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Mass Petitioning, Education Reform, and the Development of Political Culture in Madras, 1839–1842

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Abstract

This article explores the emergence of reformist sentiment and political culture in Madras in the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, it contributes to, and expands upon, the growing body of literature on colonial petitioning through a case-study of a mass petition demanding education reform. Signed in 1839 by 70,000 subjects from across the Madras presidency, the petition demanded the creation of a university that would qualify western-educated Indians to gain employment in the high public offices of the East India Company. Through an analysis of the lifecycle of this education petition, from its creation to its reception and the subsequent adoption of its demands by the Company government at Fort St George, this article charts the process by which an emergent, politicized public engaged with, and critiqued, the colonial state. Finally, it examines the transformative effect that the practice of mass petitioning had on established modes of political activism and communication between an authoritarian colonial state and the society it governed.

In November 1839, Lord Elphinstone, governor of Madras (1837–42), was presented with a petition,¹ signed by over 70,000 subjects of the East India

¹ In this article, I use the terms petition, memorial, address, and supplication interchangeably for the sake of style and avoiding repetition. While there is scholarly debate about the propriety of using these terms interchangeably, the contemporaries who dealt with this petition, and other documents of a similar nature, did not bind themselves to a singular word or definition for the document in question. The 1839 petition is referred to variably as a memorial by the petitioners themselves; as an address by the Public Department at the seat of government in Madras; and as a petition by Company officials in their personal correspondence and published works. For more on the question of the definitional boundaries of petitions, see Rohit De and Robert Travers, ‘Petitioning and political cultures in South Asia: introduction’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 53 (2019), pp. 1–20, at pp. 5–7.

Company's (hereafter, 'the Company') government, demanding a remodelled and reinvigorated system of education for the Madras presidency. The petitioners wrote:

If the diffusion of Education be among the highest benefits and duties of a Government (to the conviction of which we have been led) we, the people, petition for our share. We ask advancement through those means which we believe will best enable us, in common with our other fellow-subjects, to promote the general interests of our native land.²

The mass petition, unprecedented both in the number of signatories and in its demands, would set in motion, and recurrently justify, a set of educational initiatives that had long been contemplated by reformers within the Company administration and amongst the leading members of Madras society. Foremost among these demands was the creation of Madras University, which would provide training to Indian students aspiring to roles within the Company's bureaucracy.

Consulting the original petition, one is met with a heavy and unwieldy scroll composed of many individual sheets of paper pasted to a cloth base (Figure 1). The weight of the artefact, followed by the task of finding sufficient space to roll out a scroll exceeding 50 metres in length, immediately impresses upon the reader the performative potency of such a document.³ It is not difficult to imagine that such a petition, when extended across the floors of the presidency government offices at Fort St George, would have conveyed to its addressees the weight of its demands. Indeed, when compared with the individually or collectively signed single-page petitions that were typically presented to the Company's *cutcherries* (administrative offices), either in the city of Madras or throughout the *mofussil* (countryside), the extraordinary nature and scale of the mass petition becomes clear.

At the top of the scroll, the address is printed in English, followed by Tamil and Telugu translations. Appended below the supplication are metres upon metres of handwritten signatures, displaying various levels of literacy and social status; and, thus, presenting a rich tapestry of the highly varied and diverse body of subjects from whom the petition drew its power. Signed in the Latin, Tamil, Telugu and other scripts; displaying a wide range of

² India Office Records (IOR), Mss Eur G54, 'Petition from the native inhabitants of Madras' (11 Nov. 1839).

³ In its current fragile state, and respecting British Library manuscript preservation regulations, only three to four metres of the petition are accessible to the reader. However, studies of better-preserved mass petitions provide some indication of the scale of these documents. For example, in his analysis of a seventeenth-century English mass petition signed by 18,000 subjects, Mark Knights notes that the surviving sheets of signatures measure 'fifty two yards when joined together'. Although the formatting of petitions varies widely, it is conceivable that the 1839 petition, subscribed to by approximately 50,000 more signatories, would at least exceed the length of the petition described by Knights. See Mark Knights, 'London's "monster" petition of 1680', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), p. 42.



Figure 1. 1839 education petition scroll with printed memorial and appended signatures. © British Library Board, India Office Records, Mss Eur G54.

penmanship skills; marked by a variety of writing utensils; notched and scored by a wear and tear that recalls the long journeys these signatures made; and eliciting a conspicuous diversity and deliberate intermingling of caste affiliations: the petition as a physical document brings to life the multitudinous and heterogeneous ordering of the signatories who triggered the education reforms of the late 1830s. Furthermore, the variety of signatories, locations, castes, and languages, all deliberately organized, indicates the existence of a complex, integrated, and widespread political culture that was able to entrench acts of mass petitioning as an effective political tool, not for individual subjects seeking favour, but for a public that had interests in the practice of governance and the creation of public institutions. The architects of the address sought, through the channel of mass petitioning, to seize the initiative in directing policy-formation and institution-building.⁴

This article seeks to contribute to dissecting the lifecycle, that is the origins and short- and long-term effects, of mid-century colonial mass petitions. It does so through inquiries into both the correspondence and deliberation that preceded the petition's release, and the consequent resolutions and debates that followed the implementation of its demands. I argue that the

⁴ De and Travers note that institution-building and state-formation through petitioning is typically a jealously guarded prerogative that the state typically attempts to preserve. See De and Travers, 'Petitioning and political cultures', p. 9.

petition was the product of an emergent political culture that was mobilized by the need for social elites to renegotiate their relationship to the state as the latter underwent dramatic structural transformations in the 1830s.⁵

Recent scholarship on the history of colonial bureaucracy has provided instructive insights into the relationship between South Indian society and the Company state as it consolidated its political-administrative role.⁶ However, such studies remain somewhat unclear about how Indian subjects, both within and outside of the Company service, shaped colonial policy and state-building in the late Company period. Analysis of this petition reveals that the façade of the colonial bureaucracy, despite its deliberate construction as a spectral and opaque set of institutions, was a porous frontier (that did not necessarily sustain a wholly exclusionary logic) that administrators and Indian subjects crossed with regularity. Furthermore, it demonstrates that an Indian political culture not only existed, but exerted direct influence on the development of institutions and policies in Madras. Indeed, it became an integral part of the educational project induced by the petition to render the complex institutions of the Company government intelligible to those educated by the state.⁷

Since the pioneering work of historians Douglas Haynes and Majid Siddiqi, petitions have become critical objects of analysis in the history of the relationship between state and society in South Asia.⁸ Recently, historians have noted that colonial petitions were, in the words of Bhavani Raman, ‘quintessentially hierarchical forms of address’⁹ through which the state attempted to cast “native” petitioners as humble supplicants of imperial favour rather than politically engaged citizens representing the will of the people’.¹⁰ In accordance with these definitions of colonial petitioning, this article argues that these were the circumstances under which the 70,000 memorialists entreated with the state for education reform in 1839; indeed, it argues that tensions emerged out of new questions about the representative capacity of such a numerously signed petition. This article repositions the colonial mass petition as a form of political cultural activity that emerged at the intersection of public and official initiatives to enact reform. Moreover, it argues that the memorial, while perceived by officials as a tool for consolidating the legitimacy of the state,

⁵ For ‘the analytical value of identifying and investigating specific conjunctures’ in the history of petitioning and political culture, see Prashant Kidambi, ‘The petition as event: colonial Bombay, circa 1889–1914’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 53 (2019), pp. 203–39.

