Letters of the Labouring Poor: Hindi Letter-Writing Manuals and the Art of Letter-Writing in Colonial India

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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.

Keywords: Letter-writing Culture of the Labouring Poor, Subaltern Reading and Writing Practices, Urdu-Hindi Letter-Writing Manuals, Colonial Postal System, Scribal Culture, Indian Soldiers, Book History, Caste, Labour migration and mobilities.

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It was 1915. The Great War was in full swing. Khan, one of the Indian soldiers fighting for the British empire from the muddy trenches of France, was anxious about his farm fields

and crops back in the 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 of 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 — they all knew that letters were critical in sustaining the mobility generated by the war. It had produced an unprecedented moment in Indian history — a large number of illiterate and newly literate peasant-turned soldiers and their families were learning to correspond for the first time in their lives. More than 1.3 million Indians fought for the British empire. Constant exchange of letters was the only way to remain in touch. The Censor Mail in France was surprised by the volume of letters it had to process. Even though, it reported, soldiers and their family members were new to letter-writing and overseas postal mechanism, they wrote thousands of letters every day in various vernaculars (Gujarati, Gurmukhi, Urdu, Marathi, Hindi).[2] In 1915, the Indian contingent in France received between 10 to 20,000 letters per week, and at times the number of letters was more than 23,000 in just one day.[3]

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[1] The original letter was written in Urdu on 21 October 1915 which was translated into English by the Censor Mail. David E. Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914–18* (Basingstoke, 1999), 112. For a collection of letters by Indian soldiers, see British Library, London (hereafter BL), IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1–3, *Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France* (hereafter RIMC), vol. 1, 2, 3. IOR stands for the India Office Records.

[2] BL, IOR/L/MIL/5/828/1, *RIMC*, 7th November 1915, 75.

[3] Geoffrey Clarke, *The Post Office of India and Its Story* (London, 1921), 171–72.

The British government was wary of soldiers' letters. It feared that letters from soldiers' family might carry 'seditious news' and the letters from the front might pass sensitive war-related information to the enemy. Any unpleasant news or rumour carried by the letter from the front to Indian villages might badly affect the recruitment of new soldiers.[4] British imperial officials feared that letters of Indian soldiers carried news that threatened the 'superior' political and moral order of the West.[5] Soldiers were given detailed instructions as to what to write and what not to, and their letters were subjected to a double layer censorship by the regiment and Censor Mail. Why was the writing of 'illiterate subalterns' feared and considered so transgressive? If scribes did the major part of the subaltern letter-writing, as the current historiography stresses,[6] then why did British imperial rule simply not establish control over those handful scribes who wrote letters for those soldiers? Was it possible that more soldiers wrote or learned to write letters by themselves than has been assumed?

This article argues that members of diverse labouring classes (peasants, factory workers, coolies, domestic servants) learned to read and write letters in order to negotiate diverse regimes of (labour) mobility that emerged in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia. Unlike the thrust of existing works, it contends that workers' experience of letter-writing was far more direct, intimate, and pervasive. Related to this, it also argues that

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[4] Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 6–10; Shahid Amin, *Some Considerations on Evidence, Language and History, Indian History Congress Symposia Papers* (Delhi, 1994). On the recruitment of peasantry from India and suppression of rumours, see 'A Record of Continued Progress and Loyal Activity', *The War League Journal* (Karachi), i, 3 (1916), 290–94, 280.

[5] Letters of soldiers carrying the message of sexual encounters with White women were seen as damaging the white race supremacy and were suppressed by the regimental and postal censorship. Soldiers caught of having sexual affairs with local White women were stripped, flogged, and demoted publicly. Regiment officials were asked to read outgoing letters aloud to catch perpetrators. Sherwood Eddy, *With Our Soldiers in France* (New York, 1917), 92; Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 7, letter n. 455 and 644.

[6] Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 4–5; Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922–1992* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), 36–7, 119, 88; Mark R. Frost, 'Pandora's Post Box: Empire and Information in India, 1854–1914', *The English Historical Review*, cxxxi, 552 (2016), 1043–73; Heike Liebau, (ed.), *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia* (Leiden, 2010), 7; Claude Markovits, 'Indian Soldiers' Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from Rear of the Front' in Liebau, *The World in World Wars*, 37.

a whole new market of vernacular letter-writing manuals (hereafter LWMs) and guidelines (in the case of army and war) emerged as an elites' response to discipline the 'uncontrolled' hands of subalterns that threatened to collapse the social, political, and economic hierarchies maintained by the elites. Throughout this article, I use the following terms — the labouring poor, nonelites, subalterns, subordinated, marginalized — interchangeably. These terms refer to the marginalized social groups who primarily came from a lower social caste background and performed labour against a wage or without a wage at the site of household (housewives, domestic servants), factory (industrial workers), and farm/plantation (peasantry and indentured coolies). While these groups experienced a shared history of exclusion from the elite literary sphere and formal schooling that allows me to use the above terms interchangeably, their experiences of letter-writing, as we will see, were heavily coloured by their caste, class, and gender identities.

In the non-South Asian context, historians have discovered that the labouring poor wrote profusely to the state authorities and family members. These letters provide an excellent source material to write the social history from below. Pauper letters, in the context of Europe and America, are now a valuable source material to unravel the discourse of poverty, interaction of the poor with authorities, ideologies of welfare states, everyday life of the labouring poor, and interaction of orality with the printed writing.[7] Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner's collection of letters written by the employed workers during the depression years offer a nuanced view of the subjectivity formation among the American working-class.

[7] See Thomas Sokoll (ed.), *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2001); Andreas Gestrich and Steven A. King, 'Pauper Letters and Petitions for Poor Relief in Germany and Great Britain, 1770–1914', *Bulletin, German Historical Institute*, xxxv, 2 (2013); Steven King and Peter Jones, 'Testifying for the Poor: Epistolary Advocates and the Negotiation of Parochial Relief in England, 1800–1834', *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* (Cambridge, 2015); Andreas Gestrich, 'German Pauper Letters and Petitions for 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, 2001); Toni Fairmean, 'English Pauper Letters 1800–34, and the English Langauage' in David Barton and Nigel Hall (eds.), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Amsterdam, 2000).

These letters show that although economically insecure, American 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 letters of European migrant workers who travelled to America and elsewhere in the colonies show that letters in general 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] Keith Breckenridge's work shows that South African mine wage workers in the first half of the twentieth-century used letter-writing to communicate their grievances to authorities, express love to ladies, and discuss household matters.[10] These studies clearly show that migrant workers did not merely rely on literate intermediaries for reading and writing letters[11] but also learned to read and write themselves.[12]

Historians working on India have discovered personal letters of soldiers and indentured coolies, and petitions of the poor.[13] Except in the case of Indian soldiers whose letters the

[8] Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner (eds.), *Slaves of the Depression: Workers' Letters about Life on the Job* (Ithaca, 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 and Burlington, 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', *The 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, 'Letter-Writing in Early-Twentieth-Century South Africa' in Karin Barber (eds.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington, 2006), 143–52; 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), 337–48.

[11] *Ibid*.; Laura Martínez Martín, 'Shared Letters: Writing and Reading Practices in the Correspondence of Migrant Families in Northern Spain', *The 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, *Letters across Borders*.

[12] Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860–1920* (Cambridge, 2014).

[13] Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* (London, 2014); Amin, *Some Considerations on Evidence*; Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*; Omissi, 'Europe Through Indian Eyes: Indian Soldiers Encounter England and France, 1914–1918', *The English Historical Review*, cxxii, 496 (2007); Claude Markovits, 'Indian Soldiers' Experiences in France'; Santanu Das, *Indian Troops in Europe: 1914–1918* (Ahmedabad, 2015); Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (Leuven, 1997); Prabhu P. Mohapatra, *Longing and Belonging: The Dilemma of Return among*

Censor Mail translated in excerpts and kept a copy, not many complete letters of the poor have survived. Such a gap at the level of records, combined with historians' assumption that workers were an illiterate lot in this period, reinforces the dominant historiographical view that the subaltern classes were predominantly relying on scribes for their letter reading and writing.[14] While this article does not completely challenge that proposition, it strongly suggests to treat workers as independent writing-subjects. Evidences are relatively smaller (compared to western cases) but comprehensive enough to suggest that that workers and their families in India, like elsewhere, relied significantly on letters to negotiate the distance that diverse regimes of employment and mobility (indenture, factory, plantation work, marriage, army) had generated. This increased letter-writing by the poor was closely connected to the general spread of literacy among the lower classes through rural schools, reformatory schools, literacy classes at the War front, working-class day and night schools established by paternalistic employers and social reformers. Besides, the relationship that the poor forged with scribes and postmen was not merely dependent but was full of experiments, emotional investment, and failures. The transnational phenomenon of labour mobility was intimately negotiated through institutions such as, post-offices, scribes, and schools, on both sides.

The study of workers' letters broadens our understanding of labour migration in the social and labour history where the focus predominantly has been on the movement of labouring bodies and money-wages. Recent interventions in Indian labour history suggests that the histories of labour migration cannot be understood properly without integrating the

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Indian Immigrants in the West Indies, 1850–1950 (New Delhi, 1998); Hazi Ghulam Muhammad, *A Hundred Hindustani Petitions in Arabic-Persian & 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 (2012); Potukuchi Swarnalatha, 'Revolt, Testimony, Petition: Artisanal Protests in Colonial Andhra' in Voss, *Petitions in Social History*.

[14] See n. 6 above.

experiences of the non-migrant family members (especially wives) of the migrant worker.[15] And when we open ourselves to such questions, we see that the lived world of labour was creative and responsive in ways than has been scantily explored by historians in India. Letters indicate that mobilities were lived and experienced in the realm of everyday not merely through occasional visits to the homeland and remittances but also via regular correspondence and exchange of objects, emotions, ideas, and knowledge (trade, agricultural, medical, technical, environmental). Their perusal also shows that the labouring poor were not averse to using letters at the site of work to assert their human, political, and intellectual self, complain about jobbers' exploitation, and think of 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 unequal relationship of workers was not merely limited to their workspace and immediate employers but extended to the larger social arena where caste elites constantly set the new terms of power relations in an age of unprecedented labour mobility, expanding communication, and increasing literacy. This line of argument connects us to my second theme of the article — vernacular letter-writing manuals.

