

Servants' Pasts
Vol. 2

New Perspectives in South Asian History

The New Perspectives in South Asian History series publishes monographs and other writings on early modern, modern and contemporary history. The volumes in the series cover new ground across a broad spectrum of subjects such as cultural, environmental, medical, military and political history, and the histories of 'marginalised' groups. It includes fresh perspectives on more familiar fields as well as interdisciplinary and original work from all parts of South Asia. It welcomes historical contributions from sociology, anthropology and cultural studies.

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Servants' Pasts

Late-Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century South Asia
Vol. II

Edited by

NITIN SINHA AND NITIN VARMA



Orient BlackSwan

SERVANTS' PASTS:
LATE-EIGHTEENTH TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTH ASIA –
VOL. II

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Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	
<i>Glossary</i>	ix

Introduction	1
<i>Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma</i>	

I

FEMALE DOMESTICS AND MORAL ORDERS

1. From <i>Bibis</i> to <i>Ayahs</i> : Sexual Labour, Domestic Labour, and the Moral Politics of Empire	41
<i>Satyasikha Chakraborty</i>	
2. The Many Lives of <i>Ayah</i> : Life Trajectories of Female Servants in Early Nineteenth-Century India	73
<i>Nitin Varma</i>	
3. Training a Servant Class: Gender, Poverty and Domestic Labour in Early Nineteenth-Century Educational Sources	109
<i>Jana Tschurennev</i>	
4. Streamlining Paid Domestic Labour in Postcolonial India: The New Female 'All-Rounder' in Master-Servant Expatriate Relationships	139
<i>Shalini Grover</i>	

Interjection 1		
Slavery and a History of Domestic Work		163
<i>Samita Sen</i>		
II		
SERVANTS IN LITERARY AND PUBLIC WORLDS		
5. Representing Servant Lives in the Household and Beyond		183
<i>Prabhat Kumar</i>		
6. Servants and Mistresses: Literary and Legal Sketches in Early Twentieth-Century Uttar Pradesh		217
<i>Charu Gupta</i>		
7. Caste-ing Servants in Colonial Calcutta		239
<i>Tanika Sarkar</i>		
Interjection 2		
Agency and Domestic Workers		265
<i>Lucy Delap</i>		
<i>Bibliography</i>		279
<i>Notes on the Editors and Contributors</i>		309
<i>Index</i>		311

Figures and Tables

FIGURES

I.1	Group of Indian Servants, 1860	27
1.1	Water Colour Painting of David Ochterlony and his Indian Wives by an Indian Miniaturist, 1820	45
1.2	William Holland's Satirical Print 'A Lady's Dressing Room in Calcutta', 1813	54
1.3	Joshua Reynolds, George Clive and his Family with an Indian Ayah, 1765	58
1.4	Johann Zofanny, Portrait of Warren Hastings with his Wife and an Indian Ayah in their Garden at Alipore, 1784–87	60
1.5	Hand-coloured Aquatint by Charles D'Oyly, Early Nineteenth century	62
1.6	Water Colour Painting of an Ayah and a Child by Charles D'Oyly, Early Nineteenth century	63
2.1	Dace or Ayah, Indian Nurse, in Petticoat and Jacket of Cotton, and Muslin Shawl, with a European Child	82
5.1	Cover page of <i>Striyon kī hitopatrikā arthāt hindī me khat-patra ādi sikhāne kī pustak</i> [A Compendium for the Benefit of Women or a Guidebook for Teaching Letter-Writing] (1873)	186

5.2	Ghar kī naukrānī: yahām ki vahām ki [Domestic Servant: Here and There] (<i>Chānd</i> , March 1930)	197
5.3	‘Misej Lahsun’ [Mrs Garlic] (Prabhā, March 1923)	199
5.4	‘Gr̥halakśmī’ [Goddess of the Household] (Prabhā, May 1923)	200
5.5	Bāhar aur bhītar [Outside and Inside] (<i>Chānd</i> , August 1933)	202
5.6	Nirāśritā vidhvā [A Destitute Widow]—Baṛe ghar kī mahilā [Woman of a Rich Household] (<i>Chānd</i> , June 1940)	203
5.7	Purvī aur paścimī nari jīvan [Women’s Lives in the East and the West] (<i>Chānd</i> , September 1934)	205
5.8	Ham aur ve [Us and Them] (<i>Chānd</i> , March 1932)	205
7.1	Scavengers of Calcutta	255
7.2	Mehtars or Street Sweepers in Calcutta	261

TABLES

3.1	Information on the Background of the Benevolent Institution’s Students	117
3.2	Operations of the BES from 1815 to 1 January 1837	132

Acknowledgements

This is the second of the two-set volume on the history of domestic servants and service in India. The volume covers the period from the late eighteenth century to the contemporary with chapters covering both European and Indian households. The chapters included in this volume are from the papers presented at our first international conference at Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi in February 2017. We are thankful to all the participants at the conference whose insights and inputs have enriched our effort to write on a social group that has largely remained invisible in both our historical and contemporary accounts.

The history of domestic servants, in this volume, has been approached through various lenses of social history: legal and literary being the most prominent among others. The intersections of caste and race, class and gender are further explored in individual chapters, thus placing the history of the domestic servants and service at the crossroads of the changing notions of home, society and state-led practices (for instance, related to slavery or legal regulation of servants). This volume is indeed a 'continuation' of the first one in which we came down to the late eighteenth century but also an independent collection of essays because we situate the history of domestic servants amidst the 'changes' that were taking place in the nineteenth century. Three broad changes we have been able to identify are of the increasing quantum of contractualisation, stigmatisation and feminisation of domestic work. This necessitated the charting of the new changes separately.

We are greatly thankful to our respective institutions in Berlin (Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner and IGK, re:work) for intellectual and logistical support we have received while doing this project. We are indeed

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Berlin
25.07.2019

Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma

Glossary

<i>achara</i>	conduct
<i>adivasi</i>	tribal
<i>āshram</i>	commune
<i>awqaf</i>	endowments
<i>ayah</i>	maidservant
<i>baboe</i>	Javanese/Balinese nursemaid
<i>baḍī dāi</i>	senior maid
<i>bāhar</i>	outside
<i>Bahūjī</i>	the bride
<i>baksheesh</i>	voluntary reward
<i>bandi</i>	concubine/slave-woman
<i>bania</i>	merchant
<i>bārin</i>	lower-caste woman
<i>baundy/bandi</i>	slave
<i>begum</i>	wife
<i>bhadralok</i>	prosperous, educated people (middle-class) regarded as a social class
<i>bhāi</i>	brother
<i>bhītar</i>	inside
<i>bibi</i>	local mistress
<i>burra-sahib</i>	officer
<i>Chandal</i>	a Hindu 'untouchable' caste
<i>chapaties</i>	flour cakes
<i>charpai/charpoy</i>	bed/couch
<i>chaudhri</i>	head
<i>chawkidar</i>	watchman
<i>chhota hazri</i>	breakfast
<i>dav-peṃc</i>	tricks and manoeuvrings
<i>desh seva</i>	patriotism

<i>dharmā</i>	ethics
<i>durwan</i>	guard
<i>ekghore</i>	social death
<i>galee</i>	abuse
<i>garha</i>	son of a slave woman married to a free man
<i>hookah</i>	a tobacco pipe with a long tube, drawing smoke through water in a bowl
<i>jaat</i>	caste
<i>jūṭhan</i>	leftover food
<i>kaamchor</i>	lazy
<i>kabadiwala</i>	a person who recycles paper/waste
<i>Khaddharvālā</i>	Gandhian
<i>lambardar</i>	landlord
<i>lathials</i>	stick-wielding men/retainers
<i>lotah</i>	brass pot
<i>mahal</i>	portion of land
<i>mammy</i>	a black nursemaid/nanny in charge of white children
<i>mehtars</i>	sweepers/waste cleaners/scavengers
<i>memsahib</i>	a married white or upper-class woman/blanket term for ‘white woman’
<i>mlechha</i>	impure/outcaste
<i>mofussil</i>	small administrative towns
<i>mohur</i>	coin
<i>muccadams</i>	jobbers
<i>moosulman/mussalmanee</i>	Muslim
<i>nabobi</i>	pertaining to a nabob (an official of wealth and high status)
<i>nagra</i>	shoe
<i>naukari</i>	employment
<i>nautch</i>	dance
<i>nika</i>	marriage
<i>nyai</i>	Javanese/Balinese mistress
<i>odhna</i>	shawl
<i>paan</i>	betel leaf
<i>pardā</i>	veil
<i>prahasān</i>	satire
<i>prayaschitya</i>	penance
<i>punkah</i>	hand-drawn fan

<i>pardah</i>	seclusion
<i>qasba</i>	small town
<i>raiyat</i>	tenant
<i>śabd-citra/rekhā-citra</i>	sketch
<i>samaj seva</i>	social service
<i>serais</i>	inns/taverns
<i>seva</i>	service
<i>sevak</i>	one who serves
<i>shastras</i>	Hindu religious scriptural codes
<i>shongs</i>	ritual inversion ceremonies
<i>thakur</i>	lord
<i>vakeel</i>	legal advisor/councillor
<i>vakīl-patnī</i>	wife of an advocate
<i>vyangya-citra</i>	visual satire
<i>zamindari</i>	proprietary rights

Introduction

NITIN SINHA AND NITIN VARMA

The ubiquity of servant-keeping practices and the importance of domestic service as a growing avenue of occupation and employment in contemporary South Asia is marked by a relative and surprising silence in historical scholarship.¹ The nature of this historiography and the historical transformation of servants and the service relationship from the pre-colonial to the colonial period has been addressed at length in the first volume of this series.² A more detailed treatment of themes and historiographical limitations has been provided in the introduction to the first volume. The newness of this project, together with related productive challenges, has also been mapped there.

The scope of this introduction is therefore limited to flagging trends, features and practices that emerged in the colonial and postcolonial periods. The individual chapters in this volume, which present historical and historically informed sociological accounts, situate servants and service relationships in a range of social, political and economic settings from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century.³ We limit ourselves here to those clusters of themes that individual chapters raise in this volume, and through them, attempt to present a broad picture of changes and shifts attending the master–servant relationship as mediated through institutions

¹ This was an observation made in a review of South Asian labour historiography almost a decade ago that still holds true. See Willem Van Schendel, 'Stretching Labour Historiography: Pointers from South Asia,' *International Review of Social History* 51, suppl. 14, 2006, 252.

² See Nitin Sinha, Nitin Varma and Pankaj Jha, 'Introduction,' to *Servants' Pasts: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century South Asia*, vol. 1, ed. Nitin Sinha, Nitin Varma and Pankaj Jha (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2019).

³ For the existing historiography on servants and service in South Asia, see Sinha, Varma and Jha, 'Introduction.'

such as the state. We also, very briefly, reflect on some of the conceptual signifiers such as morality and agency that shaped this relationship.

Together, these two volumes, and particularly their introductions, aim to initiate and consolidate a 'domestic turn' in South Asian social history writing. This in no way means that an argument is put forward about the site's ahistorical existence *per se*, but that the making of the site—the domestic—is interrogated, to discover how it interacted with the laws, customs and practices that governed the public sphere. The follow-up to this is the second novelty of this project: the attempt to locate and analyse the forms of social relationships that were encapsulated in the 'domestic microcosm' to which master-servant relationships were crucial, and at times, foundational. And finally, and most importantly, the aim is to write the social history of domestic servants, wherein the 'social' stretches from the structural and institutional to the everyday and discursive. The centrality of servants in the Indian social context poses a question, akin to the historiographical shift that took place in studies on Atlantic slavery: is South Asia a society of servants or a servant society?⁴

A 'NEW ORDER' OF AN OLD RELATIONSHIP

Domestic servant, as noted in the first volume of this series, was not a self-evident occupational category or a readily identifiable social identity in the early modern and early colonial periods. Several contributions to the first volume detailed the myriad manifestations of this category and identity, together with variant forms of the master-servant relationship, in a range of discourses (political, moral, literary), relationships (both non-

⁴ Often, in the British and European case, it is observed that grandmothers or great-grandmothers of the current middle classes were in service, that is, they worked as domestic servants. In the South Asian case, the chain of subordination tied people of various groups and ranks to higher nodes of authority, thus creating a series of command. The expression 'servant society' for South Asia does not intend to suggest that, in a particular period, service was the common denominator or stock employment, which then declined with time, leading to the emergence of professional middle classes; rather, it evokes a sense of deep ties of subordination—individual and institutional—that structured the social fabric, and the varied shades of master-servant-like relationships that inform personal and public lives.

kin and kin), diverse social (courtly, urban, household) and geographical locations. Different approaches to the theme, as the introduction to the first volume proposed, focused simultaneously on *relationships*, that is, between servants and masters, or more broadly, between subordinates and superiors (including individuals, groups and institutions) in several guises and diverse space–time settings and the historical production (and challenges) of a *status* (social and occupational) of the servant.⁵

These approaches remain relevant in the later period as well, the period with which this volume is concerned. Although we do set on to chart out what we believe are the ‘new’ elements or processes in the master–servant relationship that could be characterised as either emerging or consolidating in the nineteenth century (more towards the later part of it), we would also like to re-emphasise one thing very clearly: between the attempt to suggest new ‘modes’ of doing servants’ pasts and following the older conventional way of presenting a historical narrative organised along a progressively moving timeline, we consciously opt for the former. In other words, we are open to experiment, suggest and implement the ‘temporal *harakiri*’, so to say, by mixing the past and the present (as we did in the first volume’s introduction) of the servants’ lives and stories, culled out from visuals, state records and literary representations. By doing so, we are not advocating the flattening of temporal slice, erasing the changes coming with time, but arguing for ‘graded’ pasts, the different constituents of which are both co-existing in different time periods as well as mutating into new processes while retaining the earlier textures.

So we begin by outlining the features of a ‘new order’ that emerged in the nineteenth century. We can observe a closer identification of domestic service with paid employment: individuals took it up as an occupation in lieu of wages. The period was also marked by a growing degree of menialisation of domestic servants and paid domestic work. Servants were identified as a distinct social group, performing menial household tasks, which was seen as a function of their lower class and caste status and their marginal position in a feudal culture of authority and subordination. This became a theme in the emerging nationalist and anti-caste political discourses and movements that were agitating for political independence

⁵ See Sinha, Varma and Jha, ‘Introduction’.

and social equality. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the metaphor of master and servant came to be invoked by these movements to underline not loyalty but *subordination*—both political and social—to colonial rule and upper-caste dominance.⁶ At the same time, upper-group servants (*munshis*, *banians* and *sircars*, for example) and some servants of leisured households—who acquired distinct professional identity (e.g. *darzis*)—moved out of homes into public arenas, while a majority of other household servants were relegated to a lower occupational and social status.⁷ This period was, therefore, characterised by a growing identification of domestic servant as a socially marginal figure, and domestic service as an institution that was prominent in the production and reproduction of social hierarchies, distinctions and inequalities.⁸

⁶ The period witnessed a reworking of many words and concepts, reflecting the new political and, at times, radical potential of redefining social relationships. For instance, for ‘untouchable’ and ‘untouchability’, see Ramnarayan Rawat, ‘Genealogies of the Dalit Political: The Transformation of Achhut from “Untouched” to “Untouchable” in Early Twentieth-Century North India’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 52, no. 3, 2015, 335–55.

⁷ On the interface of *darzis* with the changing nature of clothing and technology in the late nineteenth century, see David Arnold, *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India’s Modernity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 33–38.

⁸ There is a vast and burgeoning literature on paid domestic work in contemporary India. See Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta, *Domestic Days: Women, Work, and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016); Kathinka Frøystad, ‘Master–Servant Relations and the Domestic Reproduction of Caste in Northern India’, *Ethnos* 68, no. 1, 2003, 73–94; Sara Dickey, ‘Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India’, *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 2, 2000, 462–89; Sara Dickey, ‘Mutual Exclusions: Domestic Workers and Employers on Labor, Class and Character in South India’, in *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. K. Adams and Sara Dickey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 31–62; Rachel Tolen, ‘Transfers of Knowledge and Privileged Spheres of Practice: Servants and Employers in a Madras Railway Colony’, in *Home and Hegemony*, 63–86; V. Tellis-Nayak, ‘Power and Solidarity: Clientage in Domestic Service’, *Current Anthropology* 24, no. 1, 1983, 67–79; Lakshmi Srinivas, ‘Master–Servant Relationship in a Cross-Cultural Perspective’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 30, no. 5, 1995, 269–78; Parvati Raghuram, ‘Caste and Gender in the

The wider implication of domestic service in the narrative of transition to modernity, as noted in several western European societies, is its function as a bridging occupation for rural migrants who were moving into urban locations. This facet of domestic service, rather than the physical mobility itself, is absent or muted in the South Asian case. Also missing in South Asian historical trajectories and experiences is the view of domestic service as a lifecycle stage for adolescents, who moved into non-kin households as servants during their early youth to acquire skills, resources and capital to prepare them for their transition to adulthood, and the setting up of their own households.⁹ In South Asia in late colonial and contemporary times, participation in paid domestic work provided scant resources and opportunities for upward social, economic and occupational mobility.¹⁰ Similar trends have also been reported in

Organisation of Paid Domestic Work in India', *Work, Employment & Society* 15, no. 3, 2001, 607–17; P. Barua, H. Haukanes and A. Waldrop, 'Maid in India: Negotiating and Contesting the Boundaries of Domestic Work', *Forum for Development Studies* 43, no. 3, 2016, 415–36; Shalini Grover, Thomas Chambers and Patricia Jeffrey, 'Portraits of Women's Paid Domestic-Care Labour: Ethnographic Studies from Globalizing India', *Journal of South Asian Development* 13, no. 2, 2018, 123–40; K. Mattila, 'Gendered Vulnerabilities: Work-Life Trajectories of Female Domestic Workers in Jaipur', in *Women Workers in Urban India*, ed. S. Raju and S. Jatrana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 67–96.

⁹ Theresa M. McBride, 'Social Mobility for the Lower Classes: Domestic Servants in France', *Journal of Social History* 8, no. 1, 1974, 63–78; Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965); Deborah Simonton, "'Birds of Passage" or "Career" Women? Thoughts on the Life Cycle of the Eighteenth-Century European Servant', *Women History Review* 20, no. 2, 2011, 207–25; Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, ed., *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity: Understanding the Globalization of Domestic Work, 16th–21st Centuries* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004). For a historiographical survey of this literature, see Raffaella Sarti, 'Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work', *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 2, 2014, 279–314.

¹⁰ There were instances in the colonial period of certain marginal groups (e.g. Kahar caste) acquiring a higher status through their participation in household work for Europeans and upper castes. These groups were previously considered as 'unclean' castes but seemed to show a degree of mobility on account of their participation in paid domestic work. But such possibilities of social mobility linked to domestic service have rapidly shrunk in the post-Independence period, and especially, in the period after the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s. Contemporary paid domestic

several African, Asian, Latin American and North American contexts, in which the legacies of slavery, racism, sexism and colonialism, more than anything else, appear to have fundamentally structured the nature and practice of paid domestic work.¹¹

However, the lack of a lifecycle phenomenon that improved social status does not mean that other possibilities of movement, mobility and occupational shifts were entirely closed off. By the mid-nineteenth century, we can observe a definite shift in the constitution of the *naukar* and *chakar* groups. The occupational profile of the servant categories that comprised the former group had diversified. This was partly because of the emergence of a new order of colonial bureaucracy and partly because of the concomitant new ordering of the *zamindari* households, which were restructured owing to the changes in the political economy. The changed socio-legal ideologies of the new political dispensation also played a role. The shrinking resources of elite households that were used to maintain multiple dependent relationships (of servants, retainers, *bibis*, slaves and also kin) was notable in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many such households were feeling the burden of the strict revenue demands made by the colonial state, but also due to the changes in rules on heirship and patronage. In addition, the material objects of everyday life pertaining to gifts and rewards were also redefined

work has become identified with personal, and often humiliating, subordination and subservience of vulnerable groups working under precarious conditions. See Nandini Goopu, 'Servile Sentinels of the City: Private Security Guards, Organized Informality, and Labour in Interactive Services in Globalized India', *International Review of Social History* 58, no. 1, 2013, 9–38. For a contemporary account of domestic servants in urban India, see Tripti Lahiri, *Maid in India: Stories of Inequality and Opportunity Inside our Homes* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2017).

¹¹ Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Distant Companions: Servants and Employers in Zambia, 1900–1985* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989); Jacklyn Cock, *Maids & Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989); Elsa M. Chaney and Mary G. Castro, eds, *Muchachas No More: Household Workers in Latin America and Caribbean* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989); Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domesticity and Their Employers* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1985); Victoria Haskins and Claire Lowrie, *Colonization and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Dirk Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Silke Neusinger, eds, *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

under the new sensibility of propriety and corruption.¹² *Baksheesh* (voluntary reward, which the colonial archives and ego-documents characterised as coercive) demanded or requested by servants became the epitome of native degeneracy. Petitions from these households show that on many occasions their ‘pension’ was fixed by the colonial state, without considering the ties and obligations in which masters and a range of dependents were socially, historically and generationally tied. The abstraction of status of these families through a fixed monetary number—the pension—led to the partial, if not full, dismantling of the patronage system that had thrived earlier. This meant the restructuring of the master–servant relationship as seen and perceived in terms of the ties of patronage. The disbursement of retainers and *lathials*, for instance, from zamindari households, also meant a surge in the labour market of coolies, servants and other labouring categories, although the extent of this surge is very difficult to ascertain.

¹² Gregory Kozlowski, for instance, in his study of endowments (*awqaf*), which was part of both scripturalist and popular Islam and widely practised by wealthier Muslim families of north India, notes that these endowments often took into account distant relations, dependents and servants. There was a practice of rich families providing stipends to old retainers, who sometimes continued to eat at their employer’s expense. Indrani Chatterjee argues that the declining material circumstances of the slaves and servants of a prominent *nawabi* household (Nizamat of Murshidabad) was to a large measure linked to the policies and ideologies of the East India Company’s (EIC) government in Bengal. The EIC, for instance, pushed for a stricter distinction between ‘kin’ and ‘servants’ which ‘circumscribed the membership of the former and ossified the composition of the latter’. The EIC tended to commute the ‘gifts’ allowed to the ‘slave-servant’ (of food and clothes) into cash amounts and treated each ‘slave-servant’ stipend as an ordinary life provision rather than private property. Gregory C. Kozlowski, *Endowments and Society in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 58–59; Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) 131–32. Also see Rochisha Narayan, ‘In the Service of Empire: Widows, Dependents and Intermediary Households in Colonial India’, paper presented at ‘Servant’s Past Conference’, 11–13 April 2018, Berlin. For influential histories of transformation in the colonial and postcolonial period of relationships approximating patriarchal master and dependent servant from rural north Bihar (*Bhuniya-Kamia*) and rural south Gujarat (*Halipratha*), see Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Jan Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979).

Further, towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the movement of certain service categories from homes into the public arena was also occasioned by other shifts in the dominant servant profile: by the third decade of the twentieth century, we start finding a new trend of feminisation of domestic labour force together with the growth in live-out hiring system. From the 1960s onwards, this new trend further added on new elements as one could notice a decline in the practice of keeping resident male servants, who were generationally tied to specific families and their employers' households.¹³ Such long-term resident dependent servants gradually became a rarity, being replaced by full-time live-out servants and later casualised part-time female servants working simultaneously for several nuclear families living in smaller homes and apartments.¹⁴

There were two marked developments in the late nineteenth century to which the idea of the modern domestic servant was closely tied. The first was the proliferation of public institutions and amenities in urban but also middle-sized *mofussil* (small administrative towns or those pre-colonial cities that saw the development of colonial bureaucratic institutions such as courts, jails, schools and hospitals) towns. New industrial enclaves, increased labour demand and railway-induced mobility accompanied the growth in municipal structures across cities of varying sizes. The growth in hospitals, offices and schools went hand in hand with the development of hotels and caf  s/restaurants along the railway tracks. We still completely

¹³ Seemin Qayum and Raka Ray, 'Male Servants and the Failure of Patriarchy in Kolkata', *Men and Masculinities* 13, no. 1, 2010, 111–25; Radhika Chopra, 'Servitude and Sacrifice: Masculinity and Domestic Labour', *Masculinities and Social Change* 1, no. 1, 2012, 19–39. Male servants were also prevalent in several African contexts. See Karen Tranberg Hansen, 'Household Work as Man's Job: Sex and Gender in Domestic Service in Zambia', *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 2, 1986, 18–23; Janet Bujra, *Serving Class: Masculinity and the Feminisation of Domestic Service in Tanzania* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude*, 7–8. Such a trend was already reported from the late 1950s from several districts in northern India (Bihar) by P. C. Roy Chaudhury. See *Bihar District Gazetteers, Gaya* (Patna: Bihar Secretariat Press, 1957), 115; *Bihar District Gazetteers, Monghyr* (Patna: Bihar Secretariat Press, 1957), 250; *Bihar District Gazetteers, Purnea* (Patna: Bihar Secretariat Press, 1963), 452–54; *Bihar District Gazetteers, Champaran* (Patna: Bihar Secretariat Press, 1960), 392–94.

do not know the full import of this transition, for example regarding what happened to those who worked in the early nineteenth-century *serais* and what exactly was new in terms of the social profile of those who worked as bearers, cooks, *ayahs*, attendants and servants in *gymkhanas*, hotels, hospitals, schools, inns and other such places.¹⁵ But an expansion in new employment opportunities, increased mobility with various implications for gender and work, and a reinvigoration of the ties between the rural and the urban, without necessarily making a case for a causal or gradual increase in ‘acceleration’, with the coming of new technologies affecting the time–space relationship, define the new order in this period.¹⁶

If the first change indicated a growth in public institutions—an expansion creating new opportunities—the second took place in the domain of the private, which was not in opposition to but in dialogue with the first. The home became a place of sanctity. Its reform reflected the new politics of the nation. *Chakri* acquired a new meaning of subjugation, not only to the superior colonial order but to the reckoning of time itself.¹⁷ If the first change (public institutional growth and new urban amenities) seems to have afforded greater occupational opportunities to servants—to work in a factory or a hotel or become a municipal sweeper or *dhye*—then the latter (the recasting of home), in contradistinction, attempted to make

¹⁵ The government ‘circuit house’, which also worked as an accommodation place for touring officials, approximated the household set-up. Each of these circuit houses would at least have a *khansaman*, a *durwan*, a *mali* and a bearer. On the *khansaman* being the patriarch of the dak bungalows, see Rajika Bhandari, *The Raj on the Move: Story of the Dak Bungalow* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2012).

¹⁶ Nitin Sinha, ‘The Idea of Home in a World of Circulation: Steam, Women and Migration through Bhojpuri Folksongs’, *International Review of Social History* 63, no. 2, 2018, 203–37. On the critique of acceleration, see Alf Luedtke, ‘Writing Time—Using Space. The Notebook of a Worker at Krupp’s Steel Mill and Manufacturing—An Example from the 1920s’, *Historical Social Research* 38, no. 145, 2013, 216–28.

¹⁷ It is beyond the scope of this volume to explore, but the question can surely be raised as a future research possibility: when the clerical middle class felt the heat of time discipline, one wonders what this new time discipline meant for servants in terms of organising their day and work. When *babus* were forced to reach office at a stipulated time, was the servants’ rhythm of work—of getting up early, fetching water, helping in the kitchen, and so on—also changed? See Sumit Sarkar, ‘“Kaliyuga”, “Chakri” and “Bhakti”’: Ramkrishna and His Times’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 27, no. 29, 1992, 1543–59 and 1561–66.

servants invisible. If liveried servants became visible in public places, the didactic literature on women and home that proliferated in the nineteenth century presented domestic servants as liminal figures in its textual narratives and tropes. This related dialectical development—between public and private, between expansiveness and insularity, between visibility and marginality—was the stuff of the ‘new order’. In this recasting of the work regime, and amidst a new discursive formation of the nation and new idioms of home emerged the new modern servant, without entirely shedding his/her past avatars.

The professionalisation of certain domestic service categories, as noted earlier, marked their movement into public arenas and employment.¹⁸ There were certain other implications as well. Tanika Sarkar, in Chapter 7, charts the journey of a particular service category—*mehtars* (sweepers/waste cleaners/scavengers), who, from offering their services to private homes came to become municipal employees. This, she argues, allowed for the forging of new links between the home and the public arena. The movement from a private home to corporation employment did not necessarily transform the value of the work, as sweeping (and scavenging) still had certain stigmas attached.¹⁹ Yet the possibility of mobilising *mehtars*

¹⁸ By professionalisation, we are not hinting at any institutional mechanism that was put in place towards skill development of these ‘workers’. We use the phrase to indicate the proliferation of public institutions in which a numerous category of domestic servants was employed. We also use it to indicate the growth in corporate identity of some of these service categories, whose wage-based employment created different kinds of movements. For instance, sweepers in the municipal bodies took recourse to strike to press for better wages; *darzis*, on the other hand, became professional by setting up their own businesses and were not necessarily attached to the household as they were earlier in the first half of the nineteenth century. This could also be argued for barbers and washermen, although again their cases need independent research to trace the long-term shifts. Those who moved into public institutions became ‘menial servants’ and came under the bureaucratic rules related to livery, holiday, pension, etc. This debate on their uniform, leave and pension vigorously took place in the late nineteenth century.

¹⁹ A similar trend is noted for paid care workers. See Rajni Palriwala and N. Neetha, ‘Care Arrangements and Bargains: Anganwadi and Paid Domestic Workers in India’, *International Labour Review* 149, no. 4, 2010, 511–27. Sometimes, there was not such a neat transition from domestic servants to municipal employees. In the case of Madras Presidency, sweepers and scavengers, for instance, came from Chakkiliyars, who were leather workers. The latter, in turn, were not just leather workers, but also agricultural

traditionally identified by their caste and now organised through their public occupational identity had the potential to affect master–servant relationship more broadly. There were instances of strikes among sweepers encouraging other household servants (who were offering similar services) to refuse work. This brings us to the question of the growing voice of certain categories of workers who were formerly domestic servants and were later inserted into public employment.

This created conditions for their mobilisation and politicisation, and had an impact on the emerging trade union politics and nationalist politics. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, municipal sweepers of Bombay twice went on strike over issues regarding wages, holidays and exactions of *muccadams* (jobbers), which led to the passing of the Municipal Servants Act by the Bombay Legislative Council in 1890.²⁰ The issue of overseers was also raised by sweepers of Delhi when they went on several strikes in the 1870s. Vijay Prashad, in his study of sweepers in late colonial north India, notes a particular moment in 1946 when the sweepers of Bombay, Srinagar, Multan, Delhi, Lahore and several other towns ‘put down their dustpans and brooms in anticipation of a better world’. This militancy, Prashad notes, disturbed Gandhi to an extent, and this was reflected when he made a statement that ‘there are certain matters in which strikes would be wrong. Sweeper’s grievances come in this category.’²¹

and farm servants, who, in the late nineteenth century, due to the growing demand of the leather industry, went through changes in their work process. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this traffic between private and public was also mediated through urbanisation, resulting in the reconfiguring of the association between caste, stigma and work. Market, social hierarchies and law came together to reinforce stigmatised social and economic practices through changing meanings of work, caste, objects and so on. See Shahana Bhattacharya, ‘Rotting Hides and Runaway Labour: Labour Control and Workers’ Resistance in the Indian Leather Industry, c. 1860–1960’, in *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, ed. Ravi Ahuja (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013), 47–96.

²⁰ Jim Masselos, ‘Jobs and Jobbery: The Sweeper in Bombay under the Raj’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 19, no. 2, 1982, 102.

²¹ Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1–4 and 132–33. This might, however, be linked to Gandhi’s earlier experimentation with creating a conceptual difference, which he wished also to be followed in practice, between social and political boycott. Also, during the non-cooperation movement, he did not approve of sweepers withdrawing

At an adjourned meeting of the Municipal commissioners held in Madras 1891, the Municipal Council decided to implement a labour law along similar lines of the Bombay Municipal Servants Act. This section was introduced in the Madras Municipalities Act of 1891 in response to strikes by scavengers, which was deemed to have 'dangerous consequences' for which preventive legislation was required. The enactment of the labour law inaugurated a phase whereby the scavengers had to sign an agreement by which they had to give two months' notice of their departure and bind themselves to work during their service.²² The workers had to get the written permission of the commissioners or his officers and procure health certificates for leave of absence. The agreement further stated that they would be liable to be sentenced to a period of fixed hard labour and the absconders would be summarily imprisoned or brought back to work.²³ The legal statute apart from defining the service provisions also imposed restrictions over their handling of dead horses and carcasses of animals which effectively defined the scope of their labour solely as municipal workers. These legal regulations, (section 282 of the Municipal Act, 1890) empowered municipal employees to exercise powers of the police officer over the scavengers. Thus, judicial coercion and penal regulation signified an aggressive attempt by the state to curb the autonomy of the scavengers and subject them directly to state control.²⁴

services from those who did not participate in or endorse the movement. He articulated a stance against any kind of social boycott of non-supporters. Ranajit Guha, 'Discipline and Mobilize', in *Subaltern Studies: Writing on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 95. Equally important is to remember Gandhi's general views on strikes. He believed in the mutuality of interests between capital and labour and often advised in favour of 'non-violent' relationship between them. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'The Indian Working Class and the Nationalist Movement', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 10, no. 1, 1987, 59.

²² See for changes in service conditions, Administrative Report of Madras Municipality (Madras, 1900 & 1910): 80.

²³ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁴ We thank Vidhya Raveendranathan for adding text and references to this part of the discussion. See her 'Constructing the Scavenger: Caste and Labour in Colonial South India, 1860–1930', unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Delhi, 2012. In general, on the question of sweepers, caste and untouchability, see Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement Against Untouchability in Twentieth Century Punjab*

It also meant that the spatial arena in which the master–servant relationship now played—from private to public—was new, but the ties of patronage remained the same. For instance, a biography of a convert published in the early twentieth century by a Basel missionary based in Kerala, narrates the story of an upper-caste woman named Baru who converted to Christianity after widowhood. With her changed new name, Esther, she became an ayah in the missionary household. After a period of lengthy service, before their departure from India, the missionary family arranged a permanent job for her as a matron of a girl’s home.²⁵

There is, of course, a limit to what we could classify as ‘new’ in this period. The invisibility of servants in the didactic texts also suggests the recasting of the feudal order. The *badi dai* (the old, senior maid, in Chapter 5 by Prabhat Kumar) encompassed the vestiges of this feudal order while living in times of pervasive social and economic change.²⁶ Later, the decline of extended families and the joint family system, as well as the greater participation of middle-class women in the labour market, especially in urban areas, led to a spike in demand for domestic servants. They took up manual and care work within families.²⁷ The issue of loyalty,

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), and R. S. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself: Ideology, Identity, Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Nandini Gooptu’s work looks at the means by which urban ‘untouchables’ developed bhakti devotionism through the construction of a pre-Aryan identity of the ‘untouchables’ as the original inhabitants of India. Vijay Prasad’s study of the religious worlds of the Chuhra has looked at the radical potential of the powerful religious traditions of Bala Shah Nuri who allowed them to retain autonomy and provided them a vision of emancipation despite their ‘untouchable’ status within the village economy. Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁵ Heinrich Oskar Kuhner, *Esther Ayah: Eine Indische Kinderfrau* [Esther Ayah: An Indian Nanny] (Basel: Baseler Missionbuch, 1924). We thank Jana Tschurenev for translating this text.

²⁶ See Chapter 5 by Prabhat Kumar in this volume.

²⁷ Neera Desai and Sharayu Anantram, ‘Middle Class Women’s Entry into the World of Work’, in *Women, Work and Society*, ed. K. Saradamoni (Calcutta: Indian Statistical Institute, 1985), 308–23; Padmaja Barua, Anne Waldrop and Haldis Haukanes, ‘From Benevolent Maternalism to the Market Logic: Exploring Discursive Boundary Marking in Domestic Work Relations in India’, *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 4, 2017, 5.

which was seen as an essential quality and attribute of servants because of their long association with their masters' families, was still desirable, but was less evident as servants came to be employed in several homes simultaneously. As loyalty was parcelled out, the identity (as a set of desirable attributes) of a servant changed. Servants showed less and less allegiance to or identification with a particular household or employer.²⁸ The discourse of paternalism and patronage, which had underpinned master-servant relationships, nevertheless continued to be invoked by employers and also to some extent by servants in order to obtain certain privileges. Patronage was the knot in the tug of war in which loyalty was demanded on the part of masters and conditions of employment were negotiated on the part of servants.²⁹

Certain other shifts can also be traced to changes in technology and domestic material cultures. Certain servant categories such as *punkhawala* became obsolete with the coming of electrification and a decline in the use of hand-pulled fans.³⁰ The *bheesties* met the same fate. The increased supply of piped water into households led to a substantial decline in their presence as a quintessential servant. On the other hand, with the advent of new technology and especially the motor car, specialists such as drivers joined the ranks of household servants.³¹

²⁸ Seemin Qayum and Raka Ray, 'Grappling with Modernity: India's Respectable Classes and the Culture of Domestic Servitude', *Ethnography* 4, no. 4, 2003, 520–55. For the uses of loyalty in another context, see Sarah Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

²⁹ This theme also occupies a prominent place in the prescriptive and popular literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See the chapters by Charu Gupta and Prabhat Kumar in this volume.

³⁰ Animesh Chatterjee, "'New Wine in New Bottles': Class Politics and the 'Uneven Electrification' of Colonial India", *History of Retailing and Consumption* 4, no. 1, 2018, 8–12.

³¹ The broader implications of technology on domestic work (and the master-servant relationship) have remained underexplored in the South Asian historiography. Satyasikha Chakraborty, 'Technologies of Domestic Labour', available at <https://servantspasts.wordpress.com/2017/10/16/domestic-gadgets-and-domestic-servants-in-late-colonial-british-households/> (accessed on 10 December 2018). How far they remained the specialist couched in contractual service relationship is open to question. In contemporary India, drivers are also used for getting other household tasks done such as running errands, grocery shopping and other minor works mostly related to public space.

However, even other kinds of service that were presented as ‘modern’ and ‘skilled’, and which appeared to be professionalised, were marked by their own structures of hierarchies and exploitation. This is similar to the condition of private guards in Calcutta at this time, who were positioned as trained professionals but had conditions of employment and levels of control exercised over them that were the essence of the master–servant relationship. Nandini Gooptu poignantly describes that the

private security guard, despite its new professional trappings and the veneer of grooming, was still no better than being a mere domestic or personal servant at the beck and call of the upper class...Many had chosen security work mainly to avoid the humiliation of private domestic work, only to find themselves in a situation of personal subordination.³²

The underbelly of this new service economy, whether based in the household or the public institution (malls, banks, offices), was therefore interrelated rather than separated. There was a reproduction of a master–servant-*like* relationship, even in jobs that appeared to be contractual, transactional and professional. This also occurs through the process of feminisation and the ways in which the segregated labour market developed. Men worked as guards and women as domestic workers;³³ but they both contributed to the reproduction of the hierarchical status relationship with their masters, mistresses and employers.

In this introduction, we have deliberately opted to create a dialogue between the past and present by going back and forth in time and tracing lineages of continuities and changes, although not on the same scale or to the same effect as in the introduction of the first volume. The contributions in this volume, however, while attentive to the emergence of the modernist category and condition of ‘domestic servant’ (waged, stigmatised and feminised), have refrained from reading history backwards. This is a methodological hue which has coloured the sense of the past in some recent

³² Gooptu, ‘Servile Sentinels of the City’, 31.

³³ In the growing informalisation of the labour market, however, women are working at multiple sites such as factory and home at the same time. Chitra Joshi, ‘Between Work and Domesticity: Gender and Household Strategies in Working-Class Families’, in *Workers in the Informal Sector: Studies in Labour History, 1800–2000*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Jan Lucassen (Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd., 2005), 161–76.

ethnographic and sociological accounts of servants and domestic service in South Asia. The essays in this volume, while detailing the nature and histories of domestic servants and domestic service relationships, further put pressure on the frameworks and certainties about political, economic and social changes in this period, and collectively make a persuasive case for inserting servants and domestic service into the writing of modern South Asian history.

REGULATION, LAW AND STATE

Law, as we noted in *Servants' Pasts*, volume 1, has a long, complex and wide-ranging influence in shaping the nature of master–servant relationships and the making of domestic order and authority. The absence of explicit laws regulating domestic service in contemporary times, for instance, has been read as evidence that this relationship has always remained outside the purview of law.³⁴ Several contributions in this volume, and a few in the first volume, instead point to the connections and links between domestic service and the emerging legal discourses and practices. The absence of a formal legal structure is not to be confused with the absence of a legal milieu in which the absence itself was actively created or sustained. The second point is that when we think of domestic servant and service as a form of relationship, we inevitably need to think of interrelated practices, sites and other social relationships in which the law was intervening. We have to think of households, changing norms of morality (see the chapters by Satyasikha Chakraborty and Jana Tschurennev in this volume) and conjugality, notions of patriarchy, practices of adultery (Nitin Varma) and abortion, and not least the nature of slavery and servitude (Samita Sen and Tanika Sarkar). Direct legal intervention with regard to the master–servant relationship appears to be less evident (this is only partially true, as interventions concerned with wages and forms of punishment

³⁴ N. Neetha and Rajni Palriwala, 'The Absence of State Law: Domestic Workers in India', *Canadian Journal of Women and Law* 23, no. 1, 2011, 97–120; N. Neetha, 'Contours of Domestic Service: Characteristics, Work Relations and Regulation', *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 52, no. 3, 2009, 489–506; N. Neetha, 'Regulating Domestic Work', *Economic and Political Review* 43, no. 37, 2008, 26–28.

were actively pursued), but other regulations on the interrelated themes mentioned above impacted master–servant relationships.

A prominent instance of regulating domestic relationships, as Samita Sen sketches in Interjection 1, comes to the fore in discussions on slavery and marriage from the early nineteenth century. The domestic authority of masters was legitimated and even constituted in the household through law.³⁵ The framing of these relationships as private and dependent was crucial in moulding their nature, and here colonial law operated both explicitly and insidiously to legitimate the rights, authority and obligations of masters (and husbands) in relation to other members of the household. The fact that this corpus of early colonial law, contemporaneously called ‘Anglo-Muhammad Law’, was itself a processual outcome of engagements with what existed before colonial rule is something we should not lose sight of. But sometimes the subtle or indeed more pronounced recasting of existing laws for both civil and criminal adjudications was undeniably in process. The moral sanction regarding the chastisement of wives, servants and children had legal bases as well. On many occasions, it is observed in court cases related to the violent beating of servants that masters pleaded ignorance; they claimed that they gave a minor beating as a form of ‘correction’, a moral chastisement. A subsequent death was always blamed on something else, ranging from an already enlarged spleen to the minor wound being treated with bad ghee.³⁶ But coming back to the relationship between law and master–servant relationships, in Interjection 1, Sen uses the optic of slavery and its deep ties with forms of marriage, caste, family and religion to show the making of the formal structures in which informal relations could flourish. This historical background, Sen suggests, shapes the situation of domestic workers in

³⁵ Radhika Singha, ‘Making the Domestic More Domestic: Criminal Law and the “Head of the Household”, 1772–1843’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 3, 1996, 309–43; Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law*; Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

³⁶ Jordanna Balkin, ‘The Boot and the Spleen: When Was Murder Possible in British India’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 2, 2006, 463–94; Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

contemporary India by keeping them in an informal situation, but one which is not outside the purview of the law.³⁷

Slavery is indeed an important filter through which to understand forms of domestic service and servitude. But, as argued above, the nineteenth century was also the period when the growth of waged domestic work took place. Be it for ayahs performing specific tasks or a set of bearers performing a variety of tasks, there was a growth in the labour market for domestic servants from the late eighteenth century. The wage lists of servants that we find from the mid-eighteenth century, repeatedly published, officially or unofficially, in different types of travelogues and guidebooks, are an example of the existence and expansion of the domestic labour market, which it was thought should be regulated by adhering to prescribed wages. Wage lists are also historical documents whose existence not only in administrative correspondence but also in private diaries shows the importance attached to the question of wages and contracts. These ideally defined the relationship between those who hired and those who were part of this labour market. In fact, from the late nineteenth century, we find such wage lists tucked into the diary pages of native elites, signifying the preponderance of waged domestic labour market beyond the traditionally organised forms of labour market based on caste or region. In Premchand's story *Mahri*, we find reference to an exchange service from which the protagonist of the story hired maids.³⁸

The folding of the master-servant relationship into practices of slavery and servitude, and the state's legal interventions, were also occasioned by other attempts to control mobility and servants' wages in the expanding colonial urban centres (e.g. Calcutta, Madras and Bombay). These were backed by other legal instruments of control such as master and servant laws, which established and legitimised the authority of masters (mostly

³⁷ In contrast to this trend in the European context it has been argued that domestic service, in fact, provided a template for the emergence of a new conception of labour with the appearance of precarious or short-term contracts in contrast to the hierarchy, training and rules of apprenticeship linked to the labour organisation of the guild system. A. Fauve-Chamoux, 'Introduction', in *Domestic Service*, 8.

³⁸ Premchand, *Mahri* (in Devanagari script), available at <http://gadyakosh.org/gk/महरी/प्रेमचंद> (accessed on 18 May 2018).

Europeans) in relation to their household servants.³⁹ The ‘contractual sense’ that was embedded in master and servant laws placed the relationships in the realm of rules to be potentially overseen by magistrates and other state authorities, and not just private informal arrangements. The act of ‘fleeing’ without giving timely advance notice, for instance, was taken to infringe the contract, and was legally punishable. Servants asking for wages higher than prescribed were also technically liable to be reported to the courts. What, therefore, needs to be explored is not whether master–servant relationships fell within the realm of law or custom. This, we strongly argue, is the reproduction of a false binary and a question that leads us away from unknotting historical complexities. Customary practices were sustained, for instance, through court verdicts. Forms of punishment based on the ideas of public shame persisted, and they were used as deterrents: the blackening of faces, parading of the convicted around a town seated on a donkey, public lashings and even orders to cut beards and hair are to be found in the orders of judges and magistrates. The second point is that law was treated as a graded instrument of governance that helped to enforce social contracts. Certain crimes required summary judgements; in fact, it was not only the judgement but the whole legal procedure that was summary. Once the legal redress either for servants or masters involved in certain disputes was turned into summary legal procedures, the customary was more likely to be reproduced through legal judgements.

Further, the application of master and servant laws strengthened the view (both for officials and employers) that breaches in employment contracts (either implied or explicit) on the part of servants should be

³⁹ See chapters by Nitin Sinha and Simon Rastén in *Servants’ Pasts*, vol. 1. Also see Ravi Ahuja, ‘Labour Relations in an Early Colonial Context: Madras, c.1750–1800’, *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no. 4, 2002, 793–826; Ravi Ahuja, ‘The Origins of Colonial Labour Policy in Late Eighteenth-Century Madras’, *International Review of Social History* 44, no. 2, 1999, 159–95; Prabhu P. Mohapatra, ‘Regulated Informality: Legal Constructions of Labour Relations in Colonial India, 1814–1926’, in *Workers in the Informal Sector*, 65–96; Prabhu P. Mohapatra, ‘From Contract to Status? Or How Law Shaped Labour Relations in Colonial India, 1780–1880’, in *India’s Unfree Workforce: Of Bondage Old and New*, ed. Jan Bremen, Isabelle Guerin and Aseem Prakash (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96–128. For a broader application of master–servant laws in the ‘imperial’ context, see Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, eds, *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

placed in the domain of criminality. This criminalisation accompanied comprehensive policing of servants, both privately and through state police. The nexus between law, policing and the profiling of servants as thieves resulted in culturally entrenched negative stereotypes. This arises precisely because of the servants' dual positioning: a servant is an insider, having access to inner quarters and places in the household, but s/he is also an outsider—as s/he comes into and leaves the household.⁴⁰ This unique position (from a servant's viewpoint perhaps a burden rather than a boon), being simultaneously treated as an insider and an outsider, has substantially contributed to the servants' criminalised profile. For instance, in this volume, Prabhat Kumar notes an instance from a reformist and moralist Hindi manual from the late nineteenth century (a letter-writing book addressed to a genteel female readership) that recommended that mistresses should verify a domestic servant's character before employment. Such perceptions and policing techniques inaugurated in the colonial period have continued until today, when police verification and the registration of servants have often been recommended by local authorities, or sometimes even made mandatory when hiring new servants for urban homes.⁴¹ Perhaps the instrument of verification in itself is not an issue: character chits were used in the early colonial period, and informal neighbourhood- or community-based inquiries existed later. What is symptomatic of the abuse of power is the asymmetry that is embedded in the act of verification. Do servants get to verify the past conduct of their new masters? Do they have

⁴⁰ In a study of a nineteenth-century *zamindari* (Pittapore), Pamela Price shows that the 'intimate knowledge' servants possessed about their mistresses made these mistresses potentially vulnerable. When these servants took this information elsewhere, either by taking service with rival households or by testifying in colonial courts, they successfully challenged relationships of power and authority within the household. Pamela G. Price, 'Kin, Clan, and Power in Colonial South India', in *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 192–221.

⁴¹ These servant verification forms are usually available on the official websites of the police forces for most of the metropolitan cities in India, and can even be found for smaller cities. See, for instance, the forms for Delhi, Kolkata and Patna, respectively, at: <http://www.delhipolice.nic.in/home/servant-f.htm>; <http://www.kolkatapolice.gov.in/images/docs/DomesticProfile.pdf>; and <http://www.patnapolice.bih.nic.in/Files/VERIFICATION%20OF%20DOMESTIC%20HELPER.pdf> (accessed on 10 December 2018).

the option of checking police records to discover if masters and mistresses have been accused of wage theft, beating or summary firing? The answer is no. But they do have agency, because they can discover a great deal about their new masters and mistresses by talking with fellow servants. The privacy of the household is in some sense a matter of public talk—because this is how servants come to know about a new workplace. This translates into masters' anxiety that servants are talking behind their backs. What appears to be a breach of privacy for masters is actually, in the absence of legal equality, an improvised measure on the part of servants that allows them to gather more details about their employers.

SERVANTS' VOICES: IN JUDICIAL ARCHIVES AND LITERARY NARRATIVES

These murmurs of the servants are rare, if not completely absent, in the archives. We are definitely not posing any new question by attempting to retrieve servant-subaltern voices, but are doing this from within the ambit of the historical materials we are dealing with. Additionally, we are attempting to write the social history of these servants—partly biographical, partly structural and partly discursive. A combination of methodologies—of close-contextual reading and of reading against the grain—is seen in the different chapters of this volume. Chapter 1 by Satyasikha Chakraborty closely looks at visuals and uses them as an important source for writing the history of early nineteenth-century ayahs. For the same period, Nitin Varma in Chapter 2 adopts the tool of microhistory to closely excavate ayahs' social history in materials related to divorce trials. In Chapter 6, Charu Gupta, in her innovative way, combines literary and judicial archives to present a non-uniform account of servants' social pasts. Each of these chapters presents us with a slice of social history, each highlighting the role of a specific type of historical material and a particular methodology.