⁶ On this subject, see Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: writing and scribes in early colonial South India* (Chicago, IL, 2012).

⁷ George Norton, *Rudimentals; being a series of discourses addressed to the natives of India* (Madras, 1841), esp. p. 262.

⁸ Douglas Haynes, *Rhetoric and ritual in colonial India: the shaping of a public culture in Surat City, 1852–1928* (Berkeley, CA, 1991); Majid Siddiqi, *The British historical context and petitioning in colonial India, with an introduction by S. Inayat A. Zaidi* (New Delhi, 2005). See also P. Swarnalatha, ‘Revolt, testimony, petition: artisanal protests in colonial Andhra’, in Lex Heerma Van Voss, ed., *Petitions in social history* (Cambridge, 2002) pp. 107–30; Rohit De and Robert Travers, eds., *Modern Asian Studies Special Issue: Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia*, 53 (2019); Raman, *Document Raj*.

⁹ Raman, *Document Raj*, p. 161.

¹⁰ De and Travers, ‘Petitioning and political cultures’, p. 10.

constituted a novel form of political expression that inaugurated a transformation in the political agency of an emergent Madras public.

Placing mass petitions in a more precise analytical framework provides the opportunity to interrogate how new publics were forged out of the process of composing popular addresses. An analysis of the process of gathering signatures provides a new inroad into understanding the ways in which the interactions between state and society were reconstituted during this period. The culture of mass petitioning initiated in South India by the education petition provides a new and clearer means of understanding the formation of 'the public' as a phenomenon that emanated from within Indian social structures and political networks, only some of which were subject to influence by the state.¹¹ Thus, the mass petition warrants greater exploration as one facet of the 'repertoire of subaltern political action' alluded to by Rohit De and Robert Travers.¹²

While this petition reveals much about South Indian political culture, so too does it occasion the need to consider the problem of certain absences.¹³ In the case of this petition, historical and methodological absences emerge out of two distinctive problems. The first is of a primarily material nature: the scroll upon which the signatures were appended has, over time, become so fragile that to unravel it completely would be to destroy the document. Thus, the names that appear on the first several metres of parchment are the only historical actors susceptible to any form of analysis. This intractable material problem is, in some sense, symbolic of the second absence: mainly that the individual political orientations, ideas, and senses of participation of the majority of the petition's signatories remain inaccessible through orthodox archival avenues of inquiry.

The near impossibility of determining the precise politics of individual signatories was, in the late Company period, a feature of the hierarchical nature of colonial petitioning. The bureaucratic channels through which petitions were presented to, and assessed by, the state were fashioned to refract, and in some cases remove, the original context of composition and signature. Thus, the acts of authorship and signature were deliberately obscured and simultaneously subordinated to the interpretive apparatus of Company administrators. In light of these constraints, this article accepts that the authors and signatories were 'abstractly embodied' within a medium of political representation that was given significance by the state.¹⁴ Indeed, it was through this simultaneous process of erasure and reassignment of meaning

¹¹ Although the petition was the first of its kind in South India, cultures of mass petitioning, albeit on a smaller scale, had developed elsewhere in South Asia in the early nineteenth century. For examples of such mass petitions, see Martin Moir and Lynn Zastoupil, eds., *The great Indian education debate: documents relating to the orientalist-anglicist controversy, 1781-1843* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 189-93, 247-53, 273-80.

¹² De and Travers, 'Petitioning and political cultures', p. 11.

¹³ For considerations of historical and archival absences in other South Asian contexts, see Anjali Arondekar, *For the record: on sexuality and the colonial archive in India* (Durham, NC, 2009).

¹⁴ For abstract embodiment, see Elaine Hadley, *Living liberalism: practical citizenship in mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago, IL, 2010), esp. pp. 14-20.

that the state attempted, paradoxically, to draw power from vernacular forms of political expression. Nonetheless, this article argues that the mid-century mass petition extended genuine opportunities of political participation to Indian subjects of the Company who were otherwise excluded from colonial high politics.

Although its existence has been noted by historians of South India working on the history of education, of early nationalist politics, and of colonial religious conflict, the 1839 petition remains a footnote in the history of South Indian political culture.¹⁵ Recent scholarship on subjects such as colonial bureaucracy, petitions, and Indian public politics give cause for the need to revisit the mid-nineteenth-century period of South Indian political organization.¹⁶ By placing the events surrounding the petition at the confluence of these various lines of historical inquiry, this article suggests that the subsequent plan to establish Madras University marked the genesis of a project justified by, and framed in the language of, liberal principles. It was conceived of as a project of intellectual, political, and moral improvement, and found support within both the Company state and the Madras public. Its effects were far-reaching, drawing support from, and spurring the expansion of, independent (i.e. non-government) literary and pedagogical institutions as distant as Masulipatam and Calicut.¹⁷

The first section of this article considers the social and political conditions that spurred the creation of a reform-minded community, a public, which expressed demands that transcended specific local needs in pursuit of policies that would have a transformative effect, not only on South Indian society, but also on the distribution of power between state and society.¹⁸ In addition to tracing the links between demands for education reform and the emergence of a public in Madras, this section also addresses the negotiated process of mass petition authorship as a means of uncovering how these documents emerged out of the interactions between Company officials and Indian reformers operating within the constraints of an increasingly demanding colonial bureaucratic order. The second section assesses the effects of the petition on South Indian political culture and argues that mass petitioning initiated

¹⁵ For examples, see Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'Modern education in South India, 1784–1854', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), pp. 37–65; R. Suntharalingam, *Politics and nationalist awakening in South India, 1852–1891* (Tucson, AZ, 1974).

¹⁶ Aparna Balachandran, 'Petitions, the city, and the early colonial state in South India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 53 (2019), pp. 150–76; idem, 'Petition town: law, custom, and urban space in colonial South Asia', in Aparna Balachandran et al., eds., *Iterations of law: legal histories from India* (Delhi, 2017), pp. 147–67; Bhavani Raman, 'Civil address and the early colonial petition in Madras', *Modern Asian Studies*, 53 (2019), pp. 123–49; idem, *Document Raj*; J. Barton Scott and Brannon D. Ingram, 'What is a public? Notes from South Asia', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38 (2015), pp. 357–70.

¹⁷ See, for example, IOR/F/4/2012/89866, Boards Collections (BC), 'Managing committee of the Masulipatam Auxiliary Hindoo Literary Society to Lord Elphinstone' (14 Nov. 1841), pp. 69–81.