Letter-writing practices of the poor as well as epistolary texts are absent subjects in the pages of modern Indian history.[16] In contrast to India, the LWMs of Europe and America have been very well explored and documented.[17] Recent scholarship in the field highlights

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[15] Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (New Delhi, 2017); Nitin Sinha, 'The Idea of Home in a World of Circulation: Steam, Women and Migration through Bhojpuri Folksongs', *International Review of Social History*, Online First (2018).

[16] 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*, i, 2–3 (2007).

[17] 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), 866–69; Cécile Dauphin, Roger Chartier, and Alain Boureau, *Correspondence: Models of Letter- writing from the Middle Ages to the*

that the number of LWMs grew since the eighteenth-century, and these manuals catered to the aspirations of the middle- and lower-class readers: women, apprentices, and migrant workers.[18] Led by historians and literary critiques, this new scholarship proposes that LWMs were crucial to the literary experiences and self-formation of the middle and lower classes, functioning of the family economy, trans-Atlantic migration, and larger socio-politico-economic developments of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century. We will see that Indian LWMs confirmed to these broader trends in a slightly later period but, interestingly, the overseas migration did not capture the imagination of LWMs' authors. Eve Tavor Bannet shows that LWMs were never just about expanding and democratizing letter-writing culture; they were also about reproducing dominant political and social norms.[19] The democratization of letter-writing culture in this period was not limited to Europe and America. Yuval Ben-Bassat and Fruma Zachs argues that new LWMs were written in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman empire and the old ones were transformed to meet the growing demand for letter-writing among the public and aspiring scribes.[20] 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 elite-caste

Nineteenth Centuries (Princeton, 1997); Decker, *Epistolary Practices*; Rabecca Earle (ed.), Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600–1945 (Aldershot, 1999); Barton and Hall, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*; Martha Hanna, 'A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I', *The American Historical Review*, cviii, 5 (2003); Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (New York, 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 and Philadelphia, 2007); Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009); Catherine 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 and Philadelphia, 2012); Simon Garfield, *To the Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing* (New York, 2013); Anita Auer, Daniel Schreier, and Richard James Watts (eds.), *Letter Writing and Language Change* (Cambridge, 2015).

[18] Eve Tavor Bannet, 'Studies in British and American Epistolary Culture', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, xxxv, 3 (2011), 89–103.

[19] Bannet, *Empire of Letters*; Bannet, *British and American Letter Manuals, 1680–1810* (London, 2008), xiv.

[20] 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).

authored commercial-cum-educational Hindi LWMs 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 subalterns 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 of caste elites that the labouring castes would transgress and threaten the patriarchal socio-economic order was critical in shaping LWMs and the letter-writing experiences of the poor. However, what was prescribed by elite authors in LWMs was not always followed by the subaltern. Rather, they introduced their own styles, concerns, and modes of writing letters that showed subaltern creativity.

The first section of this article 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, postmen, letter-writers and nonelite schools. Building upon this, the second section explores the contents of vernacular (Hindi) LWMs to see if the world of labour and labour mobilities caught the imagination of the authors, and if it did, in what ways. The final section examines contexts in which LWMs were read by the poor. By discussing the actual letter-writing of the poor in the light of model letters of LWMs, this section will examine if the subaltern read LWMs and followed the guidelines proposed by the elite authors. I primarily focus on letters and LWMs in Hindi language from the North-Western Provinces and Oudh region (NWPO, renamed as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh in 1902) in northern India. Methodologically, this article brings together two types of closely connected writings — letters of the labouring poor and LWMs of caste-elites — 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 had linked distant villages to towns, industrial cities, and offshore colonies. The total strength of postal stations, which included head post-offices, sub-offices, village branch-offices, and receiving-houses, increased from 27,671 in 1860 to 100,894 in 1919–20. And, the number of village postmen from 1695 in 1876 to 8354 in 1919–20.[21] The historiography on postal communication in India, mainly focussing on its political, economic, and disciplining roles in consolidating the British empire,[22] has begun to examine its effects on the indigenous social sphere. C.A. Bayly argued that the colonial postal system in the nineteenth century could not expand in the countryside due to the unavailability of cheap papers, absence of professional letter-writers in villages, and high delivery charges.[23] However, Mark R. Frost suggested that Bayly's study, which was limited to the period until the 1860s, offered a very static view. Far from being a failure, the colonial postal system was deeply entrenched into the rural world with the introduction of the penny post (½ anna for a letter) in 1854, a quarter-anna postcard in 1879, and rural post-offices and letterboxes in the 1870s.[24] Evidence that I found supports Frost's analysis. Half-anna postcards with pictures of Hindu deities had become a 'rage all

[21] *Statistical Abstract relating to British India*, n. iv & lv (London, 1870 and 1922).
[22] 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), 216–34; Michael H. Fisher, 'The East India Company's "Suppression of the Native Dak"', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* (hereafter IESHR), xxxi, 3 (1994).
[23] C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1999), 335.
[24] Frost, 'Pandora's Post Box', 1048–62. The denominations of Indian Rupees were following: 1Rs. = 16 anna; 1 anna = 4 paisa; and 1 paisa = 3 pies. See Anirban Biswas, *Money and Markets from Pre-Colonial to Colonial India* (Delhi, 2007), 145–56.

over India' in the 1870s.[25] The statistics of the Postal Department reveal that the total number of letters and postcards that passed through it had increased from 347.1 million in 1894–95 to 891.9 million in 1912–13 and to 1.189 billion in 1919–20—nearly three and a half times increase in just twenty-five years.[26] However, Frost, like Bayly, maintains that literate intermediaries mediated the letter-writing of subalterns.[27] By the end of this section, we will see that such a line of argument provides only a one-sided picture given that letter-writing had become an integral part of the lived experience of many rural and urban poor since the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. Before that, let me illustrate how workers forged a relationship with post-offices, scribes, schools, postmen, and letters to traverse the new mobilities.

The emergence of global labour history have challenged the overtly Europe and North Atlantic centred studies of migration and suggested that South Asia witnessed an unprecedented internal and transnational labour mobility.[28] While the land-dispossessed peasantry and poor artisans were on the move in search of a secure wage,[29] diverse labour regimes (government and private, Indians and non-Indians) had evolved elaborate recruitment mechanisms for the wage-seeking rural populace and used coercion, deception, advance money offers, and contracts to keep and bind workers at the site of production.[30] Often leaving their friends and families behind, the circulating worker (often male) found work in the army; at the tea plantations of Assam and Ceylon; in the cotton mills of Bombay, Cawnpore, and Madras; in the jute factories of Calcutta; at sugar

[25] Clarke, *The Post Office of India,* 9.
[26] *Statistical Abstract*, n. xxxix (London, 1905), 91; n. lv (London, 1922), 91.
[27] Frost, 'Pandora's Post Box', 1061–2.
[28] 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).
[29] Crispin Bates, *Coerced and Migrant Labourers in India: The Colonial Experience, Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies,* n. xiii (Edinburgh, 2000); Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton, 1951).
[30] Mohapatra, 'Eurocentrism, Forced Labour'; Arun Kumar, 'Labour in Your Cup: Global Histories of Labour, Commodities, and Capitalism', *International Review of Social History,* Online First (2018).

plantations in offshore colonies; at the infrastructural projects of the colonial government (railways, roads, bridge, canal-making). Letters connected the diasporic communities with their homeland as well as produced and reproduced new and existing sociabilities. New sociabilites could range from workers writing to each other, to employers and state authorities, while the existing sociabilities could mean letter correspondence between the mother and her worker son, wife and brother. Letters force us to understand labour mobility not merely in terms of desire to return (either occasional or permanent) and sending regular remittances, but more as a phenomenon that was lived and built every day by the worker and 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-formed and always successful, but it was constantly constructed, experimented, and abandoned by workers and their families. Letters did not always reach to the recipient, and the recipient did not always answer the letter.[31]

Postal officials reported many intriguing events of the labouring poor's interaction with the postal system. I discuss here an event from 1885.[32] A post-official noted that a woman of the 'agricultural class' came to a Sub-Post Office in Gorakhpur district (NWPO) to post a letter for her son who was an indentured coolie in Trinidad (vernacularized as 'Chini Dad'). She got her letter written by a scribe but was not sure if the scribe had written the full message. To ensure that her message reached to the son safely, she retold the whole message verbally to the postman who, she believed, would carry her message personally. The surprised post-official wrote the message 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

[31] George A. Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency* (Calcutta, 1883), 37.
[32] National Archives of India, Delhi (hereafter NAI), *Report on the Operations of the Post Office of India for the Year 1885–86* (hereafter ROPOI), Finance and Commerce Department, Separate Revenue, February 1887, Nos. 92–4/ A, 25.

him to come home as soon as possible, or to send some money for her expenses.'[33] Her letter ensured that the lived realities of the transnational migration (wages, work conditions, return) and the home (death of the black cow and the necessity of remittance) were experienced by both the parties. It brought the two worlds closer for her, allowing her to experience the distance and express intimate emotions. Prabhu Mohapatra's research in the Trinidad Archives shows that many more mothers wrote similar types of letters to their indentured sons, asking them to return.[34] The evidence of this new relationship of the poor with the colonial postal machinery is not lost 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 family members back in villages. About thirteen post-offices located in the mill neighbourhoods served the purpose.[35] Postal expenses had become an intrinsic part of the working-class family budget. A cartoon beautifully illustrated various expenditures of an urban working family (Figure 1).

[33] *Ibid*.
[34] Mohapatra, *Longing and Belonging*.
[35] G. Findlay Shirras, *Report on an Enquiry into Working Class Budgets in Bombay* (Bombay, 1928), 36. On remittances, see Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, 162–3; Chinmay Tumbe, 'Towards Financial Inclusion: The Post Office of India as a Financial Institution, 1880–2010', *IESHR*, lii, 4 (2015).