The growing presence of the state's regulative intentions (through courts and police) also opened up possibilities for social subalterns, including servants, to appear in administrative, police and legal proceedings—as accused, victims or witnesses. The evidence, testimony and depositions offered by subalterns before police, courts and magistrates, which was fairly rare in an earlier period, became more widespread with the making

of the colonial bureaucratic order from the late eighteenth century.⁴² The possibility of finding ‘speaking servants’—as evident in this material—should not be simplistically read as allowing for the construction of an authentic ‘servant subjectivity’, as their voices were noted, recorded and catalogued through multiple layers of mediation and translation.⁴³

Servants, at least in northern and eastern India, deposed in Hindustani or Bengali, which at times went through two levels of translation before reaching the archives: Persian and English. Sometimes, we only find summaries of the depositions that were prepared in English. When, in some cases, we hear servants answering that they were Muslims on being asked what their ‘caste’ was, we can speculate if they took caste and religion as interchangeable categories of identity or whether (mis)translation played its role when the question was posed in the vernacular and the answer was preserved in English.

This corpus of material in the colonial archive—evidences, depositions and witness accounts—has been further refracted through registers of gender, class and caste, affecting its authenticity, that is, the credibility at which the historian could use them at their face value. Servant voices could potentially be suppressed, radically summarised or even drastically altered.⁴⁴ These testimonies were also shaped by the logics of inquiry and modes of questioning. For instance, the divorce trial proceedings of Europeans in India, in which servants appear very prominently, were shaped by the ‘logic’ of establishing the guilt of the mistress of the household. Therefore, the

⁴² The classic works exploring this material come from ‘early’ subaltern studies and especially the writings of Ranajit Guha, Sumit Sarkar and Shahid Amin, among others. See Ranajit Guha, ‘Chandra’s Death’, in *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135–65; Sumit Sarkar, ‘The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal’, in *Subaltern Studies VI*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 1–53; Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995). Also see Asiya Siddiqi, ‘Ayesha’s World: A Butcher’s Family in Nineteenth-Century Bombay’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 1, 2001, 101–29.

⁴³ Cornelia Hughes Dayton, ‘Rethinking Agency, Recovering Voices’, *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 3, 2004, 827–43.

⁴⁴ Ricardo Rocque and Kim A. Wagner, *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

mode of questioning directed at household servants and the information that was considered worthwhile to note and record was filtered through the primary intention of establishing guilt (see Chapter 2 by Varma). In important cases (in terms of the nature of the crime, the accusations made, or the wealth and status of the master), where several servants were asked to appear as witnesses, we encounter the problem of their formulaic replies. If they were appearing on behalf of wealthy masters, did their *vakeels* (legal advisors/councillors) tutor the servants? Finally, in those disputes which appear to have taken place between social-subalterns equals, we face the problem of constant shifts and changes in their depositions in subsequent inquiries. Sometimes, the figure of the servant seems to be invented in the courtroom, only to be denied later. From preliminary denial to final conviction, the voices in testimonies appear to be unstable. Among social subalterns as witnesses, the instrument of evidence, at times, appears to be resting on shaky grounds, as the testimonies swing between direct approval of the act to that of tactful crafting of the narrative to show the complicity of other accomplices, acquaintances and friends.

While recognising these limitations, the chapters in this volume (by Gupta and Varma) that focus on servant testimonies in court nevertheless demonstrate that such material can prove valuable in reconstructing servant experiences. Servants can be placed in their social lives and networks through the use of this material more effectively than they can through intentional documents (laws and regulations) of the state, which provide a more normative and rigid sense of the master–servant relationship. The mere collection of laws and regulations that relate to aspects that affected servants’ lives (wage, crime, theft and so on) just bears out the state’s agenda. The ‘thick’ court materials, on the other hand, show the actual working of the law. Simultaneously, they allow us to reconstruct aspects of the social lives of these servant subalterns. Beyond the formulaic replies, it is possible to actually peer into servants’ own households, to recreate their kin and neighbourhood acquaintances, and to reconstruct, even if only in a fragmentary form, the social practices in which they took part (see Varma’s chapter).

In Chapter 6, Gupta notes that the testimonies given by servants in early twentieth-century north Indian courts allow us a different view of the master–servant relationship from the one presented in the didactic and manual texts of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hindi

literature. In Chapter 2, Varma, through a few detailed testimonies of ayahs before the divorce court and the colonial enquiry commission, partially reconstructs their trajectories of work and life in Anglo-Indian households in early nineteenth-century eastern India and beyond. Working through judicial archives, to give this material a name, allows us to see distinctions in modes of representation from other types of sources that the authors have used in this volume. There is obviously no compartmentalised division between the 'legal' and the 'literary' servant. But such a heuristic divide helps us not only to see and potentially hear servants from different aspects of social arrangements, but also to approach the questions of their agency and consciousness when they encounter the different institutions (state, caste, patriarchy and so on) embedded in their social worlds.

The appearance of servants in literature, media and other forms of mass popular culture (such as cinema and television) hints at the various purposes and projects for which servants were mobilised in literary and popular discourses from the late nineteenth century. For instance, Carolyn Steedman notes the English and western European case where

domestic servants were used—more than any other social group—to write histories of the social itself. This was an important aspect of their function, not the same as dusting, boot-cleaning and water-carrying, but, rather, an involuntary labour, by which they were employed by all manner of legal theorist and political philosopher, to think (or think through) the social and its history.⁴⁵

The chapters in this volume (particularly by Kumar and Gupta but also by Sarkar), through their closer engagement with Hindi and Bengali reformist and pedagogical texts, cartoons and literature, similarly provide us with several insights into how the social was imagined and articulated through the involuntary labour of servants as they appeared in narrative plots and literary representations that depicted and commented on the domestic and public order of the period.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13–14.

⁴⁶ Swapna Banerjee, 'Down Memory Lane: Representations of Domestic Workers in Middle Class Personal Narratives of Colonial Bengal', *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 3, 2004, 681–708; Sonia Roncador, *Domestic Servants in Literature and Testimony in Brazil, 1889–1999* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). For a contemporary account,

In a telling remark in her chapter, Sarkar notes that the silence of archives on certain intimate yet socially charged issues, such as caste, stands in stark contrast to the literary representations (Bengali, in her case) where the upper-caste ideological conditioning of the authors made caste remarkably visible in their texts.⁴⁷ This becomes more pertinent for us as we may often recognise the centrality of caste in the organisation, specialism and valuation of work performed in the household (by different servants) and the employment of several menial servants (for sweeping, cleaning dishes and toilets), something that was also driven by the masters' adherence to the caste norms of avoiding defiling tasks and substances.⁴⁸

The chapters by Gupta and Kumar also provide us with a very powerful instance of the imagination of a new kind of a household in the nationalist and reformist discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This household was seen in contrast to the Anglo-Indian household, which was alleged to be dogged by an alien and foreign sensibility, and also the traditional household, which seemed to belong to a feudal past.⁴⁹ The

see R. K. Laxman, *Servants of India* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000). The take is hardly satirical—at best could be called humorous—but the predominant tone in the book is of the helplessness of masters and mistresses dependent on servants.

⁴⁷ See Chapter 7 by Tanika Sarkar in this volume; also see Charu Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies: Representation of Servants in Hindi Print Culture in Colonial India', *Studies in History* 34, no. 2, 2018, 1–23.

⁴⁸ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 314. For the presence of caste norms in the contemporary organisation of domestic service, see Kathinka Frøystad, 'Master–Servant Relations and the Domestic Reproduction of Caste in Northern India', *Ethnos* 68, no. 1, 2003, 73; and Sonal Sharma, 'Of Rasoi ka Kaam/Bathroom ka Kaam: Perspectives of Women Domestic Workers', *Economic & Political Weekly* 51, no. 7, 2016, 52–61. The centrality of caste norms (of purity and pollution) in the performance of household work can also be gauged by the fact that the employment of 'untouchable' castes as domestic servants (by upper castes) was proposed by several nationalist leaders and social reformers in the twentieth century as a potent method to challenge the practice of untouchability. See M. K. Gandhi, 'Harijan Worker's Duty', in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 62 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1998), 216–17; available at <https://www.gandhiashramsevagaram.org/gandhi-literature/mahatma-gandhi-collected-works-volume-62.pdf> (accessed on 10 December 2018).

⁴⁹ Swapna Banerjee, 'Exploring the World of Domestic Manuals: Bengali Middle-Class Women and Servants in Colonial Calcutta', *South Asia Graduate Research Journal* 3, no. 1, 1996, 1–26.

reformed domesticity and patriarchy of the new household was particularly mapped on the construction of a new woman primarily through male authorship.⁵⁰ As the ayah's presence marked the reformed domesticity of the Anglo-Indian household in the early nineteenth century (as argued by Chakraborty in Chapter 1), the projection of a new woman in popular and prescriptive literature was at the heart of the reformed domesticity that was linked to the nationalist project. The relationship of the 'new woman'/mistress with the household servants, as described by Kumar in Chapter 5, became a particular object of scrutiny, commentary and reform, forming a set of new 'moral orders'.

FEMALE DOMESTICS AND MORAL ORDERS

While individual chapters cover both female and male domestics in depth, the preponderance of one female servant—the ayah—in colonial manuals, literature and visuals has resulted in a small cluster of three chapters, covering historical to contemporary times. There is no attempt to present a unifying narrative of the transition of the historical ayah to the modern-day all-round maid. While historically it is essential to investigate the female labour category of the nineteenth century more fully (in the context of research that is brimming with work on male categories such as coolies and lascars), for a volume like the present one, a broad-brush comparison of forms of such labouring categories across time periods is an equally important exercise. Moreover, as pointed above, the increased feminisation of domestic work is a trend that appears to have started in the 1930s and was consolidated by the 1960s. We use this framework of feminisation to go back into the past via the figure of the ayah and return to the contemporary by looking at the emergence of the all-round maid in urban settings.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Judith Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learnt When Men Gave Them Advice* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

⁵¹ On the masculinity of servants, there have been some recent insightful works, by Radhika Chopra and Swapna Banerjee, for example. Radhika Chopra, 'Servitude and Sacrifice: Masculinity and Domestic Labour', *Masculinities & Social Change* 1, no. 1, 2012, 19–39; Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domestics: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

While certain tasks remained the prerogative of male servants, the gender composition of domestic servants changed over time. In Anglo-European households, as attested to by numerous photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, female servants were still marginal.⁵² Ayahs and *mehtaranees* were the only two categories; and, at times, the latter rose up to the former rank.

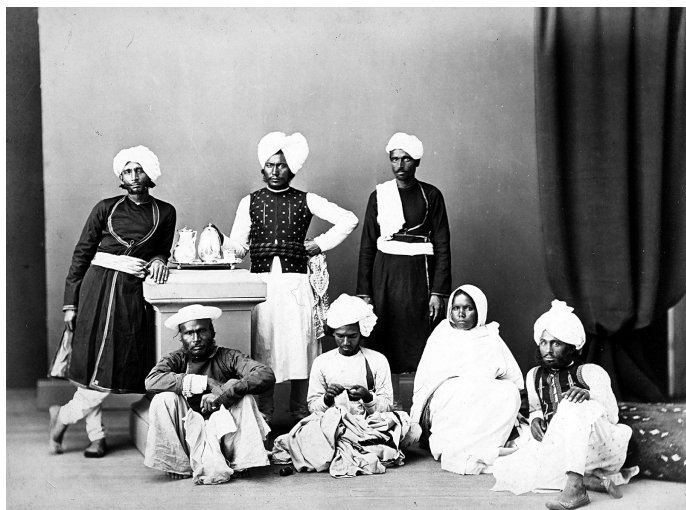


Fig. I.1. Group of Indian Servants, 1860

Source: Alinari Archives, Florence, with permission from Bridgeman Images

⁵² Not only photographs, but also postcards had become a prominent medium for the representation of servants, shared across imperial locations, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Being marginal figures (numerically speaking), female domestics were important in scripting a moral imperial narrative around sexuality and childcare. Satyasikha Chakraborty, 'Mammies, Ayahs, Baboes: Postcards of Racialized Nursemaids from the Early Twentieth Century', *Visual Culture & Gender* 13, 2018, 17–31. Also see Mahima A. Jain, 'Racism and Stereotypes in Colonial India's "Instagram"', 30 September 2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-45506092> (accessed on 10 December 2018). A few sets of photographs and postcards by individuals and companies have become renowned and are worthy of a separate study; they are Bourne and Shepherd Co., Higginbothams & Co., and the collections of Nicholas and Curths at the British Library.

In contrast, in native households, the number of female servants or service providers (such as *gwalin*, *dhobin*, *malin*, *paniharin*) besides maids for doing dishes and sweeping was always higher. With time, that is, towards the early twentieth century, this composition changed. The processes of feminisation not just of work but also of the worker (i.e. domestic servants), which had gathered momentum from the early decades of the twentieth century, resulted in women constituting the greater proportion of paid domestic workers by the middle of the century.⁵³ Accompanying this change was also the redesigning of work pattern. The female domestics were usually part-time maids doing chores such as cleaning, dish washing, sweeping and mopping (*jhaadu-pocha*, *chauka-bartan wali dai*). The male domestics, though relatively declined, continued to be hired as boy-servants, whose diminishing presence becomes evident only in the 1980s.⁵⁴ This increased feminisation sustained not only caste,

⁵³ Nirmala Banerjee, 'Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalization', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 269–301; Ishita Chakravarty and Deepita Chakravarty, 'For Bed and Board Only: Women and Girl Children Domestic Workers in Post-Partition Calcutta (1951–1981)', *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 2, 2013, 581–611; Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domestics*, 83–95. A recent ethnographic study in contemporary Delhi notes that certain caste groups from Tamil Nadu (Padyachi and Nadar) who migrate for work show a clear gendered preference to the nature of their employment. The women often take up jobs as domestics in private homes for washing clothes and utensils, and cleaning the house. The men, in contrast, perceive 'domestic service' as below their dignity and, even in the absence of regular employment, prefer odd jobs rather than paid domestic work. Leela Dube, 'Caste and Women', in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao (London: Zed Books, 2005), 227. Also see N. Neetha, 'Making of Female Breadwinners: Migration and Social Networking of Women Domestics in Delhi', *Economic and Political Review* 39, no. 17, 2004, 1681–88. For a general discussion on the feminisation of the paid domestic worker, see Jose C. Moya, 'Domestic Service in a Global Perspective: Gender, Migration and Ethnic Niches', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33, no. 4, 2007, 559–79.

⁵⁴ At least in the Hindi and Urdu literature of the period between the 1920s and 1980s, the boy-servant, who then attains adulthood and remains associated with the household where he worked for many years, remains a dominant figure. This full-time, live-in domestic was often male; and the part-time female except in cases of widows, for instance, who remained attached to the families for which they worked as long-term, live-in. For instance, see the stories *Mai Dada* and *Bahadur* for live-in servant boys and *Mahri* for part-time maids. These stories have

but also sexual stigmatisation. Didactic treatises on men, promoting celibacy as a way to contribute to the process of nation-building, also advised ‘men to keep away from the following women who entered their households as servants: *tambolin*, *malin*, *kunjri*, *bhatiyarin*, *paniharin*, *dhobin*, *nayin*, *gvalin* and *telin*’.⁵⁵

While the feminisation process can be traced both in the numerical aspect as well as in the changing value of work, the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also, at least as presented in the ‘new print’ of this period, laid down the template for the mistress–maid/servant relationship. The didactic literature on the ‘new wife’ brought it upon her to be responsible for servants performing their duties diligently (see Chapter 5 by Kumar). The master–servant relationship, therefore, had its gendered nature from multiple sides: the male master and the male servant; the male master and the female servant; the female mistress and the male servant; and the female mistress and the female servant. This gendering was, in native households, based upon the structures of class and caste, and in European households, primarily along race. Further, in native households, the age of the servant also mattered in ways the young wives were to engage with them (with respect in cases of old servants), but in European households the infantilisation of male servants was the common feature, thus denying any agency to the factor of age. The mistress–servant relationship, therefore, is as crucial as the master–servant relationship. Many contributors to this volume (Charu Gupta, Prabhat Kumar, Nitin Varma, Tanika Sarkar and Shalini Grover) explore this in their different studies.

The emergence of the female all-rounder in contemporary times is the extension of this process of the feminisation of domestic work. This is also linked to the process of professionalisation of domestic service as well as the massive expansion of urban centres leading to the creation of a ‘service

been extensively discussed in the introduction of the *Servants’ Pasts*, vol. 1. Asad Muhammad Khan, ‘The Man With Three Names’, tr. Muhammad Umar Memon, *Words without Borders*, June 2009, available at <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-man-with-three-names> (accessed on 20 May 2018); Amarkant, *Bahadur*, a short Hindi story written in the 1960s, available at <http://www.hindisamay.com/content/10293/1/अमरकांत-कहानियाँ-बहादुर.csp> (accessed on 22 May 2018); and Premchand, *Mahri*.

⁵⁵ Gupta, ‘Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies’, 11.

economy'. The female all-rounder, catering to a niche market of expatriates in urban India, is a case in point (Chapter 4 by Grover). The figure of this all-rounder does not work through and within the narrow bounds of caste identity (like mehtar) but is a product of training, skilling and social networks. Once again, in expatriates' households, such loosening of the caste-based definition of work might be more pronounced than in Indian households. The loosening of the caste hierarchy has to be contextualised within the wide range of servants attached to the household and the kind of tasks they perform. The extreme end of domestic service, for example, waste cleaning, is still very much caste and stigma governed. The entrance into the kitchen—the ritually pure domain of the home—might have the same rules.

The figure of the ayah, as emblematic of Anglo-Indian households from the early nineteenth century, also points to the emergence of a particular service category linked to a new kind of household and domesticity. The occupational and social profile of the ayah, as mentioned in *Servants' Pasts*, Vol. 1, can also be seen as part of a longer history of female care-givers attached to the feminine quarters of the pre-colonial households (Mughal and Rajput). But the figure of the ayah also signalled a new shift from their pre-colonial counterparts. Ayahs in Anglo-Indian households seemed less bound by ties of dependency and patronage and appeared more as waged labour hired from a specialised labour market.⁵⁶ In her chapter on the figure

⁵⁶ See essays on Rajput households in *Servants' Pasts*, Vol. 1. The contours of this specialisation of the ayahs' labour market are something which await future research. What is very clear is that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they usually came from Portuguese and Muslim backgrounds. Muslim widows travelled across northern and eastern India and worked as ayahs in Anglo-Indian households. They could have been residents of any of the prominent towns but moved along with their employers. Portuguese women, in contrast, were largely residents of Calcutta, although they also moved along with the masters and mistresses. Both of them also accompanied families and children returning 'home', that is to England, against the security deposit provided by their masters. Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, we find a decline in the employment of Portuguese ayahs. The low-caste Hindu female workers start appearing as ayahs. In some instances, we have references of the *mehtaranees* being 'promoted' to ayah. This kind of occupational mobility of lower-caste Hindus was more possible in Anglo-Indian/British households than in native households. In the native elite households, we do find references to ayahs tending

of the female all-rounder, Grover further pushes the parallel with the ayah to show how the emergence of the female all-rounder in contemporary India is tied to the emergence of a new kind of niche household. Expatriate households in urban Delhi comprise the site of her case study. One can, however, also draw distinctions in this comparison. The new all-rounder maids are involved not only in childcare, but also in baking and cooking things that are palatable to 'Western' taste. The nineteenth-century ayahs did not get involved in kitchen work, or hardly ever. They were akin to the British lady's maid, who worked as her mistress's informant on other servants working in the household and undertook childcare.

But their tasks meant something more than just the performance of labour. The implications of the domestic labour of ayah, as Chakraborty explains in her chapter in this volume, went beyond simply providing care for children and attending to European mistresses. Through their work, they were fundamentally tied to the ideological project of producing a moral empire.⁵⁷ Through a wide-ranging examination of textual and visual material, she makes a case of the centrality of the ayah as a desexualised caring labour in Anglo-Indian households that stood in stark contrast to the presence of native female concubines (bibis) in Anglo-Indian homes from an earlier period. This shift—from bibi to ayah—as the central native female figure in European households embodied the shift in the colonial moral order, which was partly based upon maintaining emotional distance from the natives and partly because of the necessity of casting the presence of natives in tangible and identifiable forms of labour.⁵⁸

The issue of imperial morality is further explored in Chapter 3 by Jana Tschurennev. Moving beyond the dichotomous relationship between

the children, but the majority of female servants included those who were assigned with specific tasks such as sweeping, fetching water, washing clothes and so on. The high-caste women might have worked as cooks but usually this was the preserve of male servants. These are definitely some leads to help us understand the relationship between work, the labour market (with its specialisation and changes) and caste. More work is required in this direction.

⁵⁷ For other instances of such imperial moral projects, see Deana Heath, *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵⁸ Durba Ghosh, *Sex and Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the coloniser and the colonised, she details the practices regarding the education of poor orphan European children in India. Tschurennev argues that this pedagogic project for poor children was fundamentally structured by moral ideals and gender norms, where the appropriate skilling of young boys was seen in vocational fields, whereas young girls were seen fit for housekeeping and domestic work (including ayah work).

The invocation of morality in terms of duty was not in opposition to the ways in which domestic work was increasingly becoming organised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instances of wage-based domestic work proliferated in this period, but the notion of domestic work was still couched in terms of moral obligation and duty. The idea of *seva* (service), for instance, which emerged as a conceptual premise to define political, social and public activities in the early twentieth century, was also proposed in contemporary literature as an essential quality of work rendered by servants.⁵⁹ The use of the word *sevak* for servant (that is, one who serves, derived from *seva*), other than the usual word *naukar*, symbolises this addition to the meaning of domestic work. This moral compass of the master–servant relationship is covered in the chapters by Gupta and Kumar.

THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

The concluding reflection piece in this volume by Lucy Delap provides a cautious reminder to historians who seek to recuperate the agency of subaltern subjects.⁶⁰ Delap notes that such an exercise, which often assumes a liberal autonomy of the self and which in turn embodies agency, needs to be qualified. Borrowing from Lauren Berlant, Delap argues that it would be more productive to think along the category of lateral agency, that is agency without intention.⁶¹ Such an approach would seek to prioritise a careful crafting of not only the self, and through that the identification of agency,

⁵⁹ The other concepts that acquired a ‘new range of connotations’ in the early twentieth century were *dharma* and *achara* (loosely translated as ethics and conduct). Guha, ‘Discipline and Mobilize’, 80.

⁶⁰ Walter Johnson, ‘On Agency’, *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, 2003, 113–24.

⁶¹ Lauren Berlant, ‘Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)’, *Critical Enquiry* 33, no. 4, 2007, 754–80.

but also of moments where the conditions of work and meanings of labour are potentially transformed through small gestures, desires and hopes.

Our attempt to maintain a simultaneous focus on the everyday and the episodic, customary and legal, public and private, and individual accounts and institutional macro-structures is interwoven with, if not explicitly tagged to, the question of agency, collective action and fragmentary acts of subversion. Delap's intervention, as summarised above, offers a new way of thinking, which requires us to be extra-attentive to some of the laconic expressions concerning agency which we encounter in our sources.

Even in the conventional sense of the term, the question of agency on the part of servants can broadly be seen through two aspects: their own role and position in the making of the master-servant relationship and their use of language, law and institutions in challenging and subverting the grammar of that relationship. There could be another way, a more schematic way, of exploring agency as an expression of desired actions registered at different scales and sites: agency as legal consciousness and claim-making, intended to secure wage arrears and register complaints against masters and mistresses. It can also be seen embedded in forms of collective action such as strikes. Furthermore, the idioms of everyday encounter, based upon the usages of gestures and words, could possibly shake the normalised conditions of behaviour towards masters and mistresses. Finally, it can be located in the individual act of refusal to undertake tasks or in acts of desertion from households.⁶² In combination with one or the other aspect, various chapters in the present volume and in *Servants' Pasts*, Vol. 1 explore the issue of agency. Culling the acts of resistance from the story of Kali, the maid in ancient India, to those of the unionised Calcutta corporation sweepers in the twentieth century, contributors to these two volumes have resisted the weight of the masterly narratives, which either silence or only present a fragmented context of any acts done by servants that we could methodologically categorise as agency.⁶³

⁶² We are not suggesting synonymising agency with protest—either overt or everyday. There could be other forms of agency beyond the dyad of oppression-suppression, control-resistance. It could, for instance, be part of the performance of loyalty, embedded in the practices and experiences of affect. A servant might actively partake in the honour and pride of his master.

⁶³ These narratives do contain instances when servants were alleged not to have

The act of reading poses a challenge in thinking about agency. Let us, for example, take the case of caste. The Europeans in India incessantly complained of being forced to hire innumerable servants because of the alleged caste taboos that defined work. Tied to this was the idea that servants were characteristically lazy, who often gave the excuse of caste prohibitions in order not to perform certain tasks. In this orientalisising mix of caste and essentialised native character, where does the possibility of recovering agency on the part of servants lie? Conventionally, the methodology would be to look for a category that exists outside this framing. Agency as a marker of resistance needs to be located not within but outside the discursive regime which it intends to resist.⁶⁴ We contend that, while it might be possible to do this, servants' agency could also be located in the same orientalisising mix in which they were represented as caste-organised and afflicted with innate laziness. Servants might have sensed the European predilection for understanding Indian society through caste, and hence, creatively used the textualised notions of caste and work to not succumb to their demands for extra work. When servants travelled with their masters to Europe, during subsequent disputes over wages or arrears, they also demanded caste compensation. If caste became a tool of orientalisising Indian society for European masters, then it could also have served as a rallying point for servants to resist, or to not act out their prescribed social role or to make demands, thus exhibiting their agency. This angle of vision allows us simultaneously to locate agency through resistance within the dominant discursive regime as well as to historicise the practices associated with categories such as caste, elucidating its contestory or compensatory nature.

Agency is tied to the idea of selfhood, which in turn takes us away from the act of reading to the act of writing. Modern self-fashioning is arguably an outcome of the act of writing.⁶⁵ Servants, as many other

performed their tasks. In most of the European accounts, this is presented as an outcome of Oriental laziness. This also holds true for vernacular expressions that regarded servants as *kaamchor* (lazy).

⁶⁴ For an insightful methodological intervention challenging this, see Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4, 1991, 773–97.

⁶⁵ See Carolyn Steedman, 'Enforced Narratives: Stories of Another Self', in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. Tess Cosslett, Lury Celia

subalterns of South Asian history, peasants and workers, have not left first-person accounts, here are a few exceptions though. In a text titled *Untouchable: Autobiography of an Outcaste*, the author Hazari described his life's journey of coming from a lower caste background (sweeper) to becoming a domestic servant in an Anglo-Indian household. From being a humble servant, Hazari rose to the rank of 'head bearer', who occupied the highest status in the servant hierarchy and wielded power and authority over other servants. Later in life, Hazari detailed several instances of employment as a servant in 'Indian' families. Here, he faced widespread discrimination owing to his 'outcaste' status, which he presented as a stark contrast to his time spent in Anglo-Indian homes. In his narration as a bearer in an Indian household, he recounted that the job was not very well paid. He was made to slog for long hours, and lost his job after a few weeks. The mistress fired Hazari as she felt that he had deceived her with regard to his caste. She alleged that she was made to believe he belonged to the caste of water-carrier and not sweeper. Hazari indignantly noted that he 'thought of her to be intelligent and educated enough not to bother about

and Penny Summerfield (London: Routledge, 2000), 25–39, for questioning this strict notion of 'autobiography' and instead thinking of 'narration' either in literary texts or administrative/judicial documents (for instance, in magistrates' records of settlement cases involving the poor) and further analyse these 'narratives' to understand the making of the modern self. In South Asian history or literary scholarship, the dominant focus has remained limited to exploring elite self-fashioning in times of colonial modernity. More so, arguably, this relationship between selfhood and modernity was so heavily viewed through colonial experiences that in colonial society (read Bengal) it was inevitable that the search for collective self would precede the individual self. But this collective self was the 'Bengali self'. This indeed has been typical of the move from 'early' to 'late' subaltern, a move from the socially marginal subaltern to communitarianised subaltern, from the social subaltern to the discursive subaltern, who is the victim of essentialised colonial knowledge. Sudipto Kaviraj, 'Laughter and Subjectivity: The Self-Ironical Literature in Bengali Literature', *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 2, 2004, 379–406. A change in this direction has come through the proliferation of accounts of 'urban experience', in which everyday events concerning the lower orders of Calcutta are traced through art forms and folksongs. This is still a step removed from the exploration of the selfhood of the urban poor, but the sources which historians of different regions have at hand also account for this difference. See Anindita Ghosh, 'Singing in a New World: Street Songs and Urban Experience in Colonial Calcutta', *History Workshop Journal* 76, 2013, 111–36.

her servant's caste or creed. Did the words of Congress mean nothing?⁶⁶ Servants have been written about, and this in a variety of forms, each of which evinces a different kind of textuality. The fragmented snippets of life and work present in judicial archives are different from those found in ego-documents, whose frames of representation spin around the forms of social stereotypes or reproduce personalised accounts of servants' betrayal and loyalty. However, it is equally important to stress that in spite of the ideological framing of the personal narratives, the ego-documents are the most likely of the places from where the master-servant relationship can be culled and constructed—relationship that is part of everyday encounters incorporating mundane registers of patronage and affect. The feeling of anger, the expression of excitement, the forms of dependence and the degree of violence, they all fill the pages of the variety of ego-documents.

It is crucial to outline the interplay and juxtaposition of the different registers in which servants are narrated, as Gupta, Sarkar and Kumar do in this volume. However, these chapters, and to a larger extent, our collective effort at writing servants' pasts, must also bear in mind the productive tension in the challenges inherent in any attempt to reconstruct the servant as a distinctive historical subject or a social category. This claim is as much based upon the conceptual discussions that have happened in the past over the retrieval of subalterns' consciousness and agency as upon the methodological conviction in producing 'empirically generated' accounts that explore the historicity of that subject. The incompleteness of this historical exercise—and not of the historical subject, the domestic servant—also reflects the difficulty in locating and narrating servants' agency; for, the presence of the servant, be it in a judicial or literary context, is at best fragmentary and at worst eclipsed behind the shadow of or moving routinely as the shadow of the master. The impossibility of absolute collective agency foregrounds the uniqueness of the analytical category of

⁶⁶ Hazari, *Untouchable: Autobiography of an Outcaste* (London: Bannisdale Press, 1951), 140. The invocation of the political body—the Congress—and its discourses on social questions interpenetrated the realm of the household. In another celebrated account, Baby Halder described her experiences as a domestic servant in Delhi in the 1990s. Baby Halder, *A Life Less Ordinary* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006). For a discussion of Halder's text, see Swapna Banerjee, 'Baby Halder's A Life Less Ordinary: A Transition from India's Colonial Past?' in *Colonization and Domestic Service*, 239–55.

domestic servant, which is also a social and work category that is based upon individual ties with masters and mistresses. This reminds us that servants had their internal hierarchies and conflicts, and that they might (and, in fact, did) turn against each other. Servants as individuals possess unique life trajectories, which becomes extremely challenging to write about;⁶⁷ servants as a collective, positioned in a hierarchical relationship, had a collective social past(s), which is relatively easier to reconstruct through an examination of institutions and practices of which they were a part. Without prioritising any one of these approaches, *Servants' Pasts* has traced these historical processes with the servant appearing as a more identifiable sociological category—both individually and collectively. But it has also placed the servant as part of a web of relationships within the shifting meanings of being a servant, or of service, ranging from affiliation, loyalty and devotion to encapsulating a sense of subordination and stigma. These were never neat transitions, and *Servants' Pasts* has followed these non-linear, complicated and contested processes which have shaped our present.

⁶⁷ Nitin Varma, 'Servant Testimonies and Anglo-India Homes in Nineteenth Century India', in *To Be at Home: House, Work, and Self in the Modern World*, ed. James Williams and Felicitas Hentschke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 219–24.

I

FEMALE DOMESTICS AND MORAL ORDERS

1 | From *Bibis* to *Ayahs*

Sexual Labour, Domestic Labour, and the Moral Politics of Empire

SATYASIKHA CHAKRABORTY

INTRODUCTION

In the eighteenth century, local mistresses or *bibis* were part of most European men's domestic lives in India. Cohabiting with South Asian women was an effective strategy for British men to economically, socially and culturally integrate with Mughal India. By the closing decades of the eighteenth century, however, there was an increasing moral embarrassment in elite British circles about inter-racial concubinage and domestic slavery in empire.¹ This led to attempts to cleanse the shameful presence of *bibis*, slave-girls and 'half-caste' children from British imperial biographies.² This chapter argues that the figure of the *ayah* as a non-sexual non-bonded maidservant emerged in late eighteenth-century India as a distinct signifier of elite Anglo-Indian domestic morality.³ Cultural depictions of

¹ Race in the late eighteenth century was much more fluid and differed from late nineteenth-century racist rigid scientific conceptions. Yet, my reading of late eighteenth-century materials shows that socio-cultural, linguistic and phenotypic differences were frequently understood by historical actors as racial differences. So, despite appreciating the constructed nature of race as a category, I use the term 'inter-racial'.

² Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

³ I use the term Anglo-Indian in the way it was used in colonial sources to denote people of English, Scottish and Irish descent living in India. I do not use it in its present meaning, where Anglo-Indian refers to people of Eurasian ancestry, with mixed British and Indian parentage.

the desexualised ayah, serving as a waged lady's maid to the Anglo-Indian *memsahib*, and nursemaid to Anglo-Indian children, enabled upper-class British imperial families to highlight their racial and class status. By the early nineteenth century, the figure of the ayah became crucial for the production of the memsahib and the reproduction of the racially pure British imperial family. The ayah's presence in Anglo-Indian homes marked a respectable break from the domestic labour–sexual labour continuum, as well as from the slave–servant–concubine continuum widely prevalent in empire.

This chapter situates the emergence of the ayah in the imperial domestic transition from bibis to memsahibs in the late eighteenth century, and in British attempts to desexualise and contractualise household labours in India. Similar efforts at 'Making Empire Respectable' have been noted by Ann Stoler in the context of the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina, albeit in a slightly later period.⁴ As colonial governments in South-East Asia actively encouraged the immigration of European women, *nyais* (Javanese/Balinese mistresses) were erased from Dutch cultural representations, while *baboes* (Javanese/Balinese nursemaids) became hyper-visible.⁵ Historians even outside European colonial contexts have noted the cultural usage of a racialised and gendered domestic servant figure as a marker of white purity and morality. American historians of slavery, for instance, have argued that the myth of the beloved asexual black *mammy* was created by Southern plantation families to stave off Northern abolitionist accusations of slavery's sexual exploitation.⁶ Romanticisation of the mammy during the Jim Crow years enabled white families to morally evade accusations of racism.⁷ Drawing upon such scholarship, and underlining the trans-

⁴ Ann L. Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures', *American Ethnologist*, 16, no. 4, 1989, 634–60.

⁵ Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherland Indies 1900–1942* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000).

⁶ Deborah Gray White, *Aren't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

⁷ Kimberley Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

imperial circulation of racialised sexual anxieties and domestic labour ideologies, this chapter argues that the figure of the desexualised faithful Indian ayah was an Anglo-Indian creation to fend off British metropolitan accusations of slavery, concubinage and 'going native'. The ayah as a contractual lady's maid and nursemaid morally distinguished elite Anglo-Indian households in the presidency towns from slave-holding polygamous 'native' households, lower-class 'mixed' households, and Catholic French and Portuguese imperial households.

While tracing how the figure of the ayah invisibilised the continued existence of inter-racial sex in empire, this chapter pays attention to the actual lives of Indian women performing not just the domestic labours but also the moral labours of empire. While the first two sections of the chapter trace the cultural production of the ayah, the last section provides a social history of the ayah in early colonial households. I use a range of primary sources—from official documents to letters, fictions, portraits and miniatures—to trace the domestic and moral labours of early colonial ayahs. What did it mean for these women to work as ayahs? And what did it mean for ayahs to maintain the respectability of British men and the racial purity of the Anglo-Indian family? In particular, this chapter explores the experiences, anxieties and emotional labours of women who initially performed sexual and reproductive labours for British men and later became ayahs. The traumatic lives of these ayahs show the constant blurring of the boundaries between sexual and non-sexual domestic labours, and between slavery and servitude—boundaries that colonial official policies and cultural representations strove to create and enforce. The domestic failures to live up to the idealised neat transition from racial mixture to racial purity, from bonded to contractual labours, and from bibis to the ayah-memsahib dyad, reveal the inner contradictions of empire.

CONCUBINAGE, SLAVERY AND THE MORAL CRISIS OF EMPIRE

Early colonial British men who emulated Mughal domestic practices—or 'White Mughals' as they have been called by historians—frequently kept Indian bibis; some even converted to Islam and maintained harems

mimicking the Mughal aristocracy.⁸ Hailing from elite South Asian households, these bibis often observed *pardah* (seclusion) to maintain their respectability and gave birth to biracial children. By the late eighteenth century, the balance of power was steadily shifting from the Mughals to the East India Company (EIC), which was rapidly transforming from a mercantile organisation into a territorial power, and laying the foundations of a fiscal–military state.⁹ For the new elite exclusive class of Company administrators, it was still important to mimic Mughal tropes of authority to establish their legitimacy. However, it was also important not to become fully Mughal, but to only mimic the superficial glosses of Mughal culture: *hookahs*, *nautches*, *palanquins*, *pankahs* and the hierarchy of menservants with Persian names.¹⁰ Taking bibis and slave-concubines was becoming socially unacceptable by the late eighteenth century, and British women were shipped in to create a racially pure British ruling class in empire.

Several European men who worked privately for South Asian native rulers continued to have South Asian bibis well past the 1780s. The princely status of some of these bibis enabled class-conscious British men to project their own elite status. In 1798, while serving the Holkar of Indore, the French-educated Briton, William Gardner, married the daughter of the Nawab of Cambay. In a letter to his aunt in 1815, Gardner wrote, ‘It is upwards of seventeen years that I have been united to this lady, who is of the highest birth in this country.’¹¹ The Frenchman Francois Allard, who had served in Napoleon’s army and later became a general in Maharajah Ranjit Singh’s army in 1822, married a *Pahari* princess—the daughter of the chief of Chamba—with whom he had several children. Many British Residents and political agents in South Asian native states continued to lead

⁸ William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love & Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 1–40.

⁹ C. A. Bayly, ‘The British Military-Fiscal State and Indigenous Resistance, India 1750–1820’, in *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815*, ed. Lawrence Stone (London: Routledge, 1994), 322–53.

¹⁰ It is useful to deploy Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of mimicry to understand why in the early colonial period, the British were emulating Mughal tropes of power while attempting to politically disempower the Mughals. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 121–31.

¹¹ Letter from William Gardner to his aunt Dolly Gardner, 25 May 1815, Gardner Papers, Cambridge South Asian Archives.

very Indianised lives; they wore Indian clothes, married Indian princesses and patronised Indian miniature painters. David Ochterlony, the British Resident in Delhi from 1803 to 1806, and again from 1818 to 1822, wore Mughal attire and lived with his 13 Indian bibis (Figure 1.1). Around 1800, James Kirkpatrick, the British Resident of Hyderabad, married the young Hyderabad princess Khairunnissa and adopted Islam.¹²



FIGURE 1.1: Water Colour Painting of David Ochterlony and his Indian Wives by an Indian Miniaturist, 1820

Source: The British Library Board, Sir David Ochterlony (1758–1825), in Indian dress, smoking a hookah and watching a nautch in his house at Delhi. BL Add. Or. 2.

Inter-racial relationships, which were the norm in the remote outposts of princely India, were becoming unacceptable in early nineteenth-century elite Anglo-Indian social circles of the presidency towns. Kirkpatrick's marriage and conversion caused a big scandal in Calcutta.¹³ Cohabitation with South Asian women meant political loyalty to the EIC was also

¹² Dalrymple, *White Mughals*, 2–6.

¹³ Ibid.

suspect. The Company's policies, particularly under Governor-General Cornwallis, actively discouraged such mixed unions for upper-class British men.¹⁴ In 1786, an order was passed banning 'half-caste' children from travelling to England or serving in the Company army. In 1791, another order was issued banning mixed-blood children from employment in the civil, military and marine branches of the Company. In 1795, further legislation disqualified men with 'native' mothers from serving in the Company's army, except as pipers, drummers and bandsmen.¹⁵ James Skinner, the son of Colonel Skinner and an aristocratic Rajput lady, initially was not allowed to serve as an officer in the EIC army because of his Indian heritage; he entered the Maratha army instead. Although 'half-caste' children with elite Indian mothers faced less social discrimination, Company policies penalised 'mixed' children born of both elite and lower-class Indian bibis. The Company encouraged the immigration of British women to India in order to provide suitable marriage opportunities for its officers. Going 'native' or having Indian bibis had significant social and professional costs for the British ruling elite, for whom marrying British women and forming racially pure families became an imperial racial duty.

The new racial etiquette, however, was also a class etiquette. While it was becoming scandalous for high administrative officers to have bibis, it was acceptable for lower-class English clerks, soldiers, sailors and planters in India to cohabit with native women. The EIC in fact encouraged such temporary liaisons and even set up military orphanages to provide for the 'half-caste' children born of such unions.¹⁶ Sexual opportunities in empire were arguably a major recruitment booster for young British boys in lower-level imperial positions.¹⁷ From the Company's point of view, lower-class British men maintaining lower-class Indian women as bibis

¹⁴ Claude Markovits, 'On the Political History of Britishness in India: Lord Cornwallis and the Early Demise of Creole India', in *Memory, Identity and the Colonial Encounter in India: Essays in Honour of Peter Robb*, ed. Ezra Rashkow, Sanjukta Ghosh and Upal Chakrabarti (New York: Routledge, 2017), 55–70.

¹⁵ Dalrymple, *White Mughals*, 39–41.

¹⁶ Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*, 206–44.

¹⁷ Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990).

was much less expensive than importing British wives.¹⁸ Indian mistresses also ensured proper heterosexual channelling of the sexual energies of British men. There was thus a clear class difference in early colonial standards of domestic morality. Eventually, however, bibis and mixed-race children became dishonourable and shameful for all classes of British men. Historians differ on the reasons behind the growing disapproval of bibis in early nineteenth-century India. Durba Ghosh, for instance, attributes the disapproval to increasing racism and social distancing. Peter Robb, on the other hand, points to growing veneration of Christian life-long marriages and evangelical criticism of short-term illegitimate liaisons, irrespective of race.¹⁹ Evangelicals like Charles Grant encouraged monogamous marriages and severely reproached all classes of Britons who took up 'heathen' practices and sexual partners. The enmeshing of race, class and religion best explains Anglo-Indian moral anxieties about bibis and 'half-caste' children. Although British men continued to covertly visit Indian prostitutes, living openly with an Indian bibi was becoming an impropriety. By the mid-nineteenth century, even for mid- to low-level Anglo-Indian men, bibis and biracial children became strictly guarded secrets.²⁰ The older mixed households, such as Colonel Gardner's *zenana*, were objects of scorn as well as voyeuristic curiosity.

British moral shame about bibis was probably also due to the close association in British imagination between concubinage and slavery in India. In 1835, Fanny Parkes, during a visit to Colonel Gardner's *zenana*, wrote in her diary about Indian households: 'When a woman of rank marries, two female slaves are given with her, who are also the wives of her husband.'²¹ In the closing decades of the eighteenth century, particularly in the wake of British defeat in the American Revolution, anti-slavery

¹⁸ Kenneth Balhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and Their Critics, 1793–1905* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980).

¹⁹ Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*; Peter Robb, *Sex and Sensibility: Richard Blechynden's Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11, 155.

²⁰ Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13–46.

²¹ Fanny Parkes Parlbey, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque: During Four-and-Twenty Years in the East*, vol. 1 (London: Pelham Richardson, 1850), 390.

ideology gave Britons a new sense of national virtue and moral supremacy. Popular British abolitionist writers presented slavery as a crime against humanity. For late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britons, abolitionism meant doing what was moral, what was good for humanity, even at great economic costs. Banning the lucrative slave trade highlighted the selfless character of the British nation. Abolitionism became essential to British national identity, British Protestantism, British liberty and rule of law.²² Even after the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, the British nation spent millions of pounds to eradicate the illegal transatlantic slave trade, thereby reasserting its identity as a land of freedom and humanity.²³ Anti-slavery ideology, by uniting commercial and moral motives, in fact became one of the main driving forces of early nineteenth-century British imperialism.

Domestic slavery, however, was widely prevalent in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century households in India. But in governmental papers there was a reluctance to acknowledge this as slavery, especially when it came to the subject of Britons owning slaves. Wills and personal papers from Anglo-Indian households often hinted at slave ownership.²⁴ British official discussions from as early as the 1770s pointed out the benevolent nature of Indian slavery and insisted that bonded labours were a benign and traditional essence of Hindu and Muslim households to which Anglo-Indians had to adapt. The paternalistic institution of domestic slavery in India was contrasted with the violent and inhuman nature of the transatlantic slave trade and American plantation slavery.²⁵ When violent abductions, forceful sale and purchase of slaves in India were acknowledged, these 'savage' practices were associated with non-British

²² Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1–30.

²³ Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 5–20.

²⁴ Margot Finn, 'Slaves Out of Context: Domestic Slavery and the Anglo-Indian Family, c. 1780–1830', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19, 2009, 181–203; Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*.

²⁵ 'Extract of the Proceedings of the Committee at Kishen Nagur', 23 June 1772, in *Bengal Papers: Regulations Relative to Slavery, 1772–1774*, 2, in *Slavery in India: Correspondence of Court of Directors and the Government of India*, 1826, Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons.

European traders, particularly Catholics, such as the Portuguese and the French. They supposedly colluded with tyrannical native chiefs who defied their own religious codes—the *Shastras* and *Koran*—which sanctioned slavery but forbade the sale of slaves.²⁶ In 1789, a letter from Governor-General Cornwallis in Calcutta to the Board of Directors in London argued that the main obstacle to abolishing slavery in India was the legal status of slavery in ‘Mahomedan and Hindoo laws’. Simultaneously, he blamed slave trafficking on the ‘low Portuguese’ and ‘several foreign Europeans’, who kidnapped native children ‘for sale to the French islands.’²⁷

In the 1780s and 1790s, district administrators of the Company regularly wrote to the secretary of Fort William about the strong steps they were taking to curb immoral slave trafficking. In 1789, for instance, the British magistrate of Nadia informed the government that his subordinates had rescued sixteen girls and three boys who had been abducted by ‘a black Portuguese, an inhabitant of Chandernagore.’²⁸ He had written to the magistrate of Chandernagore, a French settlement, about apprehending the Portuguese offender, but he expressed doubts about whether his application ‘will be attended to’, suggesting a complicity of the French and Portuguese in the nefarious slave trade that the British were trying to suppress. In 1792, another letter to the secretary, from a Mr Rees, detailed the ‘illegal and infamous proceedings of the agents of Gomosthas of the Zemindars’ who were ‘seizing’ young girls and ‘confining them to be sold as slaves’ to various ‘native’ chiefs. This ‘inhumane’ and ‘infernal trade of humans goes on openly’, he wrote, also in the Dutch settlement at Serampore. His letter beseeched the ‘humane and benevolent attention’ of the Company to stop this ‘barbarous’ trade by natives and Europeans.²⁹

Although practised by many lower-class and provincial Britons in India, slavery and concubinage were nevertheless attributed to despotic Oriental households and to non-British European imperial households. Native female slaves, inter-racial sexual intimacies and a consequent *metis* or *mestizo* empire were attributed to French, Spanish and Portuguese forms

²⁶ ‘Extract Bengal Revenue Consultations’, 17 May 1774, 3, in *Bengal Papers*.

²⁷ ‘Extract of a Letter from Lord Cornwallis’, 2 August 1789, 13, in *Bengal Papers*.

²⁸ Home Department, Public Branch, Part B, No. 12, 4120–4123, 2 September 1789, National Archives of India (henceforth NAI), New Delhi.

²⁹ Home Department, Public Branch, B, No. 21, 1185–1198, OC. 9 March 1792, NAI.

of colonisation. Marriages between Portuguese men and Indian women and the conversion of native wives to Catholicism were encouraged by the Catholic Church in Goa and in other Portuguese settlements. In the French Indian colonies of Pondicherry and Chandernagore, inter-racial marriages were not viewed with as much anxiety. In fact, the native Catholic wives and children were given French status. Catholicism and French language were central to French identity in the colonies, rather than notions of racial purity.³⁰ Miscegenation was associated by Anglo-Indians with Catholicism, at a time when Protestantism was crucial to the self-definition of Britons.³¹ Similarly, slavery was also attributed to continental Catholic empires and came to be seen as distinctively un-British in the wake of British abolitionism. For the new elite class of Anglo-Indian administrators in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, domestic practices such as slavery, concubinage and *metissage* were morally reprehensible, and they tried to distance their own households from the taint of these immoral lower-class and Catholic practices.

In the households of lower-class white men, polygamous cohabitation relationships were mainly forged with maidservants and slave-girls. Sexual labour and domestic labour were intimately tied together in the homes of poor white imperial men, who could not afford white wives and brown maidservants separately. Because of the growing shame attached to having bibis and 'half-caste' children, many British men's wills and testaments referred to their 'native' mistresses as 'my housekeeper' or 'my servant girl' or 'my faithful servant woman' to give the impression that these women were nothing more than domestic servants.³² Such euphemisms to conceal inter-racial sex made 'native' maidservant itself a very problematic and sexually imputed imperial domestic category. Not only did 'native' female

³⁰ Adrian Carton, *Mixed-Race and Modernity in Colonial India: Changing Concepts of Hybridity across Empires* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 11–27, 63–79.

³¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 11–53.

³² Indrani Chatterjee, 'Colouring Subalternity: Slaves, Concubines and Social Orphans in Early Colonial India', in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, vol. 10, ed. Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 49–97; Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*, 107–32.

servants become associated with imperial concubinage and miscegenation, they also became suggestive of domestic slavery. Although many Anglo-Indian men and women left gifts and manumission grants to their slave-girls in their wills, the usual tendency, in the wake of anti-slavery national sentiments, was to euphemise the female slave as a 'servant' or as 'a girl who has been brought up in my house'.³³

The insistence that the labour of native girls whose families had been compensated in fact constituted an indigenous form of domestic service—and not slavery—was an old one. In 1796, a certain Mr Robertson wrote a letter from London to his friend Mr Morris in Bengal, asking him to take charge of 'two female attendants' named Hanna and Niobe whom Robertson was returning from England. Robertson praised Hanna as 'a quiet sober good nurse' who had 'never been remiss in her duty', and requested his friend to pay her 50 rupees 'for her assiduous attention to the children on board ship'.³⁴ For Niobe, however, his letter betrayed considerable concern. Robertson 'had her from her father, at Sylhet, with a written agreement' that he was to take her back into his family 'in the event of my not choosing to detain her in Europe'. He requested Morris to safely convey her to her family in Sylhet, unless 'she may prefer the service of some European lady' in Calcutta. Robertson shared Niobe's services with another friend Mr Willis. He ordered Morris to pay her 500 sicca rupees, debiting 150 from his account and 350 from Willis'. Robertson had arranged for Niobe to be trained as a milliner before returning her to Bengal, and hoped she could benefit from that skill. The exact nature of Niobe's labours was perhaps deliberately left vague by Robertson, but he certainly maintained a deep affection for her, as indicated by his words: 'So much for her poor soul! Pray take care of her'.³⁵ Why Niobe was paid 10 times more than the nurse Hanna, just for being 'a good girl', and why Robertson was so much more interested in her future happiness, is not revealed in his letter. But the prevalence of such ambiguous domestic relationships explains why Anglo-Indian men's references to 'my servant girl' or 'my native servant woman' evoked suspicions of both slavery and concubinage.