¹⁸ The notion that a 'public' is characterized by a community that is mobilized by an adherence to non-local, universal commitments is borrowed from Pamela G. Price, 'Acting in public versus forming a public: conflict processing and political mobilization in nineteenth-century South India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 14 (1991), esp. pp. 92–3.

the contemplation of moderate reformist policies within a liberal idiom. Moreover, it argues that the 1839 petition set a precedent for a mass petitioning culture that would define the political relationship between state and society throughout the late Company period.

I

The initial outcome of the petition was the publication of a minute on education by Elphinstone, which, written a month after the production of the petition itself, elaborated a plan to fulfil the demands of the petitioners by establishing Madras University in the presidency capital. This institution was to consist of two separate, yet highly interdependent, departments: 'a college, for the higher branches of Literature, Philosophy, and Science, and a High School for the cultivation of English Literature and of the Vernacular Languages of India, and the elementary departments of Philosophy and Science'.¹⁹

The content and tone of Elphinstone's minute reflected a sense that there was a congruity between the doctrine of improvement being espoused by officials within the Company and the request for education reform laid out in the petition. Indeed, Elphinstone's minute repeated and affirmed, from the highest offices of the Company in Madras, the core demands and priorities of the petition which were compatible with his administration's reformist agenda. It was declared that the new institution, alongside developing a programme of English and vernacular education in European knowledge, would eschew any attempt at religious instruction and would ensure that all castes would be permitted to obtain instruction and attain officially recognized qualifications upon examination.²⁰

Despite its general absence from works on nineteenth-century Indian education reform, the petition has been taken up by historians as evidence for the state of public sentiment about English education in South India.²¹ Most notably, Robert Frykenberg, in his endeavour to critique the near-inescapable historiographical gravity of the educationalist and reformer, Thomas Macaulay, and his notorious 'Minute on Education', referred to the petition as proof that the introduction of English language education in South India, far from being a colonial imposition which emanated from the likes of Macaulay in Bengal, was in fact primarily a product of localized 'nativist pressures'.²² These pressures and the influence that demands for English instruction exerted were, according to Frykenberg, powerful and endemic forces in South Indian political considerations from the earliest foundation of

¹⁹ IOR, F/4/1864/79198, BC, 'Minute by the governor of Madras, advocating the establishment of a university' (12 Dec. 1839), p. 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²¹ For an example of its absence from the definitive sourcebook on Indian education, see Moir and Zastoupil, eds., *Great Indian education debate*; H. Sharp, ed., *Selections from the educational records, part I, 1781-1839* (Calcutta, 1919).

²² Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'The myth of English as a "colonialist" imposition upon India: a reappraisal with special reference to South India', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 120 (1988), pp. 305-6, 310-11.

Company power in Madras. Frykenberg's observation echoes a contemporary Madras civil servant who, reflecting on the state of public sentiment towards education prior to 1839, wrote that the people of Madras 'had become, for some time previous to any effectual Government measure in that direction being taken, fully ripe, not only to appreciate the advantages of education, and its bearing upon the national prosperity, but also to afford a very cordial personal support to any public project to that end'.²³

Beyond Madras, Charles Trevelyan, the infamous advocate of English education reform and member of the General Committee of Public Instruction in Bengal, noted, perhaps not without a hint of envy, the extent to which English instruction was coveted and pursued in the southern presidency, stating: '[In Madras] knowledge of English is a much more common acquirement than it is in Bengal...English is no novelty; it is in great request; thousands already know it.'²⁴ Despite the Madras public's long-standing enthusiasm for English education, a petition of the scale that appeared in 1839 was entirely unprecedented and represents a transformative moment in the practice of reform-oriented political organization in South India's emergent public during this period. Additionally, the adoption of the petition's demands by the colonial state suggests that a transformation had taken place in official thinking about the acceptable limits of colonial intervention into Indian social and cultural issues.²⁵

Critical to the transformation of the state's thinking about reform was the expansion of the vocal and opinionated public in Madras. This public first emerged out of the city's urban elite, many of whom had benefited financially from the Company's consolidation of the presidency and the expanded economic influence of Madras that occurred in the early nineteenth century. The long-standing merchant tradition in Madras – which was sustained by an intricate trade network that spanned the Coromandel Coast and beyond to Ceylon and across the Bay of Bengal – had made considerable economic gains from the Company's trading policies and from new markets in an expanding global economy. Most notably, the Madras merchants who experienced the greatest transformation in economic prosperity were those who operated agency houses that dealt in the import and export economy.²⁶ These agency houses predominantly dealt in the trade of cash crops such as indigo, coffee, cotton, and sugar, and the profits were then reinvested in other business ventures, often in partnership with European businesses.

²³ George Norton, *Native education in India: comprising a review of its state and its progress* (Madras, 1848), p. 31.

²⁴ Charles Edward Trevelyan, *On the education of the native people of India* (London, 1838), pp. 178–9.

²⁵ For an elaboration of the argument that the Company developed over the course of the early nineteenth century a confidence to legislate in socio-political domains that it would have considered untouchable at the outset of its period of political rule in India, see Nancy Gardner Cassels, *Social legislation of the East India Company: public justice versus public instruction* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2010).

²⁶ Suntharalingam, *Politics and nationalist awakening*, p. 30. For an example of one such merchant, see Paramavaram Pillai, *Representative men of southern India* (Madras, 1896), pp. 146–66.

Accompanying this newfound wealth and access to global markets and business partners was the gradual emergence of English as the *lingua franca* of political and economic life within the increasingly urbanized city of Madras.²⁷ During this period of urban consolidation, characterized by transformations in demographics towards a more socially and structurally pluralistic metropolitan organization, the numerous linguistic groups that constituted the presidency's capital adopted English as a means of communication.²⁸ Moreover, economic instability in the 1830s, paired with an expanding colonial bureaucracy, spurred demand for the acquisition of English as government employment came to be perceived as an economically secure alternative to entrepreneurial pursuits.²⁹ Finally, during the mid-1830s, the Supreme Government resolved to make English the sole official language of government business. Thus, English became both necessary and sought after for economic and political advancement.

These intertwined economic, linguistic, and demographic developments spurred the establishment of various institutions to facilitate the acquisition of English. In the main, the city's elite sought English language instruction through private tutors or pedagogical societies such as the Madras Hindu Literary Society.³⁰ The lower classes were forced to resort either to missionary schools or to the numerous private institutions – claiming, sometimes dubiously, to provide introductory instruction in English – that were established along the arterial Mount Road.³¹

Societies such as the Madras Hindu Literary Society, founded in 1830, were especially instrumental in bringing the English-speaking gentry of Madras into communication with the state.³² Founded by Kavali Venkata Lakshmayya, former assistant to the renowned surveyor and scholar Colin Mackenzie, the society was, from its inception, always led by Indians who were aware of, and involved in, the affairs of the state. The society was created with the intention of promoting Indian educational interests through appeals for pecuniary assistance from the Company administration.³³ Lakshmayya, and his various associates who would go on to take a leading role in Madras's mass petition culture, were also supported, both in their academic work and in their appeals to government for aid, by the reformer and advocate-general,

²⁷ Frykenberg, 'The myth of English'.