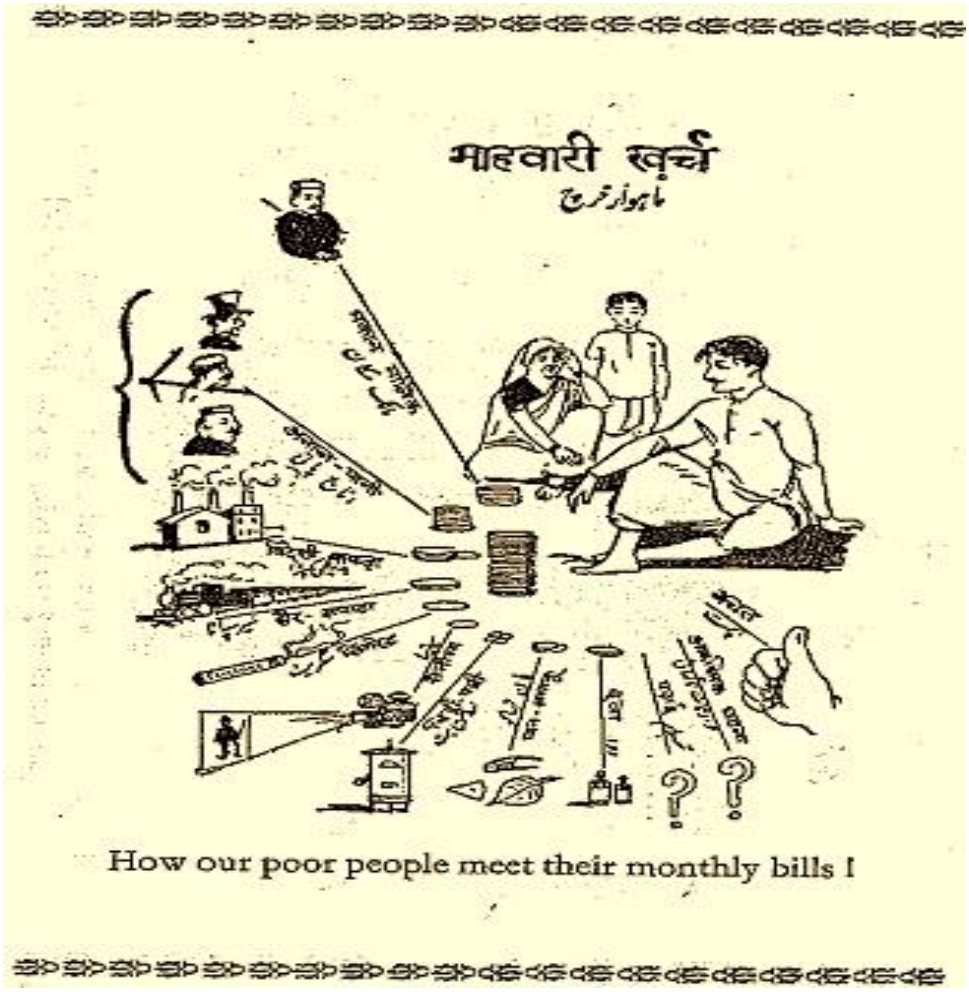

Figure 1: A Working-Class Family Budget. Source: *Cartoon Booklet: Containing 50 Interesting Cartoons on Swadeshi* (Allahabad, 1938), 32.

The expenses in the image included accommodation costs, groceries, foreign clothing, railway travel, cinema, postage, tobacco, medicine, education and accidental expenses with a question mark, and savings with a thumb indication. A large number of Indian coolies who worked as indentured labourers in the offshore plantation colonies, such as Trinidad, British Guiana (Demerara), Jamaica, Fiji wrote letters to their family members in India. Sending

money order was not enough to uphold the kinship ties. The labour recruiting agency for British Guiana at Calcutta maintained a record of coolies' letters to India for some years. According to its records, the number of letters received was 24 in 1874, 34 in 1875, 35 in 1876, 53 in 1877, 95 in 1878, 335 in 1879, 509 in 1880, 546 in 1881 and 702 in 1882.[36] We notice a gradual increase in the number of letters by coolies who numbered about 88,000 in Demerara in 1882. However, these numbers did not represent the total letter-writing done by Demerara coolies as the agency included only those letters that passed through it.

Personal letters were one type of letters that workers wrote, political and work-related letters were other types.[37] Such letters were drafted by one person (literate worker or a scribe) or a group of workers.[38] 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 of 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.'[39] Letters of the indentured coolies also discussed and produced anti-indenture labour politics. A proscribed drama-book titled *Coolie Pratha* depicted that letters were crucial in knotting the off-shore coolie politics with the national movement at home.[40] It was not surprising that the anti-indentured campaign of the Indian nationalist leaders in its earliest phase centred around a letter which alleged that Kunti, an 'untouchable caste' indentured women labourer to Fiji, was raped by a white overseer.[41]

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[36] Grierson, *Report on Colonial* Emigration, 37.
[37] See A. Alwe's (a labour leader in Bombay) Statement in Meerut Conspiracy Case Files, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics Digital Archives (http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/), File no. GIPE-024101, 957.
[38] On a collectively written letter 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*, 2013, 177.
[39] *Royal Commission on Labour in India* (hereafter RCLI), Evidence, 11 vols. (London, 1931), viii, 2, 498.
[40] BL, File No. 1109, IOR/L/PJ/6/1479.
[41] Ashutosh Kumar, 'Songs of Abolition: Anti-Indentured Campaign in Early Twentieth Century,' 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

The abovementioned evidence clearly suggest that the labouring poor often interacted with letters, post-offices, postmen, and letter-writers to make sense of their reconfiguring world. Though unaware of the exact working of the colonial post-office machinery, the poor were open to experiment. They took time to trust the postal mechanism and scribes. A postman's relationship with the village life was unique and was built gradually. The postman not only delivered and received letters, parcels, and money orders but also read and wrote letters for illiterate folks, sold postage stamps, brought the news of the outside world, educated villagers about letter-writing and money orders. Unlike any other government officials, whose arrival in the village was feared, hated, and avoided by the poor as they were often forced to perform labour (*begár*) for the official, periodic visits of a postman (usually a male) were welcomed. Villagers celebrated postmen's timely arrival and complained to local authorities in case if they were absent for long.[42] Because of the intricate local knowledge required for the job, a postman in rural areas was usually the village schoolmaster or the literate shopkeeper. This cost-effective system of appointing locals for the job got formalized in the 1880s.[43] With the governmentalization of the postal system and a regular salary, upper- and middle-castes were also drawn to the profession which, until now, according to William Crooke was primarily a job of the lower castes. Crooke, a colonial official interested in collecting information on indigenous customs, found that letters carrying happy messages, such as the birth of a male child or a marriage proposal, were carried by a low-caste barber and letters containing unfortunate news were carried by Chamars (the 'untouchables').[44]

Colonial North India', *Modern Asian Studies*, xlix, 5 (2015); Brij V. Lal, 'Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations', *IESHR*, xxii, 1 (1985).

[42] Clarke, *The Post Office of India*, 88; A resident from Shahpur (in north India) complained to a local Hindi newspaper *Sainik* (Soldier) that the postman of his area did not deliver post on time. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, *Sainik* (23 June, 1936), 25.

[43] BL, *Oudh Educational Report* for the year 1871–72, 77–8, IOR/V/24/993; Frost, 'Pandora's Post Box', 1058.

[44] *North India Notes and Queries* (hereafter NINQ) (July 1895), note n. 156. *NINQ* (July 1895), note n. 156; (June 1891), note n. 334; (Nov. 1895), note n. 835.

Letter-writers were crucial to the letter-writing of the migrant poor not just because workers were illiterate but also because scribes possessed pen, paper, and ink and knew how to write a proper letter, petition, application, address. However, the relationship of illiterate and semi-illiterate subalterns with scribes was not always straightforward. The incident from 1885 relating to the agricultural class woman suggests that trust and time mediated the relationship between the poor and professional letter-writers. She was not sure if the scribe had written all she wanted. A more recent example of this trust relationship is Rekha Kumari, an illiterate worker in Delhi, who only goes to her trusted letter-writer, Jagdish Chandra Sharma, apparently one of the last surviving professional letter-writers of India. Sharma sits outside the Kashmiri Gate post-office in Delhi and writes letters of migrant workers, vegetable and fruit vendors, sex workers, and domestic servants.[45] Back in the late nineteenth-century, cities were full of amateur scribes and letter-writers. They sat outside post-offices and courts, worked for specific clients, and established a business in working-class neighbourhoods.[46]

But the existing dominant view that professional letter-writers/scribes were crucial to the letter-writing of subaltern gives a one-sided picture. It does not consider the educational history of the poor, letter-writing experiences of the educated workers, and efforts of the subaltern 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 lot was a myth. For example, a study of the family budgets of 168 workers, employed at the Gorakhpur Railway Workshop (NWPO), revealed that about 36.6 per cent of the total workers surveyed were literate in 1930. The reason given for high literacy rates was migration. The report noted, 'the Gorakhpur worker with a large number of relatives at home

[45] Geeta Pandey, 'The Disappearing Tribe of India's Letter Writers', *BBC News* (20 March 2014), India section, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-26379747, last accessed on 22 May 2018.
[46] BL, *Native Newspaper Reports, North-Western Provinces, Oudh, Central Provinces and Rajputana* (NNR), 1893, 49.

has an incentive to learn to read and write to correspond with the people.'[47] The same inquiry into the family budgets of 729 factory workers in the Cawnpore city discovered that about 23.2 per cent of total workers were able to read and write a letter.[48] Similarly, in Bombay, the inquiries of R.G. Gokhale found that the average literacy rate among Bombay mill-workers was 29.7 per cent in 1940 which increased to 42.5 per cent in 1955.[49] The evidence of literate, schooled, and didactic workers are numerous 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' (*acchút*) schools, prison schools, orphanage schools.[50]

The poor who attended these schools intermittently were not only taught reading and writing but also letter-writing. Letter-writing emerged as an independent subject in the curriculum of the late nineteenth-century schools. It formed an essential exercise in reading and composition. In the NWPO rural schools, peasant students were able to write a proper personal letter in class III and a business letter in Class IV.[51] The first reading primer of students, *Varnaprakáshiká* (The Light of Letters), contained examples of six model letters.[52] As students mastered the skill of reading and writing, they moved on to more advanced LWMs such as *Maktúb-i-Ahmadí* (The Letter-Book of Ahmadi) in the Urdu classroom and *Patra Hitashiní* (A Guide to Skilled Letter-Writing) in the Hindi classroom. 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