³³ Home Department, Public Branch, Consultation No. 1, 18 January 1822, NAI.

³⁴ Home Department, Public Branch, Consultation No. 108, 3 May 1797, Letter from Mr Robertson to Mr Morris, dated London, 21 March 1796, NAI.

³⁵ Letter from Mr Robertson to Mr Morris, Home Department.

The conflation of female servitude with sex-slavery and concubinage was one of the reasons why elite Anglo-Indian households employed a retinue of menservants. Emulating and amalgamating domestic servant hierarchies from both British and Mughal aristocratic households, the Anglo-Indian domestic retinue comprised almost entirely of menservants: *banian*, *sarkar*, *khansaman*, *khidmutgar*, *bawarchi*, *abdar*, *darzi*, *bhisti*, *mashalchi*, *dhobi*, *mali*, *dooriya*, *mehtar*, *darwan*, *chobdar*, *soontabardar*, *hookabardar* and so on.³⁶ In the wake of industrialisation and the availability of more lucrative industrial employment opportunities for men, domestic service was rapidly becoming feminised in late eighteenth-century Britain. Moreover, servant taxes imposed on employers for having menservants meant that only elite households could afford them.³⁷ Coming from humble backgrounds, employing a huge retinue of menservants—when they were becoming unaffordable in Britain—was part of upstart Anglo-Indian performance of status.

Black servants particularly enhanced status in British townhouses and country-houses. There was a long tradition of bringing African menservants to Britain from West Indian plantations, as indicators of imperial connections, affluence and fashionable tastes.³⁸ However, at the same time, black menservants also embodied British anxieties about the moral corruption, sexual perversion and profligacy of empire. In several of William Hogarth's paintings, such as *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), *Taste in High Life* (1742) and *Marriage a-la mode* (1745), young black slave/servant boys were the incarnation of imperial vice, lust, vanity and hypocrisy, steadily invading and corrupting British values.³⁹ The preponderance of

³⁶ For a list of servants in late eighteenth-century Anglo-Indian households, see Balthazar Solvyns, *A Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Coloured Etchings; Descriptive of the Manners, Customs and Dresses of the Hindoos* (Calcutta: Mirror Press, 1799), reproduced with original commentaries in Robert Hardgrave, Jr, *A Portrait of the Hindus: Balthazar Solvyns & the European Image of India, 1760–1824* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2004.

³⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

³⁸ Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995), 53.

³⁹ Catherine Molineux, 'Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves: Moral Corruption in Eighteenth-Century London', *English Literary History* 72, no. 2, 2005, 495–520;

menservants in Anglo-Indian households became a subject of metropolitan scorn, partly because of the normative association of domestic labours with women in Britain. Indian menservants doing intimately feminine domestic work—attending on a lady and her children, for instance—was particularly comical to metropolitan Britons. In William Holland’s satirical print of *A Lady’s Dressing Room in Calcutta* (1813), six black menservants are shown preparing the Anglo-Indian lady’s toilette, fanning her, caressing her child and smoking a pipe (Figure 1.2).⁴⁰ The presence of menservants, particularly black menservants, in a lady’s dressing room insinuated the Anglo-Indian family’s lack of domestic propriety. The constant presence of black/brown menservants not only posed an imagined sexual threat to white women, but also indicated (to metropolitan audiences) the lack of Anglo-Indian sexual morals, and underlined the proverbial sexual promiscuity of Anglo-Indian wives—ridiculed as the ‘fishing-fleet’.

THE AYAH AS A SYMBOL OF ANGLO-INDIAN MORALITY

It was in this context of growing anxiety about domestic morality that the figure of the ayah emerged as a distinct signifier of a new respectable elite Anglo-Indian identity. The ayah was specifically employed as a lady’s maid for the British memsahib or as a nursemaid to British children. In British visual and literary representations and domestic manuals, the ayah was desexualised and maternalised and often presented as an elderly Indian woman—past her sexual prime, so as to preclude any suspicion of sexual relationship with the British master. A 1799 commentary on the ayah noted that she performs ‘no other service than her own particular one’ of looking after British women and children; the ayah was ‘incapable of any attachment to her masters, whatever benefits she may have received from

Exhibition: ‘William Hogarth: Painter & Printmaker’, May–August 2015, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

⁴⁰ William Holland, *A Lady’s Dressing Room in Calcutta* (Lewis Walpole Library, 1813). The Yale University catalogue erroneously describes the Indian servants as maidservants. The attire of the servants (when compared with early nineteenth-century visuals) clearly reveal they are all menservants, and that is precisely where the satirical aspect of the print lies.



FIGURE 1.2: William Holland's Satirical Print 'A Lady's Dressing Room in Calcutta', 1813

Source: Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

them.⁴¹ The fact that the ayah was a waged contractual servant and not a slave was repeatedly highlighted in British autobiographical writings. The presence of the ayah providing paid domestic service to the memsahib and her children became a marker of morally appropriate non-bonded non-sexual domestic labours in the British imperial home. The ayah was a status symbol too; her presence in the Anglo-Indian household denoted an elite class identity. It meant that the Anglo-Indian *burra-sahib* (officer) did not have to depend on the domestic, sexual and reproductive labour of a 'native' woman, like the hundreds of poor white soldiers and sailors in India, but could afford a British wife and also employ a 'native' maid to tend to his British wife and children. The presence of the ayah was crucial to the creation of the racially and sexually pure respectable Anglo-Indian family.

The ayah's domestic labours paved the way for British women to become memsahibs in empire. The ayah as a lady's maid provided status and respectability to her British mistress. By cleaning and folding

⁴¹ Hardgrave, *A Portrait of the Hindus*, 306. Solvyns' commentary on the ayah.

the mistress's clothes, by making the mistress's bed, by bringing the mistress's breakfast and by taking care of British children, ayahs enabled the creation of memsahibs as a new racially elite feminine social class in empire. The domestic labours of South Asian ayahs allowed memsahibs to become companionate imperial wives. By freeing memsahibs from the drudgery of arranging their own wardrobes, washing their own lace or looking after their own children, the ayah enabled memsahibs to pursue imperial feminine careers as travel-writers, fiction-writers, diarists, poets and missionaries. And many ayahs in turn entered their memsahibs' autobiographical and fictional writings, while others became objects of their memsahibs' missionary endeavours. The missionary memsahib, Mary Martha Sherwood, produced one of the earliest didactic fictions about an ayah. First published in 1813, *The Ayah and Lady: An Indian Story* was reprinted multiple times and even translated into several South Asian languages for the benefit of Indian servants. Written in the form of a conversation between an ayah and her lady, Sherwood's book reveals attempts made by memsahibs to impart 'Christian modesty' to their ayahs, even if formal proselytising failed. The Christian lady teaches the seventh biblical commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery', to her Muslim ayah through the cautionary tale of an adulteress who lost her husband and all social respect and whose corpse was devoured by vultures and jackals.⁴² Christian moral lessons by memsahibs to ayahs about the sins of 'filthy thoughts' and the virtues of 'modesty' were no doubt meant to protect the sexual and racial purity of the Anglo-Indian home. The Anglo-Indian household was thus a gendered pedagogical space where the Christian memsahib controlled her 'heathen' ayah's sexuality, and thereby her morality, by teaching her the virtues of chastity.

Memsahibs' autobiographical and fictional writings as well as Anglo-Indian domestic manuals routinely highlighted the fact that the ayah was a contractual servant with a monthly wage, and not a slave. In *The Ayah and Lady*, the ayah tries to placate her memsahib by calling herself a slave. But Mrs Sherwood is quick to point out that the ayah is not a slave; the memsahib pays her 7 rupees every month, in addition to tea, sugar, new

⁴² Mary Martha Sherwood, *The Ayah and Lady: An Indian Story* (New York: John Haven, 1822), first published 1813, 64–71.

clothes and other gifts.⁴³ In her autobiography, Mrs Sherwood describes how her son's ayah was in fact a slave rescued from Begum Samru's household: this woman had 'run away and found refuge with us...we took care that she should never be a slave again.'⁴⁴ Other Anglo-Indian women writing autobiographies in the 1820s and 1830s, such as Fanny Parkes and Emily Eden, also pointed out that they paid their ayahs generous monthly salaries. Parkes, the wife of a Company servant, paid her ayah 10 rupees a month in Calcutta in the 1820s, and later increased her wages to 11 rupees.⁴⁵ Emily Eden, the sister of Governor-General George Eden (1835–42), unlike contemporary memsahibs, acknowledged purchasing two girls, but only with the intention of rescuing them from 'a very bad man' and depositing them at the Female Orphan School. 'They are two little orphans...the natives constantly adopt orphans', she wrote in a self-justifying gesture.⁴⁶ However, she made a clear distinction between these girls and her ayah Rosina who was employed at a monthly wage to attend on her. The girls imitated Rosina, but their purpose in the Eden household was mainly to keep everyone amused, Miss Eden insisted, not to provide domestic labour. These same writers, in their descriptions of the Hindu and Muslim zenanas they visited, pointed out the exploitation of poor slave girls bonded in life-long unpaid servitude to native households.

Sometimes a 'native' girl's rise to an ayah was shown as proof that she was no longer a slave even if she had started her life as one. Thomas Baber, a Company servant, testified that in 1803 he had purchased two young slaves 'for the sake of emancipating them' and was happy to report in 1834 that the manumitted girl had now become 'a lady's aya.'⁴⁷ Another Company servant's testimony from 1841 reported that a native woman, who was 'formerly a slave' in a native household, had now started serving

⁴³ Sherwood, *The Ayah and Lady*, 5, 86.

⁴⁴ Sophia Kelly, ed., *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood, Chiefly Autobiographical with Extracts from Mr. Sherwood's Journal During His Imprisonment in France and Residence in India* (London: Darton & Co., 1857), 449.

⁴⁵ Parkes, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*, 142.

⁴⁶ Emily Eden, *'Up the Country': Letters Written to Her Sister* (London: Richard Bentley, 1867), 275.

⁴⁷ *Slavery in India: Papers Relative to Slavery in India*, 6 March 1834, 22, Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons.

a Company officer 'of high rank' in Calcutta 'in the capacity of an ayah, or child's maid'. Working as an ayah in an Anglo-Indian household not only provided emancipatory possibilities to dependent slave women, but sometimes even furnished sufficient wealth to become charitable towards their old impoverished masters. This particular ayah was reported to be 'maintaining her former mistress, at Calcutta, from the savings of her wages'.⁴⁸

The myth of the ayah was also visually produced. Elite Anglo-Indians in the late eighteenth century commissioned family portraits with their Indian ayah. In traditional European family portraits, white maidservants were usually completely erased out or painted as obscure figures on the margins as they threatened the mistress's class position.⁴⁹ By contrast, the presence of Indian ayahs was highlighted in Anglo-Indian family portraits, as they bolstered the family's moral respectability and class status. In the painting commissioned by George Clive to Joshua Reynolds in 1765–66, we find that the Indian ayah is not at all hidden in the fringes but she is placed quite centrally in the painting and her exoticness is made conspicuous through the use of special pigments, attire and ornaments (Figure 1.3). Race was materially inscribed in portraits of ayahs by painting their skin with a special yellowish-brown pigment called Indian yellow—itself produced through colonial labours.⁵⁰ Emphasis on the ayah's dark skin racialised her as an 'other' of the white family. Her kneeling position and downcast eyes indicate her servility in contrast to the British memsahib's and child's confident gaze towards the spectator. The British master lovingly looks at his British wife to preclude any suspicions of sexual relationship with the Indian maid.

The ayah depicted in the portrait was named Bolah and was one of the servants who was taken to England with the Clives.⁵¹ Like other imperial

⁴⁸ *Slavery: Report from the Indian Law Commissioners*, 15 January 1841, 282, Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons.

⁴⁹ Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 27–55.

⁵⁰ Jordanna Bailkin, 'Indian Yellow: Making and Breaking the Imperial Palette', *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 2, 2005, 197–214.

⁵¹ Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain 1600–1857* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 62–63.



FIGURE 1.3: Joshua Reynolds, *George Clive and his Family with an Indian Ayah*, 1765

Source: Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin Art Resource, New York.

luxury commodities, the bodies of Indian ayahs were deliberately used in early colonial British portraits to articulate the white family's wealth and exotic taste. Well-dressed ayahs, adorned with expensive gold jewellery, were not only a testament to their employers' wealth but also a testament to their employers' benevolence. Given how little ayahs were paid, it is unlikely that they would possess such an abundance of gold jewellery, let alone wear it to work. Yet the Clives' ayah wears multiple gold necklaces, gold earrings, a gold hair ornament, gold bangles and gold rings on every finger. At a time when Anglo-Indian 'nabobs' were criticised for their immoral inhumane treatment of Indian subjects, the ornately attired Indian ayahs were used by British employers to display their generosity towards Indian subordinates. The ornaments also emphasised British indulgence of the 'oriental' luxurious lifestyle of their Indian maidservants. George Clive—the patron of this portrait—was a nephew of Robert Clive, the first governor of Bengal. Robert Clive's policies were largely responsible

for the Bengal famine of 1770 that wiped out one-third of Bengal's population. In 1772, the British Parliament started an enquiry against the EIC for financial corruption. Clive faced a lengthy parliamentary trial for the immense personal wealth he had accumulated by plundering Bengal. Though acquitted, Clive was publicly humiliated; Clive's suicide in 1774 was taken by the British public as proof of his guilt. Even those who had earlier been opposed to parliamentary interference in the Company's affairs—the champions of free trade—now demanded greater governmental regulation to make the EIC and its employees financially accountable. British public resentment against the Company's corruption continued to rise in the wake of Clive's trial. Poems and plays such as *The Nabob: Or, Asiatic Plunderers* (1773) and *Intrigues of a Nabob: Or, Bengal the Fittest Soil for the Growth of Lust, Injustice and Dishonesty* (1780) critiqued Company men's immoral exploitation of the Indian masses.⁵²

In 1784, Warren Hastings, the governor of Bengal, commissioned the famous painter Johann Zoffany to paint a family portrait with his wife Marian and her Indian ayah (Figure 1.4). Marian's dark Indian ayah in her dark dress stands as a foil in the background, highlighting the racial purity of the memsahib in her irradant yellow gown. The ayah, however, is dressed as richly as her mistress. Her body is draped in a silver-bordered fine translucent *odhna* (shawl). Like Mrs Hastings, the ayah also has two strands of pearls around her neck; in addition, moreover, large pearl drops hang from her ears and a bejewelled golden *nagra* (shoe) peaks out from below her dress. This portrait, commissioned by Hastings just before leaving Bengal, was clearly meant to showcase to his metropolitan friends the status of his imperial life and his benevolence towards Indian domestic dependents. Accusations of corruption, however, followed Hastings to Britain. The year that Hastings arrived in Britain, 1785, saw the publication of *The Hastiniad; An Heroic Poem*, which gendered the public hostility against empire by satirising Marian Hastings' luxurious life at the

⁵² Richard Clarke, *The Nabob: Or, Asiatic Plunderers. A Satyrical Poem* (London: Printed by the author, 1773); Samuel Foote, *The Nabob; A Comedy, in Three Acts* (London: T. Sherlock, 1778), first performed at the Theatre-Royal, Haymarket, on 29 June 1772, also at the Theatre-Royal in Dublin, on 19 November 1773; Henry Frederick Thompson, *Intrigues of a Nabob: Or, Bengal the Fittest Soil for the Growth of Lust, Injustice and Dishonesty* (London: Printed by the author, 1780).



FIGURE 1.4: Johann Zofanny, Portrait of Warren Hastings with his Wife and an Indian Ayah in their Garden at Alipore, 1784–87

Source: By kind permission of the Trustees of Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, India

expense of India's exploitation: 'the great Sultana from the waves' swept into England with her freight of diamonds, gold, tapestries—'the wealth from plunder'd India', 'the wealth of India's impoverished shores'.⁵³ British public anger against the immoral EIC and its officers once again needed a new villain in the late 1780s, and Warren Hastings was charged with corruption by the Parliament. Hastings' seven-year-long impeachment was the biggest public spectacle in late eighteenth-century Britain. Edmund Burke started the prosecution of Hastings with words that echoed the mood of the British public: 'I impeach him in the name of Indian millions, whom he has sacrificed to injustice, I impeach him in the name, and by the best rights of human nature, which he has stabbed to the heart.'⁵⁴ Throughout

⁵³ *The Hastiniad; An Heroic Poem in Three Cantos* (London: Printed for J. Debrett, 1785), 8, 16.

⁵⁴ *The History of the Trial of Warren Hastings, Late Governor-General of Bengal, before the High Court of Parliament* (London: Printed for J. Debrett, 1796), 9.

the years of Hastings' theatrical impeachment, and even after his financial ruin, he continued to provide for his Indian ex-servants. The ayah Peggy (most probably the one in the painting) still received her pension as late as 1813.⁵⁵ Hastings' continuation of the paternalistic relationship with his Indian ayah even so many years after his departure from India suggests that the image of a moral benevolent master must have been emotionally important to him in the aftermath of the humiliating impeachment and public charges of dishonesty.

The figure of the ayah was crucial for the visual demonstration of the British family's racial purity. The ayah's darkness was emphasised in British portraits not just through the use of dark pigments like Indian yellow, but also through clever playing of chiaroscuro techniques, and used as a foil to highlight the whiteness and consequent racial purity of the British family, and particularly the racial purity of the British child. An undated painting by Thomas Hickey depicts a young British boy in non-gendered clothes with his Indian ayah. The dark ayah is deliberately placed in the shadows of the drapery to further racialise and obscure her body. Light streams in from the open window and falls on the British boy, highlighting his glowing whiteness, innocent budding imperial masculinity, and racial purity. Using the interplay of light and shade became a common strategy of British painters to produce racial difference. In Charles D'Oyly's watercolour of a British family with their Indian servants, bright sunlight from the window washes over the British couple and their young boy, making their whiteness all the more resplendent, while the dark ayah sits under the dark shadow of the wall (Figure 1.5). In another watercolour painting by the same artist from the 1810s, we see an Indian ayah holding a British child, whose racial purity is highlighted by a whiteness so intense that the child almost blends with the whiteness of the clothes and curtains (Figure 1.6). The ayah-child dyad became highly romanticised and sentimentalised in the course of the nineteenth century. British literary and visual representations emphasised the brownness of the Indian ayah and the whiteness and implied racial purity of the British child, thereby invisibilising the long and embarrassing history of sexual and reproductive labours provided by Indian women to

⁵⁵ Sydney Grier, *The Letters of Warren Hastings to His Wife* (London: Blackwood & Sons, 1905), 419.

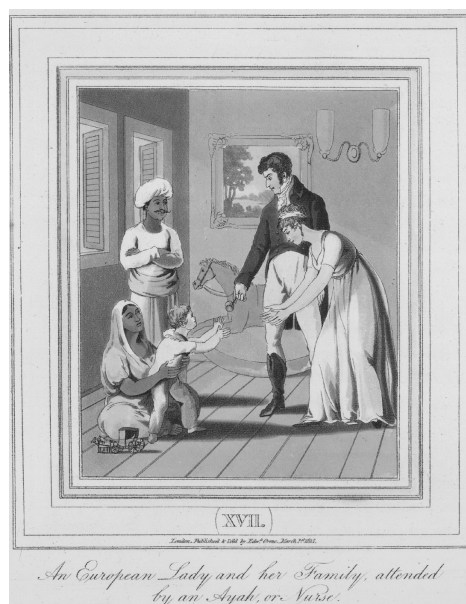


FIGURE 1.5: Hand-coloured Aquatint by Charles D'Oyly, Early Nineteenth century

Source: The British Library Board, A European lady and her family, attended by an ayah, or nurse. *The costume and customs of modern India*, Plate XVII, BL X 380.

British men. The ayah's hyper-visibility in contrast to the bibi's erasure bolstered the myth that the only imaginable presence of South Asian women in British homes was as asexual maidservants.

DOMESTIC LABOURS AND MORAL LABOURS OF THE AYAH

Despite the frequent references to and romanticisation of ayahs in Anglo-Indian writings, it is hard to assess the lived realities of ayahs from the diaries, letters and fictions written by employers keen on emphasising their own benevolence. In Mrs Sherwood's *The Ayah and Lady* (1813), for instance, the ayah never interacts with the sahib; her world revolves around the memsahib and the children. The fictional ayah stays in a two-bedroom hut with a veranda, and eats fish curry and rice every day, and

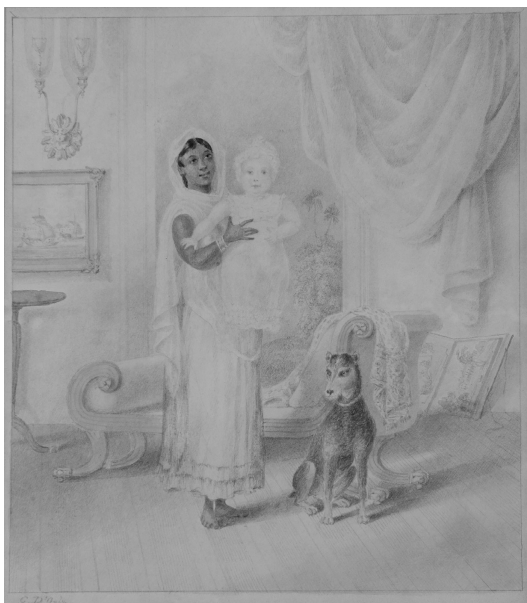


FIGURE 1.6: Water Colour Painting of an Ayah and a Child by Charles D'Oyly, Early Nineteenth century

Source: Courtesy of Karen Taylor Fine Art

throws two handfuls of leftover rice for the crows. She owns shining brass utensils, a *paan*-box (betel leaf box) and chintz clothes—all expensive commodities at the time. She also has her own maidservant to cook and clean for her while she attends on the lady. In fact, the ayah's opulent and leisurely lifestyle was such that any 'Begum herself could not have wished to have fared better'.⁵⁶ In another evangelical fiction *Arzoomund* (1829), the ayah is 'excessively corpulent' from 'ease and good living'; her ears are 'laden with golden rings', her neck is 'covered with jewels of silver', and her attire consists of 'thin muslin' and silk straight 'from the looms of Benares'.⁵⁷ Sherwood's exaggeration of the Christian benevolence and kindness of Anglo-Indian employers towards their Indian ayahs was undoubtedly

⁵⁶ Sherwood, *The Ayah and Lady*, 6.

⁵⁷ Mrs Sherwood, *Arzoomund* (London: Houlston & Son, 1829), 26–27.

meant to serve her missionary agenda. However, by reading between the lines of Anglo-Indian literary sources, and particularly by drawing upon legal sources and prescriptive domestic manuals, it is possible to get some idea about the social lives of early colonial ayahs.

Unlike in British households, where young girls worked as maidservants to save for their dowry, ayahs in Anglo-Indian households were usually older women, often widows. 'Old' is of course socio-culturally constructed and also a gendered category that is historically contingent. Lower class European men in early colonial India emulated South Asian patriarchal traditions of concubinage and demanded very young bibis. Men in their forties and fifties considered girls in their mid-twenties 'too old' to be bibis.⁵⁸ Abandoned bibis, even if they were only in their late twenties, were considered old and post-sexual, and often spent their lives as ayahs. Like other servants, ayahs lived in quarters in the compound of the Anglo-Indian bungalow. Single-roomed mud huts in a row were the usual arrangement for servants in the mofussil towns, whereas in Calcutta and the hill-towns with a concentrated British settlement, ayahs lived in nearby slums or separate servant neighbourhoods. The ayah was often the wife of one of the male servants, for example the khidmutgar or the bearer. Otherwise, she was usually a widow staying in her own hut, frequently with a dependent mother or daughter, who did her cooking and cleaning while she worked for the British family. Ayahs sometimes employed young apprentice maids who cooked and cleaned for them for them while learning ayah's work.⁵⁹ The ayah's work as lady's maid involved bringing her memsahib's *chhota hazri* (breakfast), preparing her bath, making her bed, washing her lace and stockings, making her hair, helping her into her clothes and all sorts of odd jobs around the house. After the birth of children, the same ayah usually doubled as nursemaid, unless the Anglo-Indian family kept a separate child's ayah. As a nursemaid, the ayah took care of all the bodily needs of the baby—from bathing it, clothing it and putting it to sleep to hand-feeding it if needed, and later taking the baby out for walks and putting it to sleep with stories. If the memsahib or

⁵⁸ Robb, *Sex and Sensibility*, 35–48.

⁵⁹ 'Examination of Juhoorun', *Of the Letters from the Government of India to the Court of Directors of the East India Company*, 127–128, Accounts and Papers, Colonies, Session: 26 January to 22 June 1841, Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons.

the children were sick, the ayah became the sick-nurse and had to tend to them all day and night.⁶⁰

Despite British official and cultural attempts to desexualise interracial intimacies in India, the line between sexual and non-sexual intimacies remained porous. The linguistic genealogy of the word ayah was Portuguese (*aya*—mother/tutor), and the earliest ayahs were mostly Eurasian women of Indo-Portuguese descent. In Indo-Portuguese communities, these ‘mixed’ women were given Portuguese status despite having Indian origin from the maternal side. British records, however, referred to them as ‘native Portuguese’ or ‘black Portuguese.’⁶¹ Perhaps because of their familiarity with European domestic practices, they were initially employed as ayahs in Anglo-Indian households. This was despite the fact that these Indo-Portuguese women were Catholic. Catholicism was perceived as a political and social menace to Protestant British identity, and Catholic Portuguese women were particularly viewed with great fear and suspicion by the EIC, as Adrian Carton has noted.⁶²

Hindu and Muslim ayahs were preferred and soon replaced Catholic Portuguese ayahs in Anglo-Indian households. Even some of the South Asian ayahs had previously been bibis of British men. Hindu and even Muslim women who cohabited with European men lost *jaat* (translated as caste by the British) and were often socially excommunicated from their kin network, as Europeans were considered *mlechhas* (impure or outcaste). Richard Blechynden’s unpublished diaries from early colonial Calcutta reveal that South Asian bibis of European men feared losing caste

⁶⁰ Anonymous, *A Domestic Guide to Mothers in India, Containing Particular Instructions on the Management of Themselves and Their Children, by a Medical Practitioner of Several Years’ Experience in India* (Bombay: American Mission Press, 1836); Flora Anne Steel and Grace Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook: Giving the Duties of Mistress and Servants, The General Management of the House and Practical Recipes for Cooking in All Its Branches*, 7th edn (London: William Heinemann, 1909), first published in 1888, 84–88. I realise the methodological problems of using prescriptive sources to reconstruct social life, but manuals are often the only archive that objectively document the day-to-day tasks expected of ayahs.

⁶¹ General Index, Volumes 1–4, 1834–1838, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata. These volumes document records of servants’ ship passages, and deposits paid and recovered by brokering firms on behalf of British employers.

⁶² Carton, *Mixed-Race and Modernity*, 242–45.

by living in close proximity with *mlechhas*.⁶³ Bengali vernacular literature refers to several instances of people performing *prayaschitya* (penance) to regain *jaat*, which they had lost through physical contact with *mlechha* Europeans.⁶⁴ Loss of caste was also gendered. While men could easily regain caste through expensive expiatory rituals, for women, loss of caste entailed loss of sexual morality as well.⁶⁵ No longer sexually desirable and unable to return to their ancestral families, many ex-bibis sought work as *ayahs* in Anglo-Indian homes.

Stray references in Anglo-Indian autobiographical writings provide insight into the lives of some *ayahs* who in fact began their career as *bibis*. Blechynden's diaries contain candid elaborations of his domestic and sexual life with multiple *bibis*. Blechynden wrote of bachelor white men's sexual preference for 'young flesh' between 15 and 20 years of age. Abandoned by their European partners and shunned by their natal families, seeking employment as *ayahs* in Anglo-Indian households was often the only alternative for these women once they became sexually undesirable. Blechynden's diaries refer to an elderly *ayah* who offered a very fair-skinned young boy for upbringing to Robert Downie, a merchant based in Calcutta. The woman had been a *bibi* to a European man in her youth and now worked as an *ayah* to an Anglo-Indian family. She had in fact made several trips to England by sea, nursing Anglo-Indian children. She claimed that this boy was her grandson by her daughter, who was married to a Frenchman at Chandernagore. The man had abandoned the boy and his mother, who had died of starvation. The *ayah* could no longer afford to maintain the boy and wanted him to be brought up and educated in Downie's home. Blechynden agreed that Downie should take care of the boy for the sake of charity. However, he suspected that the *ayah* was not really the grandmother, but the mother of the boy, whom she had conceived during one of her voyages to England 'bye blow made on board ship'.⁶⁶ If

⁶³ Robb, *Sex and Sensibility*, 60.

⁶⁴ Bidyashunya Bhattacharya (pseudonym), *Ekei ki Bole Bangali Saheb?* [Is This Who Is Called a Bengali Sahib?] (Calcutta: published by Babu Saracchandra Ghosh, 1874), 11–12. This *prahasan* (satire) critiques exploitative brahmans prescribing various forms of *prayaschitya* for various forms of contact with *mleccha* Europeans.

⁶⁵ 'Examination of Juhoorun'.

⁶⁶ Peter Robb, *Sentiment and Self: Richard Blechynden's Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 51.

this was the case, the woman was hiding her motherhood and giving up her child in order to maintain her reputation as a respectable ayah. The ayah's desperate attempts to give up the child to Downie in exchange for three gold *mohurs* (coins) shows the heart-breaking decisions that many ayahs were often forced to make in order to find employment.

Ayahs in other parts of British India also faced similar situations. Sir Edward Barnes, the governor of Ceylon in the 1820s, upon his retirement in 1831, took his long-time native Ceylonese mistress to England as his English wife's ayah. It is not known if Barnes' English family knew of this clandestine relationship, but even if they did, they carefully maintained their silence for the sake of family honour. Barnes' servants back in his Ceylonese estate certainly knew of or suspected their master's illicit relationship, and gossiped about the ayah's son's striking resemblance with Sir Edward: 'The Ayah has returned and has got possession of her garden, and will not support her son.... I ought to send the boy home to Sir Edward; he is so like him.'⁶⁷ Sir Edward arranged for the boy's care and eventually acknowledged him and brought him to England. In his will (1838), Barnes left a sum of £5,000 to his 'natural son'. His Ceylonese estates were to go to his wife, but in the event of Lady Barnes' death, they were to be 'divided equally amongst our children and my said natural son.'⁶⁸ Sir Edward's will, however, made no mention of the 'natural' son's mother, nor was any money left to her. The ayah's decision to abandon her son was probably a painful calculation that his wealthy father would eventually support him and he would have a better life in England. Ayahs themselves often reciprocated British men's silence about these illicit relationships, in order to maintain their respectability and continue their careers as professional ayahs. This particular woman worked as a travelling ayah for the next two decades of her life, nursing women and children on the sea voyage between India and Britain.

The figure of the ayah, in some instances, could even be a direct cover-up for Anglo-Indian men's socially unacceptable inter-racial sexual

⁶⁷ Letter from James Steuart to George Turnour, 14 September 1836, transcript of letter in H. A. J. Hulugalle, *British Governors of Ceylon* (Colombo: The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, 1963), 49.

⁶⁸ Will of Sir Edward Barnes, dated 21 July 1838, PROB11/1897, The National Archives, UK.

relations in India. Will Holland, a revenue officer of the EIC in the 1780s, lived with his Bengali *bibi* and children in the remote outpost of Dhaka. Having accumulated a fortune from private trade in diamonds and opium, he planned to return to Britain and eventually marry a British wife. However, he was very attached to his boys and wished to take them to Britain, which meant separating them from their Indian mother. Aware of the impossibility of accompanying Holland openly as his *bibi*, the woman made the reasonable request 'to go home with the children as their *Aya*'.⁶⁹ Indian *ayahs*, after all, regularly accompanied young Anglo-Indian children to Britain; so her presence in Britain would not raise suspicions. Fleeting archival references such as these enable us to imagine the sufferings of early colonial South Asian women serving British men, and the anxiety and trauma these women experienced at the prospect of separation from their families.

Holland declined to be complicit in the subterfuge, but some Anglo-Indian men like Sir Edward did in fact take their *bibis* to Britain in the guise of *ayahs*. The domestic respectability ensured by the figure of the *ayah* made it possible for a woman to earn money while serving as the *ayah* of her former partner's British wife and children. No doubt it would be a tormenting and exploitative experience for the *ayah*, but some *ayahs* may have had no other financially viable option. Others may have chosen such an arrangement as it was the only way to stay close to their own biracial children who were passed-off as white in British society. An early nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian fiction took up the subject of this domestic ruse. In *The Baboo and Other Tales* (1834), Henry Forester, a lieutenant in the Company's army, lived with his Muslim mistress Dilafoz, and they had a son together, who the father wanted raised 'as a *sahib*, instead of a *nawab*'. So, Forester sent his son to school in England, and Dilafoz accompanied her own son as his Indian *ayah*. Forester was eventually reunited with his English lover and he returned to England 'a happy married man'.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Letter from Will Holland to Frank Fowke, dated 26 November 1792, Mss. Eur. F3, APAC, British Library, cited in Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets*, 28.

⁷⁰ Augustus Prinsep, *The Baboo and Other Tales Descriptive of Society in India*, vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1834), 270–71.

Such happy resolutions were not the norm in Anglo-Indian fictions. Sexual intimacies between British men and Indian women and consequent 'mixed' children generated tremendous anxiety not just for the colonial state, but also for British women and missionaries. Instead of blaming Anglo-Indian men for sexual exploitation and abandonment of native women, the rare few Anglo-Indian fictions that depicted bibis, villainised them for seducing and victimising innocent British boys. In 1821, Mrs Sherwood published *The History of George Desmond: Founded on Facts which Occurred in the East Indies, and Now Published as a Useful Caution to Young Men Going Out to That Country*. Written in first person, in the form of a confession, the narrator George Desmond introduces his younger self when he was in love with Emily Fairfax, the pious daughter of an EIC director in Berkshire. The property-less Desmond saw no hope of marrying the wealthy Miss Fairfax and departed for Calcutta to seek his fortunes. Posted in a remote outpost of Bengal, and completely isolated from British society, he soon fell prey to the hypnotic influence of a nautch girl Amena, with whom he fathered a child. Some years later, Mr and Miss Fairfax arrived in Calcutta, and Desmond's elder brother died, leaving him considerable property and a title. This sudden upward mobility enabled him to marry his beloved Emily, who 'brought an ayah with her from Calcutta' and became the memsahib of his household.⁷¹ An Indian bibi, acceptable for 'plain George Desmond', was a scandal for 'Sir George' and his religious British wife.⁷² The role of class status, marital status and Christianity in dictating British imperial sexual morality is revealed in Sir George's desperate attempts to get rid of Amena—first with money, and then with threats. Amena, however, managed to find her way into his household when Emily's first ayah 'who was sincerely attached to her' left, and 'another ayah (or rather a devil incarnate) was admitted to attend upon my angelic wife.'⁷³ This ayah not only revealed to Emily the existence of her husband's illegitimate half-cast child, but also poisoned and killed Emily, leaving Sir George emotionally distraught and eventually

⁷¹ Anonymous (Mrs. Sherwood), *The History of George Desmond: Founded on Facts which Occurred in the East Indies, and Now Published as a Useful Caution to Young Men Going Out to That Country* (London: Wellington, Salop, 1821), 196.

⁷² Anonymous (Mrs. Sherwood), *The History of George Desmond*, 182.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 196.

financially bankrupt. This cautionary tale captured the uncomfortable but sought after domestic transition from bibis to the memsahib–ayah dyad in empire, but was far too embarrassing for the missionary memsahib Mrs Sherwood to have her name attached to it. Although a famous author by the time, she published this book anonymously.

The Baboo and Other Tales and *The History of George Desmond* were some of the rare fictions that dealt with the subject of British men's inter-racial sexual relations in empire. Early nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian cultural archives in general maintained a silence on the topic of bibis and concubines, gradually erasing them from imperial domestic history.⁷⁴ Ayahs, on the other hand, were overwhelmingly romanticised. Even though Mrs Sherwood's fiction vilified the ayah, the general trend in nineteenth-century fictions and autobiographical writings was to idealise the love between the Indian ayah and the British family. Particularly after the 1857 Indian Rebellion, through popular tales like *Edith and Her Ayah* and *Effie and Her Ayah*, the Indian ayah's self-sacrifice and love for the white child and the memsahib became legendary in British imagination.⁷⁵ The ayah's fidelity morally legitimised British rule over India at a time of mutiny and resistance.

CONCLUSIONS

The figure of the ayah was thus a myth created by Anglo-Indians to proclaim their domestic morality and benevolence, by suggesting non-slave labour, appropriate gender and class hierarchies, and racial purity in their imperial households. The desexualised and maternalised ayah in upper-class Anglo-Indian households cloaked the widespread presence of domestic slavery, inter-racial concubinage and mixed-race children in empire. The early colonial invention of the ayah as an indicator of Anglo-Indian domestic morality meant that throughout the colonial period some South Asian women hid real sexual and affective ties, and worked as ayahs

⁷⁴ Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*.

⁷⁵ A.L.O.E. (Charlotte Tucker), *Edith and Her Ayah, and Other Stories* (London: Nelson and Sons, 1872); Beatrice Braithwaite Batty, *Effie and Her Ayah* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1873).

to protect the name and honour of Anglo-Indian families. By the late colonial period, such cases were very rare, but not unknown. A century and a half after Holland's anxious bibi wished to accompany her biological children to England as their ayah, some South Asian women were still performing the same painful emotional labour for their Eurasian children's sake. Merle Oberon—the sensational star of popular British films in the 1930s, and an Academy Award nominee for best actress in 1935—hung up a portrait of a blue-eyed English woman as her deceased mother. Her real mother, however, was the sari-clad woman she kept out of sight, and sometimes introduced to her English friends as her Indian ayah.⁷⁶ Even in the early twentieth century, revealing mixed-race ancestry could ruin successful professional careers and social acceptability in Britain. The labours of Indian ayahs continued to protect the morality of Anglo-Indian men and the respectability of mixed-race children passing off as white to avoid racist discrimination.

In the immediate aftermath of India's political independence from British rule, however, a very popular Bengali movie used the very figure of the ayah to shatter the myth of Anglo-Indian racial and sexual purity. Loosely based on a 1958 novel by Tarasankar Bandopadhyay, the 1961 drama film *Saptapadi* focuses on the romance of Rina and Krishnendu, fellow students at the Calcutta Medical College. Rina Brown had grown up with her British father and her Indian ayah, and throughout her life she was led to believe that her British mother had died in giving birth to her. Later in the film, it is revealed to Rina and to the audience that the Indian ayah is actually her biological mother. In order to maintain his social respectability, the British father had forced his bibi to live for decades as the ayah of their Eurasian daughter. The woman was so intimidated by him

⁷⁶ Angela Woollacott, *Race and the Modern Exotic* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2011), Ch. 3. Oberon's mother Constance was only 12 years old when she gave birth, and was herself part Irish, part Ceylonese, and possibly also part Maori, though she wore a sari and lived as her daughter's Indian ayah. Oberon's life-long pretence to be Tasmanian was meant to obscure the reality of her mixed birth in Bombay. Another famous case of passing-off as white and hiding South Asian ancestry from the mother's side was that of Anna Leonowens. See Susan Morgan, *Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the King and I Governess* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

that she could never reveal her real identity even to her own daughter. A guilt-ridden Rina belatedly realises that she has treated her own mother as an ayah throughout her life.⁷⁷ Instead of a marker of Anglo-Indian domestic respectability and morality, in post-independence South Asian cultural representation, the figure of the ayah was thus turned into a symbol of the hypocrisy and immorality of British colonial rule. In postcolonial South Asian memory, the wronged ayah portrayed in *Saptapadi* came to stand as a reminder for British oppression of Indians in general, and British sexual exploitation of Indian women in particular.

⁷⁷ *Saptapadi*, directed by Ajoy Kar, released on 20 October 1961.

2 | The Many Lives of *Ayah*

Life Trajectories of Female Servants in Early Nineteenth-Century India

NITIN VARMA

In 1822, Ramoonee, a woman aged approximately 30 and identified as an *ayah*,¹ was being searched for in the context of a trial brought before the Supreme Court at Fort William in Calcutta.² Ramoonee was expected to testify as a witness in a case brought forward by one Major Robert Cunliffe—an army captain stationed in the north Indian cantonment town of Cawnpore—who had accused his wife Louisa Cunliffe of having committed adultery and had applied for the dissolution of their marriage.

¹ *Ayah* was the most common term used to denote ‘native women’ employed as lady’s maid or nursemaid in Anglo-Indian households in the nineteenth century. An article from a mid-nineteenth century English publication noted their popularity by claiming that ‘owing to our constant intercourse with India, there are few among us who are unacquainted with the word *ayah*’. The term itself seems to be of Portuguese origin (coming from *aia*, meaning a nurse or governess) and we can trace its presence in English language material and visuals from at least the 1750s. See, for instance, the portraits titled ‘The Children of Edward Holden Cruttenden and Ayah’ (1759/62) and ‘George Clive, Family, and Ayah’ (1765/66). ‘The Ayah,’ *Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal* 433, 17 April 1852, 249–50; see the entry ‘Ayah’ in Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: Being a Glossary of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms* (London: Murray, 1886), 42; Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 62–63. Also see Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700–1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

² Evidence taken before the Supreme Court of Judicature of the Presidency of Calcutta on the ‘Bill intituled’ ‘An Act to Dissolve the Marriage of Robert Henry Cunliffe, Esquire, with Louisa his now Wife, and to Enable Him to Marry Again’ (London, 1841) (hereafter, *Evidence on the Bill*).

The role of ayahs in Anglo-Indian homes of the time ranged from attending the lady to taking care of their infants and young children. In the performance of these tasks they entered the 'private' recesses of the household and often became privy to intimate knowledge of their mistress, master and other members of the household. Ramoonee was employed in the Cunliffe household as an ayah for the short period during which the alleged affair took place, but she had subsequently quit her employment. Her presence in the household nevertheless made her a decisive witness when Robert Cunliffe applied for the dissolution of his marriage—which was an option recently made available for British subjects in India.³

Roughly a decade and a half later (in 1838), another middle-aged woman named Juhoorun (simultaneously mentioned as Zuhoorun and Djoram)—also identified as an ayah—was called upon to appear before an enquiry committee. The committee was expressly constituted by the Company state to inquire into the 'abuses' of the living and working conditions of the first batches of 'Indian' *coolies* who were indentured and shipped from Calcutta port to labour on the French plantations of Mauritius. Juhoorun, having returned from the island as an ex-coolie who worked as an ayah, seemed like a reasonable candidate for such an investigation.⁴

At around the same time, an old Indian ayah named Rosina became a subject of interest (though marginally) in letters written by an English woman, Emily Eden, based in India, to her friends and family in England.⁵

³ 'A Bill Intituled, An Act to Enable the Examination of Witnesses to be Taken in India, in Support of Bills of Divorce on Account of Adultery Committed in India'. 1 Geo IV, Session 1820.

⁴ *Hill Coolies. Return to an Order of the Honourable the House of Commons, Dated 29 January 1841, For, Copies of a Letter from the Secretary to the Government of India to the Committee Appointed to Inquire Respecting the Exportation of Hill Coolies, Dated the 1st Day of August 1838: Of the Report Made by That Committee; with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendix: Of any Minute Recorded on that Report by Any Member of the Committee: Of the Letters from the Government of India to the Court of Directors of the East India Company, Dated the 16th and 19th Days of October 1840, on the Same Subject* (London: House of Commons, 1841).

⁵ The letters of Emily Eden have been compiled, edited and published in different publications. Emily Eden, *Letters from India*, vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley, 1872); Emily Eden, *Letters from India*, vol. 2 (London: Richard Bentley, 1872); Emily Eden, *Up the Country: Letters Written to Her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India* (London:

Eden was a celebrated observer of Indian society and also the sister of George Eden (Lord Auckland), the governor-general of India from 1836 to 1842; she had accompanied her brother (along with their sister Fanny Eden) during the course of his Indian appointment. Rosina was a 'travelling ayah',⁶ that is, an ayah who accompanied English families that were travelling either from Britain to India or in the opposite direction. In this case, she was employed by Emily in London to act as her Indian ayah.

The spatially and temporally divergent life trajectories of Ramoonee, Juhoorun and Rosina, which nevertheless converge on their known occupational profile, of being an ayah, may be conveniently bracketed into two distinctive, and sometimes competing, versions of historical narratives. Ramoonee, who lived and worked in towns limited to northern and eastern India (Cawnpore, Patna and Calcutta), would most appropriately be termed as part of a local/regional history. Juhoorun, on the other hand, who hailed from a small village in Bengal and spent a few years seeking employment in Calcutta to later board a ship bound for Mauritius to work as an ayah, and Rosina, who travelled to England and accompanied an English mistress on a ship back to India, neatly slip into the profile of mobile subjects of global history. Sidestepping such easy binaries and recent historiographical preoccupations, my task here is to piece together the fragmentary and disjointed material relating to Ramoonee, Juhoorun and Rosina in order to re-create their life trajectories as ayahs employed in European households in India and beyond in the first half of the nineteenth century.

My approach here is tied to a broader historiographical move that aims to reconstruct subaltern life histories, biographies and relationships beyond the more abstract and structuralist rendering of institutions, such as slavery, convict labour and domestic service.⁷ This has also been

Richard Bentley, 1867); Violet Dickinson, ed., *Miss Eden's Letters* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1919).

⁶ For the nature of movement of travelling ayahs and the networks they were embedded in, see Olivia Robinson, 'Travelling Ayahs of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Global Networks and Mobilization of Agency', *History Workshop Journal* 86, no. 1, 2018, 44–66.

⁷ Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet, eds, *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Clare Anderson, *Subaltern*

occasioned by some interest in biography as an element of South Asian history writing that is a way of thinking about individuals, subjectivity and historical pasts.⁸ The implications of many of these approaches are also tied to long-standing concerns about scale in history writing. In an important intervention on the methodological challenges when conceiving the relationship between micro- and macro-scale analyses, early modern historian Francesa Trivalletto argues that the current trend of global history, primarily based on secondary material, usually foregrounds a macro-scale. She proposes a renewed look at the achievements of Italian micro-history and particularly at the possibilities that emerge from reducing the scale of historical analysis, redirecting the gaze of historians towards the dense textures of everyday life, social relationships and human agency, while not shying away from the 'big questions' of history.⁹ In fact, the interest in micro-historical method for examining so-called marginal lives stands in contrast to the claims of singularity that are embedded in the writing of biographies of 'great individuals'. For microhistorians, as Jill Lepore explains, the purpose to piece together a life from slim and sketchy material is not to primarily foreground its 'uniqueness' but, in fact, to claim its 'exemplariness', to show how it serves as an 'allegory for broader issues

Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For examples of detailed studies of specific master–servant and mistress–servant relationship, see Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

⁸ David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (eds), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Richard Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Judith M. Brown, 'Life Histories and the History of Modern South Asia', *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3, 2009, 587–95; M. Finn, 'Anglo-Indian Lives in the Later Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* 33, no. 1, 2010, 49–65.

⁹ Francesa Trivalletto, 'Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?' *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1, 2011, available at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq> (accessed on 1 June 2019). For an instance of a historical essay working with different scales of analysis, see Amy Stanley, 'Maidservants' Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600–1900', *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 2, 2016, 437–60.

affecting the culture as a whole.¹⁰ This speaks to what Sandra Graham terms the ‘territory of lives’ in her study of female domestic servants in nineteenth-century Brazil (specifically, Rio de Janeiro). In this study, Graham identifies particular servant women, names them whenever possible and draws from their lived experience in order to discover what she characterises as ‘their expectations and what alternatives were available’. She thereby tries to discern ‘where the boundaries of recognizable experience lay’.¹¹

Notwithstanding the methodological challenges that are inherent in any attempt to reconstruct the life trajectories of female servants, my contention here is that such an attempt has the potential to move beyond the normative and formulaic portrayal of ayah that is prevalent in the contemporary Anglo-Indian literature and also certain established approaches in the existing scholarly literature. Critical scholarship relating to Anglo-Indian homes, *memsahibs* and servants, for instance, based primarily on a reading of Anglo-Indian textual and visual discourses—which includes advice manuals, medical manuals, diaries, letters, memoirs, magazines, newspapers, literature and also paintings, postcards and photographs—has interrogated/deconstructed the employer/coloniser perspectives/experiences and has demonstrated how the ideologies of race, gender, class and colonialism have informed the representations of native servants and shaped the anxieties, fears, prejudices, desires and aspirations of the masters/colonisers.¹² This literature overlaps with another

¹⁰ Jill Lepore, ‘Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography’, *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1, 2001, 133.

¹¹ Sandra Graham, *House and Street: The Domestic World of Servants and Masters in Nineteenth-Century Rio De Janeiro* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 7.

¹² There is a vast literature dealing with servants in Anglo-Indian households. There are writings dealing specifically with ayahs and their relations with mistresses and children; see Indrani Sen, ‘Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-Nurses and Memsahibs in Colonial India’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 3, 2009, 299–328; Suzanne Conway, ‘Ayah, Caregiver to Anglo-Indian Children, c. 1750–1947’, in *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World*, ed. Shirleene Robinson and Simon Sleight (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 41–58; Nupur Chaudhuri, ‘Memsahibs and Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India’, *Victorian Studies* 31, no. 4, 1988, 517–35. For a general literature on Indian servants and master/mistress–servant relationship in Anglo-Indian households, see Nupur

set of writings; these locate the management of home in the colonies (and particularly the role of the memsahibs and their relationship with the servants) as neither subsidiary nor marginal but fundamentally tied to broader political and colonial orders.¹³

In this wide-ranging diagnosis of discourses/ideologies and the mapping of experiences of masters/mistresses, there is little on offer that may be defined as the social history of domestic servants. For instance, we still only have a very vague sense of the social profiles and networks of the so-called servants, the nature of their relationship with masters, mistresses, children and fellow servants, and the nature and practice of domestic work—except for some fairly normative generalisations.

