press. A local publisher, Gulshan-i-Ahmadī Press, in Pratapgarh district, also brought out a few Kaithī editions, meeting the demand for the book in the eastern NWPO. The Kaithī translation was for both rural students and autodidact peasants.⁹⁵ Kaithī, being the most popular script among farmers, traders and merchants in the Gangetic belt, offered an immense market for the book.⁹⁶

The reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France again provide clues to the usage of letter-writing manuals among ordinary soldiers. Frustrated by reading ambiguous letters between soldiers and their relatives, the chief censor of Indian army correspondence in France commented in January 1915,

⁹³ For the first edition, see *QL* (Oudh, 1868–76), table for quarter ending Sept. 1876: BL, IOR/SV 412/42; for the twelfth edition, see *QL* (1882–7), tables ending with the second quarter of 1883: BL, IOR/SV 412/38.

⁹⁴ On the wages of agrarian and artisanal labour, see *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, ed. H. R. Nevill, 198 vols. (Allahabad, 1903–36), iv, 64.

⁹⁵ Sayyid Ahmad Hussain Khan, *Kaithī patramālā*, trans. Ambikaprasad (Kaithī Letter Writer; Lucknow, 1880), 3.

⁹⁶ Examining the everyday uses of Kaithī in Bihar (the region adjacent to the NWPO, to the east), Bhudeb Mukherji, the inspector of schools, wrote: 'If the entire amount of writing per annum (except that of courts) be taken at 100, that of Nagari will hardly amount to ten, of the Persian will be between twenty and fifteen, and all the rest will be found to be done in Kaithī. Not only is correspondence mostly carried in Kaithī, and all accounts are kept in Kaithī, but a very large number of books in most popular use in the interior districts are read from Kaithī manuscripts': letter, 4 Apr. 1877, in *General Administrative Department Proceedings*, pts 1–2 (June 1877), no. 16: Uttar Pradesh State Archives. Pointing out the widespread use of Kaithī in Oudh, J. C. Nesfield, another inspector of schools, found that many ex-students of village schools who publicly claimed that they used Devanāgarī for everyday writing were actually using Kaithī or Mahājanī: John Collinson Nesfield, 'Results of Primary Education in the North-West and Oudh', *Calcutta Review* (July 1883), 73.

‘The Indian army is in the main recruited from an illiterate peasantry, or rather from several peasantries, all nearly inarticulate, whose common wishes and opinions, when they have any, are difficult to discern’.⁹⁷ Not all the letters from soldiers were written by scribes. The officials noted with interest that the soldiers themselves were trying hard to learn to read and write and had requested ‘primers and spelling books’ in large quantities from India. The censors also found that they were copying the style of letter-writing manuals. For example, the report of 11 December 1915 remarked, ‘The author of extract No. 2 [a letter not printed] is typical of this class, and his letter is really very well written’.⁹⁸ The Indian branch of the YMCA, a global Christian missionary organization, not only employed eight secretaries in France to help illiterate Indian soldiers to write their letters but also organized regular classes for soldiers on letter writing in Urdu and Hindi.⁹⁹ Those who were writing from the other end, especially wives, sons and brothers of soldiers, would have also used letter-writing manuals. The wife of Dafadar Prayag Singh wrote a very articulate letter in Hindi to her soldier husband in 1915:

My dear, when your letter comes, my heart is made happy. I write to you every week, but sometimes your letters to me are delayed. Why should I be annoyed with you? I am your servant, and you are my all! Every morning when I wake I do homage to your picture, and my picture, is it not imprisoned in your heart? Why, then, are you distressed in mind? Often I see you in my dreams, but never in a state which would cause me anxiety. Question your heart. Does it not tell you that at all times I am with you in spirit? Who is there in this world, besides yourself, to whom I would give a thought? . . . God alone knows when I shall see and do homage to you again and thus be freed from trouble . . . Your letters reach me on Wednesday. When a letter comes, I am happy till the following Tuesday. When a letter does not come I am sunk in despondency for a week, asking myself ‘what can it be that has deprived me of a letter from my Lord this week?’ And I never fail to write weekly to you . . . Today a letter has come from Kheri in which uncle has asked me to lend him all the money I have as Kalmawatti is to be married . . . I shall raise no objection because I do not wish anyone to say that I raised any obstacles in the family.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Note by E. B. Howell, Indian Civil Service, Indian Mail Censor, Boulogne, 23 Jan. 1915: BL, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1, 59.