[47] *Report on the Enquiry into the Family Budgets of Certain Factory Workers in the United Provinces* (Allahabad, 1930), 22.
[48] *Ibid*., 10.
[49] Morris David Morris, 'New Data on Cotton Mill Workers of Bombay', *The Economic Weekly* (21 September 1957), 1225.
[50] Arun Kumar, 'Learning to Dream: Education, Aspiration, and Working Lives in Colonial India (1880s–1940s)' (Univ. of Göttingen Ph.D. thesis, 2017).
[51] BL, *Report on Public Instruction in the North-Western Provinces and* Oudh, 1883 (Allahabad, 1883), IOR/V/24/914, 91–3.
[52] *Varnaprakáshika*, part 1 (Lucknow, 1875), 13–5.

vagrant classes, were punished and reformed.[53] Students, mainly convicted of petty thefts, were given here compulsory elementary education and training in hard manual labour.[54]

Letter-writing was also an important subject in the schools established by benevolent capitalists for their workers. The British India Corporation (BIC) in Cawnpore which maintained two housing colonies for its cotton and leather factory workers in the 1920s and 1930s — the one in Allenganj and the other in MacRobertganj — ran many day and night schools for workers and their children. These schools provided elementary education to workers and also taught them letter-writing. This was clearly brought out by the propaganda newspaper of the BIC housing complex, *Parosí Bát-Chít* which highlighted the usefulness of letter-writing to workers. An article, titled '*Am Ke Am Aur Guthliyon Ke Dam*' (Enjoy mangoes at the price of kernel), asked workers to attend schools and learn the art of letter-writing. To establish his point, the author of the article discussed a tantalizing story of an illiterate woman whose husband had gone to the city to earn wages. A need arose for the correspondence. While the husband knew how to read and write, the wife relied on a close friend to write for her. On one such occasion, the friend was not available, and a letter containing secret information had come. The woman, now having no one to read her letter, asked a stranger to read it by paying one rupee on condition that he blocked his ears by putting cotton. The man happily read the letter and took the money. Later, he began to blackmail the husband by threatening to reveal the private information if he did not pay a further amount. Without an option, the husband paid for the ignorance and illiteracy of her wife. Through the story, the author made his plea to workers saying that such cannot be your excuse as 'the B.I.C. 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

[53]BL, *Annual Report on the Reformatory School Chunar* (hereafter ARRS), 1895. IOR/V/24/3601. Chunar is located in the Mirzapur District of Uttar Pradesh.
[54] *ARRS*, 1894, 24.

good education.'[55] Letters had acquired a role in the strategies of capitalism to settle the migrant male workforce at the worksite and reproduce the class socially. While such efforts were very sporadic, working-class schools, in the form of night schools, were widespread both in Bombay and Cawnpore.[56]

It appears that the labouring poor, later in their lives, used the letter-writing skills learned at the school. Ram Ghulam and Ganga Charan, who had been students at the Chunar Reformatory Schools and were now indentured labourers, wrote letters to friends. Ghulam, a Muslim from the barber (*nái*) caste, wrote a letter to one of his school friends in 1897 narrating him about his whereabouts, his new job at a sugar plantation in Trinidad, and his monthly wage of rupees twenty-eight. Similarly, Charan, a Brahman upper caste, also wrote to one of his schoolfriends informing him about his migration to Natal and the job under a European with a salary of nine rupees per month.[57] Take another example from a different context. Behramji Malabari, a Parsee social reformer and writer, remembered that when he failed as a carpenter apprentice, his mother had sent him in a free Gujrati school in the 1860s. Here, he excelled in letter-dictation. In his biographical accounts, Behramji recounted,

> 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 parent's 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

[55] *Parosí Bát-Chít*, iii, 4 (April 1929), 4: BL, Mss Eur F221/45.
[56] Kumar, 'Learning to Dream'.
[57] *ARRS, 1898*, Statement–E, IOR/V/24/3601.

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."[58]

Behramji's account provides a fascinating window to understand how the world of mobilities (a husband gone to the city, wife threatening to go to her parent's house, son gone to the 'remote country' of Delhi) as well as expanding commercial and trade networks were negotiated and articulated through letters. Such accounts reinforce the agency and experiences of subjects (wives, father, mother who remained at home) in the labour history. Schools again feature in the letters of soldiers during the First World War as a place where illiterate family members could get their letters written. Jawan Singh wrote to his family (in Punjab) from France on December 3, 1916, '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!'[59] Abdul Ghafur, a six years old boy, wrote to his brother Abdul Hakim Khan (in France) on January 2, 1917: '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?'[60]

The point I am making here is that letter-writing was a pervasive activity among the labouring poor that allowed the labouring families to construct their social world generated by newly emerged local and global mobilities. Non-elite schools, the cheapening of the postal services, and the desire of the poor to learn reading and writing were critical elements in expanding the letter-writing culture. Had the postal charges not been lowered since the 1850s, or the correspondence not made free for soldiers and their

[58] 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), xi–xii.
[59] Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, letter n. 452, 259–60.
[60] *Ibid.*, letter n. 459, 265.

family members during the war,[61] or the poor not exposed to literacy, the engagement of the labouring poor with letters would have been tenuous. The fact that the poor emerged as voracious writers is explained by the massive production of vernacular LWMs and transformations in their contents. Through an examination of these LWMs, we will see that as much as this period was about the democratization of letter-writing practices, it was also about controlling and disciplining subalterns' letter-writing.

II

Printing Letter-Writing Manuals for the Labouring Poor

Since the late nineteenth-century, a large number of commercial and pedagogic vernacular LWMs appeared in the book market throughout north India. These manuals narrated 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 not only catered to the demands of students but also of aspiring professional letter-writers and the general public. Hindi LWMs can be classified into four types: letter-focussed manuals; manuals focussing on letters and specimens of court applications, property papers, commercial documents, petitions; primers that included model letters; and manuals specifically targeting women.

Works on the medieval and early modern Persian epistolary (*inshá*) literature suggest that letter-writing was a domain of ruling elites and upper- and middle-castes. The epistolary literature was written by and for upper-caste scribes.[62] Neither peasants nor artisans figured

[61] NAI, *Annual Report on the Posts and Telegraphs of India for the Year 1914–15*, File No. 160, Department of Commerce and Industry, Post Office Branch, Nov. 1915, Nos. 1–6, 2–3.
[62] Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Making of a Munshi', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, xxiv, 2 (2004), 61–72, 62; Rajeev Kinra, 'Master and Munshí: A Brahman Secretary's Guide to Mughal Governance', *IESHR*, xlvii, 4 (2010). Francis Balfour (ed. and trans.), *Inshá-i Harkaran* (Calcutta, 1781). For a collection of Persian letters, see Charles Stewart, *Original Persian Letters: And Other Documents* (South Carolina, 2013 ©1825); C.A. Storey, *Persian Literature a Bio-Bibliographical* Survey, vol. ii, part 3 (Leiden, 1977). Kumkum Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal', *IESHR*, xlvii, 4 (2010).

as subjects in these epistolary texts. While these texts continued to be present in the nineteenth-century, contents of epistolary texts were significantly transformed to produce clerks and scribes of the East India Company. The Company relied on clerks and scribes for drafting official correspondence, translating Persian texts, and understanding norms and rituals of the 'native' political culture. Medieval epistolary texts, such as *Abulfazal's Letter Book* and *Inshá-i-Madhorám* (The Letter Book of Madhorám), became standard textbooks of the indigenous schools that trained scribes during the Company Raj.[63]

Hindi LWMs that appeared in the book market since the late nineteenth-century were significantly different from the erstwhile epistolary texts in three respects. First, these vernacular manuals were produced in bulk for the masses. Second, these manuals considered rural populace, petty-traders, students, peasants, housewives, migrant-workers, and menial servants as their intended audience. Third, these manuals included model letters on the quotidian subject-matters. Such shifts in the content, audience, pattern, and publication were already visible in the English language LWMs which were being published since the eighteenth-century.[64] Before we discuss how these manuals constructed a hierarchized 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 LWMs.

The *Quarterly List of Publications for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, which maintained a record of all books published in the region under the Press and Registration of Books Act 1867, gives us a rough estimate of LWMs' bulk publication.[65] For example, two

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[63] William *Adam, Report on Vernacular Education in Bengal and Bihar submitted to Government in 1835, 1836 and 1838* (Calcutta, 1868), 20, 208. A Sanskrit LWM titled '*Lekha Darpan*' (*The Mirror of Writing*), was written by one Raghunandan Goswami of Potna thana (Patna Police Station). He also wrote *Patra Prakasá* (The Light of Letters), a letter-writer of 16 pages in Sanskrit with an explanation in Bengali, 187–9. For a brief discussion on the Persian school textbooks, see Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites', 462.

[64] Bannet, *Empire of Letters*, xiii–xiv; Konstantin Dierks, 'The Familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750–1800' in Barton and Hall, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, 31–42.

[65] My calculations are based on the *Quarterly List of Publications for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (QL) (variously titled), BL, IOR/SV 412/ 38–42. The *Quarterly List* could never map entire books and titles published in a given year because many new titles were never sent for registration and many old titles

prominent Hindi LWMs — *Patra Dipiká* (The Light of Letters) by Ramchandar Sen and Kali Charan and *Patrí Mala* (Letter Series) by Pandit Kali Charan — had a total production of 22000 copies in 1868. According to Christopher R. King, in that year, 851,304 books and periodicals were registered in the NWPO.[66] In the same year, only nine texts were printed with 10000 or more copies. Out of these nine texts, three were in Hindi.[67] If these figures represent the total publication of texts in the region, the two of these texts in Hindi were LWMs. Sold cheaply at the price of two annas and published by the Newal Kishor Press Lucknow (NKP), the two texts suggest a growing demand for LWMs among the Hindi reading public. Take the case of another popular Hindi LWM, *Patra Maliká* (The Queen of Letters) written by Pandit Sree Lal. In the ninth edition of the book in June 1873, 50000 copies were printed.[68] There were just two other books which were printed with a similar number of copies between 1867 and 1881.[69] Some of the other Hindi LWMs which were published in several editions with thousands of copies were: *Patra Hitáshiní* (The Well-Wisher of Letters), *Gyán Darpan* (The Mirror of Knowledge), *Byohár Patra Sangrah* (The Collection of Business Letters).