A major constraint in writing this social history, as often suggested, has been the nature of historical material, which is either scant and scattered or mostly normative. Here I propose that the methodology of micro-history—or intensively focusing on the historical material and through such a methodology the possibility of reconstructing individual life trajectories of domestic servants—has the potential of revealing fresh insights. For instance, the judicial trial, coolie enquiry and personal letters, which become the most substantive sites for reconstructing brief life trajectories in this chapter, were originally intended for entirely different purposes: to establish the guilt of a European mistress (Ramoonnee),

Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India', *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4, 1994, 549–62; Fae Ceridwen Dussart, 'The Servant/Employee Relationship in Nineteenth-Century England and India', unpublished dissertation (University College London, 2005); Elizabeth Ann Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). There are other writings explicitly exploring the construction of servants in Anglo-Indian literature. See, for instance, Joyce Grossman, 'Ayahs, Dhayes, and Bearers: Mary Sherwood's Indian Experience and "Construction of Subordinated Others"', *South Atlantic Review* 66, no. 2, 14–44; Dara Rossman Regaignon, 'Intimacy's Empire: Children, Servants, and Missionaries in Mary Martha Sherwood's "Little Henry and His Bearer"', *Children Literature Association Quarterly* 26, no. 2, 2001, 84–95.

¹³ Alison Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4, 1999, 421–40; Alison Blunt, *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Fae Ceridwen Dussart, "'That Unit of Civilisation' and the 'Talent Peculiar to Women': British Employers and Their Servants in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire", *Identities* 22, no. 6, 2015, 708–21.

to ascertain the condition of coolies in Mauritius (Juhoorun), and to document and convey an English woman's experience in India (Rosina). These purposes, in turn, set their limits, and defined what was considered to be relevant and therefore what got noted, recorded and written down. But as I argue here that it is possible to retrace brief period of 'servant' lives but any further claims that this material allows us to get a deeper sense of well-rounded 'subjectivities' with interior lives are rendered extremely weak, if not entirely untenable.

Here I deliberately use the notion of lives in a double sense. In a more familiar understanding, lives refers to the life trajectories of the individual servants (ayahs in this chapter) that I trace here. At the same time, I use the notion to probe the trajectory of the category itself (i.e., ayah). This allows me to interrogate the validity of ayah work as a neatly separated category of labour (care work) as portrayed in much of the literature, and sharply distinct and separate from other categories of work (e.g., stigmatised manual labour and even sexual labour) that female servants performed or were at times expected to perform in European households. This double investigation of lives (howsoever incomplete) of some individuals, and through them the reconstruction of the history of the ayah category (as implicated in histories of domesticity, migration, mobility, law and affect), allows us to go beyond the limits of generalised representations.

THE HINDUSTANEE AYAH IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

It is useful to dwell briefly on the terms that were often used to address ayahs from eastern and northern India at this time—including Ramoonee, Juhoorun and Rosina; these are Hindustanee ayah and later Mussalmanee ayah. These terms were used in a widely circulated guide published in 1810 that was intended for 'gentlemen' who were taking up employment in the civil, military or naval service of the East India Company.¹⁴ The author, Thomas Williamson, used the terms specifically to refer to ayahs

¹⁴ Thomas Williamson, *The East India Vade-Mecum; or Complete Guide to Gentlemen Intended for the Civil, Military, or Naval Service of the Hon. East India Company* (London: Black, Parry, and Kingsbury, 1810).

born of Mussulman or Hindu parents who worked for wages. However, in elaborating a typology of ayahs (and female slaves/servants) found in Anglo-Indian households of the time, it became fairly clear that his usage did not involve merely a religious/ethnic principle. Williamson, for instance, also noted that many of the ayahs were in fact 'half-cast' (half-caste: offspring of a European father and an Indian mother), who were brought up in the household of their birth for service later in life. Regarding the nature and condition of their service in these households, he added that 'good treatment and kindness' towards these ayahs formed a 'valuable compensation for the smallness of [their] wages' and this, he believed, induced 'some of them to remain for number of years, faithful and affectionate'.¹⁵ Williamson also mentioned the fairly common practice of purchasing girls in infancy; they were called *baundy* (*bandi* or slave). This, according to him, was generally approved by the prevailing Muhammedan law which 'authorized the purchaser of a child to retain and command services upon the condition of proper food and raiment until a certain age'.¹⁶ In contrast to the half-caste ayahs and bandis,¹⁷ the term Hindustanee ayah, at least from the late eighteenth century, seemed to denote female servants from parts of northern and eastern India who were less tied to the master's household through relationships of dependency,

¹⁵ Williamson, *East India*, 337.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 340. For slave-keeping cultures of Anglo-Indians in India, see Margot Finn, 'Slaves Out of Context: Domestic Slavery and the Anglo-Indian Family, c. 1780–1830', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19, 2009, 181–203, and Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ These practices did not simply die out. In a telling reference from a diary of an English woman (Fanny Parkes) stationed in north India (Allahabad), she mentions a 'plan' of the European ladies of the station for the 'purchasing' of young girls during a famine year and bringing them up as 'Christians', to teach them reading, writing and needlework, and on their attaining a suitable age to put them into service as ayahs. Again, in a case of theft brought before a sessions court in north India (Bhagalpur), the accused Junnoobun was identified as a Christian ayah who was said to have been raised in the household of her English employer (Wallace) for more than 17 years. Fanny Parkes, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque: During Four-and-Twenty Years in the East*, vol. 2 (London: Pelham Richardson, 1850), 294–95; *Report of Cases Determined in the Court of Nizamut Adawlut for 1854*, vol. 4, part 1 (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1854), 12–13.

kinship, patronage and bondage, but rather found employment in households (mostly Anglo-Indian) for wages.¹⁸ Again they appear as different from Portuguese ayahs—who were also remunerated through wages. Hindustanee ayahs were often migrants in search of work or were mobile owing to their work, while most Portuguese ayahs were based and worked in cities.¹⁹ This was also linked to the emergence of a new kind of household and the specific demands of labour. But at this time Williamson also reported a distinct problem of supply: Hindustanee ayahs were not readily available for hiring ‘unless in cases where young women have lost their casts [castes], and, in a manner, become aliens to their own sects.’²⁰ These observations seemed to confirm some of the findings of a survey of eastern districts conducted by Francis Buchanan-Hamilton in the same decade. Buchanan-Hamilton reported a general ‘scarcity’ of ‘free female servants’ in several districts that he surveyed, and the few that he could find were mostly ‘old woman who have lost all their kindred’ and attended as domestics for ‘food and raiment.’²¹

¹⁸ Several advice manuals and diaries from the period note the practice of paying wages to ayahs, which depended on the place of hiring and could range from anything between 4 rupees and 12 rupees. See Williamson, *East India*, 337; the text accompanying Plate XVII, ‘An European Lady and Her Family Attended by an Ayah, or Nurse’, in C. Doyley, *The European in India* (London: Edward Orme, 1813); *The Bengal and Agra Annual Guide and Gazetteer for 1841*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: William Rushton, 1841), 20; George Parbury, *Handbook for India and Egypt* (London: W.H. Allen, 1842), 327; R. Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book* (Madras: Athenaeum Press, 1850), 3–4; Parkes, *Wanderings*, vol. 1, 209.

¹⁹ Emma Roberts noted that Portuguese ayahs, who were Christians and a ‘better class of ayahs’, were not ‘easily attainable outside Calcutta’. Emma Roberts, *The East India Voyager or the Outward Bound* (London: J. Madden, 1845), 28.

²⁰ Williamson, *East India*, 340.

²¹ Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the District of Bhagalpur in 1810–1811* (Patna: Bihar & Orissa Research Society, 1939), 192. For a discussion of domestic servants and female servants, also see *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District, or Zila, of Dinajpur* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1833), 79; Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809–1810* (Patna: Bihar & Orissa Research Society, 1939), 159; Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811–1812* (Patna: Bihar & Orissa Research Society, 1939), 287; Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the District of Shahabad in 1812–1813* (Patna: Bihar & Orissa Research Society, 1934), 165. For a discussion of servants in Buchanan-Hamilton’s account, see Samita Sen, ‘Slavery, Servitude and Wage

Writing in the 1830s, Emma Roberts reiterated several of the early difficulties regarding female domestics. At the same time, she noted that in Anglo-Indian households (in northern and eastern India) it was effectively ‘essential for the ayah to be a *Moosulman* woman’ apart from a few lower-caste Hindus who sometimes took up this office.²² Again the ayah described by Roberts through a social/religious marker (‘Mussalmanee’) simultaneously referred to a female servant who worked for wages.



FIGURE 2.1: Dace or Ayah, Indian Nurse, in Petticoat and Jacket of Cotton, and Muslin Shawl, with a European Child

Source: Handcoloured copperplate engraving by an unknown artist from “Asiatic Costumes,” Ackermann, London, 1828. / © Florilegius / Bridgeman Images.

Work: Domestic Work in Bengal’, SWS-RLS Occasional Paper 1, School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Kolkata, 2015, 18–25.

²² Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society*, vol. 1 (London: W.H. Allen, 1835), 92.

Roberts also seemed to carry forward another older prejudice about the social origins of ayahs when she claimed that there were hardly any ‘respectable women’ among this class. She, however, blamed their low status not just as a function of their social background (outcaste) but also as a distinct consequence of their ‘unveiled mingling with the male domestics’—who dominated the servant class in Anglo-Indian households.

An incident involving a Mussalmanee ayah and a male domestic that touches on these issues of respectability and also of attire very poignantly captures these issues. The incident was noted in the diary of Fanny Parkes who described her ayah sitting on a *charpai* (bed) and diligently making ‘chintz pajamas’ (trousers). Chintz pajamas were full round the body but quite tight from knee to ankle. The appearance of these trousers seemed patently different from the petticoats that ‘Moosalmanee’ ayahs supposedly wore (as the book claimed) and which was frequently represented in the visuals from the period.

Parkes, in fact, offered an observation that Mussalmanee women who attended English ladies in the capacity of ladies’ maid often wore the petticoat only to please and satisfy the ‘ideal delicacy of English ladies’, as these ladies disliked the idea of a female servants without it. But the ayahs themselves, Parkes claimed, often saw this as a ‘badge of servitude.’ She further noted that the moment the ayah got into her house, she would normally take off her petticoat and the large white mantle (*chadar*) and appear in the trousers which she always wore beneath it.²³ As Fanny’s ayah continued to work on her trousers, her friend and a fellow servant Sheik-je (abdar) taunted her by suggesting that she should make the trousers full to the ankle—clearly referencing the attire of *nach* women (public dancers). The quip offended the ayah, and she remonstrated with Fanny and threatened to quit her employment. Sheik-je seemed unruffled by all this and continued to sit calmly, making *chapaties* (flour cakes) and smoking his *narjil* (cocoa-nut shell hooqu), until the ayah made a *galee* (abuse) which enraged him.²⁴ Parkes later claimed to have had some trouble trying to restore peace between them. The issue of respectability and the low status of ayah as described by several commentators, including

²³ Parkes, *Wanderings*, 140–41; Parkes, *Wanderings*, vol. 2, 380.

²⁴ Parkes, *Wanderings*, vol. 2, 140–41.

Roberts, was not as simple as they often asserted. This could lead to instances in which respect and dignity became sites of contest in seemingly mundane everyday encounters as individual lives unfolded.

SEARCHING FOR RAMOONEE

Ramoonee, a native of Patna, was in the cantonment town of Cawnpore in 1817, seeking employment as an ayah in Anglo-Indian households. Cawnpore in some ways encapsulated several political and economic changes of the time. The place was linked to the military expansion of the East India Company in northern India, being acquired in 1801 and becoming the major company garrison. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, when the company became 'militarily and commercially secure', Cawnpore was no longer considered a 'dangerous frontier zone' but started acquiring the character of a 'permanent station'.²⁵ This period was also occasioned by the expansion of a new kind of household and domesticity, with a growing presence of white women (memsahibs) and English children in India. It seems that Cawnpore would have been attractive for individuals searching for work as servants in Anglo-Indian households.²⁶

Ramoonee seems to have been alive to these opportunities when she travelled from Patna to Cawnpore. But we do not know how and when she arrived in Cawnpore. Where was she employed before? Was she out of work, and if so, for how long? But we do know that her employment in the Cunliffe household in early 1817 was made possible by another ayah, who informed her about the opening and recommended her for the position.²⁷ The testimonies of some of the male servants in the household clarified how Ramoonee was assigned the work of ayah in the household.²⁸ It all

²⁵ Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 24.

²⁶ Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics*, vol. 1, 45–72.

²⁷ Testimony of Etwarry on 11th July 1822. *Evidence on the Bill*, 69–70.

²⁸ The four male servants in the employ of Robert Cunliffe interrogated by the Supreme Court were: Cocundoo (*mashalchi*), Ghonisham (*chaprassey*), Nundooram (*chaprassey*) and Etwarry (*khidmutgar*). Mashalchis were described as 'humble domestics' (similar to scullions) whose tasks were to wash dishes and look after the

started when Louisa Cunliffe—the mistress of the household—left for Calcutta in late 1816 to see off some of her children who were being sent to England. In Calcutta, Louisa met one Lieutenant Loftus, accompanied by his wife and an infant and also bound for Cawnpore. It was not clear whether they were previously acquainted with each other, but they travelled back together. On arrival in Cawnpore, the Loftus family stayed in the Cunliffe household for a few months. Taking care of their infant required an ayah, and Ramoonee was taken into service.²⁹

When Robert Cunliffe accused his wife of having an affair with Lieutenant Loftus, and started proceedings in the ecclesiastical court, it was Ramoonee who provided witness accounts of the ‘encounters’ between Loftus and Louisa Cunliffe at home. She came to be in this situation because as the child’s ayah she was required to be present in the sleeping room that was assigned to Mrs Loftus and the infant. This room was linked to another one, where Loftus slept alone. Ramoonee was frequently awake during the night, because she was frequently attending to the baby, and on a few occasions she noticed Louisa discreetly tiptoeing through her room into Loftus’s room. Ramoonee also glimpsed encounters between the two, because she was also present in private spaces.³⁰

When Robert Cunliffe initiated the legal process to dissolve the marriage in 1822 (after having received damages from Lieutenant Loftus and separation from his wife), it was fairly evident that Ramoonee’s witnessing of several potentially adulterous encounters in the household would prove indispensable in the trial, which was to be conducted at the Supreme Court in Calcutta with the clear mandate (and warrant) of determining Mrs Cunliffe’s guilt. But Ramoonee—who had already left her employment in the Cunliffe household before the commencement of the preceding trial (in 1818)—was untraceable. An attempt to determine

lamps. Khidmutgars were said to be ‘Mussalman servants’ and ‘peculiar’ to Anglo-Indian homes in Bengal Presidency. Their duties were primarily connected with serving meals and waiting at the dining table. Chaprasseys were badged-servants as they bore *chapras*, that is, a badge-plate inscribed with the name of the office to which they were attached to. Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 200, 486, 601.

²⁹ Testimony of Cocundoo on 10 July 1822 in *Evidence on the Bill*, 64–66. Deposition of Ramoonee from August 1818 in *Evidence on the Bill*, 34–35.

³⁰ Deposition of Ramoonee from August 1818 in *Evidence on the Bill*, 34–35.

her whereabouts was launched at the behest of Robert Cunliffe in his preparation for the trial (as he would profit most from her testimony in court), and was conducted through the agency of some of his male servants. During the trial the servants recounted their futile search efforts, including details of their previous contact and familiarity with Ramoonee. These accounts give us some inkling about Ramoonee's life between 1818 and 1822, and a few other clues regarding her background and the social networks that she might have been part of. Ironically, even this thin reconstruction of a small slice of Ramoonee's life would not have been possible if she had been found, brought to court and then merely expected to respond to queries relating to legal proceedings surrounding a particular agenda: the conduct of the mistress/wife. We seem to find out a bit more about Ramoonee precisely because she went missing.³¹

Ghonisham, a male servant who appeared at the trial, was in the employ of Major Cunliffe for more than a decade. He accompanied Ramoonee on a boat journey from Cawnpore to Calcutta in 1818, which she undertook in order to appear before the court. This trip seemed to have been arranged and funded by Major Cunliffe although Ramoonee was no longer in his employ. Ghonisham told the court that she seemed to be no-one's servant at this point (or at least he could not say she was with any conviction). During this trip, Ramoonee voiced a desire to him to make a stopover in Patna, so she could visit her home and meet her 'family and relations'. Their stopover lasted for two days, and Ramoonee accompanied by Ghonisham visited her home.³²

It is not entirely clear whether or not Ramoonee and Ghonisham were already familiar with each other. What we do know is that they worked for the same household, and their employment overlapped at least for the time that Ramoonee was employed (for almost 18 months). To a pointed

³¹ The leading question in court to three of the four male servants was 'Did you know Ramoonee ayah?' These men had nothing to contribute to the primary purpose of the trial (the charge of adultery), but were called to report on their knowledge about Ramoonee and their efforts to track her down. The fourth servant (Cocundoo), who was privy to a particular 'encounter' between Louisa Cunliffe and Lieutenant Loftus, was subsequently asked by the court: 'Do you remember a female servant named Ramoonee, an *ayah*, in the service of Mr. Loftus?' *Evidence on the Bill*, 14, 65, 67, 69.

³² Testimony of Ghonisham in *Evidence on the Bill*, 67–68.

question in the trial, 'Did you know Rammoney Ayah?' Ghonisham's terse reply (or at least what was recorded in the written transcript) was, 'I did know her.' It was not entirely surprising or even unusual for an ayah who worked in a household dominated by male servants to develop collegial, friendly or even romantic relationships with some of her fellow servants.³³ Possibilities of such interactions were hinted at by Emma Roberts when she argued that the low status of ayahs was because they have 'forfeited their characters' by 'publicly associating with men.' Notwithstanding Roberts's negative portrayal of ayahs (mostly Hindustanee ayahs), there were many instances of friendly or mutually beneficial relationships emerging at work. Fanny Parkes, for instance, noticed that her ayah in Calcutta had struck an arrangement with her 'friend'—a *durwan* (guard)—in which they found their meals together: they pooled some money and used this common fund to buy the necessary ingredients for cooking. This plan, however, fell through as the ayah felt that the *durwan* was a glutton, and would end up consuming food that she estimated was worth at least 1½ or even 2 rupees per month while she herself consumed food (or so she believed) that would never exceed a rupee.³⁴ Parkes noted another instance when her ayah wished to attend a dinner party (*khana*) organised by some *khidmutgars* whom she described as her friends.³⁵

It is difficult to say with any degree of conviction whether Ramoonee and Ghonisham had a relationship that could be termed as friendly or whether Ghonisham was simply carrying out a task that was assigned by his master. But Ramoonee did take him to her home. This belonged

³³ These relationships could at times unfold as conflicts, jealousy and violence, and could be brought before courts. For instance, a *khidmutgar* who had been in the service of an Anglo-Indian (Brigadier McCombe) urged an ayah with whom he had a 'connection', and who was in the employ of Mrs McCombe, to quit service and live with him. The refusal of the ayah to heed to the *khidmutgar*'s suggestion made him particularly jealous as he suspected her of having an affair with another male servant of the household, and he attempted to 'cut her throat' after breaking into the house. He was later convicted for wounding her with the intent of murder and was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment with hard labour. 'Shuffee's Case', in W. H. Macnaghten, *Report of Cases Determined in the Court of Nizamut Adawlut*, vol. 3 (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1828), 162–63.

³⁴ Parkes, *Wanderings*, vol. 1, 142–43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

to a woman named Imaum khanum, who was described as a respectable person of rank upon whom Ramoonee was said to be a 'dependent'. After staying a couple of days, they left for Calcutta and arrived at the house of Mr Hunter—who was a friend of Major Cunliffe. Ghonisham left Calcutta a month later for Cawnpore. In the meantime, Ramoonee had already taken up employment as an ayah in Mr Hunter's household, and in a few days would appear at the Supreme Court to give her testimony.³⁶

Ghonisham was the only individual known to Robert Cunliffe who had visited Ramoonee's home, and so it was logical that in his efforts to trace her, he was seen as essential. In the search for Ramoonee, Nundooram, another *chaprassay* in the employ of Major Cunliffe for more than eight years, was also deployed, and the fact that he was a native of Patna (like Ramoonee) perhaps gave the impression to Cunliffe that his local knowledge would come in handy. The enquiries these two individuals conducted in Patna (possibly at the same time) took place through the agency of city authorities (a local judge and local police *thana* or station) and finally zeroed in on the household that Ramoonee had earlier visited and described as her home. The patron of the household (Imaum Khanum) informed the 'search parties' that Ramoonee had returned to Patna from Calcutta (her last known employer Mr Hunter had left for London), and had stayed in her household for an extended period of almost six months.³⁷

It became fairly clear from these investigations that Ramoonee often visited this household—sometimes after leaving an employment and before undertaking a new journey either for work or in search of it. A particular pattern seems to emerge here. Ramoonee travelled along the river Ganges, at least between Cawnpore in the west to Calcutta in the east, in search of employment; this included the work of ayah in Anglo-Indian households. Her employment stints were rarely long and she did not become permanently attached to any particular individual/family/household. Her life trajectories (and employment choices) were tied to the household in Patna, where she found refuge and could stay for longer periods if need be. This household seemed to correspond to what has been noted as a fairly prominent phenomenon in north India, wherein some

³⁶ Testimony of Ghonisham in *Evidence on the Bill*, 67–68.

³⁷ Testimony of Nundooram in *Evidence on the Bill*, 14–15.

Muslim women who had gained control of property (by inheriting from their fathers or husbands) set up endowments. Describing the nature and function of these endowments, Kozlowski suggests:

Beyond the inner circle of the family, endowments took notice of distant relations, dependants or servants. Most modestly affluent homes had a shifting population of poor but respectable guests. Most often they were women, widows or spinsters, sometimes kin and sometimes not. They stayed for months, sometimes years. When they left to become someone else's guests, other women in similar straits invariably took their places.³⁸

Is it possible that Ramoonee was simultaneously a dependent of a native household, where she received food and shelter for her services, and an ayah in Anglo-Indian households, where she worked for wages? Ramoonee's search for waged work did not snap nor exclude her ties with a household where she often found protection. In our search to establish distinctions between different kinds of households in this period (for instance, native 'feudal' households and Anglo-Indian households), we should not lose sight of the fact that individual life trajectories/strategies could also combine them in fairly unexpected ways.

During her stay at the household in Patna in 1822, Ramoonee fell ill. After witnessing several deaths owing to the raging cholera epidemic, she took her belongings and left, with another Hindustanee woman. Did she leave to search for work, or was she just trying to avoid the disease and possible death? Nundooram told the court that he strongly believed Ramoonee had died during the epidemic. All we can conclude is that she could not be traced any further.

JUHOORUN'S TESTIMONY

Juhoorun, unlike Ramoonee, is not an obscure figure. Her testimony was part of a published and widely circulated report on coolie labour, and it has

³⁸ G. Kozlowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 58. Also see G. Kozlowski, 'Muslim Women and the Control of Property in North India', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 24, no. 2, 1987, 163–81.

been mentioned, discussed and analysed in numerous monographs and articles, and even reproduced in some anthologies.³⁹ Juhoorun has become part of a narrative of 'coolie labour': a colonial project to transport men, women and children from various parts of Asia to labour on plantations across the globe. The work of coolies in most of these accounts has been predominantly portrayed as fieldwork on plantations under conditions of indenture; however, Juhoorun was hired to work as an ayah on the coolie ship and later as an ayah and servant in a planter household. This tension around fixing Juhoorun's identity as just another coolie was already evident in the interview that the Calcutta committee conducted. These interviews were more like questionnaires, and contained standard questions and responses (how many hours did you work, what was your wage, etc.) that were meant for a 'standard' coolie. Juhoorun's testimony, in contrast, appears as a consolidated text that does not fit neatly into the categories laid down.⁴⁰ It is evident from the flow of Juhoorun's transcript that she was responding to specific queries posed by the committee, but this did not deter her from bringing in specific conditions of her work and experiences of life.

³⁹ Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 147–48; Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars, and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–1874* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 166; Marina Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy: The Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (Stanley, Rose Hill: Editions de l'Océan Indien, 1994), 41–42; Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem, 2002), 18–19; Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 113–14; Jane Samson, ed., *The British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–12; Anna Winterbottom and Facil Tesfaye, eds, *Histories of Medicine and Healing in the Indian Ocean World*, vol. 2 (London: Springer, 2016), 12–13; Cindy Hahamovitch, 'Slavery's Stale Soil: Indentured Labor, Guestworkers and the End of Empire', in *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism*, ed. Daniel E. Bender and Jane K. Lipman (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 238; Ulrike Lindner, 'Indentured Labour in Sub-Saharan Africa (1870–1918): Circulation of Concepts between Imperial Powers', in *Bonded Labour: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th–21st Century)*, ed. Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf, Ulrike Lindner, Gesine Muller, Oliver Tappe and Michael Zeuske (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 63.

⁴⁰ The testimony of Juhoorun appears in the report under different names—Juhoorun, Zuhoorun and Djoram, and only one iteration of the name (Juhoorun) has been followed for consistency.

The city—Calcutta—functions as an important opening to Juhoorun's testimony that details her journey of work. From the late eighteenth century, Calcutta had been a place of service that drew men from a hinterland for wage work in an expanding labour market.⁴¹ But by the early decades of the nineteenth century, it also seemed to offer opportunities of work for women, such as Ramoonnee and Juhoorun. It is therefore not surprising that Calcutta often appeared as an element in the trajectories of mobility and employment of female servants in eastern India. Juhoorun arrived in the city from a village called Amtah, close to Midnapore in Bengal, in 1834. Initially she seemed to have gone alone in order to look for work, but she was joined by her mother and brother after the death of her father. There are very few references to family, kin and acquaintances in the testimony, and these scant allusions are never followed up. Juhoorun also claimed that she had a husband, but we find no further elaboration on this subject. The fact that the substance of her testimony (or at least what was recorded in the transcript) was framed exclusively through her Mauritius experience means we have very few hints about the social networks she might have been embedded in.

Juhoorun's first known employment in the city was that of an ayah's servant. She worked as a live-in maid and her tasks were to serve and cook for her mistress. For this she received a monthly salary of 2 rupees, which is substantially less than an ayah's salary—which could vary between 7 and 12 rupees. But Juhoorun's employment included food and lodging, which she would not have received as an ayah.⁴² Furthermore, Juhoorun learnt 'ayah's work' from her mistress, something that would prove extremely useful to her. The learning here refers not only to acquiring skills required for the job but also implied insertion into the networks of recommendation and employment that interlinked Anglo-Indian households. Ramoonnee,

⁴¹ P. J. Marshall, 'The Company and the Coolies: Labour in Early Calcutta', in *The Urban Experience: Calcutta—Essays in Honour of Professor Nisith R. Ray*, ed. Pradip Sinha (Calcutta: Riddhi-India, 1987), 23–38.

⁴² Ayahs and other servants of the Anglo-Indian households would either go back to their homes/living spaces to have their meals, or would cook their own food in the master's household, as Fanny Parkes's ayah and *durwan* did in Calcutta. We find other suggestions that the lower-caste servants, especially the sweeper (*mehtar* or *mehtarani*), were the only servants who would accept leftovers from the master's table.

for instance, was employed in the Cunliffe household through an ayah's recommendation. So after serving an ayah for a year (1834–35), Juhoorun found work as an ayah in the household of a Mr Martin.⁴³

It is not very clear whether Mr Martin lived by himself or if there were other members of the household (family, friends or visitors). It appears similar to Mr Hunter's household, where Ramoonee found work when she arrived in Calcutta. The possibility that some of these women worked in single-male households alerts us to the limits of the generalisation that ayahs worked exclusively as maids for women and nurses for children.

When Mr Martin moved out of the city in 1836, Juhoorun found herself unemployed after almost a year of service (1835–36). Having been without work for a couple of months, she was approached by two men identified as Baboo and Jungli Havildar. They offered her work attending the child of an English couple who were boarding a ship going to Mauritius. The terms of the offer seemed reasonably decent: she would receive a sum in advance and retain the choice of either staying at the destination or returning. Furthermore, the journey itself was described as a fairly short one (five days).⁴⁴ The practice of attending families that were travelling by ship was not unknown: indeed, there were the so-called travelling ayahs who accompanied English families as they commuted between England and India. Having worked in an Anglo-Indian household, Juhoorun would probably have known about this practice, but the question still remains whether she perceived the offer along these lines and, more importantly, whether she knew about Mauritius. The practice of sending coolies to plantations in Mauritius had only begun recently, in 1834, and by 1836 there were no more than about 200 women who had been taken, of whom only four had returned.⁴⁵

When the voyage commenced, in October 1836, Juhoorun soon found out that she was not going to get what she had bargained for. Instead of waiting on a child, she was sent to attend a French lady. Juhoorun reported this discrepancy to the captain of the ship, and he told her that the recruiters had most likely 'deceived' her and that she was being sent to

⁴³ Examination of Juhoorun in *Hill Coolies*, 128.

⁴⁴ Examination of Juhoorun and Bibee Zuhoorun examined in *Hill Coolies*, 127–28, 45.

⁴⁵ Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy*, 30.

Mauritius to 'serve French people'. After a month and twelve days (not five days!), the ship docked in Mauritius.⁴⁶ There Juhoorun discovered from the local police that the coolies on board (including her) had been assigned to a master named Dr Boileau—who owned a salt works operation and lived in a place called Les Salines. Boileau was a married man, but seemed to be estranged from his wife: she lived separately with their child on her father's plantation, which was located in a place called Tamare—about 30 km from the salt works.⁴⁷ Notwithstanding the differences between the couple, there were common business interests that held Boileau and his father-in-law together. The arrival of this latest batch of coolies, for instance, appeared to be a joint investment: some were taken to the salt works while the rest went to the father-in-law's plantation. Juhoorun was initially sent to the father-in-law's household to take care of Boileau's child, but this arrangement only lasted two months, at which point Boileau claimed the child was 'grown up' and ordered Juhoorun to join his household as a servant.⁴⁸

A few months after her arrival, Juhoorun found herself deeply inserted into a context (colonial Mauritius), space (plantation) and condition (indenture) that had collectively shaped the local structures of power and informed the nature and practice of work, including the work of servants. But at the same time, in the part of her testimony that relates to her time in Mauritius, which remains mediated and partial, there is a comparative framing of issues through a lens of what she was accustomed to or even expected circumstances to be like. For instance, when Boileau refused to pay her after a long period of service, Juhoorun found this highly unreasonable and wished to complain, but could not immediately figure out to whom and how. Perhaps her sense of indignation was shaped by her experience of having served English gentlemen in Calcutta. She noted that English masters also had this habit of withholding domestic servants' wages, but that more often than not one would 'get it [wages] at once'.⁴⁹ In addition, Juhoorun describes a site (a plantation household) where the authority of masters was radically enabled by law and in practice. This, I

⁴⁶ Examination of Juhoorun in *Hill Coolies*, 127–28.

⁴⁷ Bibee Zuhoorun examined in *Hill Coolies*, 45.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 46.

would argue, gives us a sense of certain sensitive issues related to the work of domestic servants and the relationship between masters and servants that remain hidden or are fairly hard to discern.

Becoming a servant of the household obliged Juhoorun to attend to several additional tasks: these included sweeping the house, cutting grass for cattle, making salt and even undertaking such chores as climbing tamarind trees to pick them. One of the chores she objected to was the work of a sweeper, or what she referred to as ‘*mehtranees*’ [lower-caste servant’s] work.⁵⁰ Here Juhoorun was referencing, I would argue, a fairly enduring conception of labour that permeated the estimation and practice of work that was rendered by female servants in Anglo-Indian households (and beyond). This was the notion that sweeping and cleaning were ‘stigmatized’ tasks that were appropriately delegated to the mehtarani, which Juhoorun was not, or at least claimed not to be. But in a plantation setting, and especially working under conditions of indenture, such distinctions were hard to maintain, and opportunities for negotiating terms of service or refusing to do certain kinds of activities remained very slim. Yet Juhoorun seemed to have found a solution. She mentioned that she had become familiar with two black ‘Caffre’ girls who were working in the Boileau household. Her ability to communicate with them, which was restricted at the start, later increased when she learnt to speak French, and the three shared stories of Boileau’s bad behaviour. Furthermore, Juhoorun mentioned that the girls also did the work that she claimed she ‘could not do without losing my caste.’⁵¹

In Juhoorun’s recollection of the period as a servant in Boileau’s household, the persistent sexual advances of the master figured distinctly. She noted that the master employed a dual strategy to sexually harass her. Mostly he would coerce her to have ‘connection’ with him, but there were occasions when he seemed to offer incentives and appear to be trying to persuade her to become his mistress.⁵² Remembering her reaction to Boileau’s proposals, she told the committee: ‘I am a Mussulmanee. I of course refused. I have degraded myself by going on board ship; I would not

⁵⁰ Examination of Juhoorun in *Hill Coolies*, 128.

⁵¹ Bibee Zuhoorun examined in *Hill Coolies*, 46.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45.

further degrade myself.⁵³ A struggle to retain her dignity—in a situation where it was under severe threat—to a large extent framed Juhoorun's testimony. In this light, the invocation of an identity (Mussalmanee) was not merely to highlight her concerns and failings—to observe the attendant caste practices and to follow appropriate sexual norms and behaviour—but also referenced her struggles to address this situation and thereby allow her to stake claims to respectability (of being a Mussalmanee). This can also be considered in the light of several contemporary commentators (Emma Roberts, for example), who caricatured female servants (Hindustanee ayahs) as women with suspect moral standards and low social status. Juhoorun, at least to the members of the committee, wished to be considered as a person with dignity.

In addition, Juhoorun expressed concern about not receiving her wages after a long period of service, and took measures to address this matter. At times she managed to sneak out of Boileau's home and trek to the mistress's household. There she would protest about the pending wages and also report Boileau's attempts to seduce her. Initially Mrs Boileau seemed sympathetic and expressed annoyance with her husband regarding his conduct. But she also refused to intervene, claiming that it was Boileau for whom Juhoorun was 'sent' for.⁵⁴ Juhoorun tried her luck with the police on occasion, escaping to the local station in order to register her grievances. The police response was usually to 'restore' her to Boileau, on the grounds that coolies were not permitted to leave without their employer's written permission. Once Juhoorun even told the police that she would not mind working at Tamare (Mrs Boileau's house) instead of Les Salines, but to no avail.⁵⁵ Her rebellious demeanour and numerous attempts to desert invited harsher methods of punishment, which involved severe violence: on one instance Boileau ran a needle into her breast to discipline her.⁵⁶ This, however, did not put an end to her visits to the police. On one of these occasions, when she displayed a more determined intent not to return to her master's household, and further requested to be sent to Calcutta, the

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Examination of Juhoorun in *Hill Coolies*, 128.

⁵⁵ Bibee Zuhoorun examined in *Hill Coolies*, 45.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

police decided to send her to the house of correction in 1838.⁵⁷ Possibly this was provoked by Juhoorun's record as a repeat offender. In the house of correction she had to 'break stones', but also performed an ayah task by 'playing' with a child of a European man named Stewart; for this she received some old clothes.⁵⁸

An agent of Boileau (whom Juhoorun identified as his brother) took Juhoorun out of the house of correction and put her on board ship, to be sent back to Calcutta. It seems that this decision was taken after she had declined Boileau's offer to pay her for her entire period of service; for this she needed to complete the two and half years left in her contract. Juhoorun refused to comply on the grounds that she would have to stay longer, and instead chose to leave. On the ship that was to take Juhoorun back to Calcutta, a policeman came to register the names of the people departing. She took the opportunity to repeat her complaint that her wages for two and half years were still due, but the policeman refused to entertain her. She went on to characterise the police as working in tandem with their French brethren (i.e., the planters) and as 'money eating', taking bribes; she added that one could 'get no redress' from them. The departure of Juhoorun from the island was noted in her return certificate:

Police Office, Mauritius, 1st August 1838

The Indian female servant named Djoram, in the service of Dr Boileau, embarked for Calcutta by ship Lancier, Captain Brown, at her own and employer's request, for not performing her engagement, being frequently in a state of vagrancy, as per documents of the Civil Commissary of the district of Black River

John Finniss,
Chief Commissary of Police.⁵⁹

The report, in which Juhoorun's testimony featured prominently, offered a scathing indictment of the state of Indian coolies in Mauritius.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Examination of Juhoorun in *Hill Coolies*, 128; Bibee Zuhoorun examined in *Hill Coolies*, 46.

⁵⁸ Bibee Zuhoorun examined in *Hill Coolies*, 46.

⁵⁹ Exhibit No. 15. C, in *Hill Coolies*, 130.

⁶⁰ Juhoorun was cited a few times in the report as evidence for the issues concerning coolies in Mauritius. *Hill Coolies*, 6–7, 13, 20.

But Juhoorun herself could not be traced anywhere beyond this report, and so her journey stops abruptly with the end of her testimony. One would like to know what happened to her after she returned to Calcutta. Did she go back to work as an ayah? Did she move to another place for work? We do know, though, that Juhoorun said to the committee she would never go back to Mauritius, and described it as a 'country of slaves'.⁶¹ Though we have little more to add to her life trajectory, the report became a crucial piece in the official decision to temporarily stop the shipment of coolies from India to Mauritius. Juhoorun's testimony as a coolie who worked as an ayah played a small part in that.

ROSINA AND EMILY

Rosina is first mentioned in a letter that Emily Eden sent during her October 1835 voyage from London to Calcutta. She appears to have been hired just prior to this voyage in the role of Indian ayah for Emily and also to assist an English maid named Wright. Initially, Emily does not identify Rosina by name but as 'the ayah', describing her as 'happiness of my life and a great favourite with everybody'.⁶² Emily was particularly impressed by the ayah's usefulness on the ship voyage, as she would get 'biscuits and macaroni at odd hours'.⁶³ At the same time, she showed some concern that Rosina did not seem to respect the social codes of privacy and distance that she was used to. Emily noted that the 'ayah took advantage of my weak and defenceless condition to establish herself in my cabin'.⁶⁴ This offended her notions of distance: she remarked that she wished 'she would sleep anywhere else' but also went on to say 'I am used to it now'. The developing familiarity between them meant that a few months into the voyage (from 1836 onwards) Emily referred to Rosina by name, and hardly ever called her the ayah. But this did not remove her racial and patronising sensibilities, even though these were expressed through the

⁶¹ Examination of Juhoorun in *Hill Coolies*, 128; Bibee Zuhoorun examined in *Hill Coolies*, 46.

⁶² Eden, *Letters*, vol. 1, 9–10.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

language of affection: Emily referred to Rosina as the 'old black thing,' 'poor old thing' and 'excellent old creature'.⁶⁵

An incident during the first year of Rosina's service (in June 1836) brings out this tension between familiarity and social, racial and class distance that marked the relationship between mistress and ayah. A letter written by Emily to her sister in England was sent together with a small parcel, which, as Emily wrote, 'will puzzle you unless this explanation precedes it'. In an earlier letter Emily's nephew (her sister's son) had made an enquiry to the effect of 'How is your Black maid?' Emily had told Rosina that one of her little nephews had 'written to ask after her'. She captured Rosina's reaction: 'she [Rosina] turned topsy-turvy, and kissed it and cried over it, and then went all over the house to tell all the servants that a little English boy, the Lord Sahib's nephew, had written about her.'⁶⁶

Emily understood this initially as 'a mysterious veneration for a letter, which all natives have', and also as the reaction of 'a child of three years old in feelings and intellect' which 'all the uneducated natives are'. What Rosina did next was entirely unexpected and unanticipated—at least to Emily. The next morning she came to her mistress's room with two worked petticoats and offered them as gifts for her family. When she was told that the boy did not wear frocks, Rosina made it clear that they were for his mother and an elder sister. The idea that an Indian ayah could offer a gift seemed to offend Emily and initially she refused to accept it, later even proposing to buy them. Rosina was not taken by this proposal at all, and Emily recalled her reaction: 'No, lady, me no like that. Me send little boy's mamma frock and sister frock, and then English ladies say "Where you get those pretty frocks," and they say "Poor Rosina send them," so nice. Please, lady, send them.' This was an instance where we have a faint glimpse of how the hierarchical relationship did not entirely foreclose the two-sided display of affect. The accepted idea was that Indian servants only wished to get a reward and *dustoorie*,⁶⁷ and also, as Emily expressed, that they 'in general think of spending the smallest fraction of a rupee' and their 'whole talk consists of saving'; and so in this light 'you (sister) would be as much

⁶⁵ Ibid., 22, 68–69, 210–11.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 165–66.

⁶⁷ The commission or percentage on the money passing in any cash transaction in which the servant played the role of a 'mediator'. Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 333.

surprised at her (Rosina) offering as I (Emily) am'. But all this did not take away from the fact that an ayah offered a gift to her mistress's sister in return for a kind gesture from her son. After accepting the gift, Emily made it clear to her sister that this 'crisis' in their relationship (a servant offering a gift) had been avoided as she had 'given her [Rosina] a gown and so it all comes to the same end'. But her clear intent to put Rosina in 'her place' was evident when she went on to write that she did not know what her sister could do with the petticoats as they were 'so ugly', and gave a possible but demeaning use as 'toilet cover'.⁶⁸

Yet this exchange of gifts with Emily's sister in England continued. Emily mentioned (in May 1837) that her nephew (or his mother) had sent a gown for Rosina, and on receiving it she had appeared 'quite mad about it' and showed it to all the servants of the household. Rosina was delighted to find her name in the note accompanying the gift and wished to keep it. Emily said that she would eventually get someone to 'Hindustani it for her'.⁶⁹

The mentions of Rosina in the letters of Emily Eden mostly place her 'value' as being that of an Indian female servant who attended and 'assisted' her in knowing about and navigating local circumstances and situations. However, there were a few instances when she wrote about Rosina not entirely in terms of this script of imperial and masterly distance. One such instance was when Rosina fell ill having caught a cold (in July 1836), which created a sort of a crisis in the Eden household. This was because Rosina refused to accept food or drink from any of the English servants or even the 'Mussulman servants, either of lower or higher caste'. The reason seemed to be a strict caste etiquette that Rosina insisted in following, and this Emily felt was because she had only recently 'bought her caste', which 'she had lost by going to England'.⁷⁰

Such crises occurred during the period when Emily travelled 'up the country'. One such was when Rosina and Myra—the Portuguese ayah of Emily's sister Fanny—were sent to Cawnpore two days before the arrival of the Eden sisters (in October 1837). On arrival, Emily found Rosina

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Eden, *Letters*, vol. 2, 20.

⁷⁰ Eden, *Letters*, vol. 1, 186–87.

in a 'miserable' state. This, according to Emily, was because Rosina was a 'Mussulmanee' and therefore could eat 'only certain things'; and even these had to be 'cooked in a brass pot called *lotah*'. The household in which Rosina found herself (in Cawnpore) was that of an English major, who directed her not to use the *lotah* as the food in the household was cooked by Mussalmans anyway. This was no consolation for Rosina; she refused to eat there and waited for her mistress to come and address the matter. In both these instances, it was evident that Rosina presented herself—which her mistress duly recognised—as someone who strongly adhered to practices of avoidance that were based on caste norms.⁷¹

This articulation of Mussalmanee ayah identity as being strongly caste conscious, as we see in the case of Rosina (and also Juhooran), needs to be located in the context of the specific practices of work that were followed in Anglo-Indian households—where such avoidance had practical considerations and implications. Again it seems that Rosina would in normal circumstances cook her own food—a practice followed by a majority of servants (both female and male) in Anglo-Indian households.⁷² When Rosina fell ill and refused drink or food from the other servants of the household (in July 1836), her son, who lived 5 miles away, came with tea he had made for her. Rosina insisted that she would have the drink with only 'her own caste in the room'.⁷³

Rosina's son appears only once in Emily's letters, and we have very few references regarding Rosina's social networks beyond the Eden household. There are some mentions of Rosina's husband that appear in letters from Shimla (April 1839) and Calcutta (June 1841).⁷⁴ Perhaps Rosina's husband also found employment in the extended Eden household and stayed close to her at least for some of the time, but we have few other hints to investigate the relationship that Rosina might have had with her husband or her son. The fact that Rosina travelled for work means it was likely that she would

⁷¹ Eden, *Up the Country*, 7.

⁷² Fanny Parkes noted that though the number of servants 'necessary' in India was high, their wages were usually low (she had 57 servants in her household and the total wage bill was only 290 rupees), and 'they found themselves in food'. Parkes, *Wanderings*, vol. 1, 21, 209.

⁷³ Eden, *Letters*, vol. 1, 186–87.

⁷⁴ Eden, *Up the Country*, 280; Eden, *Letters*, vol. 2, 249–50.

have spent lengthy periods (months and sometimes even years) away from her relations. Did Rosina's age play a part in this? Emily often referred to her as 'old', so perhaps we should ask if Rosina became a travelling ayah later in her life and at that point stayed away from her family and relations. We do know that when Rosina was extremely ill and feared that death was imminent (in June 1841), she stated a wish that her valuables (trinkets and shawls) should be split among her relations.⁷⁵ Again we cannot say with any certitude if relations meant her son and husband alone or whether she also meant some other individuals.

Emily's relationship with Rosina took another turn during her extended tour through north India (late 1837 to early 1840). Here Rosina's profile as a travelling ayah came in handy: she did not merely offer her services to families on sea voyages but also showed a readiness to undertake journeys with her employer on land routes across the Subcontinent—which could last for extended periods (three years in this case). During the tour there were instances when Emily had to rely on Rosina, because preparation could obviously not cater for unforeseen circumstances and on occasion was grossly inadequate. For instance, while camping at a place close to Mussorie (in March 1838), Emily was ill and had nowhere to lie down as the rains had drenched the furniture. Rosina lent her mistress her *charpoy* (couch).⁷⁶ Rosina again came to her rescue at a camp close to Hurripoew (in October 1839), when she provided sleeping arrangements on a charpoy, Emily later saying 'to lie and excruciate my head upon, till the bed came up'.⁷⁷

Apart from attending her mistress as an ayah, it was also evident that Rosina helped her encounter the society around her and even act as a translator.⁷⁸ Emily mentioned taking language lessons (from an Indian *munshi* or language teacher) before embarking on her India trip but her Hindustani was virtually non-existent. Rosina often helped. Once, in February 1841, the Nawab of Murshidabad anchored his fleet of boats in front of the Eden household on his way back home. Emily took the opportunity to meet the *begum* (wife) of the Nawab waiting in a boat. Again Rosina acted as her interpreter. The visits to 'native ladies', as Emily put it,

⁷⁵ Eden, *Letters*, vol. 2, 249–50.

⁷⁶ Eden, *Up the Country*, 118.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 232, 236.

were much more ‘amusing’ when she went with Rosina instead of a ‘stiff secretary translating from the other side of the *punkah* [hand-drawn fans]’. The begum and her attendants seemed curious to know from Rosina if women ‘walk out in London’ (as Rosina had been there) and ‘did not wear veils and loose trousers on those occasions’. Rosina’s demeanour seemed to have amused the party, as Emily noted that ‘she made them all laugh very much’, and the begum gave her 5 rupees as a reward when they departed.⁷⁹

Emily had developed a particular liking for Rosina and developed a relationship which can be described as dependent but also intimate. Rosina was, in fact, depicted in a painting by Emily Eden composed in 1837.

This ‘intimacy’ became most evident when Rosina fell seriously ill in June 1841. At this point, Rosina briefly became the subject of Emily’s letters as she wrote emotionally about her to her sister. In one of the letters (dated 16 June 1841) she wrote that ‘poor Rosina is so dreadfully ill’ and she (Emily) herself had ‘done nothing but cry about her all morning’. At this juncture, Emily reminisced that for ‘nearly six years she has been such a good affectionate old body’ and that she (Emily) ‘would miss her very much’.⁸⁰

Wright, Emily’s English maid, also appeared concerned about Rosina’s failing health, and even woke up her mistress early one morning fearing Rosina’s imminent death. The relationship between Rosina and the English maid also appears to have been close and familiar—as they had spent several years working together. Once Rosina had replaced Wright as the ‘first maid’ (August 1836) when Wright was down with a foot infection. Emily lampooned Rosina on her promotion—in much the same terms as the contemporary English views on an ayah’s inabilities to understand the nuances of the English toilette—as she failed to grasp simple instructions. For instance, she took ‘ten minutes trying to put the eye in the hook instead of hook into the eye’. Later, when Emily inquired about Wright’s condition, Rosina’s response, as recounted in the letter, was: ‘She cry because me dress her lady; but never mind, she can’t dress lady without her foot, poor ting.’ Yet, at the same time, Rosina appeared to have accepted her place in the pecking order when she said: ‘When foot get well, she [Wright] dress lady

⁷⁹ Dickinson, *Eden’s Letters*, 334–35; Eden, *Letters*, vol. 2, 221–22.

⁸⁰ Eden, *Letters*, vol. 2, 249–50.

again, and me hold pins.’⁸¹ It also appears that Rosina saw Wright as an English girl, because she addressed her as Misse Wright—an appellation used for English children and young English girls by their Indian servants which was imbued with a sense of hierarchy.⁸²

But at a moment when Rosina appeared to be close to death (June 1841), the intimacy and degree of trust between Emily and Rosina became evident. Rosina was ill for a long period before June 1841, and Emily sent her to Barrackpore to be treated in the hospital there. But Rosina decided to return to Calcutta before she completely recovered, to ‘make over her trinkets and shawls to Wright to divide after her death amongst her relations.’⁸³ Rosina’s deteriorating condition made Emily decide to send her again to Barrackpore (with her husband and a native doctor). Later, Wright visited her in the hospital to check on her situation (17 June 1841), and reported to Emily that ‘Rosina is alive, but occasionally in great pain, followed by fainting fits’ and felt ‘very low’.⁸⁴

Emily herself decided to visit Rosina on 19 June 1841, and ‘got up at half past five’ one morning and ‘drove’ (on a horse) to see her. Rosina was said to be ‘delighted’ to have her mistress with her for the day, and even ‘had herself carried over’ to the room where Emily was waiting. The doctor seemed impressed by Rosina and said that he had never seen ‘so sensible a native’ and ‘hardly ever met a pleasanter old lady to talk to than she is.’⁸⁵

Rosina recovered from the illness close to the time when Emily was due to depart from India (in early 1842). There is a mention of Rosina in a letter (dated 15 January 1842) which Emily wrote to her sister. She describes a ‘farewell party’ organised by Rosina to which six ayahs and several other servants of the Eden household were invited; the event was held at the Botanical Garden in Calcutta. She goes on to write that

⁸¹ It also seems that there was a similar arrangement between an English maid (named Jones) and Indian ayah (Myra) who were employed by Emily’s sister Fanny Eden. Fanny once noted in a letter (March 1837) that Myra’s work included ‘holding out a pin for Jones to stick into me’. Eden, *Letters*, vol. 1, 210–11; Janet Dunbar, ed., *Tigers, Durbars and Kings: Fanny Eden’s Indian Journals, 1837–1838* (London: John Murray, 1988), 49.

⁸² Eden, *Letters*, vol. 1, 314.