²⁸ Susan M. Neild, 'Colonial urbanism: the development of Madras City in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Modern Asian Studies*, 13 (1979), pp. 245–6.

²⁹ For South Indian economics in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, see David Washbrook, 'Economic depression and the making of "traditional" society in colonial India, 1830–1855', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 3 (1993), pp. 237–63; idem, 'India, 1818–1860: the two faces of colonialism', in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire: the nineteenth century*, III (Oxford, 1999), pp. 396–421.

³⁰ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, folklore, and nationalism in colonial South India* (Delhi, 2003), pp. 109–12.

³¹ Frykenberg, 'The myth of English', p. 309.

³² Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: from beginnings to the present* (Oxford, 2008) p. 321.

³³ Rama Sundari Mantena, 'The Kavali brothers: intellectual life in early colonial Madras', in Thomas Trautmann, ed., *The Madras school of orientalism: producing knowledge in colonial South India* (New Delhi, 2009), p. 139; idem, *The origins of modern historiography in India: antiquarianism and philology, 1780–1880* (Basingstoke, 2012), esp. ch. 3.

George Norton.³⁴ Arriving in Madras in 1828, Norton became a leading proponent of the educational projects that emerged in the late 1830s.³⁵ Over the course of the mid-1830s, he and the Hindu Literary Society worked to engender an enthusiasm within Madras for elite education – mainly by organizing public lectures on topics such as law and political economy.³⁶ In language that foreshadowed the petition of 1839, the leaders of the society, boasting the success of their efforts to endear their native countrymen to the cause of ‘modern’ education, stated: ‘Many of the respectable Natives are watching a favorable opportunity to observe to what extent the Government will bestow their aid towards the support of this Society.’³⁷

Because the Madras Hindu Literary Society agitated for state assistance for educational initiatives, and because it used language similar to that found in the petition, it is highly likely that the Society was the leading institution involved in the circulation of the education petition. Lakshmayya had become familiar with, and had refined his ability to adhere to, the necessary and acceptable forms of addressing the state through his frustrating experience attempting to obtain permission to continue research on Mackenzie’s extensive collection after the surveyor’s death in 1821.³⁸ Thus, because of his experience as a Company servant and because of the precise language of the petition, it is highly likely that he was closely involved in producing the address.

Conflicting accounts of the petition’s provenance also emanated from servants within the Company. Reflecting on the authorship of the petition, Norton speculated: ‘It would be too much to suppose that the original composition proceeded from any Hindoo.’³⁹ Elsewhere, he declared the authenticity of the petition’s sentiment and origins, stating, ‘I have every reason for knowing that that address was as genuine a one as ever was prepared for or adopted by the [Indian community].’⁴⁰ While some historians and writers have entertained the notion that the petition was written by reformers such as Norton or Elphinstone himself, it is more likely that the document’s authorship lay at the confluence of input from influential members of the Indian community and reform-minded officials within the Company.⁴¹

Although British reformers were undoubtedly willing to impress their ideas upon the content of mass petitions, they were equally committed to, and constrained by, the need to ensure that supplications were interpreted by the appropriate authorities as genuine expressions of Indian sentiment. As Raman has argued, the written petition became intertwined with the

³⁴ Norton, *Native education*, p. 26.

³⁵ G. S. White, ‘The Norton family and Pachaiyappa’s’, in Rao Saheb C. S. Srinivasachari et al., eds., *Pachaiyappa’s College Madras centenary commemoration book* (Madras, 1942), pp. 37–41.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³⁸ Mantena, ‘The Kavali brothers’, pp. 137–42.

³⁹ Norton, *Native education*, p. 31.

⁴⁰ ‘Evidence of George Norton, Esq., June 6, 1853’, *Parliamentary Papers (PP)* (General Sessions, House of Lords, 1852–3), p. 94.

⁴¹ Roland Perry, *The queen, her lover, and the most notorious spy in history: the intriguing story of Queen Victoria’s secret* (London, 2014), p. 97.

Company state's demands for supplicatory sincerity when such documents became the colonial bureaucratic 'exemplar of agentic enunciation'. The intended result of this emphasis on writing was to preclude other forms of protest and dissent while simultaneously consolidating the power of the state in the 'quintessentially hierarchical form' and procedure of the petition.⁴² An awareness among Company officials of the importance of documentary and performative sincerity did not, however, inhibit them from attempting to organize and encourage the composition of petitions. Moreover, the Madras administration needed petitions to be, or at least appear to be, written by earnest Indian subjects to justify policy decisions.

These priorities are notable in the correspondence between British reformers and administrators. For example, in a separate bid to convince Elphinstone's administration to appropriate funds from a temple in Tirupati for the purpose of 'National Education', Norton wrote:

It would probably answer a good purpose, and strengthen your means and views regarding the disposal of the Tripetty offering fund for the purposes of National Education, if an address and petition was made to you from the Bramins etc. of Tripetty itself and backed by the principal population of those who made the offerings (upon request made for that purpose by the Tripetty Bramins) – praying that this fund should be devoted to these Educational objects.

I could ensure such an address I think – and of a very earnest character. An extraordinary spirit seems really abroad among the natives every where promotive of your objects.⁴³

Although Elphinstone ultimately declined to support Norton's scheme, the latter's forwardness about engineering petitions suggests that the practice was commonplace among Company administrators.

The prevalence of this method of generating and organizing public opinion is further confirmed by the frequency of petition engineering in the context of Bengal. During the contentious period of education reform in the mid-1830s, reformers, administrators, and invested scholars worked behind the scenes to convince the intellectual leadership of Bengal to generate sizeable memorials in support of, or in opposition to, specific reforms. In one instance, Charles Edward Trevelyan had arranged the creation of a petition by unemployed scholars of the Sanskrit College in Calcutta to prove and insist that reform through the introduction of English instruction was necessary to improving education.⁴⁴ In another, Trevelyan's rival, H. H. Wilson, did the same, encouraging his Indian counterparts at the Sanskrit College at Calcutta to 'petition-petition-petition' the Bengal administration on historical, cultural, and moral grounds against the implementation of Bentinck's controversial policies.⁴⁵ Although it is unclear,

⁴² Raman, *Document Raj*, pp. 161–4.

⁴³ IOR, Mss Eur F87/109, 'G. Norton to Lord Elphinstone' (16 Feb. 1841), p. 107.

⁴⁴ Moir and Zastoupil, eds., *Great Indian education debate*, pp. 36–7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

given the clandestine nature of Wilson and Trevelyan's manoeuvres, whether Norton was aware of the efforts of educationalists in Bengal to harness public opinion as a vehicle for policy-formation, he recognized the power of mass petitions to induce the Company government into action. Two years after the presentation of the petition, Norton reflected that 'one single petition' categorically proved that the sentiments of the Indian public could 'no longer be disputed nor despised', nor be ignored by the presidency government.