The new LWMs anticipated a wide range of social relations, subjects, and events in their model letters. Let us look closely at the model letters of the abovementioned LWM, *Patra Hitáshiní*. It was a Hindi translation of an Urdu LWM, *Múfid-ul-inshá* by Pandit Sheonarain, a well-known Kashmiri intellectual and educational official of his time in Lucknow. Sheonarain translated the text in the spoken language of Oudh people that included Persian,

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were registered as new books. See also, State Archives, Uttar Pradesh (hereafter UPSA), GAD Proceedings, 1878, March 1873, Nos. 23, 35.

[66] Christopher Rolland King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in the Nineteenth Century North India* (Delhi, 1999), 38–9.

[67] *Ibid*., 41.

[68] QL, third quarter of 1873, book-entry n. 135; BL, SV 412/38, 1867–81, 142. The book was used as a textbook in the rural schools of the NWP.

[69] These books were *Varnamalá* (The Garland of Letters) by Raja Siva Prasad and *Násí Rasná* (The Dangerous Tongue) by the Christian Vernacular Education Society.

Hindi, Urdu, and Sanskrit words.[70] The curriculum of Oudh rural schools indicates that the text was used in Class III.[71] The simultaneous multiple editions from the NKP, Lucknow implies that the book was highly sought after by aspiring writers. From the Quarterly List, we come to know of its first edition with 3300 copies in June 1870, third edition with 2400 copies in July 1887, nineteenth edition with 2000 copies in July 1888, twenty-first edition with 1500 copies in June 1889, twenty-second edition with 5000 copies in February 1890 after which it disappeared from the list.[72] The big jump from the third edition to the nineteenth edition in just one year suggests that NKP had to print several versions of the book at the same time to meet the growing readership of the book. In the list, one also notices another Hindi translation of *Múfid-ul-inshá* by two different translators (Pandit Mahes Datt and Pandit Ganesa Prasad Trivedi). This translation was also titled, *Patra Hitáshiní*, and was published from the NKP. In January 1889, it was in its twelfth edition with 2400 copies published.[73] All these evidences suggest that the book's popularity was growing in the period, and there was a widespread demand for LWMs.

Patra Hitáshiní contained lessons on how to write letters to family members (parents, sibling, son, daughter, brother, sister, maternal grandmother, maternal grandfather, grandson, uncle, nephew, niece, and son-in-law), to government officials and authorities (district magistrate, schoolmaster, employer), to friends, and to domestic servants. The sample-range included: (1) a son residing in Lucknow and writing to his father back in the village asking if he should join the job that an English sáhib (master) had offered; (2) an urban working-class son sending his savings to the family through a Hundi; (3) a zamindar (landlord) asking his son to finish his studies, return home and manage the hereditary

[70] Pandit Sheonarain, *Patra Hitaishiní* (Lucknow, 1875), preface.
[71] BL, *Report on Public Instruction in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* 1883(Allahabad, 1883), IOR/V/24/914, 91–3.
[72] BL, *QL*, 1867–81 and 1888–93, SV 412/38.
[73] *QL* 1888–93, the first quarter of 1889, entry n. 11, Hindi books section.

agricultural business, and to not run after petty government jobs but to learn the new technical knowledge that could maximize cotton production back home; (4) a domestic servant, who looks after his masters' property in the city, writing to his master about the court matter that has begun due to the illegal takeover of the property by one of the master's idle son; (5) a master writing to his several servants: to the housekeeper (a low-caste Kahar) about his return to the home and make the house ready before his arrival, to the cook (an upper-caste Brahman) to get the food ready, and to the messenger (a low-caste barber) to invite all his friends for a feast; (6) a domestic servant writing to his master seeking financial help for his son's marriage and asking to clear the pending dues; (7) an unemployed writing to someone high in the status for a job and narrating his hard life experiences; (8) a friend asking for money from another friend to pay his medical expenses and the resulting debts; (9) a younger brother telling his family members about the arrival of the bidesiya (migrant) brother from Calcutta on a month's leave for a marriage; (10) a student seeking leave from the school to arrange and attend his brother's wedding.[74] We see that the author had anticipated various imaginary situations that highlighted the emerging mobilities (the migration of villagers to cities), labour regimes (household, work in the city), sociabilities (cross caste and class interaction, friendship network, encounters with Europeans in the city).

II.I Anxieties of Social Hierarchy

LWMs produced a social order of the letter-writing world where users were to familiarize themselves with rules of abiding class, caste, gender, age, and status hierarchy. It instructed how a domestic servant had to respond to the letter of a master; how a lower caste had to abide by the rules of her own subordination in the written speech; and how employers, caste

[74] Sheonarain, *Patra Hitaishiní*.

elites, and state authorities had to exert their dominant status in the writing. Some rules were meant to be followed by everyone. For example, *Patra Hitáshiní* instructed all readers to,

1. Write clearly and simply. Avoid any ornamentation, art, and design in letters, especially in petitions.
2. Use only spoken words even if they are of Persian, Arabic, and 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 will be obliged to you or indebted to you' in letters addressed to parents as such phrases develop a feeling of indifference in relations.[75]

Since those belonging to the lower social stratum were getting involved in letter-writing for the first time either as a writer or as a recipient, upper-caste authors of LWMs stressed that writers on both sides should know how to address and write to each other. They feared that cross-caste and class letter-writing, if not instructed, could collapse the established social order and respect for hierarchies. The fear of uncontrolled hands of new writers was profound. Until now, letter-writing had been a very tightly regulated activity and was carried out among elites. Lower-castes were their messengers, not the recipient and responder of their letters. The expanding postal communication, entry of 'lower and untouchable castes' into schools and enthusiasm of labouring classes to indulge in letter-writing, as discussed in the first section, had changed the equation. LWMs' instructions have to be seen both as a commercial response to the mass letter-writing and as a means to ensure the dominance of the dominant.

LWMs provided templates for opening and closing different types of letters. Readers, including less-skilled 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 the stress

[75] *Ibid*., preface.

on the proper use of the opening salutation remarks. The term *Shrí* (an honorific auspicious title) — symbolizing the power structures of kinship, age, class, caste, and intellect — was to be used precisely. *Patra Hitáshiní* advised readers to use the *Shrí* salutation six times for parents, schoolmasters, and grandparents; five times for an employer and other elderly relatives; four times for a foe; three times for a friend or a brother; two times for a son; and one time for a wife.[76] Further, a letter addressed to an elder should use the prefix *Siddhí* (the enlightened) before the word *Shrí.* And, if the recipient was younger in the age, *Shrí* was to be preceded by another term, *Swasti Shrí* (source of all auspiciousness).[77] Thus writing to his mother, a son was to salute like this: 'To Siddhí Shrí 6 [times] mother, may your auspicious presence receive the respectful greetings of [name of the son].'[78] In return, the mother replied: 'I hope my wishes reach to my beloved and eternally-blessed auspicious son.'[79]

Although the wife of an elite and 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 in the overall social hierarchy. The advice on how lower-castes should address upper- and middle-castes was sharp. The author, who himself was an upper-caste school official, insisted that marks of submission and forms of oral salutations should figure prominently in the written speech of the lowest castes. He advocated that a Shudra (lower-caste) should always open her letter by writing these phrases — '*Dandavat Pranám*' (greet by prostrating the body in submission) or '*Pálagan*' (I touch your feet in respect!). While writing among themselves, a Shudra, the author instructed, should use a different phrase: '*Rám-Rám*

[76] *Ibid.,* 5.
[77] However, it was equally possible that LWMs were borrowing their styles from real letters. Evidence of a *Devnágarí* letter dated 17th April 1876 (7th baisákhí 1933 Samvat) published in a letter-book collection of a Postmaster General shows that phrases like 'Swasastí Shrí' were already in use. C.W. Hutchinson, *Specimen of Various Vernacular Character Passed Through the Post Office in India* (Calcutta, 1877), 15.
[78] The actual Hindi phrase was: 'Siddhí Shrí 6 [times] sarva-shubhópamá-yogya mátájí ko Shivdutta ka pranám pahunche'.
[79] The actual Hindi phrase was: Swastishrí chiranjívi putra Rámdin ko merá bahut tarah se ashirvád pahunche.

Sítarám' (greetings in the name of God).[80] While *Dandavat Pranám* could be used by anyone writing to an elder 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 the everyday oral interaction between the lower and upper caste groups of north India. An Indian Christian, Baboo Ishuree Das, writing on the domestic manners and customs of north India, found that similar forms of salutations were prevalent in the everyday speech.[81] Upper-caste elites were interested and anxious to retain their marks of higher status which the advent of the mass letter-writing threatened. Charu Gupta's research on the representation of domestic servants in the popular Hindi literature suggests that upper- and middle-caste authors were very cautious of the cross-caste interaction. She shows that the literary trope of subordinating and controlling low-caste servants, within the literary representation of upper- and middle-caste households, was crucial to the production of caste, class, gender, and community difference in colonial north India.[82]

II.II Patriarchal Anxieties

It was not uncommon for LWMs 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.[83] However, much of this writing was

[80] Sheonarain, *Patra Hitaishiní*, 6.
[81] Baboo Ishuree Dass, *Domestic Manners and Customs of the Hindoos of Northern India* (Benares, 1860), 130–1.
[82] Charu Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies: Representation of Servants in Hindi Print Culture of Colonial India', *Studies in History*, Online First (2018).
[83] 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).

intended for elite-caste women in order to train them as ideal housewives. The popular Hindi literature portrayed lower-caste women as overtly sexual, immoral, uneducated, loud, dishonest, and everything that was 'the other' of the caste women who were seen as cultured, honest, soft, and chaste.[84] While LWMs reproduced these dominant representations, 'low-caste' females were also their readers whose subjectivities needed to be aligned to the social order of the written world. Model letters, meant for the consumption of female leaders, anticipated various mobilities that affected a woman' life, such as the bridal mobility from the parental home to in-laws' place, migration of the labouring husband to the city and so on.