⁸³ Eden, *Letters*, vol. 2, 249–50.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

‘[Rosina] has got such a pretty scarf to give you notwithstanding all my exhortations’ and ‘is looking forward to being with me while Wright goes to visit her sister.’⁸⁶ It seems likely that Rosina was bidding farewell to her social circle in Calcutta and making preparations to accompany Emily on her journey back to England. In fact, Rosina had already suggested the possibility of returning to England with Emily in January 1837: this was when Emily was being informed by a friend about the retrieval of a stolen package (from the post office) and the identification of the guilty party—whom Rosina seemed to know. Rosina supposedly said: ‘Me know where his mother live *when we go home to England with Ladyship*, me go and beat him for taking my Lady’s things.’⁸⁷ But prior to her departure (in 1842) did Emily also imply that Rosina would remain in her service only during Wright’s absence in England (when she visited her sister)? We do not know as there are no further traces of Rosina in Emily’s letters. But as she was a travelling ayah, it is more than possible that Rosina would have gone to England with Emily and tried to return to India with another person or family that offered her service as a Hindustanee ayah.

CONCLUSIONS

The singular lives, or at least the partial life trajectories, of Ramoonee, Rosina and Juhoorun cannot be quickly and neatly subsumed under any overarching pattern. Mobility appears to have been a general condition of these lives—but with fairly different reasons and motivations and with uneven consequences. These lives also came couched in a category—Hindustanee or Mussalmanee ayah—which *prima facie* explained their ethnic or religious condition and produced a distinction from other kinds of ayah—Portuguese, half-caste and even bandi. Yet, as I have argued here, this category was also layered by a notion of a relationship of engagement with the household/employer (i.e., employment for wages) and the background of the individual (migrant), as it came to label mobile women from parts of eastern and northern India who moved between cities, towns, cantonments, ships and plantations in search of employment as servants (primarily in

⁸⁶ Ibid., 279.

⁸⁷ Eden, *Letters*, vol. 1, 290–91 (emphasis added).

Anglo-Indian households) attending ladies and children (but not always) for wages. These defining characteristics of Hindustanee ayah (i.e., wage relationship and migrant backgrounds) were neither unprecedented nor a clear break from the past. The growing prominence of a new kind of a household with a reformed domesticity (the nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian household) offered one possibility of finding work in exchange of wages—without these women being attached as long-term dependents or incorporated as kin or quasi-kin. At the same time, particular life trajectories could still potentially combine a relationship based primarily on wages with a relationship based on patronage, these appearing in different households. This immediately alerts us to the differentiation within the category (of Hindustanee ayah), where the mobility itself could be induced by different situations and reasons. There were women who came to urban locations to seek wage work as servants after their rural connection was severed or became less important. In these cases, they could not fall back upon a patron household or the rural economy when they found themselves out of work. Their only chance of finding a livelihood was through wage-work, and this dependence created conditions where they could be drawn to precarious networks and conditions of work and employment. In addition, access to employment as servants in Anglo-Indian homes was enabled by personal recommendation and references, and this was formalised through a *chit* system (recommendation letters). There were instances of ayahs recommending individuals for employment. Furthermore, female servants who accompanied families moving between Britain and India found future employment through recommendation from their current employers and also advertisements in newspapers. But there were other instances of individuals who were abandoned en route or in England and left to fend for themselves.

Attempts to determine the social background of female servants and reconstruct their social networks have remained partial and limited. It was often argued that women working as ayahs were outcastes with a low social status, but such representations have often corresponded to a more widespread negative view about mobile women who work for wages. These women showed different degrees of attachment to their family, kin and support networks, and it seems that their economic condition (poor) and also age (old) produced conditions where they either were drawn into wage

employment or were able to seek it. This could include women who were widows and others who were without support of family and kin. At their places of work (employers' households), the ayahs forged arrangements with their fellow servants, which included addressing everyday needs (such as cooking food together) and also more intimate relationships of trust and friendship. There is some indication of practices of sociability (dinner and picnics) among servants in the same household and also other households in the same neighbourhood. The relationship with the employer (often the mistress) was marked by social and racial distance, but ties of dependence which worked both ways could develop. This, however, did not exclude possibilities of abuse of female servants, which could have a sexual nature.

The caste of Hindustanee ayah also needs some further elaboration and reflection. It appears that ayahs were very particular about their caste through their evident sensitivity to many concerns related to performing stigmatised manual work, their avoidance of certain foods and their performance of caste rituals. This seems to confirm a separation between care work (done by ayahs) and stigmatised manual work (done by mehtarani) in much of the contemporary literature and later histories. Yet, in the performance of domestic work, such a neat separation between care work and manual work or between the labour of ayahs and the labour of mehtarani was not always possible, and therefore a rigid distinction in the performance of domestic work appears more ideological than historical. Such a traffic in the work of ayahs and mehtarani was already evident in the advice manuals and literature of the period. For instance, a term used in a manual to designate a kind of ayah—*matrany ayah*—who was expected to perform the menial and lowest duties of the house suggested the possibility of such overlaps.⁸⁸ A clear trajectory of mehtarani taking the ayah's function (attending the women and taking care of children) was also noted in another manual, where in such cases 'her [mehtarani's] wages are raised a rupee or so'.⁸⁹ Another text depicting Anglo-Indian domestic life also mentioned the possibility of mehtarani 'who are clean in their habits and dress' going on to 'attend their mistresses as ayahs', and as they have

⁸⁸ Parbury, *Handbook for India and Egypt*, 326–27.

⁸⁹ J. H. Stocqueler, *The Handbook of India: Guide to the Stranger and Traveller and a Companion to the Resident* (London: W&H Allen, 1844), 240.

'few prejudices of caste or rank, they become the most useful of women servants'.⁹⁰ Yet as the elevation of mehtarani to the rank of ayahs meant an increase in wages, the ayahs who were performing the 'menial offices' were on the 'lowest scale of pay'.⁹¹ Did such valuation of ayah work as better paid also create the conditions in which they could adhere more strictly to the rules of caste in situations where such transgressions were possible? Again, this did not foreclose the possibility of mehtarani doing ayah work and claiming better wages. The lives of ayahs, rather than resolving such apparent ambiguities, were informed by them.

⁹⁰ C. Grant, *Anglo-Indian Domestic Life: A Letter from an Artist in India to his Mother in England* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1862), 117.

⁹¹ Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy*, 4.

3 Training a Servant Class

Gender, Poverty and Domestic Labour in Early Nineteenth-Century Educational Sources

JANA TSCHURENEV

It is well known that of female servants the majority cannot read, and it is very rare to meet with one capable of writing a legible hand. It ought not, therefore, to occasion surprise, if those who have never enjoyed the means of instruction, and have been withheld from the sources of moral and religious principles, should exhibit a conduct corresponding with the example and habits to which their destitute state has exposed them.¹

What makes a good domestic servant? In the early nineteenth century, military orphanages and charity day-schools were founded in the colonial cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, promising to turn unruly paupers of European descent into subordinate, obedient and useful members of India's European Protestant community. It was a period in which new boundaries were drawn to set the 'respectable' British-colonial elite apart from Eurasian mixed-race populations, and the 'white subalterns' who mingled and intermarried with them.² The transition from male '*nabobi* homes to *memsahib* households' was accompanied by efforts to reform British upper-class domesticity.³ At the same time, schools for the European

¹ British and Foreign School Society (BFSS), *Annual Report* No. 10 (London: Borough Road/Free School Press, 1815), viii–ix.

² Christopher J. Hawes, *Poor Relations: The Making of a Eurasian Community in British India, 1773–1833* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013); Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and 'White Subalternity' in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009).

³ Nitin Varma, 'Servant Testimonies and Anglo-Indian Homes in Nineteenth-

and Eurasian poor were set up to produce orderly working-class homes, which would properly perform their socialising function for the next generation of children, and to supply trained servants for the colonial elite. Europeans orphans and destitute youths were to serve colonial society in gender-differentiated ways. Young male apprentices and employees would ideally form a link between European superiors and Indian subordinates in private businesses and the emerging public service, while their female peers would work as domestic servants, before marrying within their social class.⁴

This chapter explores colonial domesticity and domestic service from a history of education perspective. What do the records of early nineteenth-century schools for the urban poor in colonial India tell us about servants' pasts? Educational institutions clearly aimed to strengthen and to reform the 'deep ties of subordination...that structured the social fabric'.⁵ In the early nineteenth century, employment was still regulated by master-servant law; and master-servant relationships assumed centre stage in British visions of social order.⁶ In other words, 'people learned their social place through their relation to service'.⁷ Households were envisioned as core spaces of socialisation. As the influential domestic advice book by Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner put it, a good middle-class housewife's job was the 'formation of a home...where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed, can learn their several duties'.⁸ The flourishing advisory literature—a source body fruitfully

Century India', in *To Be at Home: House, Work, and Self in the Modern World*, ed. James Williams and Felicitas Hentschke (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 220.

⁴ David Arnold, 'European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 7, no. 2, 1979, 105, 111.

⁵ Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma, 'Introduction', n. 4, in this volume.

⁶ Leonore Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 4, 1974, 411.

⁷ Fae Dussart, "'That Unit of Civilisation' and the 'Talent Peculiar to Women': British Employers and Their Servants in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 22, no. 6, 2015, 710.

⁸ Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook: Giving the Duties of Mistress and Servants, the General Management of the House, and Practical Recipes for Cooking in All Its Branches* (London: William Heinemann, 1909; originally published 1888), 7. Also see, Dussart, 'That Unit of Civilisation', 710.

explored by historians of gender, domesticity and servants—shows that the mistress of the home seemed in dire need of instruction.⁹ The British-colonial housewife, the memsahib, was not exceptional in this. ‘Genteel’ upper-caste Indian housewives received ample—often male—advice on how to improve their families’ domestic lives as well.¹⁰

Domestic relations in British households in colonial India, including family and work relations, were reformed and transformed through public debate, legislation and, as I will show, through the powerful intervention of public schooling. The spaces where service was performed were clearly not the only sites to produce social hierarchies. The explicit agenda of many schools for the poor in the early nineteenth century, in Britain and its empire, was ‘to furnish the inferior orders with such instruction, and such only, as will be calculated to render them useful members of society, in the humble rank in which it has pleased providence to place them.’¹¹ In the colonial context, the destined place of the urban poor, who shared religious and ethnic ties with colonial masters and memsahibs, was, so to speak, at their service. It was in public disciplinary institutions that the future servants not only learned their place, but also acquired the orderly habits and useful skills that made them preferable candidates for European employers.

I begin this chapter with a short overview of the new disciplinary techniques, which a movement for the ‘education of the poor’ helped to spread in the British Empire. Second, I discuss the case of a charity

⁹ Swapna M. Banerjee, ‘Blurring Boundaries, Distant Companions: Non-Kin Female Caregivers for Children in Colonial India (Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)’, *Paedagogica Historica* 46, no. 6, 2010, 775–88; Indrani Sen, ‘Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-Nurses and Memsahibs in Colonial India’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 3, 2009, 299–328; Dussart, ‘That Unit of Civilisation’.

¹⁰ Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community. Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India. What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

¹¹ John Bowles, *A Letter Addressed to Samuel Whitbread, Esq., M.P. in Consequence of the Unqualified Approbation Expressed by Him in the House of Commons, of Mr. Lancaster’s System of Education; The Religious Part of Which Is Here Shewn to Be Incompatible with the Safety of the Established Church, and, in Its Tendency, Subversive to Christianity Itself* (London: Rivingtons, 1808), 1; also see Bombay Education Society (BES), *Report of the Bombay Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor*, No. 1, 1816, Bombay, 22.

day-school in Calcutta, the Benevolent Institution for the Instruction of Indigent Christians. This school catered to children from urban households, marked by insufficient family income, precarious employment and often the absence of a male breadwinner. In the context of the history of domestic servants, I highlight that this includes the children of Portuguese *ayahs* who were part of Calcutta's unschooled working poor. The third section discusses the gendered curriculum which was meant to produce both good servants and good working-class housewives and mothers. Drawing on the reports of the Society for the Education of the Poor within the Government of Bombay, the fourth section looks at employment options. The Society's orphanage, for the children of European soldiers and officers, served as a kind of placement agency, by procuring for their male and female charges employment in 'private', 'public' and 'domestic' service—categories that deserve semantic exploration.

I argue that in these educational records we encounter the normative model of an unmarried, female, all-round maid, schooled in habits of obedience, deference and humility, for whom domestic service was part of the transition into adult married life. This female-gendered life-cycle model of domestic service corresponded much more to the north-western and central European eighteenth-century experience than to the reality of British households in India.¹² Indeed, it stood in sharp contrast to the emerging colonial model of household service delivery, which was characterised by a caste-based division of labour, married male servants and female infant and child-care providers, whose practices constantly clashed with memsahibs' expectations.¹³ Poor European girls' education,

¹² Josef Ehmer, 'Living in Homes, but What Kinds and Whose? Single Young People in Nineteenth-Century Central Europe', in *To Be at Home*, 49–50; Raffaella Sarti, 'Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work', in *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 2, 2014, 279–314; for the original formulation of life-cycle service as part of the western European marriage pattern, also see western European marriage pattern: John Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective', in *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography*, ed. David V. Glass and David Edward Charles Eversley (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965), 101–43.

¹³ Nupur Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India', *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4, 1994, 549–62; also see, Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions'.

in summary, was linked to a dual reform agenda: to help recreate a 'respectable' British domesticity under colonial conditions, and to improve Eurasians' and white subalterns' homes.

'CIVILISING THE MASTERLESS POOR'

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, a vivid debate took place in Britain about the education of the poor. Two voluntary associations claimed responsibility for organising the expansion and reform of public elementary schooling for the working class. The British and Foreign School Society (BFSS) was founded in 1808 by an alliance of dissenters and Utilitarians.¹⁴ It aimed to provide 'Schools for All', as the title of a pamphlet written by James Mill—who is better known as author of the influential *History of British India*—put it.¹⁵ Its rival, the National Education Society (NES), was set up in 1811, supported by the subscriptions of the conservative Church faction. Both societies promoted their own version of a new model of schooling, the so-called monitorial system of education, which promised the cheap and effective spread of elementary instruction by means of employing more advanced students ('monitors') as instructors of their peers.¹⁶ Monitorial schools introduced the very kind of modern social disciplinary techniques that are paradigmatically

¹⁴ George Bartle, 'Benthamites and Lancasterians—The Relationship between the Followers of Bentham and the British and Foreign School Society During the Early Years of Popular Education', *Utilitas* 3, 1991, 275–88.

¹⁵ James Mill, *Schools for All, in Preference to School for Churchmen Only: Or, the State of the Controversy between the Advocates for the Lancasterian System of Universal Education, and Those, Who Have Set Up an Exclusive and Partial System under the Name of the Church and Dr. Bell*, reprint, ed. Jeffrey Stern (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995 [1812]); James Mill, *The History of British India*, 3 vols (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1817).

¹⁶ Marcelo Caruso, ed. *Classroom Struggle: Organizing Elementary School Teaching in the 19th Century* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015); Patrick Ressler, 'Marketing Pedagogy: Nonprofit Marketing and the Diffusion of Monitorial Teaching in the Nineteenth Century', *Paedagogica Historica* 49, no. 3, 2013, 297–313; Jürgen Schriewer and Marcelo Caruso, eds, 'Nationalerziehung und Universalmethode: frühe Formen schulorganisatorischer Globalisierung' [National Education and Universal Method—Early Forms of the Globalisation of Schooling], special issue, *Comparativ* 15, 2005.

analysed in Foucault's classic *Discipline & Punish*.¹⁷ As early nineteenth-century reformers hoped, they would help counteract both pauperism and political unrest, and, thus, re-establish social order.¹⁸ In an economically and demographically fast-changing society, where potentially unruly young persons no longer lived under their employers' paternal control, public elementary schools appeared as a new means of 'civilizing the masterless poor'.¹⁹

This movement towards public elementary schooling was not limited to Britain. In the context of the mushrooming of missionary societies, and the lobbying for the inclusion of the 'pious clauses' in the charter of the English East India Company of 1813, the BFSS and NES formed close ties with the foreign mission movement: 'for if the world were full of Bibles,' Andrew Fuller of the Baptist Missionary Society preached on behalf of the BFSS, 'it would be of little avail if the people were not taught to read them.'²⁰ Education societies similar to the BFSS and NES were formed in the colonial urban centres. Among the earliest and most influential ones was the Calcutta School Book Society, a collaborative project between British missionaries, *bhadralok* education reformers and colonial officials.²¹ An imperial civil society network emerged, which aimed to promote modern public elementary schooling as a means for the 'diffusion of useful knowledge'. Eventually, the efforts of the missionaries and civil society organisations participating in it initiated major transformations in Indian education.²²

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 135–230.

¹⁸ Karen Jones and Kevin Williamson, 'The Birth of the Schoolroom: A Study of the Transformation in the Discursive Conditions of English Popular Education in the First-Half of the Nineteenth Century', *Ideology and Consciousness* 19, 1979, 59–110.

¹⁹ Pavla Miller, *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500–1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 143.

²⁰ BFSS *Annual Report No. 10*, 66. See also Paul Sedra, 'Exposure to the Eyes of God: Monitorial Schools and Evangelicals in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Paedagogica Historica* 47, no. 3, 2011, 263–81.

²¹ N. L. Basak, 'Origin and Role of the Calcutta School Book Society in Promoting the Cause of Education in India, Especially Vernacular Education in Bengal', *Bengal, Past & Present: Journal of the Calcutta Historical Society* 78, 1959, 30–69.

²² Jana Tschurennev, *Empire, Civil Society, and the Beginnings of Colonial Education in India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

The earliest efforts to discipline and 'civilise' subaltern children by means of schooling, however, were directed at poor Europeans and destitute children of mixed European-Asian ancestry. This included the 'half-caste' students of the Madras Military Male Orphan Asylum, among whom the original pedagogical experiment, which informed the monitorial system of education, was conducted.²³ In addition, the two earliest and most long-lasting monitorial schools established in Calcutta and Bombay primarily targeted 'indigent Christians' and European military orphans. This is not a coincidence. As a sermon preached on behalf of the Bombay Education Society in St Thomas's Church, dated 14 March 1824, put it, there was a particular obligation for British Protestants to 'rescue' their degraded fellow Christians. On their vice, or virtue, depended the standing of the European Christian community at large: their 'happiness is our prosperity; [their] shame is our reproach; ...in [their] degradation, we, as Christians, are made to blush'.²⁴

The appearance of an urban colonial underclass of nominal Christians, consisting of Portuguese Catholics and Protestant soldiers, sailors and prostitutes, posed a problem to colonial policymakers and social reformers. Although several regulations were passed from the 1780s onwards in order to separate destitute British people, such as widows and orphans, from mixed-race populations, neat distinctions between black and white, European and Asian proved impossible.²⁵ Although often approached separately, 'poor Europeans' and mixed-race (or 'half-caste') 'Eurasians' remained the priority targets of colonial educational and social policy interventions throughout the nineteenth century.²⁶ The earliest

²³ Andrew Bell, *An Experiment in Education, Made at the Male Asylum of Madras, Suggesting a System by which a School or Family may Teach Itself under the Superintendence of the Master or the Parent* (London: Printed by Cadell and Davies, 1797).

²⁴ BES, *Report*, No. 9, 1824, 15.

²⁵ Valerie Anderson, *Race and Power in British India: Anglo-Indians, Class and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), Kindle edition; also see, Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

²⁶ Tim Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*; Arnold, 'European Orphans'.

institutions set up for this ambiguous colonial urban underclass included, most importantly, military orphanages and charity day-schools. Under colonial conditions, they pursued a social agenda similar to their British counterparts: public schools were part of what the governmentality studies debate has framed as 'the government of poverty'.²⁷ As such, they aimed to contribute to the formation of a subordinate, industrious, Christian servant class. From a social 'evil', and a threat to British reputation, European and Eurasian poor would be turned into a valuable 'asset'.²⁸

'INDIGENT CHRISTIANS': ENCOUNTERING POOR PORTUGUESE CHILDREN

The first modern monitorial school in India was founded under the name of the Benevolent Institution for the Instruction of Indigent Christians in Calcutta.²⁹ The Benevolent Institution (BI) was set up in 1812 by the well-known Baptist missionaries of Serampore, William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, and existed until the early 1900s. The missionary 'Serampore trio' was involved in a variety of social causes, including the campaign against *suttee* and the reform of vernacular elementary instruction. For their educational projects, they cooperated with the BFSS in London.³⁰

As a charity day-school, the BI was run at first exclusively on public subscriptions and donations. From 1826 onwards, it received a government

²⁷ Giovanna Procacci, 'Social Economy and the Government of Poverty', in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 151–68.

²⁸ Anderson, *Race and Power in British India*, Introduction, paragraph 10, Kindle; Arnold, 'European Orphans', 110–11.

²⁹ Charles Lushington, *The History, Design, and Present State of the Religious, Benevolent and Charitable Institutions, Founded by the British in Calcutta and Its Vicinity* (Calcutta: Hindustanee Press, 1824).

³⁰ Clare Midgley, 'Female Emancipation in an Imperial Frame: English Women and The Campaign against Sati (Widow-Burning) in India, 1813–30', *Women's History Review* 9, 2000, 95–121; Joshua Marshman, William Carey and William Ward, *Hints Relative to Native Schools Together with an Outline of an Institution for Their Extension and Management* (Serampore: Serampore Mission Press, 1816).

grant-in-aid.³¹ Since funds were limited, the institution aimed to provide basic instruction in the cheapest possible way. From the beginning, the BI kept a close record ‘of the circumstances of the parents and friends of the children received into the school’, so that ‘the managers [could become] acquainted with the state of this class of society’.³² For 1817, schoolmaster Penney, recently sent out by the BFSS in London, gives us figures concerning the BI’s male students’ social background (see Table 3.1).³³

TABLE 3.1: Information on the Background of the Benevolent Institution’s Students

Male Students of the Benevolent Institution	198
Jews	5
Armenians	10
Africans	2
Bengallees	6
Mussulmans	5
Malays	4
Chinese	4

Source: Report of Schoolmaster Penney, BI, *Annual Report*, No. 6, 1817, 12–15.

The BI’s records provide us with a picture of a student body which, for the most part, belonged to an urban Christian underclass of ambiguous and mixed-race origin. Many of them were classified as ‘Portuguese’ and were considered Catholics. The managers of the BI calculated that there were about 7,000 such families, who occupied ‘the lowest walks of life’.³⁴ The Portuguese Catholics, Joshua Marshman found, were ‘literally the

³¹ *Donation to the Benevolent Institution for the Instruction of Children of Indigent Christians of All Denominations, of Rupees 13,000*. India Office Records and Private Papers (March 1825–August 1826): IOR F/4/956/27123. According to the final report by Benevolent Institution for the Instruction of Indigent Christians (BI) of 1900–01, the government grant was continued until 1882. See BI, *Annual Report Relative to the ‘Benevolent Institution’ at Calcutta* (Calcutta, 1901).

³² BI, *Annual Report*, No. 3, 1814, 3–4.

³³ Report of Schoolmaster Penney, BI, *Annual Report*, No. 6, 1817, 12–15. Table 3.1 refers only to male students, but the female students had similar family backgrounds.

³⁴ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 1, 1812, 4.

poor of Calcutta, poorer than most Hindus and Muslims.³⁵ Since many trades and occupations were closed to them owing to caste restrictions, the Portuguese had no option 'but of betaking themselves to those occupations which the Natives regard with contempt, or reject as quite unprofitable'.³⁶

In 1815 and 1816, branch schools of the BI were opened in Serampore and Dacca. These were run on the same teaching system as the BI and catered to similar populations; the majority of the Dacca branch's students were classified as 'Portuguese' too. For both places, Calcutta and Dacca, the school reports show us that the students lived in households troubled by precarious employment and unstable income. Among the fathers and male guardians, we find dock workers, day labourers and former artisans who could no longer exercise their craft owing to physical disability. Others were domestic servants; we find a reference to a father working as a 'butler'.³⁷ That the children of servants were the proper object of the BI's educational intervention also appears from the fact that 'native' subscribers were welcome 'to get the son of a valued servant instructed in the English language' in the BI, even if he was not a Christian.³⁸

Most of the students' households, however, were characterised by the absence of a male wage-earner, because their fathers had died, were not living with the family or were reported 'unknown'. Thus, they were cared for by single wage-earning women.³⁹ For these single mothers or female guardians, three sources of income were reported: they worked as ayahs and 'servants', sold 'needlework' or 'liv[ed] on charity'.⁴⁰ For the male butler, and for a woman living on needlework, the monthly income was estimated as 4 rupees. For many households such wages proved insufficient. In Calcutta and Dacca, many children had been begging before entering the BI. They soon had to leave school 'when employment [was] offered'.⁴¹

³⁵ Joshua Marshman, Letter to Andrew Fuller [Secretary to the Baptist Missionary Society, BMS], 1 September 1811, in *Periodical Accounts Relative to the Baptist Missionary Society* (London: Burditt and Morris), 1810–12, 347.

³⁶ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 6, 1817, 4–5.

³⁷ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 3, 1814, 3–4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁹ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 2, 1813, 8.

⁴⁰ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 5, 1816, 18.

⁴¹ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 3, 1814, 10.

As it appears from these sources, domestic service was one of the limited employment options available to Eurasians. British-colonial households in early nineteenth-century India often preferred Portuguese cooks, who were willing to handle different sorts of meat and serve wine. Alternatively, they hired low-caste domestic workers, who would switch between ‘polluting’—in terms of caste norms—and other tasks. This was also true for the recruitment of ayahs. The job profile of the ayah, as a nursemaid, care-taker of children and/or a memsahib’s personal attendant, developed with the growth and transformation of Anglo-Indian households. In the nineteenth century, we find Muslim, untouchable and Christian convert women who performed these functions.⁴² In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, there was a close association of the ayah’s work with the Portuguese community. It was the Portuguese who introduced the Spanish word *aya* (nursemaid) into India.⁴³ Here we encounter Portuguese ayahs’ own children from a school providers’ and social reformist perspective; they seemed in dire need of ‘saving’.

The schools’ designation of their target group, ‘indigent Christians’, points to the contemporary British debate on ‘indigence’: a condition which characterised idle and immoral paupers in contrast to the industrious or working poor.⁴⁴ This means that ‘vice’ and ignorance were as characteristic of the BI’s students as were their economic circumstances. These uncontrolled, ‘half-catholic and half-heathen’,⁴⁵ children ‘wander[ed] from street to street in the most wretched and abandoned state’.⁴⁶ Owen Leonard, the BI’s first schoolmaster, complained that it was ‘no uncommon thing to hear boys of five or six years old [speaking] a language which would shock even a wicked man in Europe’.⁴⁷ Many of the Portuguese children were

⁴² Chaudhuri, ‘Memsahibs and Their Servants’, 551–52; Sen, ‘Colonial Domesticities’, 303–04; Varma, ‘Servant Testimonies’, 223.

⁴³ Hugh Chisholm, general ed, entry for ‘Ayah’, 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1910, available at <https://www.studydrive.org/encyclopedias/bri/a/ayah.html> (accessed on 2 July 2019).

⁴⁴ Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on Indigence* (London: J. Hatchard, 1806).

⁴⁵ Marshman, Letter to Fuller, 347.

⁴⁶ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 2, 1813, 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

‘acquainted with no written medium of instruction,’ neither English, nor Portuguese, nor Bengali. They had ‘never been favoured with Christian instruction in any language they could understand.’ And ‘as all the service of their churches [was] performed either in Portuguese or Latin, they [lived] in darkness thick as midnight, with regard of the way of salvation.’⁴⁸

Indeed, the BI’s students had hardly any other educational options. On account of the new racial politics in which Eurasians were excluded from governmental social welfare, they were ‘not eligible to either of the Military Orphan Schools.’⁴⁹ From the school providers’ point of view, the lack of access to formal schooling, and thus to basic literacy and religious instruction, was exacerbated by their lack of proper familial upbringing. The deficiency of the children’s homes, which was associated with the absence of male heads of households, underlined the necessity of institutional interventions. A fatherless—or, in other words, a ‘masterless’ home—lacked the paternal authority necessary for discipline and moral guidance. The Portuguese mothers were accused of indulging their children, and of being unable to control them during their working hours: In ‘addition to the little control which Asiatic mothers have in general over their children,’ the BI’s managers opined, most of their students’ Portuguese mothers were ‘obliged to go out to daily labour for the support of themselves and their children.’⁵⁰ This statement contains a good deal of negative colonial stereotyping; it shows that the position of the Portuguese was, at times at least, among ‘Asiatic’ people. Additionally, two points deserve to be highlighted. First, if these mothers worked as domestic servants, it seems that they did not live with their employers, but attended them during the day. And second, there was a mismatch between the European early nineteenth-century pedagogical obsession with discipline, which one-year-olds already needed to learn,⁵¹ and the observed practices of infant and child care in India. This mismatch not only

⁴⁸ Marshman, Letter to Fuller, 347; BI, *Annual Report*, No. 1, 1812, 3.

⁴⁹ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 2, 1813, 5; also see, Arnold, ‘European Orphans,’ 108.

⁵⁰ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 2, 1813, 8.

⁵¹ *A Domestic Guide to Mothers in India, Containing Particular Instructions on the Management of Themselves and Their Children, by a Medical Practitioner of Several Years’ Experience in India* (Bombay: American Mission Press, 1836), 49–52. My thanks to Nitin Varma for pointing out this source to me.

fuelled the discourse about the need for public schooling;⁵² it also led to conflicts between memsahibs and Indian ayahs within colonial nurseries.⁵³

WORKING-CLASS WIVES AND DOMESTIC SERVANTS: THE AGENDA OF 'FEMALE EDUCATION'

Wage-earning poor Eurasian women were presented in the educational sources as deficient home-makers. They were also described as lacking the kind of firm morality and maternal authority which were considered necessary to bring up children in habits of discipline. I want to shift the focus now to the agenda of female education in the context of the early nineteenth-century debate about the education of the poor—because this was crucially tied up with the evangelical reform project aimed at improving the home. Schools for the European and Eurasian poor, I will show, aimed to produce both good wives for 'respectable' and hard-working male subalterns and also good domestic servants. British Protestant school reformers wanted to encourage an 'honest' livelihood and a regular, married, home life among the urban Christian colonial underclass.

As the literature on gender and empire has shown, the evangelical agenda of female education in the nineteenth century centred on the notions of rational motherhood and the improvement of domestic life as the starting points for any efforts towards 'civilisational uplift'.⁵⁴ The close connection between female education and domestic service in colonial India is, however, less explored. Even if the rhetoric of the evangelical-missionary debate concentrated on the figure of the good wife—a

⁵² The *Missionary Register for MDCCCXXII* (London: L.B. Seeley, 1822), 543, contains an interesting passage that is part of their fundraising efforts for 'native education' in India: 'Children...are seldom corrected; and, having none of the advantages of the Children of Christian parents, they ripen fast in iniquity. At a very early age, they enter the path of impurity; in which they meet with no checks, either from conscience, the virtuous examples of Parents, or the state of public morals.'

⁵³ Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities', 311; Banerjee, 'Blurring Boundaries', 779.

⁵⁴ Midgley, 'Female Emancipation in an Imperial Frame'; Joyce Goodman, 'Languages of Female Colonial Authority: The Educational Network of the Ladies Committee of the British and Foreign School Society, 1813–37', *Compare* 30, 2000, 7–19.

competent housekeeper, her husband's useful 'help-meet'⁵⁵—the curricula of schools for poor European and Eurasian girls perfectly corresponded with the profile of a hard-working, deferential, frugal domestic servant. Indeed, the European Female Orphan Asylum in Calcutta was established in 1815 explicitly for 'training girls of pure European parentage for domestic service'.⁵⁶ This was completely in line with the agenda of many contemporary orphanages in England, which also meant to prepare destitute girls for domestic labour.⁵⁷

In 1815, the newly founded Ladies' Committee of the BFSS in England—a casual cooperation partner of the Serampore missionaries who established the BI—laid down civil society's responsibility 'for imparting to *Females, belonging to the labouring classes of life* [emphasis added], such a portion of education in reading, writing, arithmetic, and needlework, as shall enable them to discharge the duties of their stations which, as *women* [emphasis original], they are destined to fill'. They continue with a problem diagnosis that starts from '*female servants*' [emphasis added]' lack of instruction, and hence their lack of access to the 'sources of moral and religious principles'.⁵⁸ It was no wonder, therefore, that those female servants (in the BFSS's interpretation) displayed bad habits and set a bad example for their social environment, including their own children. The full passage is cited at the beginning of this chapter. What I find remarkable here is the easy substitution of 'females [of the] labouring classes' with 'female servants'. This reflects a social situation in early nineteenth-century England, where employment as servants was a regular, and in the case of women the most frequent, occupation for working people.⁵⁹ Many working-class women spent some time of their lives as domestic servants, often in their youth, and often as live-in servants, under their employers' direct control and authority.⁶⁰ For the BFSS's 'Ladies' Committee, the

⁵⁵ Priscilla Chapman, *Hindoo Female Education* (London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1839), 64.

⁵⁶ Arnold, 'European Orphans', 112.

⁵⁷ Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life', 414.

⁵⁸ BFSS, *Annual Report* No. 10, 1815, viii–ix.

⁵⁹ Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶⁰ Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life', 408–10.

solution for subaltern women's—and hence subaltern communities'—deplorable state was the spread of cheap monitorial schools 'in every part of the empire'. In these, girls would be taught 'the Holy Scriptures' and further receive '*such instruction as may be necessary to qualify them for useful life* [emphasis added]'. The resulting 'elevation' of working women's 'character', the Committee hoped, would lead to 'a universal increase of integrity and virtuous conduct'.⁶¹

What kind of instruction was it that 'qualified' working-class women for 'useful life'? From the BFSS's point of view, it was an education both gendered and 'classed': working-class women needed to learn to be good *women*, but specifically good *subaltern* women. Their instruction differed from middle-class and upper-class women's 'accomplishments' as much as from their male peers' preparation for extra-domestic employment. This is paradigmatic also for the institutions for poor Europeans and Eurasians in early nineteenth-century India. In the following, I will discuss this by contrasting the BI with a second case study, the Society for the Education of the Poor within the Government of Bombay (Bombay Education Society, BES).

Initiated in 1814 by Bombay's Archdeacon, George Barnes, the BES was the first educational association to be established in an Indian city. It was explicitly modelled after the NES in London, with which it maintained close ties of cooperation.⁶² Though it has changed its denomination and shifted its location within Bombay several times, the BES continues to provide education to the Anglo-Indian community today. The BES's central school comprised a male and female department. While all girl students were 'the offspring of Europeans',⁶³ the male student population was more diverse. '[A]mongst the day scholars are to be considered several children of Natives, Hindoos, Musselmans, and Parsees, who have been admitted at their own expense.' They attended the school mostly with the motivation of 'learning the English language, which is in a great degree necessary at Bombay to qualify them for many situations'.⁶⁴ As a model school, the BES

⁶¹ BFSS, *Annual Report No. 10*, 1815, viii–ix.

⁶² BES, *Report*, No. 2, 1817, 4.

⁶³ BES, *Report*, No. 3, 1818, 20.

⁶⁴ BES, *Report*, No. 2, 1817, 17. The report of the BES's central school for 1818 counts sixty-one boys who are the 'offspring of Europeans', nine 'native Christians',

became a relevant agency of educational reform in the Bombay Presidency. Its primary objective, however, was to provide for the children of British soldiers who died in service or returned to Britain, where they were not permitted to take 'their native families'.⁶⁵ In other words, it functioned as a military orphanage. It is noteworthy that the term orphan here denotes destitute and/or fatherless children, whose mother might well be alive.

In the BES reports, we again encounter children who are considered vulnerable on account of their fathers' absence: 'the mother is in most cases unable to afford them the common necessities of life, much less to provide any...moral instruction.' This meant that if these British soldiers' children 'adopt[ed] any religious worship at all, it is generally one or other of the false systems around them; in no case perhaps are they ever brought up members of a Protestant church'.⁶⁶ Against this background, the aims of the BES's orphanage can be summarised as threefold: first, the provision of economic relief to British soldiers' children; second, the reclaiming of half-British children as subordinate members of the Protestant Christian community; and third, related to this, the separation of these children from their mothers and relatives, who were considered a 'corrupting influence'.⁶⁷ This separation from barracks, bazaars and immoral homes was crucial for the 'saving' particularly of female orphans.⁶⁸ It is one significant element that distinguishes a day-school such as the BI from the orphanages. The rules of confinement were particularly strict in the case of girls: 'The peculiar circumstances of this country render it essentially necessary that the whole of these girls should be maintained and lodged in the house'.⁶⁹ Female students' guardians had to sign an agreement to leave the girls in school until their fifteenth year; in 1829, the BES decided that 'no Girl shall be allowed to go out from the School, to her Friends even during Vacations, except her Parents are Married and bear unexceptionable characters'.⁷⁰

seven Parsis, five Hindus and one Muslim. All Indian students and nine 'Europeans' were day-scholars (BES, *Report*, No. 3, 1818, 20).

⁶⁵ BES, *Report*, No. 2, 1817, 6–7.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ BES, *Report*, No. 12, 1827, 14.

⁶⁸ Arnold, 'European Orphans', 110.

⁶⁹ BES, *Report*, No. 2, 1817, 11.

⁷⁰ BES, *Report*, No. 14, 1829, 7.

This internal regulation points to a specific fault that British Protestant reformers found with the Indian families left behind by European soldiers. They were not only fatherless homes, a problem they shared with the BI's Portuguese target group. Some of the BES's 'orphans' were considered to be of 'illegitimate' birth. This meant that their (British) father and (Indian, or Eurasian) mother had not entered a formal, Church-registered marriage. From the BES's perspective, this set a dangerous example. Combined with their precarious economic circumstances, it increased the 'temptation' for a poor young woman to 'fall' into prostitution or form 'illicit' sexual relationships. As Archdeacon Barnes explained in a sermon on behalf of the BES,

A boy may maintain himself from an early age as a sailor, a soldier, a mechanic, [or] a labourer.... But an indigent girl is not merely excluded from many honest means of support, she is beset by peculiar temptations; and even men who revolt through honour from perpetrating other offences, scruple not to lie in wait to corrupt her principles, and entice her to sin.⁷¹

This quote points not only to the social disadvantages faced by women in terms of employment options (compared with those of their male peers), but also to the very real danger of sexual abuse and exploitation—for which, here, the woman herself and her 'principles' were held responsible. The school's task was thus a double one: to provide 'indigent girls' with 'honest means of support', and to teach them Christian 'virtue', so they would choose these options over others.

How was such a social agenda translated into curricular content? I will now provide an overview of the gendered curriculum that we find in schools for the European and Eurasian poor. In both the BI and the BES, the teaching given to girls consisted of three elements: basic literacy and numeracy; religious and moral education; and needlework.

Basic Literacy

Reading, writing and arithmetic were part of all early nineteenth-century school curricula. Reading skills were considered essential, since reading

⁷¹ BES, *Report*, No. 1, 1816, 20–21.

and the memorising of the Anglican catechism (in the NES in England and in the BES) was the core of the education of the poor. In the British-colonial context, as the BI's managers wrote, literacy skills became a 'means of obtaining a livelihood' which was 'indeed nearly equivalent to giving a poor boy in England a trade of employment'.⁷² The male students of the BI received bilingual literacy instruction, in English and Bengali. This was supposed to qualify them for a mediating position between English masters and Bengali subordinates. A knowledge of English would enable them to 'comprehend directions given them by English gentlemen, which their superior colloquial acquaintance with the native language and idiom, enable[d] them to convey to native servants with ease and effect'.⁷³ This is a telling example of how the ambiguous or intermediary position of the Portuguese could be turned into an asset for the colonial masters. For the female students, however, literacy was not connected to employability but to habits of respectability. The managers of the BI felt that having received literacy instruction was 'among this class of people esteemed no inconsiderable recommendation' and helped girls to make better marriage matches.⁷⁴

Religion and Morality

Morality was a core concern of the education of the poor, and it rested on religious instruction. In the BES, instruction in the Anglican Church's catechism was mandatory for all boarders; only for the self-paying, non-Christian day-students was it not enforced.⁷⁵ In the BI, all children received a non-denominational Christian instruction and were encouraged to read the Bible. The moral instruction that poor children of both genders received reflected their 'station' in society. I want to illustrate this point by citing a poem that the students of the BI, both boys and girls, learned by heart and recited to the pleasure and satisfaction of the managers on the occasion of a public examination:

⁷² BI, *Annual Report*, No. 4, 1815, 4–5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

⁷⁵ BES, *Report*, No. 3, 1818, 6.

While others early learn to swear,
And curse, and lie, and steal,
Lord I am taught thy name to fear,
and do thy holy will.⁷⁶

The children of the poor were to learn habits of industry, obedience and subordination. Instead of a life in ‘idleness’ and ‘vice’, they were to strive for a simple, but ‘honest’ life. In the BES, the orphans were taught ‘to submit themselves lowly and reverently to their betters, ... to keep their hands from picking and stealing, and their tongues from evil-speaking, lying and slandering’. The core of this was that they learned that it was through ‘labour’ that they got their own living.⁷⁷ This important lesson was imparted not only by means of formal instruction, but the whole internal arrangement of the BES’s boarding school was meant to teach the ‘children of Charity’ humility, and acceptance of their subordinate state:

[T]heir moral behaviour, a point of infinitely more consequence than their learning is diligently watched both in school and as much as possible out of it; for which purpose they are distinguished by a peculiar dress, which teaches them also humility and to consider themselves children of Charity. Their... cloath [*sic*] are no better, if so good, as they may hope to wear all the rest of their lives,—no gaiety of colour, no trifling ornaments permitted; if they are fed, their food is of the plainest sort and no more than enough,—if they are lodged, it is in a manner that is suitable to everything else; for besides that frugality it is a most important branch of faithfulness in the management of charities, it is good that they should bear the yoke in their youth, and be inured to the treatment they must expect to receive in their future life.⁷⁸

Indeed, the records of the BES’s boarding school repeatedly report on changes in diet and management which would save the donors’ and subscribers’ money. At times, the reader is reminded of the misery of the poor-house regime in Charles Dickens’s well-known novel *Oliver Twist*.⁷⁹ But the most important point here is that the school was put into continuity

⁷⁶ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 4, 1815, 13.

⁷⁷ BES, *Report*, No. 1, 1816, 22.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁹ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Richard Bentley, 1839).

with a domestic and wage-earning life consisting of plain food, plain dress, obedience and hard labour.

Part of the BES's lessons to prepare the orphans for a life of service was to put them to labour while they were still in school. This was particularly true for the female students. From the second year of the school's existence onwards, the girls made their own and part of the boys' clothing.⁸⁰ Moreover, the school sold the products of the girls' labour at fixed prices—a list of available services was published in the Society's annual reports. Later, the girls were also responsible for mending and washing the clothes, which, as the committee observed, 'will afford a considerable saving to the Society'.⁸¹ In the 1830s, the 'training [of] the girls in the most useful domestic arts' gained even more prominence: 'Provision has been made for teaching all girls above twelve years of age, the whole work of a laundress, a measure that cannot fail to make them better wives, and better mothers of families, in the state of life, in which it has pleased God to place them.'⁸² Even if the purpose of the domestic training highlighted here was preparation for marriage—which tells us something about the labour that working-class wives were expected to perform—it contained the same skill set that would qualify a domestic servant. It was hard manual domestic labour, frugality and subordination in which the poor European and Eurasian girls were schooled, to prepare them both for paid domestic service and for unpaid domestic labour for their own husbands and children.

The same principle of putting the students to work and preparing them for 'useful trades' was applied later in the male department. The school employed a tailor and a shoemaker to teach boys their craft.⁸³ Instruction in book-binding was also offered. For a period of three years, the boys' skills in book-binding, lithography and shoe-making were advertised with price lists, in the same way that the school sold the girls' seamstress labour. After this period, however, 'the efficiency of the trade class' was found wanting and 'the effect upon [the boys'] education, had been very

⁸⁰ BES, *Report*, No. 2, 1817, 12.

⁸¹ BES, *Report*, No. 14, 1829.

⁸² BES, *Report*, No. 20, 1835, 12.

⁸³ BES, *Report*, No. 16, 1831.

unsatisfactory’—a fact which never seemed to bother those in charge of the girls’ education.⁸⁴

Needlework

One curricular element characterised the nineteenth-century British vision of ‘female education’ like no other: needlework. This was a task only girls were expected to learn. It was a symbol of women’s constant employment in an orderly household and was hence thought of as an essential part of girls’ moral training.⁸⁵ However, it was also one of the few marketable skills, and one of the very few acceptable employment options, for European and Eurasian working-class women. The BI report of 1815 happily stated an increase in the number of its female students, for which the managers gave the following explanation:

To this increase the introduction of Knitting in addition to Needlework has contributed greatly. ... Its value...as a means of support in future life, is very considerable; as a girl who might apply to it with diligence, could, when grown up, procure thereby three rs. monthly; which circumstance...renders it quite an object to those females, whose utmost exertions, when they are so happy to procure work, seldom realise more than four rupees monthly; and to obtain this they are often obliged to leave their family during the whole of the day. It is no wonder, therefore, that they should so willingly embrace an opportunity of learning an employ which provides them with the means of subsistence at home, and which they can pursue to any extent that industry or the call of necessity may dictate.⁸⁶

Seamstress work would thus allow a low-class Portuguese woman in early nineteenth-century Calcutta to earn about the same amount of money (3 to 4 rupees) that she could earn as a domestic servant—if she was lucky enough to find employment.

⁸⁴ BES, *Report*, No. 20, 1835, 14.

⁸⁵ Also see, Midgley, ‘Female Emancipation in an Imperial Frame’. This concentration on needlework made British missionaries’ efforts to transfer the same kind of female education to Indian communities rather more difficult. It was a curricular element which ‘native’ female students usually tolerated, but did not actually demand from colonial schools, which they attended in order to acquire literacy skills.

⁸⁶ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 4, 1815, 11–12.

Needlework, in the British imagination, was closely associated with femininity and domesticity across class boundaries. There were, however, hierarchies at work, which would distinguish the 'finer' work of upper-class girls and women from the kind of seamstress skills taught to the poor. In the BES's central school, the female orphans were instructed only in 'the plainest and most useful kind' of needlework, because 'fine work of any sort...would be raising them above the rank for which they are intended...'⁸⁷

FIT FOR SERVICE

So far, I have discussed how charity schools and orphanages for poor Europeans and Eurasians taught the children their proper place in a society, which was marked not only by the politics of colonial difference, but also by the early nineteenth-century British politics of class.⁸⁸ The question was how to fit low-class Europeans into colonial society and its division of labour. As the BES managers repeatedly emphasised, this was not an easy task—the class structure and division of labour in the home country could not simply be replicated under colonial conditions.

Since the preparation for 'useful life' was such an important concern of the colonial 'education for the poor', the question of how to 'dispose' of the graduates was a major concern of the managers of schools.⁸⁹ Speaking of European orphans in India throughout the nineteenth century, David Arnold has argued that for most of them 'the years at an orphanage were like the recycling of industrial waste: the orphans of one generation of soldiers, railwaymen and their wives were recast as the soldiers, railwaymen and wives of the next.'⁹⁰ Early nineteenth-century educational institutions for the poor, in summary, aimed to train a better class of labourers and servants, a project which rested on a Christian, married, home life and wives capable of hard labour and frugality. To some extent, as I will show,

⁸⁷ BES, *Report*, No. 3, 1818, 21; BES, *Report*, No. 1, 1816, 26.

⁸⁸ Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries; A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁸⁹ BES, *Report*, No. 3, 1818, 22.

⁹⁰ Arnold, 'European Orphans', 113.

they were successful in this aim; at least, we can see that indeed, youths who left the BI and the BES were 'placed in service' (this differing according to gender) or made official Church marriage matches.

For the female students of the BI, two options for after-school life were mentioned. In 1815, 33 girls left the school 'either to be married or to assist at home in the family'. While the return to domestic labour at the mothers' home was not further commented upon, the fact that 'nearly twenty have this year been married from the school into their own connections' was seen as a marker of the success of their education. Of the forty-eight boys who left the BI in the same year, three had been dismissed for 'acts of vice'. Many, however, had found employment 'where, on wages not greatly exceeding those given to superior native servants, they subsist themselves comfortably'.⁹¹ Among the boys leaving school in 1816, some had found jobs in shops, warehouses and 'factories at some distance in the country'.⁹² Others were withdrawn without giving reasons or continued schooling elsewhere.

The BES reports are much more detailed about the employment prospects of their students. Their report of 1838 includes an overview of what became of the students after they left school. The fates of the students are given as 'apprenticed', 'placed in service', 'withdrawn' by their guardians, 'deceased' and 'expelled'. The numbers in Table 3.2 refer to the post-school lives of all boarders 'from the commencement of the institution' until 1837.⁹³

While the highest number of students (383) were withdrawn, 95 died and 25 were expelled for breaking the school rules. A considerable number (280), however, were either 'placed in service' or 'apprenticed'. What did that mean for the male and female students?

The service of the BES's male charges was of two kinds, public and private. The BES's Committee was convinced that 'as long as the elements of useful knowledge, and the precepts of sound religion and decent subordination shall be studiously taught, the boys who have been educated in the school will be most acceptable in their services, either to the public

⁹¹ BI, *Annual Report*, No. 4, 1815, 12–14.

⁹² BI, *Annual Report*, No. 5, 1816, 12.

⁹³ BES, *Report*, No. 22, 1838.

Table 3.2: Operations of the BES from 1815 to 1 January 1837

	<i>Apprenticed</i>		<i>Placed in Service</i>		<i>Withdrawn</i>		<i>Deceased</i>		<i>Expelled</i>	
	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1823	48	22	24	29	124	81	22	6	8	9
1824	53	22	24	21	132	82	24	7	8	9
1825	59	22	24	24	134	82	28	11	12	9
1826	76	22	24	28	143	85	35	23	12	9
1827	85	22	24	33	145	89	37	23	12	9
1828	85	22	24	33	150	93	37	25	12	9
1829	98	22	25	35	159	4	39	25	12	9
1830	109	22	27	37	173	100	39	28	12	9
1831	117	22	27	40	180	103	40	30	12	9
1832	122	22	27	46	189	111	45	30	12	9
1833	13	22	29	53	200	119	54	33	15	9
1834	139	22	29	58	203	121	55	33	16	9
1835	145	22	34	58	218	138	58	34	16	9
1836	148	22	52	58	228	155	60	35	16	9

Source: BES, *Report*, No. 22, 1838.

or individuals'. Indeed, apprenticeships for the male students were found among captains of merchant vessels, watchmakers and jewellers, and other private employers. Others became sailors, mechanics and joiners.⁹⁴ The BES committee was, moreover, highly pleased to find the Bombay government interested 'to employ some of the Boys in a public capacity'. This was particularly appreciated, since the colonial circumstances precluded the BES's male charges from entering 'many occupations to which in England they would naturally betake themselves'. The Bombay government enquired 'if any of the boys, the offspring of Europeans...were sufficiently advanced in their education, as to...being employed under the revenue surveyor of Guzerat, under whose care and superintendence they might qualify themselves in the principles of surveying'. The government hoped they could 'thus form a *class of servants* [emphasis added], who may

⁹⁴ BES, *Report*, No. 5, 1820, 9; BES, *Report*, No. 14, 1829, 6; BES, *Annual Report*, No. 15, 1830, 5.

hereafter be advantageously employed in several branches of the public service, particularly in those of the Engineers and the Collectors of the land revenue. The 'monthly allowance' for the apprentices would be 15 rupees.⁹⁵ Over the years, the government recruited further apprentices and assistants among the BES's male students for work in hospitals and with the engineering and surveying departments.⁹⁶

These descriptions of male European orphans' career options are noteworthy not only for highlighting the income discrepancies between domestic and public service. They also point to an ambiguous semantic field regarding service and servant. In Table 3.2, any kind of after-school employment is subsumed in the categories of 'apprenticeship' and 'service'. Potential government employees are described as 'a class of servants'. Such notions of service are rather different, for instance, from the discourse on civic voluntarism as 'social service' in late nineteenth-century India.⁹⁷ They point to forms of employment in a subordinate position. In general, it seems that 'service' was the form in which 'the poor' were set to labour.