⁹⁸ Supplementary Letters Forwarded by the Censor, Indian Mails, in France, with his No. 921/925, Dated 4th [11th] December 1915, 116: BL, IOR/L/MIL/5/828/1, 91.

⁹⁹ Eddy, *With our Soldiers in France*, 93–4, 102–3.

¹⁰⁰ *Indian Voices of the Great War*, ed. Omissi, letter 206.

The censor passed the letter with a comment in the margin, 'written by herself'. The letter is a brilliant example of how letters sustained the long-distance relationship that Buddhimati had discussed in her letter-writing manual. Prayag Singh's wife seems to have been an expert writer who also engaged in correspondence with other family members. For her, letters were not just a means of sharing her personal feelings but also a way of communicating important family news, in this instance on marriage and money.

Letter-writing manuals would have been bought not just for their lessons on the styles and conventions of letter writing, but also because they provided valuable information about the functioning of the post office. Postal officials commented that amateur letter writers often did not know that they needed to give the proper address of the recipient.¹⁰¹ G. A. Grierson, a linguist and colonial official, noted that indentured labourers and their families often wrote the wrong address on their letters and money orders. For example, a letter to an indentured labourer from his mother was addressed simply to 'Harbans, the son of Madari'.¹⁰² The problem of undelivered post was so acute that dead-letter offices were created in major postal towns. In 1884/5 there were 3,642,994 such undelivered items in India.¹⁰³ During the First World War, thousands of letters to and from Indian soldiers never reached their relatives.¹⁰⁴ To ensure that letters from villages, often without a complete address, reached soldiers, they were directed to depots in Bombay and France for cataloguing, where an updated record of each soldier's unit, rank and division was kept.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, the YMCA secretaries directed Indian soldiers' letters going to Lahore to a missionary or a government worker in the city, and from there the post was forwarded to the soldiers' relatives.¹⁰⁶ The poor were aware of the problem of dead letters, and this would have encouraged them to keep a letter-writing guide in the house or in the neighbourhood.

¹⁰¹ Clarke, *Post Office of India and its Story*, 89.

¹⁰² Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency*, 28.

¹⁰³ *Report on the Operations of the Post Office of India for the Year 1885/86*, 25.

¹⁰⁴ For example, the Returned Letter Office at Basra in Mesopotamia dealt with about two hundred thousand lost letters per month in 1916: Clarke, *Post Office of India and its Story*, 172–3; Robert Gray, 'Indian Army Postal Service in World War I', *American Philatelist* (June 2014).

¹⁰⁵ Gray, 'Indian Army Postal Service in World War I'.

¹⁰⁶ Eddy, *With our Soldiers in France*, 94.

The editors of *Hindustan*, a local Hindi newspaper published in Pratapgarh, appreciated the efforts of rural schools to educate the peasantry in writing clear and correct addresses on letters.¹⁰⁷ Buddhimati taught her readers to put the stamp on the right-hand side of the envelope and mention dates and a full address: the name of the town, village or neighbourhood, along with a landmark.¹⁰⁸

Another reason for the poor to seek letter-writing manuals would have been to save the cost of employing a letter writer. As discussed in section I, postal expenses came to constitute an important part of the working-class family budget. According to one estimate, a scribe in the early twentieth century charged 1 paise for writing the addresses in a proper format, 2 paises for a short letter, postcard or money order, and 3 paises or more for a long letter.¹⁰⁹ If this price list is correct, scribal charges put a severe burden on the poor, who in the 1920s earned between 10 and 24 annas per day in Bombay and 3 to 4 annas in rural North India.¹¹⁰

Letter-writing manuals had a role in educating the poor in the art of letter writing, but the poor infused letters with their own writing styles. This is illustrated in a letter from a Dogrā soldier (see Plates 2a and 2b). It is dated 17 July 1915 and was sent from the military hospital in the Brighton Pavilion on the south coast of England, where he was being treated for injuries sustained at the front. The letter is addressed to his elder brother Prabh Singh, who lived in the village of Khatar, Kangra, North India. It opens with an Om sign, the sacred sound and holy icon of Lord Shiva, clearly a style not suggested by letter-writing manuals. Again, instead of writing *Shrī* twice in his opening greeting to his elder brother as prescribed in various manuals, he uses it only once. Further, he has created his own form of salutation, in which greetings and respect are first accorded to Hindu gods — a feature omitted by writers of model letters — and only then to the recipient. The salutation goes like this: ‘Om, *Shrī Rāmji*, may prayers and flowers reach *Shrī Shrī* Om Ganga [Shiva and the

¹⁰⁷ North-Western Provinces, Oudh, Central Provinces and Rajputana, Newspaper Reports, 1894, 346–7: BL, IOR/L/R/5/71.