Sheonarain, the author of the already discussed LWM *Patra Hitáshiní*, had also written a Hindi manual for female readers. Published by the NKP in 1873, it was titled *Striyon Kí Hitopatriká: Arthát Hindí me Khata Patra ádi Sikháne kí Pustak* (The Well-Wisher Book of Girls: the Hindi Letter-Writer).[85] It provided templates of letters between: a girl student and her teacher; a teacher-wife and her 'foolish' sister-in-law; a daughter and maternal grandfather; a daughter and father; a daughter and mother; a sister and brother; a wife and mother-in-law; a son-in-law and mother-in-law; a wife and husband; and, a mistress and her domestic servants. Sociabilities that were addressed in these model letters highlighted the varying degrees of subordinated and labouring life that a woman lived. In these letters, her world was underpinned by the patriarchal male dominance, caste relations, and paid/unpaid work. Let us look at the letter no. 13, from a mother to her married daughter.

> Blessings reach to the beloved Swastishri daughter. I have come to know the rumour that you are not getting along with your husband, and the reason for this is rumoured

[84] 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'.
[85] Sheonarain, *Striyon Kí Hitopatrika: arthát Hindí me Khata Patra ádi Sikháne kí Pustak* (Lucknow, 1873).

> that you deliberately do not work hard in the household. And, neither 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 labour 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 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 the God has made men for earning money and women to eat and rest on the bed. With such thoughts, women become lazy…[86]

The letter goes on instructing 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 the middle and labouring class families which drew its 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 the image of careless, indolent and unproductive wives.

Nári Sudashá Pravartak Part III (The Foundation of Women Welfare), written by a female Arya Samaji (the Hindu social reform movement) advocate, Shri Mati Buddhimati, included fifty-one model letters. But all the letters reinforced the domestic and moral boundaries of the female life.[87] Not a single letter was addressed to a stranger or a government official (except a letter addressed to a schoolmistress). Women were portrayed

[86] *Ibid*., 29–31.
[87] At least, five editions of the text with 1100 copies each were produced. The book was meant to be used as a prize for bright female students. On the 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).

in their traditional roles as virtuous and hardworking wives, daughters, mothers, 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 rhetorical reasons for which male and female patriarchs did not send their daughters to schools.[88] In contrast, these manuals told their readers to educate their daughters, wives and sisters. Buddhimati asked girls to learn not only reading and writing but also letter-writing. The necessity of letter-writing to girls was highlighted after their marriage when they would require the skill to remain connected with their parents, siblings and childhood friends. Buddhimati told girls that the skill would keep them happy when their husbands would migrate to cities for work. Like the aforementioned BIC working-class school propagandist, Buddhimati advised girls that secrecy was crucial to a successful marriage, and letters provided that. Not knowing to read and write letters was to reveal secrets of married life to others and hide love feelings for the husband. She summed up her views in these lines.

A letter is half a meeting where there is longing for a sight;
the coming of a letter brings happiness and hopes for a reunion.[89]
पाती आधा मिलन है जिहि दर्शन के प्यास
देखत ही सुख उपजैईय बहुरि मिलन की आस ||

In the female LWMs, a woman labouring in fields and factories was absent. The only wage-earning labouring women that was present in these LWMs as the audience was the

[88] Pandit Badrí Lál, *Striyon kí Shikshá Nimitt* (A lecture of Female Education) (Mirzapur, 1862), 241.
[89] Shri Mati Bhuddimati, *Nári Sudashá Pravartak*, Part 3 (Ajmer, 1896?), preface.

domestic servant. Thus, one type of non-waged household worker (the 'idealized' middle-caste wife) wrote to the other 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. The middle-class women, subordinated by the male patriarch of the household, gave orders to the 'low-caste' female servant, scolded her for negligence, threatened to fire her for absenteeism.[90] In return, the female domestic servant wrote petitions, *not letters*, to their mistress and saluted them with *Siddhi Shrí* six times as a mark of total submission. When asked by the mistress (Thakuráin) to send a domestic help, an older domestic servant of the mistress was supposed to write the following petition-style letter.

> May the Siddhi Shri 6 times Maharani, the defender and bread-giver be always happy. In response to the letter dated 5th Magh [Hindu Calendar Month], the request is that this maid/slave [Dási] always wished to serve the remaining of her little life under the feet of the Maharani. Because of my shameful acts, I could never get the opportunity. Now that the call of my girl [Laundí, the opposite of the term 'lad'] has been made, she will appear for the job as per your command. But, the subject/governed [Adheená] is surprised as to why the Maharani has asked for a security bond of Rs. 10 because the Maharani knows it well that the subject 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 I was accused of any wrongdoings nor of any theft. The girl will act as per the command of the Maharani. May the glory of the sun and fate always bestow upon you.[91]

[90] Sheonarain, *Striyon Kí Hitopatrika*, 118–20.
[91] *Ibid.,* 123–4.

The senior domestic servant was not only taught to express complete submission to the upper-caste mistress but also to see herself as an inferior being in relation to the mistress and use a derogatory language for her class. What is even more interesting to note was the ability of these model letter authors to weave in the emerging realities of the labouring world, i.e. the invocation of the master and servant contract with a security bond of Rs. 10 at which the domestic servant expressed her surprise. In her understanding, servants were just employed on the basis of recommendations, loyalty and their honest performance. We see that the content of these manuals as well as instructions of authors attempted to produce a social world where the labouring poor and lower-castes were subordinated to the socially rich elite class. But, were these manuals bought, read and followed by the subaltern classes?

III

Subaltern Readers of Letter-Writing Manuals

The large production of LWMs, both in regard to titles and copies printed, in the late nineteenth-century indicates that there was a public demand for such guides. No direct evidence exists on the absolute nature of the readership, that is, who bought, read and followed these LWMs. In the context of European and American LWMs, Linda C. Mitchell and Sarah Pearsall argue that LWMs did have readership.[92] In contrast, Susan Whyman who examined the letters of low and middle-class British families and David Fitzpatrick who studied Irish emigrants' letters argue that manuals did not figure as a tool to learn letter-

[92] Linda C. Mitchell, "Letter-Writing Instruction Manuals in Seventeenth-and Eighteenth-Century England," in Poster and Mitchell, *Letter-Writing Manuals*; Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2008).

writing.[93] Whyman argued that letter-writing skills were learned via informal education imparted by parents and other literate individuals. Roger Chartier with regard to French LWMs suggested that the style of model letters could not be taken as an indication of what people wrote in real lives, but they did provide templates and guidance for the labouring poor.[94] In the context of India, to answer this question is even more difficult as not many actual letters of the labouring poor have survived. However, the sources that I have found indicate that the labouring poor did have access to LWMs and, in some cases, followed them. We also have an instance where the subaltern writer transgressed the sacred boundaries of the social norms instructed by LWMs and evolved what appears to be his own style of letter-writing. This case, discussed at the end of this section, also reinforces that some letter-writing by the poor was happening without the help of a scribe.

Let me begin by showing how and why LWMs were being read by the labouring poor in India. I would like to return to the letters of indentured coolies (ex-students of the Bareilly/Chunar Reformatory School) and the First World War Indian soldiers which I discussed in the first section. There, I argued that schools were one of the places where the labouring poor were exposed to LWMs. In the second section, I demonstrated the nature of a few LWMs used in these schools. In the reformatory school, letter-writing between convict-students and family members came to be encouraged as a mechanism to make convicts socially responsible beings.[95] Hundreds of students, who passed through the reformatory school and later turned into skilled and unskilled manual workers, read the aforementioned LWM textbook, *Maktúb-i-Ahmadí*. Examining the intellectual progress of boys, T. J. Scott, the Principal of the Bareilly Theological College, wrote in his 1894 report,

[93] 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 Sinke, *Letters across Borders*, 97–106.
[94] Roger Chartier, 'An Ordinary Kind of Writing: Model Letters and Letter-Writing in Ancien Régime France', in Chartier and Boureau, *Correspondence*, 1–23.
[95] J.W. Coombes, *The Making of Men* (London, 1920), 271.

'some lads advanced to *Maktúb-i- Ahmadí* [and] read fairly well to page 16.'[96] A continuous production of the LWM suggests that the text had a considerable circulation and readership in northern India. The NKP brought out the first edition of the text in 1876 with 1125 copies. In the next seven years, it brought out twelve more editions of the text and increased the number of copies produced from 1125 to 5000 in its last edition.[97] The cost of the book was also lowered down from six annas to one anna — one-fourth or one-third of a labourers' daily wage.[98] The author of the book, Sayyid Ahmad Hussain Khan, was a leading official in the Education Department and held positions as the Head Master of the Normal Tahsíl (circle) School and Deputy Inspector of Schools in Pratápgarh district. Seeing the increasing popularity of the text, Ambikaprasad, the Deputy Inspector of Schools in Lucknow translated the text into Kaithí language in 1880 and titled it *Kaithí Patramálá* (Kaithí Letter-Writer). The index of Hindi books at the British Library suggests that no less than ten editions of the Kaithí book were printed from the NKP. Besides, a local press Gulshan-i-Ahmadí Press in Pratápgarh district also brought out a few Kaithí editions and met the demand of the book in the eastern NWPO. The Kaithí translation of the text was both for rural students and for the autodidact peasant.[99] Kaithí, being the most popular character among cultivators, traders, and merchants in the Gangetic-belt, offered an immense market for the book.[100]

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[96] *ARRS*, Bareilly, 1894, 24.

[97] For the first edition see the Catalogues of Books (QL) Oudh 1868–76, the table list ending in September 1876, BL, IOR/SV 412/42 and for the twelfth edition, see the *QL, 1882–1887*, the tables ending with the second quarter of 1883, BL, IOR/SV 412/38.

[98] On the wages of agrarian and artisanal labour, see H.R. Nevill, *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, vol. iv (Allahabad, 1904), 64.

[99] Ambikaprasad, *Kaithí Patramálá* (Lucknow, 1880), 3.