The difference between the male and female poor was that the former served in private businesses and public offices, the latter in households. The BES's placement politics clearly affirmed the contemporary British gender differentiation of domestic and extra-domestic employment, a process in which household labour, including paid domestic work, became increasingly feminised. Marriage was an important goal for the female students of the BES central school, as much as for the BI. However, we find that annually 22 girls were 'apprenticed' and 58 were placed in the service 'of private families' at the end of the first 20 years of the school's existence. There appears to be a close overlap in the categories of servant and apprentice. Apprenticeships were time-bound forms of service, and the term stresses the life-cycle element of adolescent learning and socialisation. It was through an 'apprenticeship' with a British housewife that the girl would further learn her role as a wife and mother. However, other placements were temporary, too. By 1822, we learn, 23 female students

⁹⁵ BES, *Report*, No. 3, 1818, 22–23.

⁹⁶ BES, *Report*, No. 7, 1822, 10–11; BES, *Report*, No. 9, 1824, 8; BES, *Report*, No. 14, 1829, 5–6.

⁹⁷ R. Srivatsan, 'Concept of "Seva" and the "Sevak" in the Freedom Movement', *Economic & Political Weekly* 41, no. 5, 2006, 427–38.

had left school to enter 'in the service of ladies to whom...., they have in those instances been apprenticed for five years'. This period was defined in the BES's internal regulations. The report of 1824 uses the formulation 'apprenticed out as Servants'.⁹⁸ Remarkably, BES-trained female students were 'in great request in the families of Ladies as domestic servants, where their general superiority of conduct and habits to the general description of native women is very observable'. The ladies' committee of the BES received regular 'applications for girls to be employed in a similar matter'.⁹⁹

In 1822, the BES committee reported with 'much pleasure...that the children, who have gone out as apprentices, or in service, have in general justified the expectations' of their benefactors, and 'the demand for children educated in the central school, both boys and girls, is greater than can be easily supplied'.¹⁰⁰ By 1824, applications for male apprentices became so numerous that some had to be declined.¹⁰¹ It was decided that 'No boy shall be apprenticed out under the age of fourteen; nor Girls under the age of fifteen, except with the special permission of the respective Committees'.¹⁰² The boys were expected to serve for some time as monitors and instructors of their younger peers, to keep the school fully functioning. Only after having 'paid the debt' to the school in this way were they to leave. Moreover, only those 'should be Apprenticed [*sic*] by the Society, or recommended to situations, as were found to have a competent knowledge of the first four rules of Three in Arithmetic, who could read well in the Bible or any other English Book, and write a tolerably fair hand'.¹⁰³ Otherwise, it was feared that boys without sufficient moral training and literacy skills would damage the school's reputation. For female students, the rules of the institution simply stated that 'no Girl shall leave the School as an apprentice before she...can read in the Bible'.¹⁰⁴

From these specifications, we can conclude that it was not academic achievement that made the BES's female charges popular among 'the

⁹⁸ BES, *Report*, No. 7, 1822, 7; BES, *Report*, No. 9, 1824, 11.

⁹⁹ BES, *Report*, No. 8, 1823, 7; BES, *Report*, No. 5, 1820, 9.

¹⁰⁰ BES, *Report*, No. 7, 1822.

¹⁰¹ BES, *Report*, No. 9, 1824, 8.

¹⁰² BES, *Report*, No. 10, 1825, 28.

¹⁰³ BES, *Report*, No. 13, 1828, 6–7.

¹⁰⁴ BES, *Report*, No. 9, 1824, 10.

families of ladies' as domestic servants; it was a combination of other factors. As young, unmarried women who would join their employers' household, they conformed to the contemporary British notion of who was a suitable domestic servant. They would provide the memsahib with female companionship in the male-dominated space of the British-colonial household, without exposing her to the observant gaze of a 'native' woman, who might judge her employer's conduct by her own cultural standards.¹⁰⁵ In their (rather futile) efforts to recreate a respectable British home around a female core, memsahibs valued cultural closeness as much as class difference.

Everyday racism certainly played a major role in this. It is remarkable that the BI in Calcutta did not try to place its female charges into domestic service. They did not have the means to find apprenticeships for male students either. But still, domestic service is not mentioned as a desirable option for the Portuguese girls and young women, even if their mothers did ayah work. Schools for poor girls of *British* descent (whether they counted as 'pure European' or had a British father), however, not only prepared their students for service, but also actively procured such positions for them. This refers to both the European Female Orphan Asylum in Calcutta and the BES. Therefore, it was the desire not only for a Christian servant—which also made memsahibs turn to Portuguese ayahs—but also a maid who was perceived as European. Moreover, she would be Protestant and an English-speaker—all qualifications which made her potential contact with the memsahib's children less problematic, considering the background of prevalent fears about superstition, cultural contamination and linguistic alienation from the mother.¹⁰⁶

The awareness of class difference and the proper performance of deference were certainly equally valued in the BES-trained girls, as was their perceived whiteness. Memsahibs wanted servants who affirmed their own superior class position and domestic authority. Thus, even a 'native' ayah could be preferable to a European nanny, who gave herself 'airs.'¹⁰⁷ 'Servant-keeping operated within a vivid emotional landscape,' as Lucy

¹⁰⁵ Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities,' 309.

¹⁰⁶ Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants,' 552; Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities,' 311–12.

¹⁰⁷ Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities,' 315–16.

Delap has argued. The performance of ‘rituals of deference and servility’ was an important part of the housemaid’s emotional labour.¹⁰⁸ These were certainly qualifications that the BES-trained students brought with them. They were accustomed and skilled in different kinds of domestic labour, including laundry, clothes-mending and other kinds of plain seamstress work. The school’s emphasis on hard labour, industry and constant employment also fitted in with the British expectation of having a maid constantly at one’s disposal and giving her a variety of menial tasks.¹⁰⁹ If there was one thing that the BES aimed to teach its students, it was their class position—and a disposition to be of service to their social superiors. How far this actually shaped the students’ subjectivities, we do not know; but the high demand for BES-trained students of both genders, for domestic, private and public service, indicates that students’ behaviours at least to some extent conformed to their masters’ and mistresses’ expectations.

CONCLUSION: TRAINING A CLASS OF USEFUL SERVANTS

A desirable domestic servant in a memsahib household in early nineteenth-century India was young, unmarried and female. She would live with her mistress for a fixed period and be available for all kinds of domestic tasks. Domestic service was a transitory period in her life, which was marked by class and gender subordination. In the records of the BES, it is literally cast as an ‘apprenticeship’, a preparation for the running of her own husband’s household. Of course, the household that a European orphan would run in Calcutta or Bombay in the 1820s or 1830s was a different business from a memsahib’s home. The orphan would usually not become a memsahib herself but would continue the manual work she had performed (unpaid) in school, (paid) in domestic service and (unpaid again) for her husband. If needed, she would resume paid seamstress work when deserted or widowed, or to supplement the meagre family income.

¹⁰⁸ Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11, 5; Davidoff, ‘Mastered for Life’, 411.

¹⁰⁹ Davidoff, ‘Mastered for Life’, 411, 415.

The number of such European domestic servants available to memsahib households in early nineteenth-century colonial Indian cities remained very small. Nevertheless, the records of the disciplinary institutions that trained them and placed them in service contain some insights into the history of domestic service in India at this time. These sources represent a normative ideal from which social reality widely diverged. This was an important source of conflict in British-colonial households, which often hired 'native' male domestic labour, something that memsahibs were rather uncomfortable with. They also disliked the female domestic labour on the market, including Portuguese ayahs. As Catholics and as older women who attended the household as external service-providers, Portuguese ayahs did not fit the normative model of the housemaid either. The schools for the European poor in the early nineteenth century represent a—highly limited—effort to produce servants who would help to recreate the gender and class relations of contemporary British households.

The educational agenda of the schools for the urban European poor in early nineteenth-century India was quite straightforward: to form an industrious class of useful servants, obedient to the higher ranks of colonial society. They used a system of classroom organisation that promised to produce habits of discipline and order. In the boarding school run by the BES, humility, industry and frugality were the most important lessons for the 'children of charity'. The male students were placed as apprentices with private European employers or in subordinate positions in 'public service'. In private companies, they were to act as mediators between European masters and 'native servants', on salaries slightly higher than the latter. Female education was linked with both domestic service and the idea of an improved working-class home life. This was in turn hoped to translate into the formation of an improved European servant class. In 1840, the BES reported that of the 892 students it had so far trained, 'many are now carrying forward the designs of the Society by the influence of Christian Example on those amongst whom they dwell'.¹¹⁰ This notion of the educative role of community is something which we encounter time and again in the discourse on the education of the poor in early nineteenth-century England and the British Empire: while a 'corrupted'

¹¹⁰ BES, *Report*, No. 25, 1840.

community promoted vice and immorality, schooling contributed to civilising a community, imposing rules on the parents of the present student generation and making better parents for the next one.¹¹¹

The schools' aim was not to enhance social mobility; they wanted to train better servants, not to have the children of the poor leave the servant class. Nevertheless, some poor Europeans and Eurasians were able to put their literacy to good use. One way out, not out of their class position but out of directly serving others, was to become a teacher. This refers not only to some of the male monitors, who had been taught in the BI in Calcutta and then became headmasters of branch schools.¹¹² In the BES records we find at least one instance where a former female student, after marrying a Sergeant of Artillery, became the mistress of a regimental girls' school.¹¹³ Moreover, some of the girls educated in the European Female Orphanage in Calcutta became teachers of 'native female schools', funded by missionaries.¹¹⁴ Indeed, as Tim Allender emphasises, Eurasian women gained privileged access to the emerging female teaching profession in colonial India—at least in government-funded institutions.¹¹⁵ This can serve as one example of what Harald Fischer-Tiné called 'the racial dividend', which particularly European and Eurasian boys, but to a lesser extent even their female counterparts, could cash in.¹¹⁶ Most of these women, however, spent most of their lives in arduous domestic labour.

¹¹¹ Helen May, Baljit Kaur and Larry Prochner, eds, *Empire, Education, and Indigenous Childhoods: Nineteenth-Century Missionary Infant Schools in Three British Colonies* (New York: Ashgate, 2014), 109.

¹¹² BI, *Annual Report*, No. 3, 1814, 16–17.

¹¹³ BES, *Report*, No. 10, 1825, 12.

¹¹⁴ *Report of the Ladies Society for Native Female Education (1852)* (Calcutta: Sanders, Cones, and Co., 1853), 8.

¹¹⁵ Allender, *Learning Femininity*.

¹¹⁶ Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'Hierarchies of Punishment in Colonial India: European Convicts and the Racial Dividend, c. 1860–1890', in *Empires and Boundaries: Race, Class, and Gender in Colonial Settings*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné and Susanne Gehrman (New York: London: Routledge, 2008), 41–65.

4 | Streamlining Paid Domestic Labour in Postcolonial India

The New Female 'All-Rounder' in Master-Servant Expatriate Relationships

SHALINI GROVER*

INTRODUCTION: THE 'ALL-ROUNDER' SERVANT FIGURE

This chapter foregrounds a new category of master-servant relationship emanating in a globalising India. Based on ethnographic interviews, anthropological 'participant observation', historical sources, published contemporary government surveys and reports, and other data sources such as domestic workers' *curricula vitae*, training certificates and food recipes, the chapter puts at its centre the servant-protagonist who is a female all-rounder, an English-speaking, educated Indian woman. She is visible in expatriate networks, communities and families, possibly wearing Western attire (jeans) and chaperoning children to play-dates, social events and international schools in Delhi's affluent neighbourhoods.

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This chapter discusses such English-speaking all-rounders and their gendered labour, which I scrutinise through two interrelated processes—the streamlining of domestic labour and the acquisition of novel skill sets in the expatriate household. For the purposes of this chapter, ‘streamlining’ denotes the more efficient organisation of domestic service, whereby multiple household helpers are replaced by one or two whose skill sets are eclectic in nature. Data from India’s government compiled in 2004–05 by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) shows a sharp rise in the number of female paid domestic workers.¹ According to NSSO estimates, 3.05 million of the 4.75 million workers employed by private households were women. Scholars argue that the NSSO underestimates the massive growth of the informal domestic sector.² The all-rounder figure in the expatriate household embodies an expanding niche labour market in contemporary times.

The employers of this sector are white Euro-Americans and it is their relationship to paid domestic labour that forms the analytical focus of this chapter. The domestic workers’ ‘voice’ complements the employer perspective, lending critical, relational and informative insights into cultural dynamics. This exploration enhances the anthropological scholarship on domestic labour that has largely focused on class and gender.³ Yet the expatriate cultures that surely interweave contemporary conditions of paid domestic labour with colonial legacies is still an under-researched area in South Asian labour histories. While India’s colonial legacy was diverse in terms of European settlers, whiteness and class distinctions, I argue for its significance in relation to expatriate cultures and

¹ National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), *Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India*, NSSO 61st Round, Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, July 2004–June 2005.

² N. Neetha, ‘Contours of Domestic Service: Characteristics, Work Relations and Regulation’, *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 52, no. 3, 2009, 489–506.

³ For the existing India-based anthropological domestic labour scholarship on class and gender, see Sara Dickey, ‘Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India’, *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 2, 2000, 462–89; Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010); Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta, *Domestic Days: Women, Work, and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the postcolonial milieu.⁴ It is of heuristic value to consider contemporary expatriates against the backdrop of nationality hierarchies and power relations, as the employers in this study are from entirely different class–race backgrounds in relation to their Indian subjects.⁵ I draw inspiration from Stoler’s seminal work on colonial constitutive implications of race and intimacy, which is marked by the central presence of gender and race.⁶

This chapter demonstrates how domestic labour in the expatriate community is being redefined around discourses of professionalism whereby ‘all-round’ competence and managerial expertise are being emphasised. Today’s all-rounders must have an eclectic skill set that should be sustained by certified levels of training, as is also evident in cases of other types of contemporary informal jobs, such as security guards.⁷ Furthermore, my intention in this chapter is to signpost the important shifts from the colonial period; a crucial one is how caste-specialised domestic workforces are being replaced by one or two female all-rounders. A caveat, however, must be added: caste could still be an important, if not determining, factor in Indian households, as shown in other works. In this regard, the focus on contemporary expatriate communities is more akin to looking at European and missionary households of the past, in which caste as a social parameter of recruitment was present (as servants themselves claimed to observe the caste-based work divisions) but also its being breached was a historical reality (as in many instances

⁴ For the importance of understanding expatriates through a postcolonial framework, see Anne-Meike Fechter and Katie Walsh, ‘Introduction to the Special Issue: Examining “Expatriate” Continuities: Postcolonial Approaches to Mobile Professionals’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 8, 2010, 1197–210; Catrin Lundström, ‘I Didn’t Come Here to do Housework: Relocating “Swedish” Practices and Ideologies in the Context of the Global Division of Labour: The Case of “Expatriate” Households in Singapore’, *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 2, no. 2, 2012, 150–58.

⁵ See Lundström, ‘I Didn’t Come Here to do Housework’.

⁶ Ann L. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

⁷ As regards training and upgrading of skills in the informal sector, Nandini Gooptu has documented the growing middle-class demand, particularly in the private security guards sector. Nandini Gooptu, ‘Servile Sentinels of the City: Private Security Guards, Organized Informality, and Labour in Interactive Services in Globalized India’, *International Review of Social History* 58, no. 1, 2013, 9–38.

of *ayahs*—someone who looks after children—and *khidmutgars* from lower-caste backgrounds).

While seismic transitions are identified in this chapter, an enduring culture of multiple servants and task specialisation does prevail amongst segments of affluent expatriates and mixed-race couples. If employer recruitment patterns are closely examined, they exhibit the unchanging elements of colonial task specialisation vis-à-vis expatriate claims of modern self-sufficiency which for the later denotes the hiring of minimal domestic staff. However, while focusing on the contemporary, I also approach the character of this recent workforce—female all-rounders working in expatriate households—through transmutations in market forces and altering domestic worker roles, expectations and terminologies used for defining job profiles. The new category of female all-rounders illustrates how streamlining domestic labour is both about desired skill sets linked with class-gender ideologies (and persistent inequalities) and spatial shifts in urban housing development.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The ethnographic data used in this chapter are from various periods during 2013–15, when I conducted research in the National Capital Region (NCR).⁸ My employer respondents were from Europe and North America, and identified themselves as expatriates.⁹ New Delhi is home to many such expatriates, while as India's capital it has always had an international community. Core ministries, embassies, consulates and multilateral organisations have had their headquarters and offices in the

⁸ The National Capital Region (NCR) covers New Delhi and several districts surrounding it from the north Indian states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

⁹ Anne-Meike Fechter highlights how the 'expatriate' label has links with race-class entitlements and white privilege. Anne-Meike Fechter, 'Living in a Bubble', in *Going First Class? New Approaches to Privileged Travel and Movement*, ed. Amit Vered (New York: Berghahn, 2007), 33–52; Likewise, see Mawuna Remarque Koutonin, 'Why are White People Expats When the Rest of Us are Immigrants?' *The Guardian*, 13 March 2015, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/13/white-people-expats-immigrants-migration> (accessed on 16 March 2015).

capital city for a long time. Since 1995, the area of the NCR has expanded hugely, with faster connectivity achieved through the metro system. With this rapid urban expansion, labour markets and economic opportunities for global expatriates have opened up. In her reportage, Gottipati indicates the rise in global demand for Indian work visas.¹⁰ In San Francisco, the number of Indian visas granted to US citizens more than doubled from 23,085 in 2009 to 47,929 in 2010. In the same period in Europe, the Indian visa office in Paris issued 41 per cent more work authorisations, while Berlin saw 48 per cent more Germans applying for visas. At the Foreigner Regional Registration Office in New Delhi, 35,973 US citizens (not including those who were eligible for special visas for Americans of Indian Origin) registered themselves in 2008. Since the 1990s, Miller verifies that there are more foreigners in India than ever before.¹¹ The expatriate wave of migration comprises higher-income bracket families and individuals relocating from wealthier countries.¹² The short- and long-term sojourns of international elites are attested by the changing pattern of consumerism and the high-spec facilities that have mushroomed in the NCR; they include bakeries, cafes, foreign retail, tourism offices, multinational postings and university recruitment offices.

A community of English-speaking domestic workers has long been catering to foreign nationals in the capital. This market has its origins before the independence of the country in 1947. Its continuity has been maintained through the presence of the diplomatic community and international elites who are dependent on English-speaking help. My own explorations into the genealogies of domestic workers reveal their employment with embassies, Christian organisations and international agencies going back two or three generations. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, there were English-speaking female domestic workers in New Delhi; they could be observed chaperoning toddlers to parks and for various

¹⁰ Sruthi Gottipati, 'Expats Flock to India Seeking Jobs, Excitement', *New York Times, Global Edition India*, 8 February 2012, available at <https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/expats-flock-to-india-seeking-jobs-opportunity/> (accessed on 2 January 2015).

¹¹ Sam Miller, *Strange Kind of Paradise: India through Foreign Eyes* (New Delhi: Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Books India, 2014).

¹² Gottipati, 'Expats Flock to India Seeking Jobs'.

play-dates or baking delicious treats for foreign families. These were usually Christian women, labelled ayah—‘maid’ or ‘nanny’. The market for domestic workers has expanded in recent years and also comprises women from north-east India, Darjeeling and Nepal who are proficient in English, as well as some Hindi-speaking workers who have adapted to the required skill set of the expatriate household.

The domestic worker respondents were women in the age range 20–50 years, who belonged to the lower-middle income and working-class backgrounds.¹³ In terms of education, they were usually tenth- or twelfth-grade pass, meaning they had continued their education only until the age of 15 or 17 years. Some of these women had a BA degree or continued their university education while working as part-timers for expatriate families. Many also had prior work experience in the ‘office line’ (that is, the lower rungs of desk jobs, multinationals, call centres, international schools, non-governmental organisations [NGOs]) and some had trained as kindergarten or primary school teachers or private tutors. Their motivations for leaving the ‘office line’ and other forms of desk job, and instead joining paid domestic labour, is a subject I have researched and published on elsewhere.¹⁴ Given that the female domestic workers in this study are associated with particular skill sets and linguistic capabilities, they are part of a unique niche labour market. Most repatriating expatriate families and newly arriving ones were (or will be) in contact with a domestic service sector, whereby their household help are cognisant of certain Western cultural practices of domesticity. The domestic workers were employed with expatriates as either part-timers (‘live-out’ employees who return to their own lodgings after fixed hours) or full-timers (‘live-in’ employees who reside with the employer in ‘servant quarters’).

¹³ For more information on the socio-economic backgrounds of English-speaking and educated domestic workers, see Shalini Grover, ‘English-Speaking and Educated Female Domestic Workers in Contemporary India: New Managerial Roles, Social Mobility and Persistent Inequality’, *Journal of South Asian Development* 13, no. 2, 2018, 186–209.

¹⁴ Grover, ‘English-Speaking and Educated Female Domestic Workers’.

METHODS, SCOPE AND STRUCTURE

To explore expatriate master–servant relations, I deployed historical sources along with ethnographic methods. For the former, I used colonial memoirs, household guides and women's magazines, as well as their textured scholarly interpretations. For the latter, I used participant observation, work-life histories, genealogies and semi-structured interviews. The nature of interviews and the chronicling of narratives was conducted as follows. I initiated interviews and ethnographic investigations in the presence of both the employer and all-rounder employee, especially in relation to observing skill sets and everyday class distinctions. I also carried out interviews at the employer's home without the all-rounder being present. Significantly, with regard to all-rounders, their narratives were heard independently and away from the workplace. This was pivotal for comprehending perceptions of unequal master–servant relations, especially complaints raised by all-rounders, which they felt were not taken seriously enough by their employers. Additionally, I collected other forms of documentation such as domestic workers' curricula vitae, hand-written and printed food recipes, recommendation letters and training certificates. I made contact with domestic workers through church communities, neighbourhood networks and internet sites. While I myself was raising children in New Delhi with my Norwegian spouse, for many years I had a Hindi-speaking childminder who lived with us in an extended set-up with my parents, grandmother and younger sister. She had no connections to expatriate domestic service and her previous employers had been Indians. On the other hand, by virtue of our family being 'mixed race', I had multiple entry points into expatriate spaces such as play-dates, social events and other forums, which facilitated interactions and semi-structured interviews with the 'employer class'.

Between 2011 and 2013, I ran a cookery club as a personal learning project for Indian and expatriate women. There were expatriates in my cookery club who introduced me to their domestic workers and allowed me to observe their skill sets (e.g., in baking sessions with toddlers). Finally, I was registered with expatriate online parenting forums, whereby I was able to access and use (via the employers' permission) hiring adverts for the use of this study. Names have been changed throughout this

chapter for expatriate employers and domestic workers, even in those recommendation letters and hiring adverts that have been reproduced.

The chapter is structured in three sections. In the first section, an overview of domestic practices in the colonial era forms the prelude for ascertaining master–servant relationships, especially the intended role of female servants. The historical evidence points to the presence of multiple servants engaged in task specialisation along the lines of class, caste, race and gender. This is obviously the theme that has been explored in greater detail in various chapters in both volumes. The character of task specialisation is then juxtaposed in the second section with the last eight to ten years of economic growth and urban development in New Delhi, signalling how the expatriate household has a smaller composition of household staff as opposed to previous decades (particularly the pre-1990s) and the colonial era. Here the advent of the ‘all-rounder’ domestic worker or servant is contextualised. The second section also complicates what exactly is ‘new’ in hiring patterns, thereby illuminating enduring practices of task specialisation. The third section details the employers’ expectations in relation to the all-rounder’s ideal skill sets by contouring emotional labour requirements, managerial styles, certified training, culinary and other gender-specific expertise and discourses of competence. The conclusion has a cautionary tone to it; it reminds us how master–servant relations are interlaced with inequalities despite the undertone of Euro-American modernism, professionalism and training being accentuated within this feminised labour market.

HISTORICAL GLIMPSES INTO SERVANT IDENTITIES

As per archival knowledge, European, Indian, Anglo-Indian and British families were known to hire several servants in the precolonial and colonial periods. Female servants were usually entrusted with the care of babies and children. They were assigned labels such as ayah, nanny, maid, wet nurse or governess. The period between the 1880s and the mid-1920s is instructive for its focus on colonial domesticity.¹⁵ A plethora of household

¹⁵ For a detailed account regarding the focus on colonial domesticity, see Alison Blunt, ‘Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4, 1999, 421–40.

guides were published by British authors in this period, detailing advice to the second generation of British middle-class housewives residing in India on the management of servants and raising children abroad.¹⁶ British authors spearheaded numerous viewpoints in these guides that invoked civilising narratives related to hygiene practices, child-rearing, servant loyalty and class–race distinctions. There is a corpus of scholarly work that sheds light on women's magazines for the Empire and household guides against the backdrop of their intended imperial role.¹⁷

Pertinently, household guides witnessed lively discussions of the existence of multiple servants along with task specialisation. Small British households usually employed 10 to 12 servants, while larger households had as many as 30.¹⁸ In her guide to house management, James ascribes these high numbers of servants to the caste system: 'In India one has to keep an absurd number, three or four at least to do the work of one, because of caste, which interferes with work sadly.'¹⁹ Whether the high number of servants was really an outcome of the caste system or served as a marker of social status of their employers is an ongoing debate even today amongst South Asianists. Steel and Gardiner, in their guide, recommended fewer servants, given the challenges in managing and supervising so many.²⁰ The white women's 'burden' emphasised the mistresses' supervisory role of hiring and disciplining servants, which was central to keeping the imperial household intact.

To reiterate then, regarding the nature of domestic employment,

¹⁶ See Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook: Giving the Duties of Mistress and Servants, the General Management of the House, and Practical Recipes for Cooking in All Its Branches* (UK: Oxford University Press, 1888); Chota Mem (Lang C), *The English Bride in India: Hints on Indian Housekeeping* (Madras: Higginbotham & Co., 1909).

¹⁷ See Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Women's Magazine, 1800–1914* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996); Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home'.

¹⁸ Pat Barr, *The Memsahibs: In Praise of the Women of Victorian India* (London: Penguin, 1976).

¹⁹ Agatha F. James, 'Housekeeping and House Management in India,' in *The Lady at Home and Abroad: Her Guide and Friend*, ed. Anon. (London: Abbott, Jones and Co, 1898), 372.

²⁰ Steel and Gardiner, *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, vii.

occupational caste-related tasks, gender-specific duties and multiple servants were the norm in colonial times. The 'ayah' epithet had a specific connotation; Blunt notes how the ayah acted as a maid for her British mistress and also cared for young children.²¹

The only female servant likely to be employed within a British household was an ayah, who acted as a maid for her British mistress and often cared for young children. An ayah's daily duties included bringing morning tea to her mistress, preparing the bathroom, tidying the bedroom and mending clothes, bringing her into more intimate contact with a British wife than any other servant.

From the employer's perspective, the presence of a female ayah in the house was an asset.²² In the feminised spaces of the colonial household and in a new country, the ayah provided great comfort to her mistress, as conveyed in the Chota Mem guide.²³

The *ayah* is a most useful servant and if she is willing and clever will be a tremendous help to you, and you must own it is nice to have one woman in the house. It is such a comfort when you come in hot and tired to have her to take your shoes and clothes off, and put out what you want to wear, to brush, and fold up your things, and generally look after them.

Yet in terms of child-rearing, a persistent concern raised in household guides was whether native ayahs or British nannies should raise children for the official British elite.²⁴ The dominant view was that a British nanny was better suited than an ayah to undertake this responsibility, because of her ability to teach English with a 'proper accent' and nurture the right manners.²⁵ This indicates class and nationality hierarchies in domestic organisation.²⁶

²¹ Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home', 432.

²² Ibid.

²³ Chota Mem (Lang C), *English Bride in India*, 61–62.

²⁴ Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home', 432; Steel and Gardiner, *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 175.

²⁵ Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home', 432; Steel and Gardiner, *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 175.

²⁶ Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home', 432; Steel and Gardiner, *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 175.

With contemporary India having embraced an unbroken record of master-servant cultures, female domestic workers form an integral part of the expatriate household. Elderly domestic staff (age 50 and above) who were employees for Euro-Americans between the 1970s and the early 1990s claim that the usual practice then was to hire several domestic workers for distinct roles. So, a full-time cook was hired for one household, the nanny exclusively nurtured children and the housekeeper performed manual labour (e.g., cleaning, dusting). Other neighbourhood service providers also entered the domestic sphere, albeit partially; the *dhobi* (washer-man or laundry person), *mali* (gardener), *chawkidar* (watchman) and the *kabadiwala* (a person who recycles paper). While these low-income services still function in New Delhi's neighbourhoods, prominent shifts are visible in task specialisation. The terminologies 'cook', 'maid', 'nanny' and 'household helper' are being replaced by 'all-rounder'. The role of a 'female all-rounder' is now routinely accentuated in hiring and domestic labour discourses. These shifts in terminologies are suggestive of how domestic labour is increasingly streamlined and tied to a certain skill set. This central argument is further sharpened by contextualising expatriate households and recruitment patterns.

EXPATRIATE HOUSEHOLDS, HIRING PATTERNS AND ALL-ROUNDERS

The number of part-time or full-time domestic workers likely to be hired by an expatriate family is linked to employer income levels, demographic household composition and spatial configurations. There were essentially two patterns of hiring that were clearly evident during my ethnographic research. In the first, families hired one or two domestic workers; and in the second, they hired several more whose roles were clearly demarcated. With regard to the first, families typically hired one or two female all-rounders and a male driver. They may have recruited a husband-wife domestic worker team, with the husband being assigned as a driver (see the advert below that describes Tina and her husband). Male drivers were often expected to assist with household chores and also double-up as childminders. Further within the first pattern of hiring, there was also

the combination of one female all-rounder domestic worker and a part-time cook.

Normally, as is assumed amongst the categories of household help, as well as in the public imagination, the ayah's role is associated exclusively with childcare, as was the case in the colonial period. In actuality, the work-tasks of an ayah, maid, cook, household helper and nanny were fairly convergent in my sample of expatriates. Thus, separate terminologies for female domestic workers were by and large misleading. Most recommendation letters and adverts specified how domestic staff were to be employed as 'all-rounders'. Besides, 'all-rounder-housekeeper', 'all-rounder-maid', 'all-rounder-ayah' or 'all-rounder nanny' also featured as job titles. If the job title just mentioned 'cook' and 'housekeeper', the employer usually specified that the worker was also a capable all-rounder (e.g., 'So and so is an all-rounder with experience of house-keeping, house-management and cooking' or 'In addition to being our cook she also acts as our back-up ayah'). The precedence of the all-rounder-male driver team is seen below from the portrayal of Tina, who exemplified the first model of hiring.

(Advert-cum-recommendation letter posted in the New Delhi Expat Network, 2014, by a French couple)

Fantastic All-Rounder to Recommend

Sadly it is time to say good-bye to India. Tina has been working with us for three years, as an all-rounder nanny. We cannot recommend her highly enough. She is truly a fantastic person. Foremost, she is a responsible and dedicated worker. She is calm, gentle and nurturing. She is passionate about working with children and our two-year-old daughter and five-year-old son have been very attached to her. From the day we hired her, the children have been surrounded by arts and crafts, fun play-dates, excursions in Delhi parks, story-telling, baking and music. Tina is a very good cook with high standards of cleanliness. She does high quality baking and cooks European, Chinese and Thai cuisines. She has travelled with us to Europe, Dubai and Thailand and speaks English and French. Tina's husband Mohan was our driver and we are posting his recommendation letter separately.

While Tina was passionate about working with children, she was not presented in the recommendation letter just as an ayah but rather a

‘fantastic all-rounder’. Tina was described as a versatile cook, proficient in foreign languages and an experienced transnational domestic worker. The performance of emotional labour at all levels was clearly integral to her persona and work-tasks.²⁷

Having said this, there were instances where the separation between an ayah and all other general domestic workers (e.g., housekeeper and maid) was retained in hiring contexts. Therefore, the ayah epithet did at times appear independently in certain job titles in adverts and recommendation letters and especially in the context of personal requests. Sophie, another French employer, explained how her all-rounder, Nita, wanted to recommence ‘ayah work’. Nita had been recommended to Sophie’s family as an exclusive full-time ayah. At the time of recruiting Nita, Sophie’s daughter had just joined big school (i.e., with timings from 8 am to 1.30 pm). Nita was not needed to look after Sophie’s daughter for the entire day, but only after 2 pm. So Nita worked mainly as an all-rounder housekeeper for Sophie. On a daily basis, Nita undertook dishwashing, ironing, dusting, sweeping, cooking and post-2 pm took care of the daughter. Nita later stated to her employer Sophie, who was leaving India, that she wanted to return exclusively to ‘ayah work’. Sophie thereafter advertised online that her ayah was looking for a full-time job with servant’s quarters. For Nita, Sophie and the wider expatriate community, this advert denoted that the former’s prime responsibilities and identity would be to look after children. Nita would need to find an employer who would be willing to hire others to do cooking and housework chores.

Most expatriates preferred hiring a female all-rounder or nanny-all-rounder like Tina, somebody who could perform a variety of chores. In one such recommendation letter, as shown to me by an all-rounder domestic worker, Neelam, her tasks were meticulously stated by the previous employer to indicate all-round competence. Neelam’s responsibilities had included performing numerous roles, including hard manual labour. The streamlining of labour undertaken by a single person, who was required to scrub floors, iron clothes and do shopping, featured in a systematic manner in Neelam’s recommendation letter:

²⁷ I draw on the term ‘emotional labour’ from sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who makes a strong connection between caregiving and relationality. See Arlie Hochschild, ‘The Nanny Chain’, *American Prospect* 11, no. 3, 2000, 1–4.

(Advert-cum-recommendation letter posted in the New Delhi Expat Network, 2014, by Neelam's Italian employers)

Recommending a Talented All-Rounder

She reported to work at 7 am and left at 4 pm.
Bathed the children.
Made their tiffin boxes.
Got them ready for school.
Cooked meals for the family.
Washed the dishes.
Cleaned the floors and dusted the houses.
Ironed clothes.
Picked children up from school.
Did all the shopping.
Oversaw that the garage was cleaned and the garbage was collected.

As per this list, Neelam, a 'part-timer' who did not take up accommodation with her employer, was paid to carry out multiple tasks. Such chores related to all-round domesticity are, as Neelam and other domestic workers mentioned, equally evident in Indian upper- and middle-class homes, where domestic staff are required to master a variety of tasks. Those working for Indians clean driveways, cook, wash dishes and look after children, sick and the elderly, just like Neelam did. In many Indian homes, low-caste women, whose labour embodies 'degrading work', are often employed to clean toilets.²⁸ 'Higher caste yet economically disadvantaged' domestic workers working for an Indian employer may refuse to clean toilets, to differentiate themselves from untouchables.²⁹ Resultantly, all-round domesticity of the type undertaken by Tina and Neelam was more of a conspicuous trait of the expatriate household, where caste ideologies and domestic hierarchies were less relevant. Tina and Neelam both cleaned toilets and washed dishes, work-tasks that might have raised concerns and tensions over ritual pollution in Indian homes.

²⁸ Shalini Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2011); Shalini Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India*, revised edn (United Kingdom and New York: Routledge and Social Science Press, 2017).

²⁹ See Sonal Sharma, 'Of Rosoi Ka Kaam/Bathroom Ka Kaam', *Economic & Political Weekly* 51, no. 7, 2016, 53–55.

In the second pattern of hiring, whereby several more domestic workers with distinct identities were recruited, domestic labour was less streamlined or oriented towards everyday multi-tasking. Consider how in the next advert-cum-recommendation letter, the cook, housekeeper and gardener have clear-cut responsibilities:

(Advert-cum-reference letter posted in the New Delhi Expat Network, 2014, by an American family)

Cook, Housekeeper and Gardener Available

Cook: Angelina has been our cook and did all the weekly menu planning. When needed she would watch over the children and always enjoys spending time with them.

Gardener: Ramu was our gardener and sweeper.

Housekeeper: Johnny cleaned the floors, bathrooms and bedrooms and was assigned laundry and ironing.

In stark contrast to the situations with Neelam and Tina, the above advert from an expatriate family suggested a larger cohort of domestic workers, echoing task specialisation. A widely perpetuated view amongst expatriates was that they do not hire a retinue of domestic workers. Rather, many expatriates claimed that 'multiple servants' was classically an Indian class-cultural phenomenon. Newly arrived expatriates were most vocal, articulating cultural tropes of self-sufficiency based on values of modernism and an egalitarian ethos.

As the advert posted by the American family suggests, the reality was quite different. To further illustrate, an Indian-French couple who came from the United States brought their Afro-French au pair to India. They also hired an Indian all-rounder nanny, a cleaner, a cook, a security guard and a driver. The family felt it would be advantageous for the Afro-French au pair to work alongside an Indian nanny. As it turned out, the Indian nanny was the one who managed to arrange play-dates with the 'right families' and spoke Hindi, which was most needed while navigating a large city such as New Delhi. Another Indian-American couple with one child had an all-rounder nanny, a driver and a live-in cook. The cook's family (wife and two children) were living on the employers' premises in the servant's quarters. This Indian-American couple then decided to hire

an additional all-rounder nanny because the first one was complaining of exhaustion and being overworked.

The variations in the two outlined patterns, whereby smaller or larger cohorts of domestic staff were hired, need further explication. In light of urban restructuring policies, apartment blocks have been replacing large houses that had separate purpose-built lodgings or servant quarters.³⁰ Accommodating several domestic workers within Delhi apartments and smaller houses might not be possible any longer. On the other hand, employers like the expatriate couples who had larger dwellings and higher income levels may still hire multiple staff, as in the case of Angelina, Ramu and Johnny.

Chiefly, in the two different hiring structures, the labour of one 'essential' servant remained pivotal for the employer-family. I borrow the term 'essential' from Ray and Qayum, who draw attention to the 'essential servant as a basic premise of the culture of servitude in Kolkata'.³¹ As the authors note, 'two different time and labor regimes may coexist, with servants who are strongly tied to one employer working alongside servants who have weaker relational ties to multiple employers'.³² Analogously, this phenomenon was visible in expatriate households, where one female all-rounder represented the notion of 'permanent staff', while the precarity of other workers was at times implicitly acknowledged. Particularly in dual-income expatriate households where spouses had demanding jobs, the all-rounder's multi-tasking abilities became indispensable for sustaining household arrangements. The part-time cook, driver and cleaner could not be relied upon exclusively, as their labour was secondary to that of the essential all-rounder. The exceptions were households with adults only; the dependence on an essential servant was curtailed here. For employers, the demographic composition of the household was thus important in determining how many all-rounders needed to be hired.

³⁰ Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 250.

³² *Ibid.*, 100.

EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS AND DESIRED SKILL SETS

Usually, an all-rounder's ability to speak English was a vital requirement for acquiring employment with expatriates. Except for those employers who were keen to learn Hindi in India, the majority were on the lookout for English-speaking and educated all-rounders who could read, write and express themselves fluently. For those domestic workers whose spoken English needed improvement, their employers would often send them on language courses. Regarding proficiency in English, there was enormous merit ascribed to the ability to independently follow a recipe. Lundström reported the same for expatriates in Singapore; fluency in English and a domestic worker's culinary expertise were central to what constituted a positive recommendation letter.³³ As part of all-round domesticity, hired help was expected to decipher recipes and they often noted instructions in both English and Hindi. During the course of an interview with Hannah, a German expatriate, she explicated how her all-rounder could follow any recipe printed or reproduced in English.³⁴

Our all-rounder's cooking skills are remarkable. She can follow virtually any recipe in any cookbook we give her. She rarely repeats the same dish twice in one day. She bakes all our breads, scones, cookies, cakes etc. She makes baking a very special event for the children and especially during play-dates. She keeps the kitchen spotlessly clean and has attended classes on hygiene at the American School.

Furthermore, expatriates preferred all-rounders who could bake, cook a multiplicity of cuisines and had the ability to draw up shopping lists. In the expatriate community, baking skills were imperative for the upkeep of regular play-dates and invites whereby parents, toddlers and house guests could enjoy various treats. Baking, as I observed, established a type of

³³ Catrin Lundström, "'Mistresses' and 'Maids' in Transnational 'Contact Zones': Expatriate Wives and Their Intersection of Difference and Intimacy in Swedish Domestic Spaces in Singapore', *Women's Studies International Forum* 36, 2013, 44–55.

³⁴ Such semi-structured interviews were a key part of the ethnographic process. The conversation with Hannah took place while I observed the skill sets of her all-rounder at a toddlers' baking session in August 2014, New Delhi.

bonding and relationality between the all-rounder and employer-family. During play-dates and other social events, all-rounders might have taught children to ice a cake, rendering baking—in the words of Hannah, the German expatriate—a ‘very special event’. The expatriate family often appreciated the all-rounder’s treats and her devotion to making their children happy and keeping them occupied through food. I witnessed on many occasions how employers such as Hannah would praise their all-rounder’s cupcakes or banana bread, in the latter’s presence. Valuing the emotional labour of the ‘all-rounder’ resonates with anthropologist Miller’s atypical concept of ‘love’ that is more akin to family devotion and feelings of obligation.³⁵ His attempt is to relate love not to romance, idealised courtship, desire or sex but a different field of ethnographic inquiry. His exposition about love is based on supermarket shopping in London undertaken by women, particularly mothers. In his view, ‘shopping not only reflects love but is a major form in which love is manifested and reproduced.’³⁶ Similarly, the all-rounder deployed her baking expertise by involving children; she would shower them with love, devotion and affection and fulfil her obligatory emotional labour responsibilities towards them through treats. To reiterate, such skills were undeniably valued by employers.

Many all-rounders had acquired a high standard of culinary expertise and could cook the likes of a complete American Thanksgiving meal or an Easter brunch. The expectation by the expatriate employer was that they would leave out their cookbooks so that the all-rounder may independently follow recipes. During their sojourns in India, employers also often coached their all-rounders with regard to their favourite dishes and baked goods. Christina, an all-rounder, noted that when her British employers returned from work in the evening, a repertoire of dishes and desserts awaited them. One day it could be their favourite cheesecake or feta pie, the next it could be a lasagne or chocolate mousse. Christina’s employers never had time to cook elaborate or healthy meals back home (i.e., the United Kingdom), as they were overworked. In India, the meals

³⁵ Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

³⁶ Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*, 18.

were nutritious and the children were not served semi-frozen foods. The advantages of raising children in India were the fresh meals, vegetarian dishes and the care that went into planning meals with fresh ingredients. Christina's culinary skills made this British expatriate family's sojourn exceptionally comfortable.

Along with high culinary standards, the all-rounder was expected to display exemplary nurturing skills. This meant the performance of emotional labour at multiple levels: helping children with homework, arranging play-dates, travelling with the family, and so on. It was expected that children would spend quality time with a nanny-all-rounder and would ultimately flourish under her care. In an interview with an American expatriate family, Sally put the emphasis on building levels of trust with the all-rounder—aligning the centrality of trust with the concept of nurturing. Trust was intertwined with elucidations of alienation, lack of kin support and vulnerability, as Sally and her husband, citizens of the United States, were away from their extended families.³⁷

Our all-rounder Anita has been taking care of Amy since she was two months old. Amy adores and trusts her. Anita is highly trustworthy and has been fantastic in raising her, especially as we were first-time parents in a new country. Anita ensures that Amy is safe in the park and never leaves her alone anywhere.

Correspondingly, like a British colonial mistress in another period, Sally articulated the comforts of hired help and how useful the all-rounder's skills were not only for raising children but also for sustaining the everyday practical arrangements of the expatriate household.³⁸

Hired help assist us to set-up a house in a foreign country, having experience on matters related to shopping, the daily task of removing gruellling dust in the summer months, talking to strangers who knock on the door and the numerous repair works that arise in rented accommodation. We are clueless on these practicalities and rely on them extensively. Once a level of trust gets established, they become like family members.

³⁷ Semi-structured interview without the all-rounder present at the employers' home, October 2014, New Delhi.

³⁸ Semi-structured interview without the all-rounder present at the employers' home, September 2013, New Delhi.

Across eras (i.e., the colonial and contemporary), these parallel employer perspectives convey gendered subjectivities of intimacy in the context of master–servant relations.³⁹ In both eras, where employers and mistresses were isolated from their wider kin in a migratory space (India as the ‘foreign country’), their Indian female servants seemed to provide a combination of practical support, solace, companionship and comfort (as a ‘family member’). Given these notable class–race distinctions in master–servant relationships, such gendered companionship and close intimacy were not, however, without their tensions and ambivalences.

To expand this further, the contemporary all-rounder’s managerial role required trustworthy conduct, contingent on expectations of reliability, professionalism and honesty. All these qualities made for a competent all-rounder, along with no abstaining from work without permission, or making persistent demands for money, inflating grocery bills, engaging in petty theft, gossiping or creating conflict with other household staff. The desired professional skill set should be matched with a certain demeanour, whereby the all-rounder was discreet, humble, diligent, pleasant, quiet and unobtrusive. Accordingly, all-rounders were expected to over-all be subservient. And therefore the all-rounder should ultimately respect the employer, or the relationship would be fraught with tensions. The expectations of the ‘ideal servant’ coincide or are in line with Dickey’s reflections on Indian employers, whereby class is the dividing line in domestic service.⁴⁰ Irrespective of the liberal views espoused by expatriates based on the trope of modernistic values, subservience and trust (‘discreet’, ‘humble’, ‘reliable’, etc.) were expected of the all-rounder. Resistance on the part of all-rounders in leaving unsatisfactory jobs, for example, where employer expectations were untenable did emanate in my fieldwork. In situations of work-place tensions, all-rounders did answer back or rebuke their employers. Nonetheless, in many instances, the agency of all-rounders was also hindered, for in order to be re-hired they need to keep-up their reputations through high-quality references (e.g., see Mona’s recommendation letter below). Thus, all-rounders may have little choice but in accepting facets of unequal master–servant relations.

³⁹ For the colonial times, see the Chota Mem housekeeping guide on the comforts of hired help. Chota Mem (Lang C), *English Bride in India*.

⁴⁰ Dickey, ‘Permeable Homes’.

The traits of obedience, subservience and deference were emphasised in training courses for domestic service. Hitherto, my ethnography has exemplified how all-rounders were often sent for training in housekeeping, cookery, childcare, food hygiene, English language and first aid. They were given instructions during these courses to speak politely to the employer, to apologise if necessary, to respect house guests and adhere to privacy codes. Upgrading and expanding expertise through training was a necessary part of the skill set requirement. Employers expressed their motivations for financially investing in training (INR 7,000–15,000 per course) by invoking notions of professionalism or as an individual responsibility towards encouraging the formalisation of domestic roles. Other employers were rather forthright that certified training would enhance their domestic workers' employment prospects. They were candid that expatriate sojourns and diplomatic postings in India are by and large temporary (between 6 months and 5 years). There were employers who were genuinely concerned about their domestic workers' economic fortunes once they left India. Accordingly, all-rounders may have been put through training courses, whereby they received certificates of their marketable skills, as seen through Mona's recommendation letter.

(Advert-cum-reference letter posted in the New Delhi Expat Network, 2014)

Recommending an Experienced All-Rounder

Mona has been working as an all-rounder-housekeeper-nanny for the past 15 years for expatriates of different nationalities. She has worked for families in the European Union, French Embassy and World Bank. She has course certificates in First Aid, Advanced Cookery, Child Care and Food Safety [how to handle food hygienically].

Mona affirmed how this most up-to-date recommendation letter would strengthen her position amongst 'high-profile' international elites. On probing her as to whether the manifold certified courses had taught her anything novel, she was positive. She mimicked the course conductor's words, which described the 'new and professional techniques' whereby she had learnt how to massage colic babies, prevent nappy rash and sterilise bottles more effectively.

What is impelling the demand for professionalised skill sets, bespoke paid domesticity, competent streamlining of labour and certified training amongst expatriates? One explanation lies in changing conceptions of parenting and child-rearing that resonate globally. We have only to look at the surfeit of blogs offering unlimited advice on childhood development and structured quality time. Ramos-Zaya, in her ethnographic explorations of parenting in two Latin American neighbourhoods (i.e., Brazil and Puerto Rico), offers useful insights into ‘privileged parenting’, which she argues is notably gendered.⁴¹ Nannies in certain neighbourhoods were majorly involved in child-centred activities, and all this echoes the expatriate culture of New Delhi. Ramos-Zaya’s work mirrors that of Neetha and Palriwala and of Banerjee, who found that parenting amongst the Indian upper middle classes now involves more individualised child-rearing.⁴² Keeping children active through creative modes and physical activities that create stratification between women (i.e., mothers versus childminders) may not be unique to expatriates. This is contiguous with wider intergenerational changes in Indian society and globally, an aspect that calls for more research.⁴³

Significantly, the streamlining of labour required trust in one or two workers, and their skill sets, rather than in several whose roles and identities were split. For working mothers, the exemplary all-rounder nanny was an extension of ‘good mothering practices’. For mothers who travelled internationally for work or even just within India, the fear of being blamed (by school teachers, friends and peers) if their children

⁴¹ Ana Y. Ramos-Zaya, who presented her work on ‘Race, Affect and Urbanism in Two Affluent Latin American Neighbourhoods’ at the Centre for Women’s Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 9 August 2016. Ramos-Zaya’s work centres on the intersections of sovereignty, austerity politics and parenting in two affluent Latin American neighbourhoods.

⁴² N. Neetha and Rajni Palriwala, ‘The Absence of State Law: Domestic Workers in India’, *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 23, no. 1, 2011, 97–119. For an excellent account of upper-middle-class conceptions of childrearing through paid domestic labour, see Supurna Banerjee, ‘From “Plantation Worker” to Naukrani: The Changing Labour Discourses of Migrant Domestic Workers’, *Journal of South Asia Development* 13, no. 2, 2018, 1–22.

⁴³ Neetha and Palriwala, ‘The Absence of State Law’; Banerjee, ‘From “Plantation Worker” to Naukrani’.

remained unoccupied or cultivated behavioural problems was a reality. The all-rounder not only replaced the working mother with her managerial role, her presence and emotional involvement were also comforting in the domestic space of a foreign country.