Because petition engineering was a common practice amongst Company administrators, it remains difficult to discern the true authorship of memorials such as the 1839 petition.⁴⁶ This problem raises a fundamental question about the extent to which such sources can be used to interpret accurately 'true' contemporary public sentiment about reformist educational projects. With this problem in mind, however, the language, tone, and presentation of public addresses reveal that the engineers, whether British or Indian, were aware that their orchestrations of public sentiment had to satisfy an increasingly bureaucratized system of governance that incorporated, however selectively, considerations of 'opinion' as a criterion for the implementation of policy and the expenditure of state funds.

Therefore, the documentation and correspondence surrounding the composition of these addresses, in addition to providing clues about the authorship of petitions, yield useful insights into the processes that guided exchanges between administrator-reformers, who saw themselves as the architects of officially acceptable public opinion, and the leaders of the Indian public itself, who were by no means passive inheritors of British reformist ideas. Charting such exchanges of ideas and plans for the promotion of reformist projects, including that brought about for 'National Education' in 1839, further reveals the persistence of reformers' concerns to promote legitimate forms of public address and to capture plausibly genuine expressions of a public appetite for government's involvement in the improvement of South Indian society. For example, the importance of the Madras Hindu Literary Society to the success of the petition is also captured in the society committee's correspondence with Norton, who, as president of Madras University, sought to retain their services for the future development of educational institutions throughout the presidency. Aware that Indian institutions such as the Literary Society were better placed to attract public support for reformist projects, Norton hurried to express praise for the society that was largely responsible for having 'excited a warm interest throughout the Native Community of this Presidency' for 'the great National cause of Education'.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, it became a matter of urgency to Company officials that public opinion, like individual and corporate petitioners, while no longer entirely manageable or suppressible, had to be constrained by methods of bureaucratization.⁴⁸ In his correspondence with the power further to improve and

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the difficulty of petition authorship, see Balachandran, 'Petitions', pp. 156–9.

⁴⁷ IOR, Mss Eur F87/109, 'George Norton to committee of the Hindoo Literary Society of Madras' (30 Apr. 1840), p. 71.

⁴⁸ It should be noted that individual and corporate petitioning persisted alongside the mass petitions which emerged in the 1840s. For bureaucratization, see Raman, *Document Raj*, pp. 171–2, 182–3.

promote intellectual and scholarly leadership of the presidency, Norton, while acknowledging their 'National Education', implored his Indian counterparts to direct their actions along the grain of the Company bureaucracy:

Everyone must see the propriety of...placing themselves under the advice and patronage of the constituted English authorities of their districts. This will not only enable them to express the more readily, and thro' the legitimate channels, their sentiments and wishes to the Government, but it will inspire a mutual confidence between the *Native Public and the Servants of Government*.⁴⁹

Underlying this insistence on deference to Company bureaucracy was a concern to maintain the state's ability to mitigate and direct the liberties that were supposedly possessed by a petitioning public. Norton concluded this plea with a generalization about the benefits of respecting a system of policy-making and institution-building that gave the final say to Company authorities: 'The Native public will thereby soonest come to know how entirely their best interests are bound up with the strength and permanence of the British Government.'⁵⁰ Despite the lofty rhetoric of reformist officials, there remained a constant tension between the intentions given to liberty-promoting institutions and their realization under a despotic and authoritarian system of governance.⁵¹

On the other hand, the leading Indian advocates of a new educational system displayed their own reformist priorities, which were often balanced between questions about caste access to state education and the defence of a secular curriculum (in this case, 'secular curriculum' broadly meant a course of instruction that excluded Biblical teachings). The leading Indian petitioners were committed, in theory, to making the institution universally accessible to all castes, which marked not only a shift away from the Company's established approach to education, but also a break from the demands of the city's conservative elite. The inclusion of a rule that stated 'members of all creeds and sects shall be admissible' indicates a rhetorical departure from what Raman noted as the primary demand of Madras elites regarding the foundation of a school in the early nineteenth century: mainly, 'the demand that the Company government...preserve the school from lower-caste incursions'.⁵² The Indian board's acquiescence to such an egalitarian regulation was derived from the priority of upholding the institution's secular nature. It was considered untenable to suggest that an educational institution was simultaneously committed to a secular curriculum and a caste-determined policy of admission. Nonetheless, agreeing to the principle of admitting all castes was far different from the

⁴⁹ IOR, Mss Eur F87/109, 'George Norton to committee of the Hindoo Literary Society of Madras' (30 Apr. 1840), p. 72. Italics are found in the original.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ For more on the balancing act between authority and liberty in thought about Company governance see, for example, Martha McLaren, *British India and British Scotland: career building, empire building, and a Scottish school of thought on Indian governance* (Akron, OH, 2001), pp. 160–91.

⁵² Raman, *Document Raj*, pp. 132–3.

practice of enrolling students of all castes. Indeed, it was at the intersection of local elite influence and reformist policy that it was conceived that the intellectual and linguistic prerequisites for admission to the university would be so high that only the uppermost castes would be eligible.⁵³ This tacit policy of excluding the 'lower orders' was, however, framed in the language of providing and maintaining the highest quality English liberal education. Thus, through the proposed curriculum, based on 'higher branches of knowledge', some of the native board were able to consent to the general liberal principles upon which the institution was founded. It appears that it was only by paying lip service to such principles that the complete opposite outcomes were made possible. In other words, the language of liberalism, despite being useful for voicing the demands of the petition, paradoxically had the propensity to silence and exclude many who contributed to the political success of elites.

II

Important to this educational project's universal and sweeping aims at 'national prosperity' were the Madras Hindu Literary Society's auxiliaries scattered throughout the presidency. Through their own mass, albeit smaller, petitions, and through their support of the educational reforms taking place in Madras, these auxiliary societies reinforced the notion of popular support for new educational establishments.⁵⁴ Initially, they provided significant assistance through their contribution of signatures to the petition. Later on, these distant institutions sought to take advantage of, and assist in creating, the provincial school system being proposed by the Board of Governors for Madras University. Thus, the project also found important support from beyond urban Madras among literary societies throughout the presidency.

For example, the Masulipatam Auxiliary Hindu Literary Society, founded in 1839 in anticipation of a new educational project for the South, sought to establish one of the four proposed provincial schools that were, according to the resolution that accompanied Elphinstone's minute, to be established throughout the presidency.⁵⁵ Its initial purpose was to gauge and spread enthusiasm for Western learning, and to commence training of Indians 'in the duty of carrying out the intentions of Government', through the introduction of 'schools of the English, Persian, Sanskrit, and the Teloogoo [sic] languages'.⁵⁶ In order to provide 'useful' as well as higher knowledge, these local initiatives were designed to teach regional vernacular languages alongside the languages of governance. In an address made to Lord Elphinstone in

⁵³ For a discussion of the relationship between local influence and the development of policy, see Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Guntur District 1788-1848: a history of local influence and central authority in South India* (Oxford, 1965), esp. pp. 9-10.