[100] Examining the everyday uses of Kaithí in Bihar (the adjacent eastern region of the NWPO), 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 Kaithi. Not only is correspondence mostly carried in Kaithi, and all accounts are kept in Kaithi, but a very large number of books in most popular use in the interior districts are read from Kaithi manuscripts.' UPSA, General Department Proceedings, Part 1 and 2, June 1877, Nos. 16, letter dated 4th April 1877. Pointing out the widespread use of Kaithí in Oudh, J.C. Nesfield, another Inspector of Schools, found that many of the ex-student of village schools who publicly claimed that they

Reports of the Censor of Indian Mail from France again provide clues as to the usages of LWMs by subaltern soldiers. Frustrated by reading ambiguous letters of soldiers and their relatives, the censor officials commented in January 1915:

> The Indian army is in the main [sic] 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.[101]

Not all the letters of soldiers were written by articulate scribes. Curiously, the officials noted that soldiers were trying hard to learn to read and write and had requested 'primers and spelling-books' in large quantities from India. They also found that soldiers were copying the style of LWMs. For example, the report of December 1915 remarked, 'the author of the extract No. 2 (a letter not printed) is typical of this class, and his letter is really well written.'[102] The India branch of the YMCA, a global Christian missionary organization, did not just employ eight secretaries in France to help illiterate Indian soldiers in writing their letters but also organized regular classes for soldiers on letter-writing in Urdu and Hindi.[103] Those who were writing from the other end, especially wives, sons and brothers of soldiers, would have also used LWMs. 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

used Nágarí for the everyday writing were actually using Kaithí or Mahájaní in reality. Nesfield, 'Results of Primary Education in the North-West and Oudh', *Calcutta Review* (July 1883), 72–128, 73.
[101] IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1, Note by Mr. E.B. Howell, 59.
[102] IOR/ L/MIL/5/828, Supplementary Letters forwarded by the Indian Censor Mail in France dated 4th December 1915, part 1, 116.
[103] Eddy, *With Our Soldiers in France*, 93–4, 102–3.

> 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.[104]

The Censor officer 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 which Buddhimati had discussed in her LWM. It appears that the wife of Prayag Singh was an expert writer. She was also engaged in letter-writing with other family members. For her, letters were not just a means of sharing her personal feeling but also a way of communicating important family news (marriage, money).

LWMs would have not been just approached for their lessons on the styles and conventions of letter-writing, they would have also been bought by the people because they provided valuable information about the functioning of the postal machinery. Postal officials commented that amateur letter-writers often did not know to write proper addresses of the

[104] Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, 129.

recipient.[105] G.A. Grierson, a linguist and colonial official, noted that indentured labourers often wrote wrong addresses on their letters and money orders. For example, a letter to an indentured labourer from her mother was addressed like this: 'Harbans, the son of Madari'.[106] The problem of the undelivered post was so acute that dead-letter offices were created in major postal towns. In 1884-85, there were 3,642,994 undelivered posts in India.[107] During the First World War, thousands of letters from Indian soldiers never reached to their relatives and vice versa.[108] To ensure that letters from villages, often without a complete address, reached to soldiers, letters were directed to the Base Depot in Bombay and France for cataloguing where an updated record of soldiers' unit, rank, and department was kept.[109] Likewise, the YMCA secretaries directed Indian soldiers' letters going to Lahore to a missionary or a government worker in Lahore, and from there, the post was forwarded to the relatives of soldiers.[110] 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. The editors of *Hindustan*, a local Hindi newspaper published from Pratápgarh (NWPO), appreciated the efforts of rural schools to educate peasantry in writing clear and correct addresses on letters.[111] 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, neighbourhood along with a landmark.[112] Another reason for the poor to seek LWMs would have been to save scribal charges of letter and postcard writing. As discussed in the first section, postal expenses came to constitute an important part of the working-class

[105] Clarke, *The Post Office of India*, 89.
[106] Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration*, 28.
[107] NAI, Finance and Commerce Department, Separate Revenue, February 1887, Nos. 92–4/ A, *ROPOI*, 1885–86, 25.
[108] For example, the Returned Letter Office at Basra in Mesopotamia dealt with around 200,000 lost letters per month in 1916. Clarke, *The Post Office of India*, 172–3. Robert Gray, 'Indian Army Postal Service in World War I,' American Philatelist (June 2014).
[109] *Ibid*.
[110] Eddy, *With Our Soldiers in France*, 94.
[111] *NNR*, 1894, 346–7.
[112] Bhuddimati, *Nári Sudashá Pravartak*, preface.

family budget. According to one estimate, a scribe in the early twentieth-century charged one paisa for writing the addresses in a proper format, two paisas for a short letter/postcard/money order, and three paisas or more for a long letter.[113] If this price list was correct, scribal charges were a severe burden on the poor who in the 1920s earned between ten and twenty-four annas per day in the Bombay city and three to four annas in rural north India.[114]

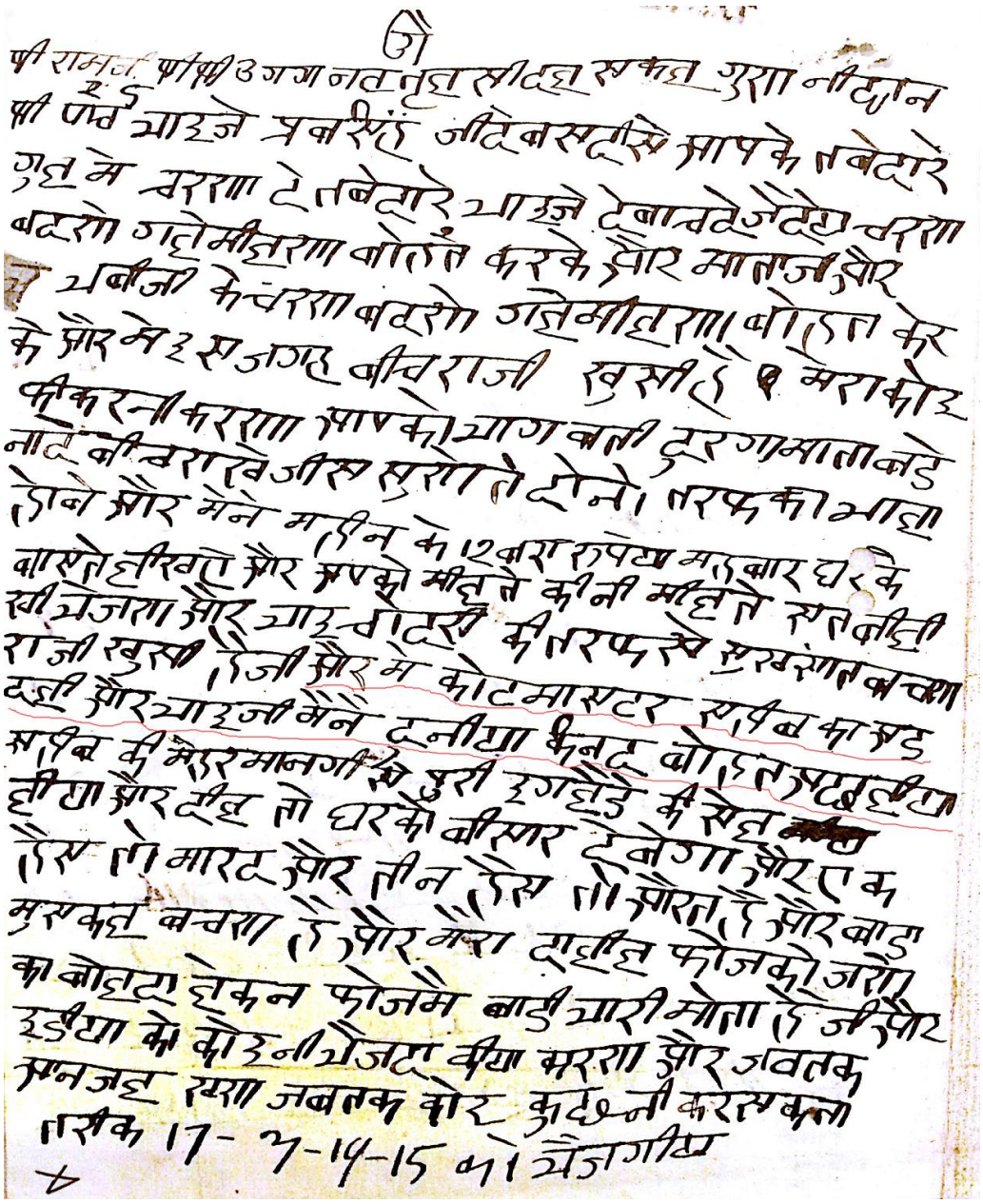
LWMs had a role in educating the poor in the art of letter-writing but the poor infused letters with their own writing styles. I would like to illustrate this point by discussing the letter of an Indian Dográ soldier. The letter dated 17 July 1915 was sent from the Brighton Pavilion in England to Prabh Singh (an elder brother of the soldier), residing in Khatar village, Kangra (north India). It opened with an *Om* sign (the sacred sound and the holy icon of Lord Shiva) on the top of the letter (Figure 2) — clearly a style not suggested by LWMs. Again, instead of writing *shrí* two times in his salutation remark to his elder brother as prescribed by various LWMs, the soldier-writer used it only once. Further, he created his form of salutation in which greetings and respect were first accorded to Hindu Gods — an aspect omitted by model letter-writers — and then to the recipient. The salutation went like this: '*Om, Shrí Rámjí, prayers and flowers reach to Shrí Shrí 3 [times] Om Ganga [the Hindu God Shiva and Goddess Ganga] and Lord Vishnu.*' Following, the author touched the feet of his brother *Shrí* Prabh Singh, his mother, and brother's wife. Afterwards, the letter went like this:

> I am happy at this place. Do not worry about me. Goddess Bhagbati Durgamata blesses both sides. I have been saving twelve Rs. per month and will send you [money] in bulk

[113] Clarke, *The Post Office of India*, 94.
[114] Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, 309–10; Nevill, *District Gazetteers*, 64.

and [sic] 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. My conscience tells me to join 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. [Page End]

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.



