The transition to colonialism in South Asian history has been a vibrant and hotly contested part of India’s history. The role of scribes as historical actors of change in India’s history has only recently been explored. This talk will examine how the formation of early agrarian revenue settlements exacerbated late Mughal patterns in taxation, and how the colonial state was shaped by this extant paper-oriented revenue culture and its scribes. It proceeds to examine how the service and cultural histories of various Hindu scribal communities fit within broader changes in political administration, taxation and patterns of governance, arguing that British power after the late eighteenth century came as much through bureaucratic mastery, paper and taxes as it did through military force and commercial ruthlessness. In particular, this paper explores the cultural and service experiences of various Kayastha scribes and how they fit within the transitional period of the mid-late 18th century between late Mughal and early colonial rule.

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