⁵⁴ In his testimony before a parliamentary committee in 1853, George Norton noted that one such petition, 'signed by more than 6000 natives', was presented to him requesting the establishment of 'a school in that collectorate'. See 'Evidence of George Norton, Esq., June 6, 1853', *PP* (General Sessions, House of Lords, 1852-3), p. 104.

⁵⁵ 'Managing committee of the Masulipatam Auxiliary Hindoo Literary Society to Lord Elphinstone' (14 Nov. 1841), pp. 69-81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-2.

the years following the petition's success in inducing the government to action on educational matters, the Literary Society at Masulipatam noted that patronage for the provincial school had been pledged by interested Indian and European parties, and that the pre-existing seminary for instruction in English and the vernaculars was already functioning satisfactorily.⁵⁷

While those responsible for developing the central institution in Madras were cognisant of the importance of enlisting the full energies of these provincial auxiliary institutions, they felt with equal intensity the importance of subordinating the latter to the authority of a centralized bureaucratic hierarchy that preserved the power of policy-making at the seat of the presidency. The petition's signatories, who hailed from diverse locations across the presidency, brought an unprecedented amount of attention to the untapped political potential of the people outside of the city of Madras. Nodes of political organization such as at Masulipatam, with its auxiliary society, were found elsewhere, for example at Calicut, Tinnevely, Trichinopoly, and Bellary.⁵⁸ As the capacity of the provinces to participate in, replicate, and advance educational projects became more apparent to authorities in Madras, unrestrained enthusiasm for an extensive network of fairly independent institutions gave way to more conservative visions tempered by the need for a powerful nucleus of institutions concentrated in the presidency capital. The two dominant institutions would be Madras University, with its president and Board of Governors making decisions on behalf of the affiliated provincial schools; and a proposed governing body, a Board of General Instruction based on the model at Calcutta, that would preside over all other educational matters such as elementary education and the organization of new institutions.⁵⁹

While the petition itself might have been devised, organized, and disseminated by the presidency's elite, its effectiveness at initiating reform was facilitated by a far larger portion of the population. After all, it was the 70,000 signatories, not the authors of the petition, who attracted the attention of the Company administration at the highest levels of government. In London, the Court of Directors noted in their reception of the address, 'which had been so numerous and respectably signed', that the primary object of the petition was 'the extension of education amongst the people at large'.⁶⁰ Officials in Madras also noted breadth of support for the petition, writing, 'this is certain, that a cordial and universal support was in fact given by the influential portion of the Native population throughout the presidency'.⁶¹

It was, therefore, the petition's representative weight – its ability to capture and express the sentiments and desires of a vast demographic – that made it such a prominent and important document in the eyes of the state. Viewed cynically, the petition's effectiveness, measured by the subsequent adoption

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 72–3.

⁵⁸ IOR, F/4/1970/86512, BC, 'Government of Fort St. George to Court of Directors' (23 Mar. 1841), pp. 13–14.

⁵⁹ IOR, Mss Eur F87/109, 'George Norton to committee of the Hindoo Literary Society of Madras' (30 Apr. 1840), pp. 79–80.

⁶⁰ IOR, F/4/2012/89866, BC, 'Court of Directors to Fort. St. George' (28 Apr. 1841), p. 9E.

⁶¹ Norton, *Native education*, p. 34.

of its demands by the state, can be explained by its adherence to, and request for, the emergent reformist aims being contemplated by those within Elphinstone's inner circle. Indeed, the petition's potency and efficacy can be perceived as having been proportional to its conformity with the administration's objectives and policies. However, when viewed as a part of the history of reformist politics, the petition's success is also discernible precisely because it transformed the terms of address between state and society and expanded the petition's representative capacity.⁶²

Raman has argued that 'early colonial petitions' in South India deployed 'a tone of redress or compensation evocative of corporate shareholding rather than the idioms of liberal political representation'.⁶³ Raman's observations are convincing in the realm of legal petitioning, which often saw individuals or small collectives pursuing litigation; and her arguments appear to hold especially true for the period of Company rule when the colonial state was very much in a stage of transition from corporation to sovereign (the petitions Raman cites, bar one, are from the period before 1820). However, it appears that in the public arena of social and political reform which emerged in the 1830s, a new space and potential for scale was created alongside corporate petitioning, which in turn facilitated the elaboration of memorials and addresses that reflected idioms of liberal political representation. As noted by Raman, these petitions are not proof of the emergence of a desire for liberal democracy; they are, however, documents which, through a novel scale of political representation, facilitated a political reformism that deployed notions of universal improvement and the language of liberalism as a tool to compel the colonial state into action.⁶⁴

One indication of the petition's broader aim at increasing Indian representation can be found in its title. By 'praying that [the plans to improve education] would not involve any renunciation of their religion and that the native people should have some voice in the measure', the petition's demands exceed simultaneously the typical requests found in other addresses.⁶⁵ The stipulation of avoiding the 'renunciation' of Indian religions – in other words imploring that Christian instruction in government schools be eschewed – indicates that the emphasis of the address lay not in a plea for redress or compensation, but in the call for the state to consider the sentiments of its subjects when forming public institutions. Beyond this policy demand was the significant request that 'the native people', more precisely, the intellectual elite of the city, should be permitted to participate in and contribute to the formation of government institutions. Nonetheless, the use of the term 'praying' marks a reluctance to deviate from the hierarchical form built into the act of petitioning and, in turn, suggests that the petitioners' desire for participation in

⁶² For analyses of comparable processes within British politics of reform, see Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic government in the Age of Reform, 1830–1852* (Oxford, 1990); K. Theodore Hoppen, *The mid-Victorian generation, 1846–1886* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 91–126, 127–67.

⁶³ Raman, 'Civil address', p. 125.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁶⁵ IOR, Mss Eur G54, 'Petition from the native inhabitants of Madras' (11 Nov. 1839).

education reform did not equal aspirations towards an egalitarian or democratic relationship between state and society.

In addition to the uniqueness of its demand-making, the petition, signed by 70,000 individuals, represented a different form and practice of civil address. The scale of the document indicates something more far-reaching than an expression of corporate agency; it is a product of an organized and politicized public sphere capable of mobilizing broad sections of the urban population. The process through which signatures were gathered indicates the public nature of the petition's creation. Norton, speaking in 1853 before a parliamentary committee, recalled that 'the signatures were taken to several different issues on parchment, each parchment containing the English [petition] and two translations. I believe there were more than 100 circulated, the names being afterwards all appended to one and the same address.'⁶⁶ These printed copies of the petitions would have circulated through the densely populated public centres of Madras, filtering through the intricate elite social networks that developed as the city's neighbourhoods became increasingly intertwined over the course of the early nineteenth century.⁶⁷

With this organizational capacity, the petition of 1839 also represented a far more powerful means of conveying protest and dissent against Company policy. This was true of the petition not only as a collective act, but on an individual political level as well. Although driven by the power of the collective, the average Indian subject's ability to act politically was enhanced through novel access to bureaucratic channels of redress, mainly through the act of signature. In the context of pervasive colonial bureaucratic control over the form of petitioning, and thus over expressions of dissent, the mass petition constituted a space in which individual opinion could be expressed safely through a strength-in-numbers scenario of political activity. This form of engagement with Company authority was, however, a fraught interaction that was refracted through the layers of colonial bureaucracy. Ultimately, the disembodied signature rendered the signatory virtually anonymous.