CONTINUAL INEQUALITIES IN 'NEW' MASTER-SERVANT RELATIONS

In conclusion, through the anthropological lens of the expatriate community we are witnessing new domestic practices, class notions such as privileged parenting norms and thus stratification between women. It has become clear that a particular ideology of managerial competence was being inflated by market forces. Albeit that there is a language of professionalism and also degrees of formalisation that make this labour market a unique and niche sector, the inequalities of these master-servant relations need to be acknowledged. First, there are the gender-specific roles whereby the new all-rounder exemplified feminine qualities, especially the quintessential skill of nurturing. Female servants retained their predominance as carers for children. Alongside this, they were also ultimately expected to remain subservient to their employers. While men have traditionally been part of urban domestic service, many tasks such as cooking and housekeeping are now being transferred to women. Second, there are the overt class-race distinctions in globalising India. Domestic service with white expatriates constituted a 'postcolonial labour market' where monetary gains for domestic workers, many of whom had impressive skill sets, need serious questioning. All-rounders constituted a pool of cheap labour for expatriates.⁴⁴ Euro-Americans offered only a fraction of the wages they would have to pay in their own countries. Despite many employers valuing the skill sets, sending their staff for training and

⁴⁴ Shalini Grover, 'Revisiting the Devyani Khobragade Controversy: The Value of Domestic Labour in the Global South', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 23, no. 1, 2017, 121–28; Grover, 'English-Speaking and Educated Female Domestic Workers in Contemporary India', 186–209; Grover, 'Who Is an "Expatriate"? Euro-American Identities, Race and Integration in Postcolonial India', in *Cultural Psychology of Intervention in the Globalized World*, ed. Sanna Schlieuwe, Nandita Chaudhary and Giuseppina Marsico (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2018), 284–95.

seeking solace from the all-rounder's everyday presence, expatriate wages were incongruent with workers' talents and hard work.

Third, another exploitative dimension was the physical exhaustion that all-rounders experienced. Many would complain of ongoing fatigue, but added in turn that their employers were unwilling to take notice or address these concerns. While all-rounders normally received over-pay for extra work hours, they did confide that the intense multi-tasking chores exacerbated body-ache and mood fluctuations. This was voiced, in particular, by all-rounder ayahs when their female employers travelled internationally for assignments or worked long hours locally. These all-rounders intimated that their employers often overlooked tiredness, while instead the latter's attention and conversations were focused around the ayah-child affective ties. While many ayahs reported notable emotional attachments with children, they also mentioned how the routine transfer of emotional labour was exacting.

The negative outcome of paid multi-tasking was the constant fatigue, especially as for the all-rounder there were no divisions between childcare, cooking, sweeping and dusting. This is why all-rounders like Neelam preferred to resume 'ayah work', whereby they could distance themselves from cleaning, cooking and indefatigable domesticity. The multi-tasking that all-rounders performed in the expatriate household also had to be repeated after work-hours. They must resume gendered responsibilities in their own homes—in other words, taking care of relatives and children. Returning sometimes to husbands who were heavy drinkers and addressing the school schedules of their own children required the all-rounder to engage further in other emotional labour demands. Undeniably, the many all-rounders who were part of this study had to endure high levels of exhaustion. Thus, persistent inequality on many levels defines the new breed of master-servant relations in postcolonial India.

Slavery and a History of Domestic Work

SAMITA SEN

Since the 1990s, there has been considerable interest worldwide in writing the history of paid domestic work. South Asia has been somewhat an exception in this regard. In this Interjection, I suggest that slavery, which has been a significant trope for understanding domestic workers in many parts of the world, may also be a good place to start when studying South Asia. In India, even today, domestic work is described as slavery in popular media. Notwithstanding processes of modernity from the colonial to the postcolonial, major transformations in labour arrangements and legislation for protection of labour rights comparable to the most advanced in the world, domestic work employment remains at the extreme end of informality. In the 200 years of 'modern' India, this informality has had a proximate relation to and/or an affinity with slavery.

The imperial implications of slavery had come to the fore most dramatically in the Haitian revolt and the abolition of slavery in France and French colonies in 1794 following the French Revolution. When the abolition debate gathered steam in Britain, the question of slavery in far-flung parts of the Empire began to be raised. It was at this time that slavery in India was cast in the frame of the 'domestic'. There was considerable hesitation on the part of the English East India Company (EIC) to intervene in matters deemed 'private' and sensitive. There was some effort in the different presidencies between 1811 and 1833 to legislate locally against slavery, but no concerted move was made in this respect. The Charter Bill of 1833 initially contained a provision for abolition of slavery by 1837, but the clause was modified during the second reading of the Bill because of opposition in Parliament. In

recognition of the difficulty of legislating on domestic matters, and considering the question of slavery to be fundamental to the constitution of families and households, the governor-general was 'required to frame laws and regulations for the extinction of slavery, having due regard for the laws of marriage and the rights and authorities of fathers and heads of families'.¹

In British India, slavery became inextricably linked to family, caste and religion. The EIC treated slavery as a domestic and social issue since it was sanctioned in both Hindu and Muslim law and legitimated in custom. C. H. Cameron linked family and slavery, arguing that the master's power of physical chastisement was comparable to the right of an Englishman to use a stick to beat his wife.² A consensus emerged that Indian slavery was benign and 'domestic', alleviated by frequent manumissions, and not comparable to modern chattel slavery. The *Report on Slavery in India* (1841) did little to dispel such notions;³ thus the law in 1843 that 'abolished' slavery declared that no 'offence' would be exempt from punishment because it was committed by a master on a slave. So the status of slavery was made non-recognisable in civil and criminal courts of India. The Act criminalised coercive practices within slavery rather than slavery itself. This caused considerable legal confusion when the courts were petitioned for freedom from masters. Indeed, masters were able to use domestic relationships to camouflage slavery or slavery-like labour relations. The current situation of domestic workers in India is complicated by this history.

¹ 'Slavery', BL BP 32/2 (23) August 1838, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library.

² Akanksha Narayan Singh, 'Forms of Labour Servitude in Colonial North India, c. 1800 to 1920s' (Ph.D. diss., Delhi University, 2015), 86. Cameron was a member of the first Law Commission (constituted in 1833). He came to India in the beginning of 1835. He was appointed member of the Supreme Council in 1843. He worked closely with T. B. Macaulay, when both were members of the Law Commission, to prepare the first draft of the penal code.

³ See India–Law Commission, *Reports of the Indian Law Commission upon Slavery in India*, 15 January 1841, available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nnc1.cu08563667;view=1up;seq=1> (accessed on 20 January 2019).

A BENIGN DOMESTIC SLAVERY

In the accounts of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton in the early nineteenth century, we see a convergence of three elements—first, a description of domestic slavery as benign and beneficial; second, its links with domestic labour; and third, its links with the constitution of the household. His empirical accounts are scattered in his many volumes on different districts of Bengal, Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh and cannot be assembled within the scope of this Interjection. Buchanan-Hamilton depicted in some detail the co-existence of wage work, servitude and slavery in the domestic work sector. Even though much of his descriptions of slavery encouraged identification with domestic labour, there is mention of agrestic slavery as part of (or in addition to) domestic slavery. His accounts do point to overlaps between agrestic and domestic labour; many workers, especially slaves, worked both in the home and in the fields.⁴ While admitting that slavery was highly varied and heterogeneous, on the whole, he distinguished a singular ‘Indian slavery’ from Atlantic slavery, and defended the former as more benign and paternalistic.

Buchanan-Hamilton addressed the question of gender as a central theme in his descriptions of slavery. It appears from his accounts that women were rarely ‘free’ domestic servants, unlike men. Most female ‘servants’ were, in fact, slaves and in complex relationships within the households in which they were located.⁵ There were domestic slaves, both male and female, kept in elite Muslim households, and he believed that there was considerable traffic in domestic slaves in wealthy Muslim households.⁶ In wealthy Hindu families, especially big landlord households, a slave family received a farm free of rent, sufficiently large for comfortable subsistence. The slave family cultivated its own land; while the men attended the landlord and his male kinsmen, a few of the women attended

⁴ Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809–10* (Patna: Bihar & Orissa Research Society, 1978), 160–64. Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the District of Bhagalpore in 1810–11* (Patna: Bihar & Orissa Research Society, 1939), 192–95.

⁵ Buchanan-Hamilton, *Purnea in 1809–10*, 159–60. Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the District of Shahabad in 1812–13* (Patna: Bihar & Orissa Research Society, 1839), 165–66. Buchanan-Hamilton, *Bhagalpore in 1810–11*, 192–95.

⁶ Buchanan-Hamilton, *Bhagalpore in 1810–11*.

the mistress and her kinswomen. Some young female slaves provided sexual services. If they had families in the estate, they were allowed to go to their husbands' huts at night. Young, attractive female slaves may have found even that difficult, paying their husbands only occasional visits. When such women grew older, they were allocated domestic chores, such as sweeping, fetching fuel and water, and washing and processing grain. Female slaves were involved in housework as well as agricultural labour.⁷

In comparison to other labouring people, according to Buchanan-Hamilton, domestic slaves were well off and never attempted to run away. They were generally very faithful and obeyed the master's command, whatever its nature; and the landlords very seldom sold them even though they possessed the power to do so.⁸

Buchanan-Hamilton indicated that slaves, especially female slaves, were a part of the gender and generational matrix of the family-household. Among Muslim elites, he wrote, female slaves were often concubines. Thus, wealthy Muslim men would purchase a pretty female child to use her as a concubine when she was a little older. She would not acquire the rank or dignity of a wife, but might obtain a separate establishment and an easy life.⁹ He also wrote very specifically of retired soldiers of the EIC, who purchased or acquired by force boys and girls. They were looked upon as children, and usually inherited the retired soldier's property. The girls often became wives/concubines and received a pension from the EIC.

From Buchanan-Hamilton's description, it is clear that there were individual slaves as well as slave families. In the latter case, all members of the family worked in different capacities for the master's household. In addition, they might also have worked on land allotted to them for the sustenance of their own household. They might not have received maintenance, such as food and clothing, directly from the master's household.¹⁰ When slaves were sold, families were not separated—husbands and wives and children below marriageable age were sold together. But separation was not altogether unknown; masters could, and sometimes did, sell them individually if the price was higher. The practice

⁷ Ibid; Buchanan-Hamilton, *Purnea in 1809–10*, 160–64.

⁸ Buchanan-Hamilton, *Purnea in 1809–10*, 159–60.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 160–64.

of including slaves as wedding gifts for a daughter was common, especially among wealthy families.¹¹ There were also domestic slaves, who lived within the master's household and received maintenance from the master.

The marriage of slave children was governed by complex and locally varied rules but, as in some other parts of the world, the slave child followed the mother rather than the father. Thus, children of female slaves were slaves, even if fathered by the master. If the master allowed male slaves to marry slaves of other masters or free persons, the master had no right to the children. If, however, the master allowed a woman slave to marry another person's slave or even a free man, he retained all the children.¹² These were some general customs but there appear to have been considerable local variations governing marriage between slaves as well as between slaves and free persons. In some districts, such as Purnea, a free man marrying a slave girl was personally degraded to slavery.¹³ Such a man was called a *chutiya-gulam* (cunnoservus) and could not be sold, though he was bound to work for his wife's master at the usual allowance. His male children were in some places denigrated but free and called *garhas* (the sons of a slave woman married to a free man). In other places, the male children were slaves. The female children, in all cases, were reduced to slavery.¹⁴

Buchanan-Hamilton found the practice of slavery 'abominable' but he also found that the majority of slaves were not subjected to physical abuse. They were in general hard-working; they seldom ran away or were beaten.¹⁵ In some places, slaves worked harder than hired servants, and were better fed; but in other areas, where slaves were more numerous, in parts of Bengal for instance, physical intimidation was routine and deemed necessary. In these areas, slaves frequently ran away and hired themselves out as servants. Since the supply of servants was insufficient, other masters knowingly employed runaway slaves.¹⁶ Buchanan-Hamilton suggested a continuum between slavery and wage servants, indicating the existence of debt bondage as part of the practice of domestic service.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Buchanan-Hamilton, *Bhagalpore in 1810-11*, 192-95.

¹⁶ Buchanan-Hamilton, *Purnea in 1809-10*, 160-64.

His account implied that even wage servants could be 'attached', that is, be unfree/bonded. Households could also employ a mix of different kinds of servants, such as slaves, bonded workers and wage workers. The sale of servants was also often induced by debts incurred by the master. Thus, debt played an important role in the system. Equally, in this mix of forms of labour, juridically free contract labour often looked the same as hereditary servitude.

SLAVERY, MARRIAGE AND DOMESTIC WORK

The issue of domestic work invokes automatically the constitution of domestic and gender relations in the family. One of the earliest questions framed by feminist historians in India was with regard to the Vedic *dasi*, which was an interrogation of labour relations within the family-household.¹⁷ There is much more research to be done with regard to transitions in the nature and constitution of families and households, and their mutual inter-relationship. Indrani Chatterjee has argued that sale and purchase were not antithetical to notions of kin-constitution; thus, slavery was in fact inclusive of kinship.¹⁸ In South Asia, remarks Andrea Major, slavery was not always marked by 'social death': 'kinship and kinless-ness were not simply biological states in pre-colonial India but were socially constructed and negotiated conditions that could be fluid and complex.'¹⁹ This is particularly clear if we compare marriage with slavery. The usual markers of slavery are natal alienation, coercion, social death or violence. Clearly, marital and domestic relations share many of these features of slavery. In north India, the emphasis on village exogamy and the notion of incorporation into marital lineage upholds marriage as natal alienation; widows suffer social death; coercion and violence are integral to marital relationships and routine to the exercise of marital authority.

¹⁷ Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 27–87.

¹⁸ Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 21.

These commonalities reinforce the image of slavery as domestic but also suggest its opposite—that domestic relationships were *like* slavery.²⁰

By and large, despite intermittent criticisms of missionaries, the British approved the illiberality of Indian domesticity with its emphasis on subordination and discipline, and they accepted domestic slavery as a part of this system. At the same time, they absolved it of the more extreme vices of slavery by characterising it as mild and paternalistic. The equivalence with domestic slavery allowed the state to domesticate slavery; the state argued, more or less along the same lines as Buchanan-Hamilton, that slaves were treated with utmost compassion and that domestic slavery played a positive social function in providing a safety net for the poor and the destitute in the absence of public welfare institutions. Neither the Act of 1843 nor the Indian Penal Code (1860) gave any clear definition of slavery, there was little attempt to systematically apply what provisions did exist, and cases relating to slavery continued into the first decades of the twentieth century. The state did try to make a distinction between domestic slavery and domestic service, that is, between domestic service rendered within a dependent relationship and that rendered in exchange of wages. Indeed, Buchanan-Hamilton too made the distinction between 'free' servants and domestic slaves. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, domestic service remained a combination of slavery, debt bondage, forced labour and wage labour.

It was generally accepted by the British that domestic slavery was customarily a component of the 'government' of families. Thus, slave-holding became indistinguishable from family authority and, significantly, spoke to forms of incorporation other than marriage and gestation, a non-kin-based aspect of the constitution of the family-household.²¹ At one level, the familial metaphor sanctioned the use of coercion and violence as emanating from the 'natural' authority of the paterfamilias. At another level, however, slavery could be folded into family through marriage, which involved the exchange of women. The ubiquity of transactions in marriage established a strong relationship between family and slavery. It

²⁰ This has been offered as a general argument in the context of Europe as well. Famulus does mean servant.

²¹ Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law*.

became difficult to distinguish between *sale of wives* and *sale of women as wives*. There is considerable evidence in Bengal, for instance, of trafficking in brides, in ways that render various streams of trafficking—of wives, of prostitutes and of slaves—virtually parts of the same process of circulation of women.

In disputes regarding slaves, the parties were referred to civil courts, which usually recognised possession, the right to service, and even at times upheld the right to buy and sell with reference to Hindu or Muslim law. Only Hindus and Muslims could enforce their claims on slaves on the grounds that this was allowed in their personal law. Thus, the construction of the family through personal laws was extended to domestic slavery. For instance, the existence of ‘secondary’ wives, often synonymous with *dasis* or *bandis* (concubines or slave-women), became legitimated through the defence of polygamy in Hindu and Muslim personal laws. There was an implicit acceptance of the continuities between marriage, domestic service and trafficking, all of which operated in the context of a thriving market in slaves. Muslim men often went through a form of *nika*²² to retain control over female slaves, or in some cases the deed of conveyance was replaced by a deed of lease. In all these variations, marriage was a key device to cloak slavery and to retrieve runaway slaves, which speaks to the nature and understanding of marriage in Hindu and Muslim laws.

The colonial state’s inability to address questions of transaction in women and children in marriage and family law complicated their approach to trafficking. In the 1830s, the drought in northern India raised the question of sale of women and children. In Bengal, these discussions reached a peak during the Orissa famine of 1866, when the sale of children raised the possibility of new legislation. These discussions included the problems related to female slaves and *dasis*, domestic slaves and servants.

The British failed to understand the institutional links between marriage and domestic slavery. They complained of the laxity in the laws of marriage, especially Muslim marriage practices, but the fuzzy line between marriage and concubinage, and trafficking and marriage transactions, was not unintended. Thus, abducted women were sold into marriage, not as

²² Meaning marriage; for Muslims, the primary marriage and refers to the formal contract. The term is also used by Hindus to mean a second or secondary marriage.

the British believed in the 'pretext of marriage'. For instance, slave-holders forced women to undergo a nika ceremony to prevent their running away or enable their restoration if they ran away. The British accepted these fuzzy boundaries when they upheld 'forced' marriages and dismissed demands for women's consent in marriage. How could courts distinguish between regular marriages and those that involved trafficking?²³ The colonial state attempted from time to time to distinguish between male property rights over members of the family and the flourishing 'illegitimate' commerce in women and children. Their efforts in this direction were stymied by the easy adaptation of customary transactions in marriage.

Akanksha Singh writes that in Kumaon, where transaction in persons was commonplace, women nevertheless were more commonly enslaved. She draws the link between marriage, kinship and slavery.²⁴ In the nineteenth century, brideprice marriages remained widely prevalent. The payment of money for a bride was socially accepted and other transactions followed from this logic. The resale of a wife by her husband or of a widow by her son or relatives was widely practised, accepted as 'tradition' in some parts of the country. Such transactions may have originated in the custom of a seducer paying a sum of compensation to the husband for injury sustained. Indeed, the custom of a lover or a second husband paying a compensatory amount was in many cases the chief ingredient of divorce and remarriage. The British tried to reinterpret or restrict such practices, but without much success. Not only were they not willing to challenge transactions attending marriage and remarriage, but were also unable to set apart such transactions from ordinary trafficking or sale and purchase. It often proved impossible to distinguish the compensation from a collusive sale; indeed, the courts could exercise no control over such transactions unless there was explicit evidence of 'immoral' purpose.²⁵

²³ Samita Sen, 'Crossing Communities: Religious Conversion, Rights in Marriage, and Personal Law', in *Negotiating Spaces: Legal Domains, Gender Concerns and Community Constructs*, ed. Flavia Agnes and Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 77–109.

²⁴ Singh, 'Forms of Labour Servitude in Colonial North India', 75–78.

²⁵ Chatterjee argues that the colonial perception of slaves as unfree beings also constituted a major shift in the understanding of the slave in relation to family and ancestry. Thus, the status of slave marriages and children born of concubinage also

The difficulty of policing the *zenana* meant that the state was unable to control trafficking in women and children, whether for marriage, domestic slavery or prostitution.

DOMESTIC SLAVERY NOT BENIGN

The debates on slavery and unfreedom speak strongly to tradition and custom in the practices rather than the legal organisation of domestic service. Throughout the British period and after, domestic workers remained ambiguously under general laws of labour contracts, without any legal framework to address the specificity of their status and working conditions. While, formally, there was a transition from slavery to wage work, this was not a secular process. The substance and forms of slavery remained entangled in waged domestic work with the persistence of different forms of bondage and dependencies, economic and cultural. Given that the elements of different forms of labour arrangements were included in domestic work relationships, they did not correspond to juridical description of categories as they emerged in colonial law. Thus, slave/servile relationships inhered in wage work.

Radhika Singha has argued that in the course of the nineteenth century the conceptual space of the domestic narrowed in relation to the state and the market, but there were also constant flows between the domestic and the market in the form of trafficking and an extension of the laws of household regulation, such as master–servant laws, to wider markets underwritten by the state.²⁶ These links between trafficking and domestic work survive into the twenty-first century. In India, since the 1990s, there has been a highly polarised situation in the domestic work sector. On the one hand, there has been considerable progress in improving conditions of work and unionisation; on the other, there is an increasing concern about

suffered. Indrani Chatterjee, 'Gossip, Taboo and Writing Family History', in *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 222–60.

²⁶ Radhika Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic: Criminal Law and the "Head of the Household", 1772–1843', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 3, 1996, 309–43.

slavery in middle class homes in major Indian cities, illegal employment of children (especially girls) and trafficking.

The passing of the International Labour Organization's convention 189 in 2011 was a landmark for the domestic work sector. Despite its initial reluctance, the government of India finally signed the convention in 2011 but has not yet ratified it. There have been intermittent efforts to legislate to protect domestic workers since the 1950s. In early 2014, there was near consensus on a bill to regulate working conditions. The incumbent government lost in the general elections soon after in May and the bill was not tabled. The hesitation of the state to regulate the conditions of paid domestic work is a legacy bequeathed from the colonial to the postcolonial state. There have been suggestions that alternatively a policy framework or a national platform be accepted; anything but legislation. A few states have passed some rudimentary regulation. More than 10 states have now included domestic workers in the schedule of minimum wage legislation. There have been many local or state-level unions registered and there are now efforts towards a national union of domestic workers called the National Progressive Domestic Workers' Federation. Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been working in this sector and some of them, such as the National Domestic Workers Movement, have been leading organisational efforts as well as lobbying for legislation. In the 2014 elections to Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament), Renuka Sayola contested on behalf of the Andhra Pradesh State Domestic Workers Union as an independent candidate from Musheerabad. Even though she did not win, her participation as a domestic worker in mainstream electoral politics is of immense symbolic significance. Apart from organisational initiatives from below, there have also been market innovations. An agency system has grown in an effort to connect demand and supply, and to a limited extent, this has improved wages and working conditions, imparting some degree of standardisation of hours of work, leave entitlements and wages in the bigger cities.

The agency system, however, has also facilitated trafficking. The pathways of such trafficking are not fully understood yet, but Delhi as a destination has been very much in the news in recent years. Many placement agencies in Delhi and Mumbai, for instance, deal with trafficked minors; some of them are directly involved in sourcing

migrants. Domestic workers, particularly young women and children, are trucked in from states like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam and Odisha, as well as from Nepal, all well-known grounds for human traffickers. The workers are often victims of extreme violence from agents and employers. Kabi Karki, who heads Save Nepali Mission, a voluntary collective, speaks of underage women kept like animals with almost no food in placement agencies.²⁷ There are horrific tales of brutal violence perpetrated on trafficked workers.

The Chhattisgarh government is the only one that has responded, with new legislation in 2014 to curb trafficking of children. In response to a public interest litigation filed in the Supreme Court, state governments were directed to be more accountable in cases of missing children. In October 2014, the Chhattisgarh government admitted to the Supreme Court that huge numbers of children were smuggled out of Maoist-affected districts such as Bastar by private placement agencies to work in paid domestic service or as bonded labourers. The state reported that out of 9,428 children missing between January 2011 and December 2013, it had traced 1,204. There was a glaring mismatch between these figures and those submitted to Parliament (over 4,000 missing children). The judges considered these reports to be misleading, since either the figure given to the Court or that given to Parliament had to be wrong. The state had already passed a law to try and check the activities of placement agencies, but the number of missing children remained large. In Bihar, for instance, 2,814 children were reported missing between January 2013 and September 2014, of whom 633 could not be traced. Bachpan Bachao Andolan had quoted National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figures that 117,469 children across the country were missing between 2008 and 2010, but the police had registered only 20,000 first information reports (FIRs). These figures were so disturbing that the Court gave a special direction to the police in all states to register FIRs expeditiously in cases of missing children. Most state governments were unresponsive; they had

²⁷ Asit Jolly and Asmita Bakshi (with Sonali Acharjee), 'Maid to Order: Cruelties on Domestic Workers Highlight the Plight of People Caught Between Dubious Placement Agencies and Homeowners with Medieval Mindset', *India Today*, 29 November 2013, Available at <https://www.pressreader.com/india/india-today/20131209/281543698716357> (accessed on 16 August 2018).

other priorities and a pragmatic policy acceptance of the limited options open to poor families. Most of them did not bother to file the compliance records required by the Court.²⁸ Things remain much the same despite the intervention of the apex court.

In 2012–14, there was a demand in Assam by anti-trafficking activists for legislation to regulate placement agencies, to combat the rise in trafficking of children as domestic workers from the state. According to activists, owners of placement agencies kept the children in confinement in unhygienic conditions for several days and prevented them from communicating with relatives back home. Digambar Narzary, chairperson of the Nedan Foundation, a Kokrajhar-based anti-trafficking NGO, said such a law was urgently required in Assam. Many districts in Assam, such as Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Sonitpur, had become a hotbed of trafficking, especially of children, who were forced into domestic work. The children were often exploited, abused or even pushed into prostitution; many simply remained untraced. Nobel laureate and child rights crusader, Kailash Satyarthi, during a visit to Assam in December 2012, acknowledged the fact that the state had emerged as one of the biggest source areas, transit routes and destinations for trafficking of children. In 2013, the regional director of the North Eastern Regional Domestic Workers' Movement, Sister Teresa Ralte, said that there were 1,500 children working in Shillong alone, apart from those taken to major cities in other states. Children, who had been rescued, demanded an end to these trafficking networks and the right to education.²⁹ Ravi Kant, president of the NGO Shakti Vahini, which has been behind the rescue of several children who were forced into domestic work in Delhi in inhuman conditions, said the absence of such legislation in Assam made it difficult to ascertain the exact number of placement agencies and their agents operating in the state. Existing

²⁸ *The Telegraph*, 'Kids Smuggled for Domestic-help Industry—Chhattisgarh Makes Startling Admission in Court, Gets Pulled up for Mismatch in Numbers', 31 October 2014, available at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1141031/jsp/nation/story_18984331.jsp#.VaywZvmqqko (accessed on 30 May 2019).

²⁹ 'Voiceless, Left to Fend for Themselves', *The Telegraph*, 13 June 2013, available at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/voiceless-left-to-fend-for-themselves/cid/291686> (accessed on 30 May 2019); Pankaj Sharma, 'Assam a Hub for Child Labour: Conclave', *The Telegraph*, 13 April 2015.

data for 2011–14 showed that a meagre 344 women and children had been rescued, and only 257 culprits arrested.³⁰

The situation in Assam is similar to some other states in India. A vicious network of human traffickers has grown, drawing children from remote poverty-stricken areas and bringing them to the metros, primarily for domestic work. The worst affected state is undoubtedly Jharkhand. Sanjay Mishra, a member of the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR) member, and Shanti Kindo, chairperson of Jharkhand Labour Commission, agreed that every year, around 35,000 children were trafficked from Jharkhand to other states. A majority were engaged either in domestic work or as labourers in hotels and *dhabas* (road-side eateries).³¹ In 2013, Phoolmani (whose namesake's death in 1891 triggered the age-of-consent debates in British India), the 16-year-old daughter of Lalmani Nagesia, died under mysterious circumstances while working in a Delhi home. She had been brought to Delhi illegally by Batti Oraon and sold to Anil Ahuja, the employer, for one year for Rs 23,000. She was not paid anything at all.³² In 2014, four girls were abducted from Jharkhand and employed as domestic workers in various parts of Delhi. While two of the girls were from Chaibasa, the others were from Khunti and Gumla. One of them was brought to Delhi by a network operated by Panna Lal Mahto, a trafficking kingpin who was arrested in Delhi. It was felt that the Jharkhand administration was not vigilant enough to check these cases.³³ Soon after, in April 2015, 26 girls aged between 10 and 15 years, who had been lured to Delhi and adjoining areas by middlemen for domestic work, were rescued and returned to their homes in Jharkhand. Among these, 12 had fled employer homes due to beatings, starvation and abuse, and had subsequently been placed in shelters. Fourteen others were rescued by a team from Delhi and Jharkhand in a series of crackdowns on homes

³⁰ Sharma, 'Assam a Hub for Child Labour'.

³¹ Arti S. Sahuliyar, 'Rescued Kids Narrate Ordeals', *The Telegraph*, 24 June 2015.

³² Ibid.

³³ Sumi Sukanya, 'Battered Khunti Girl Rescued', *The Telegraph*, 23 November 2014; 'Trafficking Kingpin Confesses to Crime', *Times of India*, 2 November 2014, available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/45007986.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (accessed on 30 May 2019).

and placement agencies starting on 7 December 2014. This eight-member crackdown team comprised of two members from the Delhi-based Child Welfare Committee, one from Delhi Police, four from the Ranchi-based NGO Bhartiya Kisan Sangh, and one from the Jharkhand State Child Welfare Committee. The girls, hailing from poor homes in Simdega, Khunti, Sahebganj, Lohardaga, the twin Singhbhum, Garhwa, Gumla and Bokaro, had been lured by their own relatives or professional middlemen with the promise of a better life. Most were school dropouts but some of them wanted to pursue their education, such as a 14-year-old Simdega girl. Her own uncle had brought her to Delhi, she recalled. She remained as a domestic worker for four months, but mental and physical torture prompted her to escape from the house. Delhi Police took her to Nirmal Chhaya, a shelter. Gumla's Kranti Kumari (15 years old) was a domestic worker for three months. She was beaten and starved, and she escaped.³⁴ In an exceptional case, Nisha Kamari (12 years old) started as a domestic worker at the age of six years.³⁵

A few months later (in June 2015), Lata Lakra from Chanhoo was arrested. According to her, she was just a domestic worker, but she allegedly owned property and assets in Delhi and Jharkhand worth millions. She was arrested from her lavish mansion on the outskirts of Ranchi. She was accused of trafficking and it was believed that she had sent out nearly 1,500 children from Jharkhand in the past decade. Lata, in her mid-thirties, confessed to having given jobs to around 150 underage girls as domestic workers, but her wealth suggested far higher numbers. She claimed that she received a commission of Rs 4,000 per girl she placed. Local NGOs had compiled a list of 245 traffickers in the state, of which 35 (including Lata) had been listed as kingpins. A school dropout from Chanhoo, Lata went to Delhi as a domestic worker in 2000. Within two to three years, she set up her own placement agency. Her husband was a casual labourer in Bharat Coking Coal Ltd in Dhanbad. Lata sent her two children to schools in Delhi.³⁶

Around the time the police were investigating Lata, in July 2015, there was a bizarre case in Noida involving the death of Kaleshri Kumari, who

³⁴ Arti S. Sahuliyar, '26 Girls Back from Delhi', *The Telegraph*, 3 April 2015.

³⁵ Sahuliyar, 'Rescued Kids Narrate Ordeals'.

³⁶ A. S. R. P. Mukesh, 'Shadow of 1500 Kids on Money Maid', *The Telegraph*, 24 June 2015.

fell from an eighth-floor flat, purportedly while feeding her employer's pigeons. The Delhi police did not act on the case, but a murder case was registered in Latehar, Jharkhand, from where the girl hailed. The case related to murder, kidnapping, human trafficking, suppressing evidence, criminal conspiracy and violation of the Juvenile Justice Act. The Noida police prepared an inquest report showing the girl's age as 22 years, but the Latehar police called Kaleshari a minor. Placement agent Mahavir Yadav, the second defendant, hailed from Gumla and supplied maids to Delhi. A third defendant, a woman named Gudiya, is suspected to have procured Kaleshari and sent her to work at locations neither she nor her family were told about. Though the girl died in Noida, the crime of trafficking a minor began in Latehar. The girl's father complained that his daughter, taken away by a placement agent three years ago, did not communicate with the family. Despite objections from NGO Shakti Vahini, which had alerted Noida police about the girl's death, and from Latehar sub-inspector Sanjay Kumar, the girl was cremated before proper investigations could be made.³⁷

This new class war inside affluent urban homes is now openly characterised as a 'modern master and slave' relationship. A news report which makes this assertion asks an important question: How do we prevent middle-class homes from being 'zones of inequity and oppression in a free and independent India'?³⁸ The association with slavery is strengthened by the conditions in which the trafficked children enter service and are often held. What is the domestic work for which children are starved, beaten, tortured and imprisoned? The purpose seems to be the reproduction of glamorous lifestyles in swanky residential areas. However, the work has not changed greatly; it remains highly labour-intensive and involves cleaning; washing; dusting; polishing metal and glass; cooking; caring for the elderly, children and pets; and watering indoor plants. The lifestyle has become glamorous, the work has remained unchanged.

The slavery motif is suggestive. In an earlier work on the history of domestic workers in colonial Bengal, Swapna Banerjee wrote of the

³⁷ Pheroze L. Vincent, 'Murder FIR for Maid's Fatal Fall', *The Telegraph*, 14 July 2015.

³⁸ Debarshi Dasgupta, Dola Mitra, Pushpa Iyengar, Madhavi Tata, Chandrani Banerjee and Amba Batra Bakshi, 'Inside Slave City', *Outlook*, 23 April 2012, available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/inside-slave-city/280558> (accessed on 20 July 2015).

centrality of wage workers within the home, mediating domestic life and relationships within the articulation of middle-class identity.³⁹ In a recent book on domestic workers in Kolkata, Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum invoke 'servitude' to understand the relationship between master/mistress and servant, not as a feudal remnant but as embedded in our modernity.⁴⁰ Domestic workers partake in a relationship that appears to be both synchronous and anachronous to modernity.

In July 2018, the Global Slavery Index (GSI) published fresh results which estimate that on any given day in 2016 there were nearly 8 million people living in modern slavery in India. In terms of the prevalence of modern slavery, India stands first in the world; there were 6.1 victims for every 1,000 people. In the 2016 GSI, there were 18.3 million people in modern slavery in India. The difference between these two figures reflects changes in methods and categories, but the 2018 GSI also reflects the addition of forced sexual exploitation and children in modern slavery. The most current available data from the NCRB indicate that there were 8,132 reported cases of human trafficking across India in 2016. In the same year, 15,379 people were trafficked of whom 9,034 victims were below the age of 18 years. In addition, 23,117 people were rescued from trafficking, including 14,183 below the age of 18 years. Of these, 10,509 victims reported being trafficked for the purpose of forced labour. In this category, the most significant are local and migrant domestic workers, both from within India and overseas. By the definition of the GSI, 'slavery' involves hard physical labour, coercion, ill-treatment, and even confinement.⁴¹ The government of the day dismissed the GSI results; however, exactly one week later, it passed the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill 2018, which controversially seeks to expand the focus to include issues such as trafficking for domestic labour. This was not passed in the Rajya Sabha (upper house of Parliament) at the time

³⁹ Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁰ Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁴¹ 'Global Slavery Index 2018 Estimates', 20 July 2018, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Global-Slavery-Index-2018-estimates> (accessed on 16 August 2018); and <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/> (accessed 16 August 2018).

of writing this Interjection. There has been a great deal of criticism of the bill from myriad perspectives, especially from communities of sex workers.⁴² It remains to be seen to what extent the Centre and various state governments in India are willing to address the spread of slavery within the domestic work sector.

⁴² Many issues have been raised. To mention three: first, sex workers' collectives have been left out of any consultations by the government in drafting this bill; second, offences such as trafficking-related pregnancy and/or exposure to HIV and AIDS seem to be targeting sex workers; and third, it fails to remove Section 8 of the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA) under which women are punished for soliciting in a public place.

II

SERVANTS IN LITERARY AND PUBLIC WORLDS

5 | Representing Servant Lives in the Household and Beyond

PRABHAT KUMAR*

Domestic servants have been ubiquitous in the modern Hindi literary corpus. Their representation, however, is contingent upon inhabiting the domestic world of the master and less on their own. This is because, until the 1990s, writers—although far from homogeneous in their approach—have invariably belonged to the class of masters. The story of servants' lives, if not central, has been intermeshed with their masters' subjectivity. Literary representations nonetheless capture the lives of domestic servants with richness and complexity, albeit they remain ostensibly inflected with their masters' moral and ideological concerns. The changing moral-political climate in history brings palpable shifts in such representations, along with nondescript continuities. We shall therefore examine the politics, poetics and history of servants' representation across several genres and over a relatively long period, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

We shall briefly touch upon the self-styled reformist educational manuals of the nineteenth century and highlight some aspects of the discursive formulation of the master-servant relationship. We shall then juxtapose and discuss the figure of domestic servant in selected early Hindi novels, a new literary genre which, amongst other things, brought the household (and its constituents, including servants) to the centre of literary-political imagination in late nineteenth-century colonial India. We shall examine the similarities and/or differences between the

* I am grateful to Dr Nitin Sinha and Dr Awadhendra Sharan for their incisive comments.

two literary representations, without overlooking their complicated interconnections with questions of domesticity and nationalism. Next, we shall explore visual and literary representations of the domestic servant between the 1920s and 1930s. Along with cartoons, which arguably aimed at reforming and entertaining readers, we shall also deal with some short stories and sketches which self-consciously endeavoured to represent these subaltern social characters and their predicament during the high tide of anti-colonial nationalism. In doing so, we shall tease out the shifts and continuities in the language and politics of representation of the servant in late colonial times.

GRAMMAR OF THE MISTRESS–MAID RELATIONSHIP

Out of countless literary, religious, social and didactic Hindi print production in the late nineteenth century, educational tracts were an important genre. Patronised and promoted by government and communitarian institutions, they aimed to train and educate young men and women in a variety of new subjects and skills. Many of these tracts keep in mind the age, sex, class and gender of the students/readers. Let us examine one such book intended to teach the art of letter-writing to women: *Striyon kī Hitopatrikā arthāt Hindī me Khat-Patra ādi Sikhāne kī Pustak* (A Compendium for the Benefit of Women or a Guidebook for Teaching Letter-Writing), published in 1873 by Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow (Figure 5.1). The book contains specimens of women's letters written to and received from various kin, relatives and domestic servants. It focuses on the skill of language, on format and manner of addressing. The content of the letters makes it quite obvious that this book shares the ideological and pedagogic agenda of contemporary reformist literature which sought to define new gender roles, duties and responsibilities. As many historians have argued after Partha Chatterjee's seminal essay in *Recasting Women*, the middle-class, high- (and also intermediary) caste nationalist/reformist discourse in the late nineteenth century put a premium on the 'autonomous' inner domain of 'home' against the outer world marked by colonial subjugation. It sought to fashion a new image of womanhood, domesticity, respectability, and so forth, which were

crucial to the self-fashioning of the middle class and its articulation of Indian nationalism.¹ Extending this line of argument, some scholars have expounded that since the servants, along with family women, were integral to the imagination of a household, the idea of the domestic servant too was redefined.² Clearly, this letter-writing manual embodies similar ideological imperatives. It underlines the significance of the domestic servant within such a nationalist imagination of home. This is reflected in the fact that of the total fifty-eight letters featured, five show communication between (female) servant and mistress.³ It is postulated that not only the ladies of the household, but also the servants should be educated and made the bearers of the reformist pedagogy.

¹ Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 233–53. For a critical use of Chatterjee's formulation, see Tanika Sarkar, 'The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Studies in History* 8, no. 2, 1992, 213–35.

² Swapna Banerjee emphasises that servants were crucial in refashioning of the middle-class self. Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Charu Gupta has shown that the image of ideal wife-woman in Hindu middle-class discourse was constructed vis-à-vis the women of lower-caste/class service providers such as *chamarin*, *kaharin* and *paniharin*. See Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016), chs 1, 2. With largely similar source material but by highlighting the servant characters, Charu Gupta's latest work deals with Hindu middle-class anxieties in relation to Muslim and Dalit servants. See Charu Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies: Representation of Servants in Hindi Print Culture of Colonial India', *Studies in History* 34, no. 2, 2018, 141–63. Moreover, we can extend Banerjee's and Gupta's arguments: such literature also sought to redefine the morality, manners and duties (but not rights) of servants.

³ This tract itself was apparently translated from Urdu. The booklet belongs to the early/formative period of Hindi prose, when the modern *khari boli* and its grammar were not yet standardised. Hence, it contains a lot of variation from today's standard, not only in spelling, punctuation and gender, but also in terms of grammatical, linguistic and idiomatic usage. For instance, a big house or mansion is termed in Sanskritised idiom as *pratiṣṭhān* in the titles of the letters, but is called *kothī/havelī* in the letters' content. The common noun for female domestics is *naukar* not *naukarani*, but their principle verbs are gendered. Paṇḍit Shiv Nārāyaṇ, *Striyon kī hitopatrikā arthāt hindī me khat-patra ādī sikhāne kī pustak* (A Compendium for the Benefit of Women or a Guidebook for Teaching Letter-Writing) (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1873), 118–24.

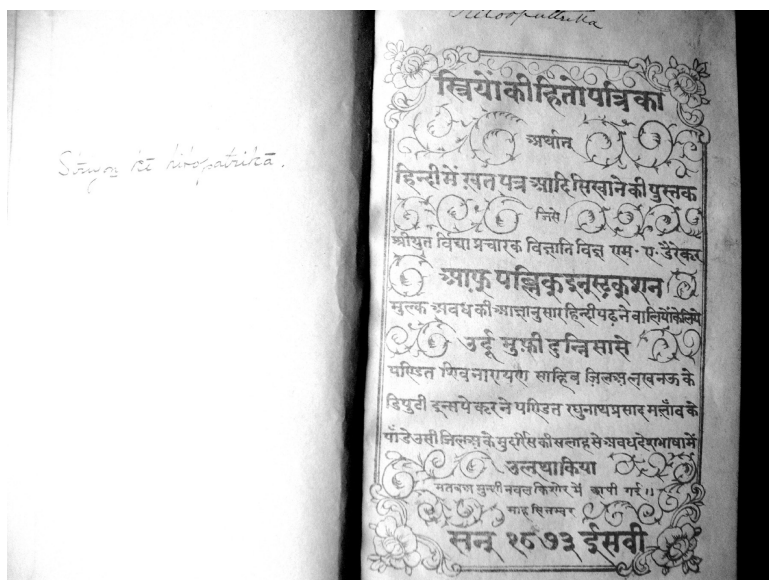


FIGURE 5.1 Cover page of *Striyon kī hitopatrikā arthāt hindī me khat-patra ādī sikhāne kī pustak* [A Compendium for the Benefit of Women or a Guidebook for Teaching Letter-Writing] (1873)

If we move beyond the frames set by these otherwise important studies, which look at the household as the site of recasting the middle-class self, patriarchy and nationalism, such pedagogic literature also provides further insights into another social relation and its hierarchy in the same domestic world. Deep in the framework of ‘the nation and its women’, there existed another relationship of domination and subalternity between the goddess of the pantheon known as ‘the home’ and her servants, ideally female. The manual contains educative/model letters. They are very much designed for hypothetical situations and are meant to be largely impersonal. These letters, it can be reasonably inferred, seek to outline a grammar of mistress–maid relations.

The content of the letters suggests that a mistress must verify a domestic servant’s character and record of service before employing him/her in the household. It is indirectly recommended that the servant’s wage (preferably in cash) be fixed before hiring. It is also alluded to that for effective control

and ensuring their disciplined conduct, there should be some sort of service rules set out to govern the servants, with regard to the likes of granting leave before their visiting home, being punctual about returning to work after stipulated leave, and so forth. The mistress, in turn, is expected to ensure that the servants are performing their duties diligently.

Moreover, the servant-letters are notable for their language and mannerisms. The relationship between the servant and the mistress is broadly delineated in the standard language of class distinction. The letters imply that the lady of the house should master the language of command and perform her superiority in her everyday gestures, mode of address and manner of speech; the maid must embody the gestures of submission and obedience.

In the formulation of this didactic text, the category of mistress is homogeneous; she is a generic wife-woman of the rich household living in a mansion. But the class of servants is marked by hierarchy and differentiation. Servants are of different ranks/ages, as senior or junior servant/maid. The senior maid is an elderly woman. She is the personal attendant of the mistress, thus symbolising not only her seniority in age but also a greater access to the physical and emotional world of the mistress in comparison to other maids. Next in rank is any other maid or junior maid who assists in household chores. There is a subtle but clear difference in the lady's mode of address to her variously ranked servants. While senior maid is addressed by proper name with a respectable suffix (*jī*), the other maids are not. However, masterly authority and the tone of the language in the lady's letters remain undiluted in her address to both categories of servants. While the lady speaks of a servant as *naukar*, the maids describe themselves as *dāsī* or *lauṇḍī* (indicating a more slave-like status) of their mistress. The mistress herself is referred to by maids as *sarkar* (a word that means 'government' in a political context, and here symbolises 'mistress' in a particular form of patronage and dependence).

The model letters are generally silent on the caste status of the maids, yet there are hints. The name of the senior maid, for instance, is Rukmini. Conventionally, such a chaste Sanskrit name would appear to be that of an upper-caste woman. In another instance, requirement of a *bārīn* (lower-caste woman) servant as junior maid is expressed in one of the letters. Steeped in reformist pedagogy of the late nineteenth century, these

imaginary letters imply that a rich upper-caste Hindu home is governed by the wife-woman of the household. Although subordinate to her man, she is expected to rule over and control a band of honest, hardworking and obedient servants (preferably women of any caste). The language and grammar of the mistress–maid relationship are to be guided by a normative code of hierarchy, marked by an impersonal tone and devoid of personal affect.

Let us juxtapose this educational manual and some early Hindi novels. Servants are important in the narratives of novels of the late nineteenth century. *Parīkṣā Gurū*, arguably the first Hindi novel set in the Indian merchant milieu of Delhi, has been studied by various scholars but none of these works have looked at the master–servant relationship therein.⁴ One of the weaknesses of the protagonist in *Parīkṣā Gurū*, the reader is told, is that he does not know how to control or deal with his army of servants. The master does not maintain a ledger-account of the servants, noting their stipulated salary and how much they have actually received. On the contrary, he keeps them more like a feudal aristocrat; the servants also behave more like his retainers and hangers-on than as hired workers.⁵ For instance, there are male domestic workers, who, although only marginally present in the story, demand large sums of money beyond their stipulated salary, as personal favours. They expect the master to help them with the marriage expenses of their children, as if he was a family patriarch and they were his kin. The master's attachment to the servants is far from ideal—it overtops the boundaries of the impersonal, rational and professional.

⁴ A. S. Kalsi, 'Parīkṣāguru (1882): The First Hindi Novel and the Hindu Elite', *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 4, 1992, 763–90; Vasudha Dalmia, 'A Novel Moment in Hindi: Parīkṣa Guru or the Tutelage of Trial', in *Narrative Strategies: Essays on South Asian Literature and Films*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Theo Damsteegt (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 169–84. The novel was first published in 1882. I have used the reprint. Lālā Śrinivās Dās, *Parīkṣā Gurū* [Tutelage of Trial] (Ilāhābād: Kitāb Mahal, 2014).

⁵ Although leading servant characters are not domestic servants but mainly *munshis*, salesmen, etc., who assist in the master's business enterprise, the discussion shares the same grammar. When trouble visits the master and his business enterprise because of his spendthrift nature, social indulgence, inadequate maintenance of the records of trade transactions, inculcation of the vices of the old aristocracy and, more importantly, due to corrupt dealings of his *munshis* and salesmen, all servants, including domestic servants, start taking advantage of the situation.

Consequently, when a crisis visits the master, the servants trouble him even more and finally desert him. It is none other than the master, therefore, who is said to be responsible for the wicked behaviour of servants, for he does not abide by the codes of the master–servant relationship to begin with.

In sum, as with the educative manual discussed above, the novel, which arguably seeks to advocate a new or modern mercantile ethos against the old or traditional aristocratic culture of business and entrepreneurship, also pitches for a ‘modern’ way of keeping servants; that is, hired servants need to be impersonally regulated. Successful command relies not on liberties accorded to them (as it used to be in case of generationally bonded dependents) but, on the contrary, on maintaining a formal and impersonal relationship. Ironically, the master is the one who behaves more in the framework of ‘cultural continuity’. He is unable to differentiate between a hired servant and a dependent domestic resident.

Like the letters above, *Parīkṣā Gurū* also deals with the question of master–servant relations in exemplary and normative terms. The domestic worker as a person remains largely generic; he is an undeveloped, stock character in the novel. Furthermore, he is shown neither as interacting with the household women nor as having access to the women’s quarters. In just one instance, the *baḍī dāi* (senior maid) is introduced to the reader and the mistress–maid relationship is thinly sketched. Dāi, we are told, was under the tutelage of the lady of the house, who is a model Hindu wife-woman. Since the lady of the house cannot go out of the precinct and meet other men, dāi performs her tasks. She goes out and speaks on her lady’s behalf as her messenger. Baḍī dāi, in fact, is an interesting category of maidservant, who is conspicuous by her presence in early Hindi novels. In the next section we shall discuss the figure of baḍī dāi with reference to a late nineteenth-century novel which is unique for her elaborate characterisation therein. Her character is not only important for the novel’s narrative strategy, it is also distinct in the ways it advocates for a mistress–maid relationship based on the culture of kin-like bonds and affective care. Dāi’s character, in fact, adds an interesting and perhaps unsettling dimension to the normative binary of home and the world on which the novel’s narrative is structured. The wife-woman was far from adequately equipped to run the everyday business along the lines of the idea of the ‘autonomous’ domain of a middle-class home. Her agency

was dependent on a quintessential outsider: the maidservant. Hence, the maid–mistress relationship, as we shall see, acquired a different valency in early novels than the one between a male servant and his master.

SERVANT AS SUPPLEMENT

Bhuvaneshvar Mishra's *Balvant Bhumihār* (1896), set in a zamindari household of north Bihar, is one such novel that stands out in this regard.⁶ The figure of *baḍī dāi* is important not only from the point of view of her elaborate presence but also in terms of narrative structure. Before we discuss the figure of *baḍī dāi*, a brief comment on the historical context of the novel is in order.

Mishra's two novels, *Gharāu Ghatnā* (1893) and *Balvant Bhumihār* (1896), can be read as a nationalist literary response to the historic Age of Consent bill controversy. The nationalist outrage and consequent public controversy around the bill primarily questioned the authority of a foreign power to legislate laws that arguably belonged to the sovereign domain of the home/nation. Mishra's novels deal with this question in a unique way. They idealise a Hindu conjugality marked by perfectly matched courtship of adults, denying the existence of child marriage and pre-puberty consummation, and lauding the rituals and customs of marriage itself—thereby making the question of reform and legislation appear redundant.⁷ Mishra, thus, creatively responds to the alleged problems in the

⁶ Before going to Calcutta to get a law degree from Ripon College, Bhuvaneshvar Mishra (b. 1867) had worked as employee of the zamindari estate of Betia Raj and run the periodical *Camparaṇ Camdrikā*. During his stay in Calcutta in the 1890s, he worked as an editor of *Hindī Bangabāsi*, published by the Bangabasi Press, which was at the forefront of agitation against the Age of Consent Bill. After his Calcutta sojourn, he settled in Darbhanga and practised law in the lower court. Bhuvneśvar Miśra, *Balvant Bhumihār* (Dilli: Vidyā Vihār, 2005, reprint).