¹⁰⁸ Buddhimati, *Nāri sudashā pravartak*, preface.

¹⁰⁹ Clarke, *Post Office of India and its Story*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*, 309–10; *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, ed. Nevill, 64.

goddess Ganga] and Lord Vishnu'. Then the author touches the feet of his brother *Shrī* Prabh Singh, his mother and his brother's wife. The letter continues thus:

I am happy at this place. Do not worry about me. Goddess Bhagwati Durgamata blesses both sides. I have been saving twelve Rs per month and will send you [money] in bulk and [I hope you] stay peacefully and happily with brother Choudhary. Because of the kindness of the quartermaster, I have enjoyed life very much. I have travelled all over England and have almost forgotten my home. There is here one man to every three women. It is very difficult to save one's life [not to fall in love]. My conscience tells me to [rejoin] the army, but there is great destruction of life in the army, and no one sends us back to India. What is to be done? As long as we get meat and drink here, we can do nothing. Date: 17-7-1915.

And the German lion has arrived in Egypt. The Germans [are] doing great damage in England. They throw down bombs from aeroplanes, killing some 40 or 50 persons every second or third day, and do not allow people to remain in one place. The Germans are immensely strong, and the English are much terrified, believing that their government will not last. Their munitions of war are all spent, and they are beginning to quarrel amongst themselves. Lord Kitchener asked for provisions for three years, but the munitions of war have all been used in one year. Date: 17-1915.

In the letter we can see various linguistic shifts. The language of the salutation is complex, poetical and creative. In contrast, the succeeding paragraphs are written in more conversational language, in which English words, such as 'India' and 'Lord' (*Lāt*, from 'Lord' Kitchener), are appropriated and 'Hindi-ized'. This also suggests that the salutation line was distinctively the author's, which he probably repeated in all his personal letters. The style of handwriting also varies in this two-page letter. For example, compared to the second page, the writing on the first page is very dense. The word 'Date' is written differently at the bottom of each page: a shift from 'तरीक़ 17-7-19-15' at the end of the first page to 'तरीख़ 17-19-15' at the end of the second page. These shifts in his handwriting indicate that our correspondent was new to the act of writing; his thoughts and hands were still unsynchronized. He presents his thoughts as they come to him, except that he knows that writing the date on each page and a proper form of salutation are necessary elements in the art of letter writing. He follows a standard format of letter writing, but we do not know whether he has read a manual or is being helped by someone who has. If he has not read any manual, it suggests that there is some autodidactic writing happening outside the scope of letter-writing manuals and scribes. If he has read a manual or has been introduced to the proper style of

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श्री रामजी श्री श्री ३ गगनत त्तु ली द्द स क्त गुरा नी द्दान
 श्री जीव आइजे प्रकरीं जीदिबसद्वि आपके तबेदारे
 गुरु मे वरणा टे तबेदारे आइजे टेबाबवेजेद्वे चररा
 बद्रो गते मीतुराण बोतते करके और मातज और
 श्री बर्जी के चररा बद्रो गते मीतुराण बोतत कर
 के और मे २ सजगह वीचराजी खुसी १ मराको ३
 श्री करनी करराण आपको आग बली दूरगमाताके डे
 नादे वीचरावे जीस सुता ते दोने। तरफकी आला
 होने और मेने मदीने के १२ बरा रुपय मरुबार घरके
 बारते होखा और आपको मीतते कीनी मीतते सतकीही
 श्री प्रजता और आइ वीद्वी की तरफसे सखंगत कच्चा
 राजी खुसी हैनी और म कोटमासटर सरीब का सुड
 द्दरी और आइजी मेने टनीया फेनद बोतत मरुलीया
 सरीब की मेहरमनगी के डुरी इगलेडे की सत कच्चा
 हीया और द्द्वी तो घरके वीसरे टेवेगा और एक
 हैस तो मारद और तीन हैस तो और है और बाहु
 मसकत बनरा है और मेरा द्द्वीत फोजको जरा
 का बोतत है कन फोजमे बाहु चारी मोता है नी और
 इडीया के कोडनी प्रेजट वीष कररा और जवतक
 सनजद त्या जबतक कोर कुदनी करसकता
 तारीक १७-७-१४-१५ श्री प्रेजगीष
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2a. Letter from a Dogra soldier, Brighton, Sussex, to his brother in North India, 17 July 1915, first page. From British Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/828 (Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France), pt 1, 3. © The British Library Board.