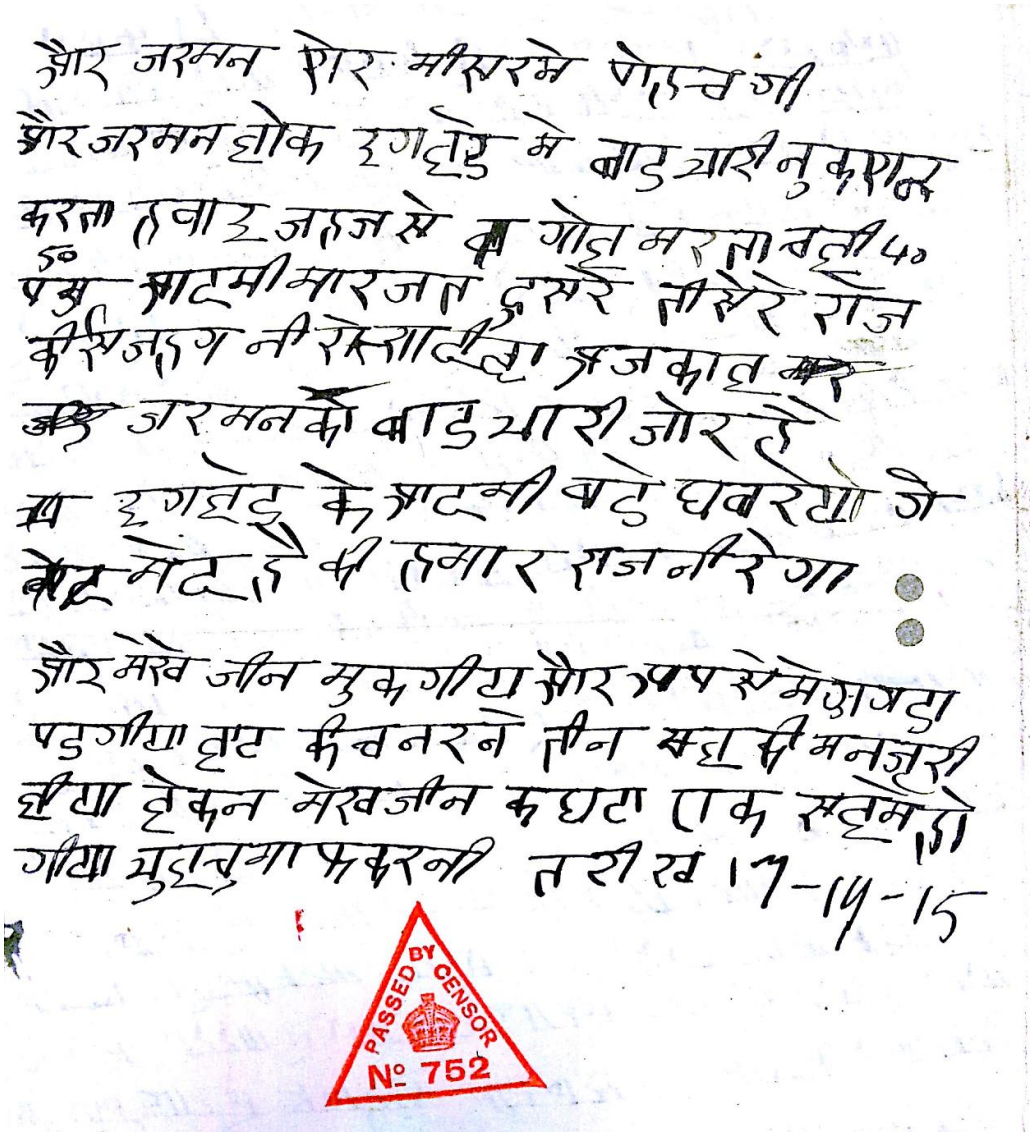


Figure 2: Source: Censor of Indian Mails 1914-1918, Part 1, 3. © The British Library Board, BL, L/MIL/5/828.

In the letter, we can see various linguistic shifts. The language of the salutation was complex, poetical and creative. In contrast, paragraphs following the salutation and greeting were written in a more straightforward and conversational language where the appropriation and 'Hindization' of English words such as of India and *Lát* (for '*Lord'* Kitchener) can be seen. This also suggests that the salutation line was author's distinctive line which he probably repeated in each and every personal letter he wrote. The pattern of writing also differed in this two-page letter. For example, compared to the second page the writing on

the first page was very dense. The words ‘date’ and ‘the date’ were written differently on the two pages (a shift from तरीक 17-7-19-15 at the end of the first page to तरीख 17-19-15 at the end of the second page). These handwriting shifts indicate that our writer was new to the act of writing; his thoughts and hands were still unsynchronized. He presented his thoughts as they came to him, except that he knew that writing dates on each page and proper forms of salutation were a necessary element in the art of letter-writing. He followed a standard format of letter-writing, but we do not know if he had read any LWM or was being helped by someone who had read a manual. If he had not read any manual, it suggests that there was some subaltern writing that was happening outside the scope of LWMs and scribes. If he had read any manual or was introduced to the proper style of letter-writing by the YMCA classes, then he also invented his own peculiar form of salutation and filled the letter with his astonishments, love, despair and employed a hybrid language. His letter helps us to go through the malleable, creative world of subaltern writing which challenges the rigidities of discourses that sees subalterns as merely labouring bodies, devoid of any intellectual activities.

The letter written by the Dogra Soldier covered various aspects: the status of well-being to the family, news of remittance, kindness of the quartermaster, social life and gender ratio in London, fear of losing morality because of being surrounded by women, availability of meat and drinks in England, bombing of London by German aeroplanes, fear of the English government, lack of the war weapons on the English side, and an imminent collapse of the British Empire. Scholars have shown that the letters of Indian soldiers, despite the censorship, were never about themselves. They, in a clear defiance to the War postal rules, discussed the progress of the war, death of the soldiers, sexual encounters, the mighty power

of Germany, and an advice to the near ones to not enlist in the Army.[115] They used a coded language to write about the matters that their superiors and postal guidelines had clearly prohibited — again suggesting the limits of the social and political orders authorized by the colonial elite.[116] A report of the Censor Mail 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.[117]

Workers of the Bombay cotton mills wrote anonymous letters to mill employers about the corrupt practices of jobbers.[118] Writing anonymously saved them from getting targeted and fired. What the caste-elites instructed subalterns to write in a letter was one thing and 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, *Chánd*, where they spoke of female agency, transgressive love, 'domestic cruelty, emotional insecurity, and repressed sexuality.'[119] Through letters, the poor also questioned the very ethos of a regimented social, political and patriarchal world that elites attempted to produce through model letters and instructions.

Conclusion

[115] See various letters presented in IOR/L/MIL/5/828/1, 2, 3.
[116] Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*; Amin, *Some Considerations on Evidence*.
[117] IOR/L/MIL/5/828/1, report dated 15/2/15, 69.
[118] *RCLI*, Bombay and Sindh, i, 1, 297.
[119] Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere*, 280–6.

Both letters and LWMs continued to be part of the lived experience of the labouring poor in the post-war years, albeit with new elements.[120] By the late 1920s and 1930s, other than the pedagogic LWMs, the collection of love letters became a literary genre of its own. Some of these texts were: Yashodá Deví's *Manual for the Love of Husband or Letter Correspondence between Husband and Wife* (*Patí Prem Patriká Arthát Patí-Patní ká Patra Vyvahar*), 1925; K.K. Malaviyá's, *Letters of Manorama: To Her Lovers* (*Manoramá Ke Patra: Apne Premiyon ke Nám*), 1927; Pandey Bechan Sharmá's, *A Love Story Told Through a Series of Letter* (*Chand Hasíno ki Khutut*), 1927; Nar Singh Ram Shukla's *Letters of Lovers* (*Premiyon Ke Patrá*), 1940. I would like to conclude this article by reasserting two main points. First, the emergence of the mass letter-writing was produced in the context of a huge local and global labour mobility. This increased act of letter-writing by the poor was mediated by a complex nexus of the cheapening of postal services, the emergence of nonelite schools, growing literacy rates, and access to letter-writing skills and LWMs. The poor did not always rely on professional letter-writers or literate intermediaries, as has been suggested in the accounts of subaltern and communication histories. Instead, they also forged a personal relationship with the practice of letter-writing, scribes, post-offices and post-officials to connect the rural spaces to the urban, distant, transnational labour regimes. A focus on the letters of the labouring poor showed that the emergent male and female mobilities during the colonial era were not merely experienced through the movement of bodies but also by an exchange of information, emotion, knowledge, and objects from both sides. Whether it were the household management advices of the mother to her married daughter, or the plea of the mother to her son to return from *pardes* (foreign land), or the cheerful and exciting letter of a wounded soldier brother from the Brighton Pavilion to his family in a village, all these letters suggest that the distances of the labouring world had to

[120] For a record of the post-war LWMs, see BL, SV 412/38, 1919–1948.

be experienced and negotiated in the quotidian life. Whichever way historians' retelling of the past takes shape, there was no escape from theses experience for the labouring bodies.

Second, I have also attempted to show that elites' (colonial officials, employers, male and female upper-castes) control over the labouring body was not merely restricted to the workspace (factory, plantations, war-fronts, domestic household) but they constantly attempted to control the behaviour of the subordinated even in the textual realm of the social world. A study of LWMs and letters allows us to notice these nuanced ways in which power was exercised by the dominant. Elites feared the freestyle self-writing of the poor, lower-castes, and marginalized groups as it threatened their privileges, social respect, and dominant patriarchal position in the written social world that was closely tied to the lived social world. The written speech of the subordinated class was as dangerous as their actions, rebellions and protests. LWMs, which guided subalterns in letter-writing, also attempted to control and discipline their written speech, thoughts and behaviour. Manuals did not just teach low-castes, domestic labourers, and girls how to open and close a letter but also to be submissive, loyal, productive, and polite to their masters, husbands, and upper-castes. They instructed lower castes to remain in their caste boundaries, and reminded upper-castes to assert their domination in the written speech. The poor, who read these manuals through school curriculums and out of necessity for self-guidance, did learn the art of letter-writing from model letters and emulated them. However, subalterns' letters did not always conform to the instructions of LWMs. Instead, they used letter-writing for their purpose that often disturbed the established elite social and political codes — whether it was in the factory space by writing anonymous letters, or by challenging the mail censorship rules of the army, or by creating their own styles of opening salutation remarks.