In her work on liberalism in mid-Victorian Britain, Elaine Hadley has argued that the emergence of author-signed editorial articles represented 'a special kind of abstraction that was to be lived in an ideal world of a liberalized public sphere'.⁶⁸ Useful here is the notion that the application of one's signature to a document also marked an identifiable moment in which the signatory was 'abstractly embodied' in the political arena. In the context of colonial mass petitioning, abstract embodiment was imposed upon the supplicant through the narrow conventions of the disembodied signature, which, in turn, decontextualized the motivations that induced the political act. Thus, colonial liberalism, as it was formulated to expropriate and monopolize political representation, creates a conceptual tension in analysing empirical 'subjects' and 'publics'. Despite this erasure and tension, the mass petition, even as a

⁶⁶ 'Evidence of George Norton, Esq., June 6, 1853', *PP* (General Sessions, House of Lords, 1852–3), p. 94.

⁶⁷ Neild, 'Colonial urbanism', pp. 226, 229–30.

⁶⁸ Hadley, *Living liberalism*, p. 128.

constrained political-communicative mechanism, was a novel tool with which Indian subjects could engage in the colonial politics of reform.

For the signatory, the act of signature potentially constituted an instance of vernacular political participation, and, in turn, marked the signatory's contribution to political culture. Thus, every signature applied to the petition of 1839 represents some engagement with the liberal project embodied in the demands of the document. However, it is important to note that engagement with the state through the act of signature did not necessarily equal specific political intention. Accessing and interpreting the motives that spurred non-elite signatories to lend their support to the petition remains a vexatious problem in the history of mass petitioning.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the form of the mass petition created space for an unprecedented number of signatories to acknowledge and participate in a formalized mode of, and venue for, political exchange between subject and state. Perhaps most importantly, the physical act of signing a document such as the education petition marked the capacity of subjects who were typically excluded from political participation – the poor and the illiterate – to lend support to a programme of social and political reform that transcended the interests of the individual or a narrow portion of society. In other words, the opportunity to sign the petition, while not in itself a self-conscious political act or an indication of a personal commitment to certain reformist principles, created the conditions for new forms of political expression and participation.

Immediately noticeable in the original petition is the regular use of the Latin script by signatories who were members of the merchant castes of Madras. Signatures in the Latin script crowd the upper portion of the petition and become less frequent as the scroll is unravelled. This suggests that the petition was initially circulated within the English-educated, typically high-caste portion of urban Madras before being disseminated more widely, both geographically and socially. A large proportion of the initial signatories were members of the Chettiar, Pillai, Mudaliyar, Komati, and Naidu castes. The presence of these various caste groupings all mingled together in the petition indicates that a political alliance had been forged between the city's wealthy merchant community and the older landowning elites of South Indian society. These changing social relationships were in part spurred by the urban expansion of Madras under Company rule. These urban transformations ultimately eroded long-standing caste rivalries and facilitated the emergence of a more unified public than had been possible under earlier forms of urban organization and codes of sociability.⁷⁰

Alongside the names of these wealthy elites appear the signatures of ordinary Indian subjects who were brought into the political fold by the renegotiation of fluid social boundaries in an increasingly urbanized Madras.⁷¹ The reach of this petition into the lower castes is visible in the quality of the

⁶⁹ Balachandran, 'Petitions', p. 152.

⁷⁰ Neild, 'Colonial urbanism', pp. 233–41.

⁷¹ For more on the dynamics of caste in this period, see Susan Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age* (Cambridge, 1999), esp. pp. 94–7, 97–143.

signatures, some of which were markings made by subjects-turned-petitioners who were barely able to write. Yet, the contribution of their individual signatures to the petition accounted for just as much as the ratifications made by their elite countrymen. Through the form of signature as participation in petitioning, the necessity of literacy for political activism was minimized. Aparna Balachandran has argued that an absence of literacy within certain communities of urban Madras did not prevent subjects from developing a 'literate mentality' which, in turn, allowed them to participate in the intertwined worlds of bureaucratic writing and Company governance. By extension, as long as signatories understood the demands of the petition they signed, either through their own literacy, or through a combination of their 'literate mentality' and the literacy of others, then some degree of legitimate political participation was achievable.⁷² The inclusion of vernacular translations was particularly useful to achieving these ends; it was clearly important to the architects of the petition to ensure that the signatories were able to understand the aims of the petition in their own terms and through their own linguistic medium. Later, Company officials who supported the petition defended its authenticity by noting it was 'translated into the two languages which are most commonly spoken in the presidency'.⁷³

The education petition of 1839 was the first instance of what would become a culture of mass petitioning in Madras.⁷⁴ This form of petitioning would be repeatedly undertaken with the aims of reforming Company policy through demonstrations of sweeping popular representations. As a common practice, mid-century mass petitioning began in 1839 when a new generation of South Indian reformers demanded socio-political improvement from the state. Among the signatories of the petition were individuals who would go on to advocate for other popular political causes. The first, and most important figure to the future of petition culture in Madras, was Gajulu Lakshmanarasu Chetty.⁷⁵ Lakshmanarasu was a prominent business leader in Madras whose family had made a fortune in the indigo and textile trade. Turning his wealth towards reformist projects, Lakshmanarasu's advocacy throughout the Company period stretched from the domain of journalism and freedom of the press to direct attacks on the Company's right and fitness to govern. His experience in the early phases of mass petitioning influenced his later public politics, which he sought to promote through institutions devoted to political reform such as the Madras Native Association which he helped to found in 1852.⁷⁶ Another petitioner was C. Srinivasa Pillai, a reformer who, over the

⁷² Balachandran, 'Petitions', pp. 171–3.

⁷³ 'Evidence of George Norton, Esq., June 6, 1853', *PP* (General Sessions, House of Lords, 1852–3), p. 94.

⁷⁴ Although the topics become more varied in the 1840s and 1850s, mass petitions were constantly framed by petition-authors as valid, in part, because of the quantity of signatures they were able to collect.

⁷⁵ Pillai, *Representative men of southern India*, pp. 146–66; Vijay Ramaswamy, 'Chetty, Gajulu Lakshmanarasu', in Vijay Ramaswamy, ed., *Historical dictionary of the Tamils* (Lanham, MD, 2007), p. 48.