ज़ोर जर्मन शेर मीसरमे पोलचंगी
 ज़ोर जर्मन लोक दुगदुग मे बाहु धारी नुकरान
 करता हवा दु जहज से का गोल मरता बती 40
 पञ्च साटमी मारजत दूसरे तीसरे राज
 की रज्जुय नी रेस्ता देवा जजकात कर
 ज़ोर जर्मन के बाहु धारी जोर है
 यह दुगदुग के साटमी चढे घबरयो जे
 बेद मे द है की तमार राज नी रेगा
 ज़ोर मेखे जीन मुकगीय ज़ोर अपसे मे भुजतु
 पडगीय वृष्ट की चनरने तीन सव सी मनजरी
 रीया देकन मेखजीन कघटा एक सवमे जो
 गीया मुदुवा फकरनी तरीख 17-14-15



2b. Second page of the letter from a Dogrā soldier to his brother shown in Plate 2a.
 © The British Library Board.

letter writing by YMCA classes, then he has also invented his own peculiar form of salutation and filled the letter with his own personal astonishments, love and despair, and employed a hybrid language. His letter helps us to break through to the malleable, creative world of lower-class writing, which challenges the rigidities of discourses that see this class as merely labouring bodies devoid of any intellectual activity.

The letter written by the Dogrā soldier covers various aspects of life, conveying his own state of well-being to his family, news of a

remittance, the kindness of the quartermaster, social life and the gender ratio in England, anxiety about compromising his morals because of being surrounded by women, the availability of meat and drink in England, the bombing by German aeroplanes, fear within the British government, the lack of armaments on the British side, and the imminent collapse of the empire. Scholars have shown that the letters of Indian soldiers, despite the censorship, were never just about themselves. In clear defiance of wartime postal regulations, they discussed the progress of the war, the death of soldiers, sexual encounters and the mighty power of Germany, and offered advice to their families not to enlist.¹¹¹ They used coded language to write on matters that their superiors and postal guidelines had clearly prohibited, suggesting the limited reach of the social and political orders authorized by the colonial elite.¹¹² A report of the chief mail censor dated 15 February 1915 remarked:

The first extract [a letter] illustrates how almost impossible it is for any censorship of oriental correspondence to be effective as a barrier. Orientals excel in the art of conveying information without saying anything definite. When they have a meaning to convey in this way, they are apt to use the phrase 'Think this over till you understand it' . . . This phrase is becoming increasingly common in letters from all sources.¹¹³

Workers in the Bombay cotton mills wrote anonymous letters to their employers about the corrupt practices of the foremen.¹¹⁴ Writing anonymously saved them from being targeted and fired. What the caste elites instructed the lower castes and women to write in a letter was one thing, but how the latter framed their letters another. The research of Francesca Orsini suggests that during the 1920s and 1930s educated middle- and upper-caste women wrote real and fictional letters to the editor of the Hindi journal *Chānd*, where they spoke of female agency, transgressive love, 'domestic cruelty, emotional insecurity, and repressed sexuality'.¹¹⁵ Through letters, the poor also questioned the very ethos of a regimented social, political and

¹¹¹ See various letters reproduced in BL, IOR/L/MIL/5/828/1–3.

¹¹² *Indian Voices of the Great War*, ed. Omissi; Amin, *Some Considerations on Evidence, Language and History*.

¹¹³ Report by E. B. Howell, Indian Mail Censor, Indian Base Post Office, 15 Feb. 1915: BL, IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1, 68.

¹¹⁴ *Royal Commission on Labour in India: Evidence, i/1: Bombay Presidency (including Sind)*, 297.

¹¹⁵ Orsini, *Hindi Public Sphere*, 280–6.

patriarchal world that elites were attempting to perpetuate through model letters and instructions.

IV

CONCLUSION

Both letters and letter-writing manuals continued to be part of the lived experience of the labouring poor in the post-war years, albeit with new elements.¹¹⁶ By the late 1920s and 1930s, other than the pedagogic letter-writing manuals, the collection of love letters became a literary genre of its own. Some of these texts were Yashodā Devī's *Patī prem patrikā: arthāt, Patī-patnī kā patra vyvahar* (Manual for the Love of Husband: or, Letter Correspondence between Husband and Wife, 1925), K. K. Malaviyā's *Manoramā ke patra: apne premiyon ke nām* (Letters of Manoramā: To her Lovers, 1927), Pandey Bechan Sharmā's *Chand hasīno ki khutut* (A Love Story Told through a Series of Letters, 1927) and Nar Singh Ram Shukla's *Premiyan ke patrā* (Letters of Lovers, 1940).

I conclude this article by reasserting two main points. First, the emergence of mass letter writing occurred within the context of huge local and global labour mobility. This expansion in letter writing by the poor was mediated by a complex nexus of cheaper postal services, the emergence of non-elite schools, growing literacy rates and access to letter-writing skills and manuals. The poor did not always rely on professional letter writers or literate intermediaries, as has been suggested in histories of communication and the lower classes. They also forged a personal relationship with the practice of letter writing, scribes, post offices and postal officials to connect rural areas to the distant urban and transnational labour regimes. A focus on the letters of the labouring poor shows that the emergent mobilities among both men and women during the colonial era were experienced not merely through the movement of bodies but also by an exchange of information, emotion, knowledge and objects from both sides. Whether it was the advice on household management of a mother to her married daughter, or the plea of a mother to her son to return from a foreign land,

¹¹⁶ For a record of the post-war letter-writing manuals, see *QL* (1919–48): BL, IOR/SV 412/38.

or the cheerful letter of a wounded soldier in the Brighton Pavilion to his family back home, all these letters suggest that the distances of the labouring world had to be experienced and negotiated in daily life. Whichever way historians' retelling of the past takes shape, there was no escape from these experiences for the labouring bodies.

I have also shown that the attempted control over the labouring body by elites (colonial officials, employers, upper-caste men and women) was not restricted to the workspace (factories, plantations, war fronts, the domestic household), but was constantly extended to the textual realm of the social world. A study of letter-writing manuals and of letters themselves allows us to notice the nuanced ways in which power was exercised by the dominant. The elites were suspicious of the freestyle writing of the poor, lower castes and marginalized groups as it threatened their privileges, social respect and dominant position in the written world that was so closely tied to the lived social world. The written language of the subordinated classes was as dangerous as their actions, protests and rebellions. Letter-writing manuals, which guided them in their letter writing, also attempted to control and discipline their written communication, thoughts and behaviour. Manuals taught members of the lower castes, domestic labourers, and women and girls not only how to open and close a letter but also to be submissive, loyal, productive and polite to their masters, husbands and the upper castes. They instructed members of lower castes to remain within the boundaries of their caste, and reminded the upper castes to assert their domination through the medium of written language. The poor, who read these manuals according to the guidelines of school curriculums and out of necessity for self-guidance, did learn the art of letter writing from model letters and emulated them. However, their letters did not always conform to the instructions. Instead, they used letters for their own purposes, which often disturbed the social and political codes of the elites, whether it was in the factory space by writing anonymous letters, or by challenging army censorship regulations, or by creating their own styles of opening salutation.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the emergence of mass letter-writing in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial north India, a region marked by the growth of an unprecedented labour mobility, postal expansion, vernacular print, and workers' literacy. It narrates how workers' and their family members' abilities and failures to read and write letters shaped their experiences of the emerging transnational labour mobility and explains how the letter-writing by the subaltern produced new sociabilities and anxieties that both colonial and indigenous elites feared and attempted to discipline and control through letter-writing manuals. It argues that the letter-writing culture in India did not merely sustain new mobilities but also produced a dominant social world which ensured that the hierarchies of caste, gender, and class were clearly mapped onto the domain of letter-writing. Hitherto unexplored (Hindi) letter-writing manuals and educational, postal, and labour records are used to challenge the rigidities of labour, communication, and literary histories of modern South Asia where the illiteracy of the labouring poor is an assumed fact.