⁷⁶ R. Suntharalingam, 'The Madras Native Association: a study of an early Indian political organization', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 4 (1967), pp. 233–53.

course of the mid-nineteenth century, devoted himself to numerous causes including women's education, the 'betterment of the depressed classes', and widow remarriage.⁷⁷ Srinivasa was first introduced to the politics of liberal reformism through the Madras Hindu Literary Society, where he participated in constructing the education petition.⁷⁸ For Srinivasa, the educational project that emerged out of the 1839 address to Lord Elphinstone marked the beginning of a close partnership with the British reformers who sought to establish Madras University. For his efforts in pursuit of developing a system of education for Madras, Srinivasa was asked to join the Board of Governors of Madras University as one of the seven native members on the committee. From this position, Srinivasa worked alongside his Indian and British counterparts to develop a collegiate institution that would fulfil the liberal aspirations embodied both in the education petition and in the resolutions which it induced.

III

Following the delivery of the petition in 1839, the most obvious immediate outcome was the creation of an educational institution that, despite its troubled early years, had profound implications for both the internal politics of the Madras administration and the broader political culture of late Company South India. This period from the late 1830s onward was, relative to the preceding quarter century, neither one of swift territorial consolidation, nor one of transition from corporation to administrative government, but was instead a period during which the Company faced challenges to its survival from British and Indian critics who were more confidently than ever demonstrating the disparity between the Company's rhetoric of benevolence and the outcomes of its policies (or, often times, lack thereof).⁷⁹ The activity surrounding the creation of reformist institutions brings these disparities into stark view.

By 1841, the petitioners who had presented their demands to the Company administration at Madras two years earlier had achieved the central objective of their campaign for the creation of a government-sponsored educational institution for the presidency. Moreover, Madras University's leadership, regulations, student population, and curriculum were all constituted in accordance with the petitioners' demands. In addition to spurring a new phase of educational development in Madras, the success of the mass petition campaign, combined with the relationships that were forged between reformist officials and Indian elites, transformed the relationship between state and society in South India. Despite the congenial tone and demands of the education petition, the practice of mass petitioning would become a powerful tool in

⁷⁷ Suntharalingam, *Politics and nationalist awakening*, pp. 37, 50–2.

⁷⁸ Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, p. 321.

⁷⁹ C. A. Bayly, *Imperial meridian: the British empire and the world, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), pp. 9, 235–48. For the period of territorial consolidation, see *ibid.*, pp. 8–9. For the period of transition from company to state, see Joshua Ehrlich, 'The East India Company and the politics of knowledge' (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2018).

the arsenal of reformers and critics of the Company. The following decade witnessed the proliferation of a political culture that used mass petitions, alongside print and public gathering,⁸⁰ as a means of expressing grievances to all levels of the Company state from the Collector's office to parliament.

Briefly described by the historian Frykenberg as containing merely 'the first "glimmer" of public consciousness in Madras', the history of the petition's importance to the subsequent generation of education reform and debate is often framed as being quickly overshadowed and nullified by the southern presidency's powerful Christian lobby.⁸¹ While it is true that the petitioners' objectives were temporarily undermined in the mid-1840s by a small but influential group of evangelical educationalists who enjoyed the favour of Elphinstone's successor, the reactionary marquess of Tweeddale (1842–8), it remains that the petition represents numerous watershed moments in the history of reformist politics in Madras.⁸² The rapidity with which education reform progressed during the three years between the delivery of the petition in 1839 and the departure of Elphinstone in 1842 is indicative of the emergent popularity of 'modern' 'liberal' educational projects in Madras.⁸³ Moreover, the relatively quick establishment of the first half of the institution, the Madras High School, suggests that there was a mutual and sustained enthusiasm between Company reformers and the leading Indian subjects of Madras for new educational projects that extended beyond the initial signatories of the petition through to the 1840s.

This article has argued that education reform movements, mass petitioning, and the emergence of an increasingly representative political culture were, in the context of late Company Madras, inextricably linked processes that enhanced the capacity of an emergent South Indian public to make demands of the state. Through these social and political developments, the language of reform became more conspicuous and more commonplace in the demands of the Company's petitioners. This was especially true of the petitions that emerged from the Madras Native Association regarding the renewal of the Company's charter in 1853, which sought redress on issues ranging from excessive taxation, to judicial inefficiency, to improvement through public works.⁸⁴ The use of such language was useful, not only for appealing to the

⁸⁰ For political print culture, see Blackburn, *Print, folklore, and nationalism*, pp. 73–124.

⁸¹ Frykenberg, 'The myth of English', pp. 311–12; idem, 'Modern education', pp. 52–3.

⁸² The fortunes of liberal education projects under the Tweeddale administration are beyond the scope of this article. However, it is noteworthy that the Tweeddale administration pursued the policy of introducing the Bible into government-funded educational institutions. The attempt to do so shocked Indian and British public opinion and was a focal point of political and social controversy throughout the 1840s. A contemporary observer juxtaposed Tweeddale with the earlier liberal administration: 'Lord Tweeddale was a very different man from Lord Elphinstone. He was a soldier...He was not a scholar nor indeed a highly educated man.' Alexander J. Arbuthnot, *Memories of Rugby and India* (London, 1910), p. 90.

⁸³ Frykenberg, 'The myth of English'.

⁸⁴ *Petition to the imperial parliament from the members of the Madras Native Association, and other native inhabitants of the Madras presidency, for redress of grievances: in connection with the expiration of the East India Company's charter* (Madras, 1852). See also Suntharalingam, 'The Madras Native Association', pp. 233–53.

reform-minded nature of some Company officials, but also for subverting the colonial bureaucracy's claim to a monopoly over political power.

Similar to petitioning publics elsewhere, such as those in North India described by Christopher Bayly and those in West India studied by Prashant Kidambi, questions of reform 'spilled over the bounds of caste, community, and sect', and initiated novel forms of popular public politics.⁸⁵ The mass petition became a critical vehicle for displaying the political sentiment of Indians across the subcontinent from the late Company period through to the mass politics of the early twentieth century.⁸⁶ Indeed, even with the emergence of other forms of popular protest later in the century, performative acts such as mass public gatherings and speech-making (always in both Tamil and Telugu) in the streets were often organized around the creation of petitions, and transformed the adoption of such memorials into ceremonies of dissent and political expression. The petition's persistence as a form of critical political communication demonstrates that the colonial state's authority and administrative role, far from being well defined, was in fact still being negotiated. As the institutions of colonial governance and bureaucracy portrayed themselves as sovereign, Indian subjects, through the form of mass petitions, not only in Madras but across South Asia, sought to induce their rulers into action; thus, spurring further changes to a political culture that was already in flux.

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⁸⁵ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 210; Kidambi, 'Petition as event'.

⁸⁶ Raman, 'Civil address', pp. 129-33; Bernard Bate, "'To persuade them into speech and action": oratory and the Tamil political, Madras, 1905-1919', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55 (2013), pp. 142-66.

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