⁷ Mishra's first novel *Gharāu Ghatnā* (1893) was first serialised in *Hindī Bangabāsi* (February–April 1893) and then published in 1893 by Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow. *Gharāu Ghatnā* (literally, 'Household Events') is a celebratory public account of the inner domain: the household. It tells the story (like modern soap operas) of the thrilling experience of an arranged marriage of a literate adult couple of the same upper-caste Hindu family. It mentions the system of early/child marriage but insinuates that consummation takes place much after the age of consent is reached. The (second)

institution of Hindu marriage within the standard nationalist ideological frame of home/world in both novels. However, in the domain of home, the maidservant moves along the plot. Let us summarise it.

Balvant Bhumihār is built around the question of marriage between a man and woman hailing from rival landed Bhumihar families of Muzaffarpur (Tirhut district). They see each other at a Hindu temple when the girl comes to worship (in baḍī dāi's company) and her eyes meet those of a well-built, handsome young man immersed in his prayer. The boy, Balvant, palpably innocent of zamindari tricks and manoeuvrings (*dav-peṃc*), happens to be on the run from the girl's father, Ranpal Singh, who, as is typical of the litigant caste of Bhumihars, has planned to get him arrested on jumped-up charges and then usurp his zamindari property.⁸ After a lot of dramatic twists and turns, thanks to the secret but critical role played by baḍī dāi, the long family rivalry ends with patriarchal consent for the boy to marry the girl, and everybody lives happily ever after.

Coming to the figure of baḍī dāi: she is a 45-year-old, literate, dark-skinned, lower-caste maidservant, who knows more than anyone else in the family about the household and its open and dark secrets. Her name is Shukni, 'the one born on Friday', but she is not known or called by her proper name in the narrative. She does not have her own home and considers herself a member of the zamindar's household. She is also a second-generation maid. Her mother, Chanchaliya, had earned the position of baḍī dāi and was a surrogate of the sarkar in the household a generation earlier. Chanchaliya kept the place orderly, for the lady of the household at that time was weak and indifferent to the management of her own world. Chanchaliya had de facto authority in the home; no

arrival of the bride in the groom's house (*gaunā* or *dvirāgaman*) takes place when the couple are in their twenties. The novel celebrates the romance of conjugal love amidst detailed description of rituals, women's songs and culture during marriage and long drawn-out post-marriage festivities in an unspecified north Indian small town/*qasba*.

⁸ Ranpal was apparently taking revenge on Balvant for the alleged fault of the latter's father, who manipulatively took land from the former's innocent father. Amongst other things, the novel also reflects on the culture of litigation, feud and excess prevalent in rural society, especially amongst the dominant caste of Bhumihars. Apparently, the zamindars of Muzaffarpur were so scandalised by this depiction that they bought all the copies of the novel they could and destroyed them. See Rāmnirāñjan Parimalendu's preface to the 2005 reprint. Miśrā, *Balvant Bhumihār*, 8.

decisions were finalised without her consent. When the new bride (Sukni's mistress) came to the house, Chanchaliya mentored her like a mother-in-law. After she retired gracefully in her old age, the baton was passed to her own daughter. Sukni was born and raised in the same house. She acquired moral virtues, skills and intelligence from her mother and earned the same position after her death. She also nursed the babies of her mistress, who was of similar age as herself. Although she has her own family—a husband and a son who work as the zamindars' retainers—her identity as *baḍī dāi* is more important in the narrative of the novel.

Baḍī dāi is present throughout. In the opening scene at the temple, when the girl, Yamuna, sees a young man (Balvant) sitting next to the idol and hesitates to go close for prayer, *dāi* exhorts her not to be wary of a male stranger when in her protective presence. While running away from the retainers of his rival zamindar, the boy ends up in hiding in the house of the same girl and faints due to exertion. *Baḍī dāi* identifies him and locks him in. She examines the character of this boy in trouble and discerns that he is pure and proud. She then scrutinises the character of Yamuna like a strict mother, lest she bring bad name to her family by indulging in a love affair. Yamuna's pleading convinces her that she is a chaste and pure girl, but *baḍī dāi* anticipates a strange emotion (love at first sight) in her. She realises that Balvant is actually a nice zamindar boy who will be a fit match, but the lord himself is after his life and property.⁹ With the noble ultimate intention of fixing the wedding of Yamuna and Balvant, she starts manoeuvring and convincing all members of the family on the grounds of morality and pragmatism.¹⁰ She uses her trust and proximity to the sarkar

⁹ In another twist in the tale, Balvant is transported to another place with the help of Yamuna's mother (sarkar). *Baḍī dāi* happens to read a note written by her brother (Rampadarath Singh) to the lady; she quickly fathoms that he is being taken to Yamuna's maternal uncle (Rampadarath Singh). While the lady of the household does not know about Balvant, *baḍī dāi* finds out who he is. Balvant is running away from her master, Yamuna's father, and Yamuna's maternal uncle helps him for altogether different reasons.

¹⁰ For instance, in conversation with diwan, the manager of the estate, she blurts out that Balvant Singh has been unjustly harassed for no fault of his own. If Balvant's father had been a victorious litigant against her master's ancestors, it was not his fault. It is insinuated that Balvant is an innocent, proud and able-bodied intelligent man. He is one of the most eligible bachelors in the locality. He instead should be won over to the master's side.

in order to convince the zamindar's son, the brother-in-law and the *divan* (who deals in revenue and litigation matters) to be mild and seek a peaceful arbitration and settlement of the dispute. These three, in turn, persuade the lord Ranpal Singh (father of Yamuna) and a settlement is reached. Thus, due to baḍī dāi's intervention, the dispute is settled and the proposal of Yamuna and Balvant's wedding is floated. Balvant hesitantly and happily agrees; so does Yamuna's father, zamindar Ranpal Singh.

One may wonder why baḍī dāi is such an important figure in the narrative. Why actions that should have ideally been assigned to the sarkar, the lady of the household, are conscripted onto the character of baḍī dāi? The narrative of the early novel, in general, is spatially structured into two separate but interlinked domains of home and the outside world. In this gendered division, the ideal household is governed by the lady of the household, tellingly addressed as 'sarkar' by the servants.¹¹ She is expected to be a sovereign in the domestic space, and should be responsible for the maintenance of (moral-ethical) order in the family. The circulation of her sovereignty, however, is confined to the precincts of the home, for her mobility is strictly limited and she does not step outside. Therefore, she needs someone to transport her authority outside the physical space of home, where other matters pertaining to household circulate. In such a household, baḍī dāi emerges as a critical figure. Since baḍī dāi's movement is unrestricted, because she is a lower-class/caste and also old woman, she provides what the lady of the household lacks (especially when the matters of the home travel out into the world). She acts as a proxy or go-between in the spaces outside, where the mistress simply cannot move because of the confining social code of middle-class respectability. It is because of her class position that dāi can do what the lady cannot. In this way, some of the sovereignty of the mistress is parcelled out to baḍī dāi.

In the cases of Chanchaliya and Sukni in the novel under discussion, baḍī dāi is more than just an inert carrier of the sarkar's power outside the confines of home. Baḍī dāi embodies, manoeuvres and performs her mistress's inferred authority on a daily basis, while simultaneously carrying the mark of her servile status. Despite being a servant, on the basis of her loyalty, honesty, integrity and devotion to the values and wellbeing of the

¹¹ Even the servant-letters discussed above address the lady as sarkar.

household, baḍī dāi earns and carves out a unique position for herself. At the cost of losing her individuality (her own family is of no relevance in the story), she is elevated to a higher status; she is *like* a member of her master's family. So, she is superior in hierarchy of servants, because she is unlike a typical waged worker, who performs assigned work and retreats into her/his own home outside of working hours. Rather, she lives to care for her master's family. Unlike the maids of the educational manual, baḍī dāi's duty and deeds in the novel operate in the register of care and affect. Consequently, she assists and often substitutes sarkar in looking after the daily affairs of home; she carries the trinkets of the latter's authority. However, her authority is always mediated and carries the mark of her identity as servant. Although she advises and instructs the young maiden and bride, with the larger aim of maintaining the ethos of the household, and is duly respected by them as a senior woman of the family, in critical moments the dāi never fails to drop a reminder that she is after all their launḍī or dāsī. Thus, she has no absolute authority over them, yet her loyalty to the sarkar obliges her to speak in the interests of the household. She commands, while being submissive at the same time. The younger women reciprocate with endearing compliance.

Baḍī dāi has interesting language, tone and gestures. To cite some examples, she addresses the young bride of the house using the respectable and formal pronoun *āp* and does not sit in her presence, but the tone of her speech remains edifying. Meanwhile, the bride does what the senior maid asks her to do. The bride (the would-be lady of the house) keeps *pardā* (veil) from the senior maid, and she also does not sit on her bed in her presence. The bride's manners are reverential, but she maintains a masterly distance and bridal silence simultaneously. Similarly, dāi is *like* an elder family woman, she is like another mother to the master's daughter.¹² She is a protector of the family's daughter outside the home as well as inside. She accompanies her as a servant and a guardian when the daughter goes out. Inside the home, she is caretaker of her moral, social, psychological (and potentially sexual) feelings and requirements. The duties and deeds

¹² Their mode of address is less hierarchical and informal. Dāi is addressed as *daiyā* by the family daughter, dāi addresses her as *tum* (informal 'you'). In the region where the novel is set, a grandmother is also called dāi.

of baḍī dāi and the ideal lady of the household, although distinguished by bold markers of class difference, are overlapping and fused into one another in the novel. What defines dāi's character is her unique relation to the sarkar and her extra-monetary service as affective caretaker of a (Hindu) family's values and culture.

In other words, the figure of baḍī dāi shares and supplements the duties and responsibilities of the ideal wife-woman of the household. Dāi effectively belongs to the same home as the sarkar; her individual identity as a household woman, wife and mother is irrelevant. Her moral integrity and loyalty to the household are unwavering. She puts herself at risk for the greater family good. She is articulate and upright, yet conforms to the code of social hierarchy (master/mistress-servant relationship). These qualities make her the moral axis of the family. She is also the bearer of the moral compass: she communicates in her conversation with divan that the patriarch is harassing the innocent lad. Her indefatigable service to the household has implications which manifest beyond the domestic world: the long drawn-out zamindari conflict is settled; a maiden is married with the best available suitor in the local clan. In fact, the dynamic figure of baḍī dāi and, by extension, the mistress-maid relationship, emerge as the constitutive axis in the early Hindi novel set in the discursive frame of the home and the outside world, which sought to redesign the architecture of relationships in the Hindu household.

SERVANT AS FIGURE OF CONTRAST

Moving away from nineteenth-century literary examples, in this section we consider the representation of domestic servants in the early twentieth-century cartoon or *vyamgya-citra* (literally, visual satire) which appeared in Hindi periodicals.¹³ Hindi journals, especially in

¹³ For literary monthlies, which operated with a reformist rhetoric and an agenda of serving the nation, the new art form of the cartoon appeared to be a potentially attractive genre with a distinctive function. For the editors, the cartoon was an entertaining medium which attracted a popular readership on the one hand. On the other, it could sharply intervene into contemporary public issues as the bearer of reformist polemic with an elevated but implicit aim of rectification, improvement and reform by highlighting the anomaly of the subject. Many editors and commentators expounded

1920s and 1930s, published cartoons in large numbers on a variety of topical themes and issues ranging from literary and political to social and religious questions and polemics. Save a few exceptions in which servants were central subjects, in most instances servants' presence remained contingent on shifting contemporary nationalist polemics related to women's questions.¹⁴ Yet, their shadowed presence was symbolically charged, and the relationship with their mistress was perhaps constitutive of the caricaturing practice pertaining to contemporary Indian social life. However, we shall begin with an unusual cartoon which had the domestic servant as its central subject matter, and then discuss some more common themes.

A cartoon plate (see Figure 5.2), showing contrasts between the maid in India and the West, largely reflects the continuation of the nineteenth-century agenda, which sought to include domestic servants in its project of reform and improvement. The cartoon implies that the Indian maidservant needs to be reformed, for she is rude, ill-mannered, unsophisticated. When a guest visits in the master's absence, the Indian maidservant, unlike her

vyangya-citra as artwork with a dual purpose: 'one purpose is pure amusement and second is reform'—so wrote the editor of *Sudhā*, for example. See Dularelal Bhargava's editorial note in *Sudhā*, March 1929. For more details on the history of cartooning practice in Hindi periodicals, see Prabhat Kumar, 'Satire, Modernity, Transculturality in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century North India' (Ph.D. thesis, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, 2015), chapter 5.

¹⁴ While the concerns of the late nineteenth-century reformist agenda had certain continuities, new concerns in the light of nationalist/Gandhian politics added more nuance and forms to the gender question. Women were no longer conceived as exclusively a creature of the home, but as someone whose field is equally outside its confines—in politics, the academy, sports, etc. Problems related to middle-class women's confinement, the drudgery of household work, health and hygiene, freedom and right to movement and feeling, and the safety and security of women in public spaces (often from lecherous men belonging to other religious communities) were added to the previous agenda of education, widow remarriage, unequal marriage and so forth. The gender question was enriched with the addition of class and sometimes caste dimensions. Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi on Women', *Economic & Political Weekly* 20, no. 40, 1985, 1691–702; Sobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012); Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Western counterpart, does not entertain him or bother to ask about him and the purpose of his visit. Nor does the Indian maidservant let the respectable guest enter the precinct of the house. She does not even allow him to rest his feet but gestures for him to go away, whereas the maid in the West—or the ideal maid—is shown to be genteel in her behaviour. She welcomes the guest inside into the living room, gestures for him to sit and asks the purpose of his visit.



FIGURE 5.2: *Ghar kī naukrānī: yahām ki vahām ki* [Domestic Servant: Here and There] (*Chānd*, March 1930)

Clearly, this cartoon continues to operate along the lines of the older register of reform, implying that a maidservant—an essential component of the household—also needs to be educated and reformed. Yet, this vision of a model servant is different from the previous century. The Indian maid's attitude may have been perfect had she been a nineteenth-century *baḍī dāi*. She is, after all, preventing a stranger male from entering the home in her master's absence. But now, in keeping with the ideal wife-woman of the twentieth century (who is expected to be educated, may enter politics or social-educational service outside the home, travel and socialise with male and female colleagues and comrades, and potentially contribute to

the cause of anti-colonial agitation and nationalist activities),¹⁵ the maids too were expected to be pleasant and welcoming in their demeanour towards a male stranger or an unknown visitor.

Apart from such exceptional cartoons that put servants at the centre of their narrative, domestic servants figure in multiple political contexts, ranging from criticising the affluence and indulgence of European and Indian elites to reforming and transforming the values governing an ideal Hindu/Indian family and, by extension, nation. Mostly, the cartoons use the language of class to highlight the conceit of affluent members of society. They ridicule or chastise the rich men and women for falling short in their affinity for fellow subaltern citizens.

Let us begin with a cartoon, 'Misej Lahsun' (Mrs Garlic), which appeared alongside a skit of the same title in the journal *Prabhā* (Kanpur, March 1923). From the subtitle of the visual, the reader knows that Mrs Garlic is an English woman, wife of a district collector who lived 150 years back (Figure 5.3).

The cartoon depicts the memsahib sitting luxuriously in the middle of her make-up room, beneath a fan and attended by dark-skinned maids: one coiffing her hair and another doing pedicure. Viewed alongside the skit, the cartoon mocks a greedy and pretentious white mistress, who throws around her weight and power over junior officers, collects expensive gifts/bribes from them and leads an indolent life. The domestic servants here are an index of the colonial master's indulgence, who thrives at the expense of Indian subjects. Dark-skinned and flat-nosed maids thus appear to depict not only the opulent life of colonial masters, but also probably the ordinary Indian population and their servility, if we consider this visual alongside the overall political tenor of the journal.¹⁶

¹⁵ Many cartoons directly or indirectly depict 'good' women (real or imagined) as educated, working as a teacher, travelling on public transport, and speaking in polite diction and language.

¹⁶ *Prabhā* was printed by the same publishing house that published *Pratāp*, the fiery nationalist newspaper of Kanpur edited by Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. The image is taken from G. F. Atkinson, 'Curry and Rice', on *Forty Plates, Or the Ingredients of Social Life at 'Our Stations' in India* (London: Day and Son, 1859). In the satirical sketch book *Curry and Rice*, this image accompanies a skit titled 'Our Magistrate's Wife' and the protagonist is called Mrs Chutney. The English skit ridicules an indolent and pretentious memsahib who is a stupid and unsophisticated white woman. She pretends to be



FIGURE 5.3: 'Misej Lahsun' [Mrs Garlic] (Prabhā, March 1923)

Servants were used as an index for ordinary Indians as well as contrasting figures against which conceited rich Indians can be seen in another cartoon, titled 'Gr̥halakṣmī' (Figure 5.4). Published in the same journal, this depicts a fat woman wearing precious ornaments spinning cotton on a spinning wheel, which is fixed to a table. She is showing a thread of cotton to her husband with a smile. Her husband is standing beside her and looks on smilingly; in his hand is a bottle labelled 'horse embrocation'. Servants are standing behind the woman, carrying hand-held fans and drinks. The caption below is the conversation between the couple, showing that the wife is ridiculously happy about mastering spinning after

cultured by flaunting her conviviality, acquiring expensive cutlery, musical instruments, etc., but she sings like a hyena. In its Hindi reproduction, the skit clearly undergoes a major transformation; there is no explicit mention of corruption and bribery in the English version. Using an image from such a widely known book was perhaps a strategy to deflect the colonial government's surveillance.

two long years of trying; the husband pampers her with the somewhat sarcastic remark, 'You are working harder than Mahatma Gandhi.'

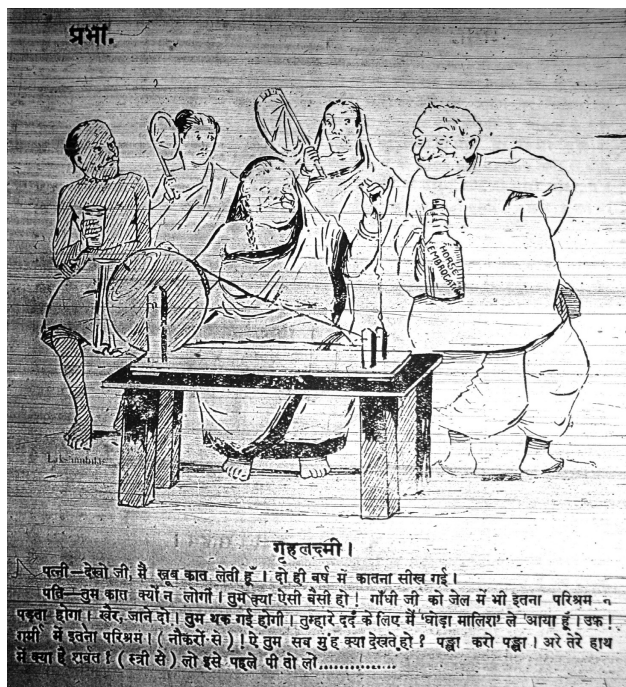


FIGURE 5.4 'Gṛhalakṣmī' [Goddess of the Household]
(Prabhā, May 1923)¹⁷

Wife: Look, I spin so well, I learnt the art of spinning in merely two years.

Husband: Why can't you master the art of spinning, are you just anybody! Even Gandhiji would not have worked so hard in gaol. Anyway, leave it. You must be tired. For your pain I have brought 'horse embrocation'. Ah! Working so much in this heat! (To servants) What are you all looking at? Fan her. And what is in your hand, sherbet? (To wife) Please drink this first.

This is also an overtly political cartoon. Amidst the social reconstruction programme initiated by Mahatma Gandhi and his fellow Congressmen,

¹⁷ Also reprinted in *Vyaṅgya-citrāvalī* [A Handbook of Visual Satire] (Cawnpore: Prakash Pustakalaya, 1927).

the act of spinning was linked with self-imposed austerity and seen as a direct contribution to the cause of the Indian quest for an alternative national economy. Spinning also provided a new sense of economic self-reliance and political significance to women within the household.¹⁸ In such a context, one interpretation of this cartoon could be that it makes a conservative and gendered mockery of the inflated accolade received by rich household women, who take up spinning as a leisurely activity at the cost of their everyday household duties and are, in return, pampered by their meek husbands. As if spinning few strings of cotton is tantamount to working as hard as a horse, and one required a massage (with horse embrocation) to counter work fatigue! However, the cartoon can also be read as an implicit criticism of the practice of the Gandhian programme of self-austerity in affluent homes, whereby the purpose of spinning cotton—originally intended to promote thriftiness and purification—is defeated. Spinning is shown as a rather self-indulgent activity. It is far from being an indication of self-reliance; on the contrary, it is shown that the act involves an army of servants and attendants. Standing to serve in the background, the servants seem to be a symbol of a rich household. They also appear to be the ordinary subaltern citizens, looking surprised (and probably appalled) at the duplicity and conceit of their rich Indian/Hindu masters pretending commitment to the nationalist cause.

The image of servant as an index to highlight the duplicity and conceit of the masters did not always portray the former in a good light either. They were also marked out as being a moral–sexual threat to the value of the Hindu household, as they were feared to have intimacy with their masters/mistresses.¹⁹ They were thus used as sexually menacing figures with the aim to highlight the problems of a Hindu/Indian patriarchal family. For example, *Bāhar aur bhītar* uses the figure of the *dāsi* (maid) to highlight the duplicity of the Hindu patriarchy and its discriminatory and repressive sexual regulations, supported by scriptures (Figure 5.5). The

¹⁸ Kishwar, 'Gandhi on Women'.

¹⁹ This fear was more pronounced in the case of Muslim and lower-caste servants. Charu Gupta has rightly pointed this out in detail, especially in the context of (Muslim) male servant versus mistress. Suffice to add that it operated in the opposite coupling, that is, female servant versus the master, as well. Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies', 162.

cartoon contrasts the plight of a wailing young widow—who is handcuffed with scriptural sanctions and cursed to stay in celibacy inside the home—to the sexual licentiousness of the patriarch who openly flirts with the maid outside. The image of the maid as a sexually flirtatious woman, although secondary to the narrative, is nonetheless deployed to ridicule the conceit of the Hindu patriarchy and its ethos, which represses its women but gives a free ride to the men.



FIGURE 5.5: Bāhar aur bhītar [Outside and Inside] (*Chānd*, August 1933)

Servant figures were used not only in attacking the privileged Hindu men but also for critiquing the rich and indulgent Hindu/Indian women, apathetic about the plight of their poor counterparts. As a part of the cultural pedagogy of reform, such cartoons tend to address broader

moral-behavioural questions: How should an ideal Hindu woman behave, especially with regard to deprived or subaltern women?

For example, see Figure 5.6: a cartoon plate depicts two snapshots of exploitation and humiliation perpetrated by rich women/mistresses. In the first scene, titled *Nirāśritā vidhvā* (a destitute widow), a lady is sitting leisurely on a big sofa, engrossed in a novel, while a poor widow woman is said to have been working tirelessly in the kitchen from early morning till noon without eating anything all. The lady does not even bother to assist her so that she can take a break to eat. In the second scene, *Barē ghar kī mahilā* (woman of a rich household), a young mistress is scolding her maid for not cleaning the room adequately and threatens to kick her and fire her from the job. Meanwhile, the maid listens to her submissively with a surprised face, probably because there is no visible trace of waste to be seen in the room.

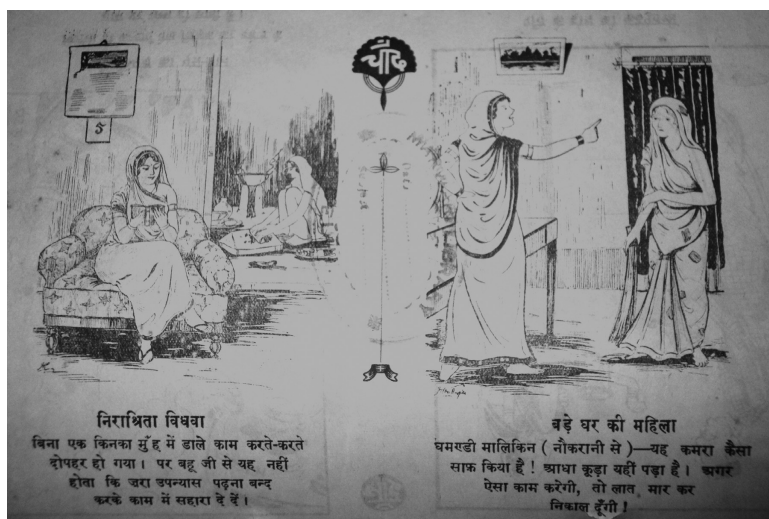


FIGURE 5.6: *Nirāśritā vidhvā* [A Destitute Widow]—*Barē ghar kī mahilā* [Woman of a Rich Household] (*Chānd*, June 1940)

In the first instance, the domestic help is a destitute widow who has no other means to survive. She is probably (distant) elder kin of the family, as she addresses the lady as *Bahūjī* (the bride). Due to her backbreaking

job of domestic service, she barely manages to eat on time and probably has no shelter of her own and, therefore, stays in the lady's house. The rich and self-indulgent young lady is not only insensitive to the plight of her destitute kin and maid, she also wastes her time in entertaining herself instead of doing productive work. The figure of a novel-reading woman, in contemporary visual and literary discourse, is predominantly vested with negative attributes. Likewise, the shouting and yelling mistress, in the second instance, is simply an arrogant and wicked rich woman who humiliates another woman of subaltern class and caste for no good reason. The sweeper/maid, as depicted, is subjected to daily humiliation, while the tenure of her service is also deeply insecure and fragile. In both instances, the plight of the domestic worker is expressed in the idiom of satire and sentimentality, which provokes a sense of moral outrage against the cruel and insensitive mistress. To put it differently, such representations push the issue of their exploitation into the moral and emotional realm and thereby perhaps deflect from the material and economic aspects. To end her mistreatment, all that is needed is a reformation of the attitude of the mistress. Kind behaviour, nice gestures and empathetic care on the part of a mistress were panacea for a maid's problems. Such cartoons thus shared the premise that domestic work is more about non-material and affective service.

These rich wife-woman-mistresses, moreover, were contrasting figures who were exactly opposite to the image of an ideal woman. The ideal Indian woman figure remained elusive and intangible—they could only be imagined through the (seductive) figuration of mobile and active European women beyond the precincts of home. Indian women (silently suffering, overburdened, duty-bound ordinary middle-class wife-women) were apparently still trapped in the drudgery of household chores. For example, in Figures 5.7 and 5.8, see the images of the Hindu/Indian wife-woman, who is contrasted with her Western counterpart. Working in the contrasting spatio-temporal frame of 'We and They' or 'East and West', such visuals called for the urgency of social reform: Indian women lagging behind their Western equivalents must be set free from the cells of home. They should not bend down with a lowly gaze, rather they should straighten up, raise their heads, rise high and enter public spaces like European women.



Figure 5.7 *Purvī aur paścimī nari jīvan* [Women's Lives in the East and the West] (*Chānd*, September 1934)



FIGURE 5.8: *Ham aur ve* [Us and Them] (*Chānd*, March 1932)

Ironically, instead of flying or marching ahead towards the open horizon, these women were stagnating in the confines of the home, doing the 'devalued' work of cleaning, cooking and nursing—tasks that could also have been performed by domestic servants. While such cartoons may explain the quantitative invisibility of domestic workers in illustrations concerning domestic space, which are mostly populated by toiling wife-women, qualitatively speaking, the 'We and They'—type images highlighting such national contrasts flattened the category of 'Indian woman'. The wife and/or the maid, it is implicit, share the same fate of household drudgery. Whereas in images underlining class contrasts, their differences are clearly marked—the wife lazes on the sofa and reads a novel while the servant toils. So, the reformist agenda was far from homogenous. It used servants sometimes to highlight the 'ills' of the modern wife and hid them at times to flatten the hierarchy between wives and maids. There is, it seems, an impossibly unitary agenda of reform in both the conditions. Unlike the West in this period, when domestic service had declined due to the First World War, technological innovations, political suffrage and so on, in India the early twentieth century was a period that saw a rise in numbers of female servants. So, the 'nationalist resolution of women's questions' remained fraught vis-à-vis the class of maidservants. It did not know whether to use them as a prop to criticise 'modern wives' and their manners or to hide them to put forth an image of a unified 'Indian woman'. In other words, domestic servants perhaps did not allow the completion of the 'nationalist resolution'; it remained indeterminate.

Servants as *figures of contrast* therefore had a constitutive presence and unsettling effect in images satirising the domain of home. In the next section, we shall discuss some contemporary prose writings which, besides contrasting their situations, elevated servants as morally superior to the class of masters.

SERVANTS AS MORALLY SUPERIOR SUBALTERNS

सच तो यह है कि मैं सबिया को उसके पौराणिक नारीत्व के निकट पाती हूँ जिसने जीवन की सीमा-रेखा किसी अज्ञात लोक तक फैला दी थी | उसे यदि जीवन के लिए मृत्यु से लड़ना पड़ा तो यह न मरने के लिए जीवन से संघर्ष करती है | (3 मार्च 1935)

The truth is that I find Sabiā closer to the legendary (*paurānik*) womanhood [of Savitri] who extended the frontier of life to the unknown realm. If she had to fight with death for the sake of life, [Sabiā] has been struggling with life to avoid being dead. (3 March 1935)

The quotation above is the closing paragraph of Mahadevi Varma's sketch *Sabiā* (1935).²⁰ Its protagonist is her own sweeper woman named Sabiā, which was apparently a rustic derivative of the high Hindi name Savitri. Paralleled to her mythological counterpart Savitri, the subject of Mahadevi's sketch (*śabd-citra/rekhā-citra*), Sabiā, is an empathetic character study of a hardworking and reticent *mehtar* (sweeper) woman's life. Sabiā's personality is marked by her selfless love and loyalty to her husband, who deserts her for another woman. She works as a domestic worker in the author's house in order to maintain the bare minimum requirements of her own household. She feeds herself, her infants and blind mother-in-law. One day, the husband returns home with his second wife. Sabiā takes up their responsibilities too, in spite of daily humiliation and torture by him and the younger wife. What is more, she puts her few possessions at stake when he is accused of burglary and taken into police custody.

Written in 1935 in delicately poised prose with a socially sensitive standpoint by a leading woman litterateur committed to the principles of gender and social equality, the sketch inverts the stereotypical public image of lower-caste female (domestic worker) as a foulmouthed, lascivious, unruly character.²¹ Mahadevi's *Sabiā* provides a critical counter-narrative

²⁰ Mahādevī Varmā, *Atīt ke calcitra* [The Moving Images of the Past] (Ilāhābād: Bhārti Bhavan, 1941), 50; author's translation. Mahadevi is also known as the one of the earliest female poets of modern Hindi along with her friend Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. She was one of the leading poets of Chāyāvādī, or the romantic school of Hindi poetry, along with Pant, Prasad and Nirala. A rebel who refused to accept her child marriage, she remained a spinster and ran schools for poor children and then a nationalist college for young women as part of her larger nationalist public commitment. For more, see Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and Chhayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²¹ It should be kept in mind that there was a general consensus amongst the new generation of writers to give literary voice and representation to ordinary people: the peasants, the workers and the lower classes—the 'real' constituents of the Indian nation.

to the dominant upper-caste middle-class view of the time, abundantly reflected in the advice literature.²² Described by her mistress, Sabiā is identified primarily as a persevering woman, who earns her livelihood as a domestic worker and hails from a lower-caste sweeper community. The narrative, however, merges the question of her class and caste identity into the story of gender. Indeed, it turns out to be a tale of gender solidarity: the elite woman shows solidarity with her subaltern comrade. Gender solidarity, in this case, transcends the barrier of class on the grounds of morality. For the servant woman Sabiā emerges as a morally superior being—an ideal, industrious, selfless woman struggling against all material and social odds—she is a modern Savitri. Such qualities markedly contrast and distinguish her individuality and character from her elite counterparts (affluent upper-caste housewives).²³ The strength of Sabiā's character is defined by her loyalty, labour, conscientiousness and reticence. She is not only an ideal servant in her lady's household; she is also the economic and moral axis of her own family. The narrative of the female domestic servant thus also seamlessly plies between two households: the master's as well as the servant's.

If we try to understand the master–servant relationship through such pieces, *Sabiā* is also reflective of a new kind of literary endeavour

This consensus was reflective of the literary zeitgeist of the time. Soon, in fact within a year, such opinion took institutional shape in the programmatic literary agenda of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), led by nationalist young men influenced by Marxist ideas. Carlo Coppola, ed., *Marxist Influences and South Asian Literature*, vol. 2 (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Asian Studies Centre, 1974). Mahadevi, although sympathetic to its larger aim, was never part of the PWA, as she was sceptical of the constraints of an ideologically driven literary imagination. She was initially the target of young 'progressive' men, but later her works, especially such life-sketches of subaltern characters, were greatly admired by them. For her troubled relationship with the PWA, see Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma*, 260–70.

²² Charu Gupta has pointed this out by looking at advice manuals of the early twentieth century. See *Gender of Caste*, chapters 1 and 2.

²³ When an acquaintance of the author/mistress, who was wife of an advocate (*vakīl-patnī*), quips at her about employing the wife of a thief, the latter snubs her: '*Yadi dusare ke dhan ko kisī prakār apna banā lenā corī hai to main jannā cāhatī hum ki hamme se kaun sampanna mahilā chor-patnī nahīn hai*' ['If making other's wealth one's own by hook or by crook is theft, I would like to know how many of rich women amongst us are not thieves' partners'], Varmā, *Atit ke calcitra*, 50.

or quest for a new mode of expression: how to write about unequal and exploitative master–servant relationships if the author is committed to egalitarian and emancipatory politics in her/his everyday social life but is also herself/himself placed in the hierarchical relationship holding position of authority. *Sabiā* and other such sketches humanised and aestheticised these quotidian and omnipresent beings called servants, who had hitherto been either invisible or simply stock characters without much individuality, and were either idolised or stigmatised. For Mahadevi, the mistress and the writer, her servants were like members of the family and, as Francesca Orsini has also pointed out, she even refused to call them servants.²⁴ Sketches such as *Sabiā* indicate the beginning of a new narrative style, in which a middle-class author/master elevates her servants as literary and moral heroes and tempers the master–servant relationship with the colours of personal affinity and attachment, without blurring the inefaceable marks of class difference.²⁵ It can be gleaned from the sketch that the image of author/narrator/mistress is of a benign and benevolent master, who ensures that the outcaste woman servant gets dignified treatment

²⁴ Orsini's main concern is to explore Mahadevi's literary-political strategies of self-reticence. She examines the predicament of a lone woman author who refused to lead a conventional life and chose, instead, to remain single, leading an autonomous life and also probably setting an example of an alternative family populated by a band of destitute, abandoned or widowed women working as servants. She contends that 'in embracing this retinue of what she refused to call "servants," Mahadevi found a way out of the impasses of the modern woman and modern writer outlined in her essays. She could be independent and yet caring, leading an autonomous life yet respected for her charitable attitude, a sophisticated middle-class intellectual who could be approached by, and who respected, illiterate menials as individuals. This fulfilled both a social and an individual exigency. By positioning herself in the midst of this alternative family Mahadevi showed that she accepted, while refashioning, customary ties of family and responsibility—this time not as a bride in a patriarchal family but from a position of authority as a woman householder and a hostel warden.' Francesca Orsini, 'The Reticent Autobiographer: Mahadevi Varma's Writings', in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History*, ed. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 68.

²⁵ This can be argued not only in the case of 'feminist' Mahadevi and her servant sketches, but also about many socialist male authors such as Rambriksha Benipuri and his servant sketch, *Mamgar*—his ploughman. See 'Mamgar', in *Benipuri Gramthāvali*, ed. Rambriksha Benipuri (Pantā: Benipuri Prakāśan, 1953), 29–36.

from other (caste Hindu) servants, and must not be served leftover food, or *jūṭhan*. She observes the maid's activity inside the home—her fastidious working style, her little daughter guarding her baby brother and such like—and discovers unexpected beauty amidst the everydayness of a maid's ordinary life and its struggles. She cares about the personal and familial problems of her maid, and frequently helps her out by giving money and goods beyond her stipulated wage to ease her mountain of troubles. However, in her everyday interactions, the mistress also maintains a polite and masterly distance. She does not speak to the maid much, or for that matter to any other servant. Yet, she receives sufficient information from another servant Bhaktin (a garrulous, widowed, elderly Ahir maid) who, knowing her mistress's reserved attitude, narrates more than enough details pertaining to all the other servants' lives, including Sabiā's. The mistress's controlled demeanour and reserved expressions are so immaculate that even after listening to the troubles of a weeping Sabiā, when her husband is gaoled for theft, her countenance and appearance remain calm and unmoved. She does not let her feelings come out. She stores them deep inside her, probably to sketch them later in her elegant and sensitive style.

THE 'REFORMIST' MASTER AND HIS SERVANT

Rambriksha Benipuri's story *Vah cor thā* ('He Was a Thief'; written in gaol during 1930–32) reflects on the problems of master–servant relationship more closely, albeit the story is narrated from the perspective of a socialist author and his moral certitude.²⁶ Set against the backdrop of high tide

²⁶ Rambriksha Benipuri (1899–1968) was a progressive writer, journalist, editor, pamphleteer and socialist politician. He was a biographer of Jayaprakash Narayan, Marx, Mao, Rosa Luxemburg, etc.; editor of a dozen anti-colonial nationalist periodicals; chief editor of the Socialist Party's Hindi mouthpiece *Jantā*; and author of plays, sketches, short stories and children's stories. He was frequently imprisoned on charges of sedition and spent more than eight years in gaol as a political prisoner. He was a young leader of the Congress, Congress Socialist Party and Kisan Sabha in Bihar. He left Congress to join the Socialist Party after Independence. After the merger of the Krishak Praja Party and the Socialist Party, he was the leader of Praja Socialist Party (PSP). He contested elections too and was also once elected as a member of the legislative assembly for PSP in Bihar. In the 1950s, he was also a prominent member of the cultural wing of the Socialist Party, which was bitterly opposed to the Communist Party of India-led

of Gandhian nationalism during the early 1930s, the story begins with a nationalist zamindar's relatively privileged life in gaol as an 'A' class political prisoner. Lakshmi Singh has embraced nationalism because it was politically fashionable and also possibly beneficial to be a *Khaddharvālā* (Gandhian). Life in prison was not so difficult after all for the respectable class of prisoners.²⁷ In gaol he is exposed to new ideas, and socialist ideas impress themselves upon him. He immediately changes his behaviour towards his prison attendants: 'C' class prisoners. Later he employs one of them, Laloo, as his domestic servant. However, his behavioural transformation remains limited to this one individual servant, and he later wants to cultivate Laloo as a model servant (and himself as a model master) to showcase his reformist self. However, he fails in this project.

The story goes like this: Lakshmi Singh is quite happy with the convenient life in gaol wherein he, following the general trend, develops the habit of reading new literature. He gets attracted to the idea of socialism. However, he settles for Robert Owen against Karl Marx and dreams of opening an *āśram* (commune). He changes his behaviour towards his gaol attendants, the grade 'C' prisoners. He starts addressing one attendant Laloo, not as Lalua but as Laloo *bhāi* (brother). He wishes to know about the material reasons for his present plight. After listening to the remorseful narration of Laloo, who was an agricultural labourer and, forced by circumstances of poverty and penury, had turned into a thief to feed his hungry wife and five children, the zamindar wishes to help and transform him. The zamindar is released soon as a result of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact; he sends money to Laloo's family and asks Laloo to join him as domestic servant after his release. Months pass. Zamindar forgets his Owenian project, goes back to his estate, exploiting poor *raiya*s (tenants). However, he treats them with feast once in a year to boast of his patrimonial benevolence amongst his fellow zamindars. But Laloo is eventually released from gaol and joins him as servant. He employs Laloo as his personal attendant, with a view to observing him lest he steal and

PWA. For more details, see Prabhat Kumar, 'Rambriksha Benipuri: Man and His Ideas' (Mphil. diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2003).

²⁷ Benipuri's gaol memoir (*Jaṃjīreṃ aur dīvāreṃ*), written around same time, deals with this theme at length. Rambriksha Benipuri, *Jaṃjīreṃ aur dīvāreṃ* [Fetters and Fences] (Dilli: Rājpal and Sams, 1957).

run away. But Laloo becomes an object of exhibition, a specimen to be flaunted as part of his initiative to reform humanity contra socialism. Laloo serves him earnestly and not only elevates himself in his master's eyes, but also becomes the subject of jealousy amongst the fellow servants and other members of the household. Some warn the zamindar not to trust his servant overmuch, for he may show his true colours one day. When Lakshmi Singh reads a letter from Laloo's wife describing the difficulties at home, his wage is hiked from 7 rupees to 10 rupees per month, and it is even proposed that he bring his sons from his village to educate them. The obliged servant keeps himself even more attentive and duty bound. The master gradually trusts him more and Laloo takes charge of his personal belongings, including essential documents, suitcase, money purse and ornaments. A few months later, the master finds his belongings missing, first his Parker pen, then his gold watch and then his purse. The scared servant perceives his master's discomfort and suspicion, cries in the night but is unable to alleviate the latter's doubts. The master first tries to hide, lest he is ridiculed for his enlightened benevolence. Then he reconsiders his opinion about Laloo showing his true colours. Lakshmi Singh gives 100 rupees to his servant and asks him to leave. While the stunned Laloo runs away and jumps into the Ganges, the master hums: '*Sūrdās' kāri kamar par cadhat na dūjo ramg*'.²⁸

This story, evidently, deals with the master-servant relationship. It is told from a deeply moral perspective of the narrator/author. It mainly reflects on the predicament of a 'reformist' master and, by implication, of the servant.²⁹ On the surface, the story appears to be a sarcastic commentary on the pretentious lord who tries to pose as enlightened master. It underlines the heightened problem of reformist paternalism, which the zamindar subscribes to in order to retain his privilege and dominance in the light of fashionable but unsettling egalitarian ideas, which were apparently unleashed during the time of the anti-colonial nationalist movement.

²⁸ 'As the saint-poet Surdas said, [my] black blanket cannot be dyed in another colour.' See 'Vah cor thā', in *Benipurī Gramthāvalī*, ed. Rambriksha Benipurī (Pantā: Benipurī Prakāśan, 1953), 41–60.

²⁹ Reformist in both senses: in the Marxist sense of the term as ideologically compromised, as well as in the sense of moral-social reform.

At a deeper level, it exposes the moral contradiction of class privilege. Within the moral universe of the story, the source of moral legitimacy and respectability of a leader lies in his commitment to (anti-colonial) nationalism; traditional social status is no longer adequate, no matter if he is a member of the traditionally privileged class. Moreover, to be a good nationalist one has to be informed about new ideas and ethics. He should be treating others as equals, no matter to which class they belong to, as *bhāi*, by sacrificing one's own privilege, by reforming one's own self (self-purification), by uplifting his weaker counterpart and so forth.

In the story, the master aspires to but falls short of this moral expectation. Tempted to reform a fallen but repenting subaltern, who has become a thief because of poverty, he employs him as his domestic servant, yet remains suspicious of the servant's character. The servant is given his due salary; he is addressed by his proper name, against the prevalent humiliating ways of treating servants virtually as 'slaves'. However, the lord's enticement to alter his behaviour towards the servant, the reader is told, is not honestly aimed at transforming his masterly self. Instead, it is a means to flaunt his apparent reformist self to other leaders/zamindars. The showcasing of 'humane treatment' is also evident from the fact that he accords special treatment to a singled-out individual (the chosen one, Laloo), but not to the other servants.

Whatever might be the predicament of the master, the servant, though happily perplexed by the novel attitude of his master in the beginning, remains emotionally unsettled and even perpetually insecure. His work starts in the early morning, before the master gets up. It ends when the lord goes to bed. He always feels the weight of his patron's beneficence. He remains insecure lest he commit any mistake inadvertently and his service will be terminated forever. Laloo, in the end, becomes the victim of reformist paternalism. When the master's belongings start being stolen, he is unable to plead his innocence; he cannot speak to his self-righteous master. The master does not inquire about the lost items; he concludes it all to be the failure of his reformist project. A subaltern cannot be reformed because of his own sins: as the saint-poet Surdas said, '[my] black blanket cannot be dyed in another colour'. The master thinks not about the plight of his servant and the possibility of his innocence, but about the reaction of his peers and how would they taunt or laugh at him after hearing of the fate of his reformist venture.

Apart from providing distinctive insights into the question of class and reformist paternalism, Benipuri's story also shares at least three common threads with Mahadevi's *Sabiā*. First, the story of the domestic servant is not exclusively the story of the servant in terms of the master's household. It is also the story of the servant's own household. In literary representation, the two are entangled. In fact, the individuality of the servant's life and world is maintained in the interwoven narrative of the two distinct households. Benipuri's story clearly delineates who is a domestic servant, and considers his family, class and social place before being a domestic servant.³⁰ It tells of the economic problems faced by an agricultural labourer and his household, recounting the travails of poverty and hunger and consequent dehumanisation. To become a domestic servant is not only economically a better option, but also relatively more dignified vocation than that of agricultural labour.

Second, as with *Sabiā*, the moral superiority of the subaltern is clearly asserted against the upper-class counterpart. In the climax of *Vah cor thā*, the patron is repentant of his self-serving generosity accorded to his 'undeserving' servant. To him, what mattered was not the dignity and self-respect of his servant, but the failure of his reformist (self-purifying) endeavour. Ironically, instead of questioning his own self, he blamed his servant. On the contrary, the servant was unable to bear the fact that he had lost his benevolent master's trust in spite of his innocence. It is the loss of his self-respect that forces him to commit suicide.³¹

³⁰ Laloo was an agricultural labourer, who was able to maintain his household with the help of his beautiful companion and wife. He worked as a labourer on the farm of the local landlord. His hardworking wife supplemented his earnings. She reared cattle and goats during the daytime, and worked in the kitchen during morning and evening. The drudgery of hard work took its toll on her beauty. The hard life of the class of agricultural labourer became unbearable when Laloo was blessed with children. The livestock were gradually sold, as their wages were no longer adequate. Hunger turned Laloo into a thief, who stole crops from others' fields to feed his starving family. One day he was caught and imprisoned. In gaol, he met his future master, the zamindar Lakshmi Singh.

³¹ This insight is taken from D. R. Nagaraj's illuminating essay on the oppositional yet complementary ideas of self-purification versus self-respect. However, I have deployed them slightly differently. D. R. Nagaraj, 'Self-Purification vs Self-Respect: On the Roots of Dalit Movement in India', in *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*, ed. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 21–60.

Third, despite the obvious generic difference between the sketch and short story discussed above, there is another commonality: a good servant is not really like a servant at all, he becomes like kin to the master. Hence, Laloo was different from (other) servants, not only in terms of his dress and demeanour but also because of his special affectionate ties with the master. In order to become an ideal master, the zamindar also personally took care of Laloo's familial obligations, beyond his stipulated wage. Paternalist and involved affection, however, coexisted with adherence to the norm of an informal and reserved demeanour in the same period. The zamindar thus maintained masterly aura in his own manners. He obliged his servant and looked in the other direction—a masterly gesture indeed. He bestowed favour like a lord: the faithful servant did not know that he had done so, yet his blessings reached his wife and children, ameliorating their poor financial condition. The master hardly ever entered into any dialogue or discussion with his servant; he either gave commands or listened to appeals. When doubtful of his servant's character, he severed ties by withdrawing affective warmth but giving extra money.

CONCLUSION

In the late nineteenth century, the servant figure emerges in the Hindi literary sphere within the larger (upper-caste, middle-class) nationalist discursive project of refashioning the realm of home. Existing scholarship has suggested that in the reformist endeavour the literary reorganisation of domestic space takes place along the lines of gender, but what needs to be considered is the fact that this reorganisation was also overwritten by the mistress–maid relationship. The mistress–maid relationship is carved out across genres and educational manuals as well as novels in the nineteenth century or in graphic satire, sketches or short stories in the early part of the twentieth century. Even if marginal, the class of maidservants, as shown in the case of cartoons, had a constitutive and unsettling presence in the nationalist-reformist discourse on the Indian household. There was a variety of ways in which class relations in the household were portrayed. The literature dealing with normative or stock characters, for example, educational manuals, prescribed a non-affective and impersonal relationship between the housemaster and servants of lower social status

and potentially suspicious character. The novels dealing in detail with ideal domestic servants showed the crafting of the class relationship in the idiom of care and affect. Hence, the *baḍī dāi* of early novels was not just another waged servant, she was the caretaker of her master's family and upholder of its moral and cultural axis. This extra-economic moral familial status of the senior maid, which was crafted in the register of affection and care, however, came at a cost to her individual self. Her own identity, her life beyond the confines of master's household, remained insignificant in literary representation. The new literary agenda of representing the subaltern brought a shift in the depiction of domestic servants in Hindi literature in the 1930s and added another dimension to representational practice. While it provided a counter-narrative to the class bias visible in the contiguous genre of advice manuals, it rescued and used the class question to broaden the horizon of the (Hindu) middle-class nationalist imagination. It underlined the class contradiction of reformist nationalism and its tragic consequences for the underclass. Furthermore, it elevated servants as morally superior humans worthy of being literary heroes, and it delineated the individuality of domestic servants. The story of a servant was no longer about his life in the master's household alone. It was now a story of his many lives: one as servant in the workplace and another as householder, or one of her class and another of her gender; yet a servant's caste identity was subsumed in the capacious narrative of class or gender injustice. Such sketches and stories, moreover, also attempted to provide their own gloss to the master-servant relationship. The idiom of care and affect was not simply pitched against relationships marked by language of distancing and indifference. Both could be deployed simultaneously to explore the complex and hierarchical nature of human relationships.

6 | Servants and Mistresses

Literary and Legal Sketches in Early Twentieth-Century Uttar Pradesh

CHARU GUPTA

INTRODUCTION

In his treatise *Nari Shiksha* [Education for Women], written in 1943, Hanuman Prasad Poddar, founding editor of the famous Gita Press of Gorakhpur and belonging to a Marwari business family,¹ ordered the Hindu middle-class household mistress to constantly supervise domestic servants to prevent any theft, while also extracting systematic work from them. Simultaneously, he conceived servants as mute and deferential beings and advised the household mistress to treat them humanely:

You should display affection towards your *naukar-naukrani* [servants–maids]. Poor souls do your *seva* [service] and hesitate in speaking in front of you. You should give them decent food...From your behaviour you should show that they are part of your family and not outsiders. Once they consider your home their home and your loss their loss, your burden of life will be considerably lightened.²

My second example moves from a literary text to a legal one. In 1913, a case came up in the Allahabad High Court in which Lochan, Chandar Rai, Rupa and Gopi, servants of a rich woman Dhan Debi, while declaring

¹ For a landmark study of Poddar and Gita Press, see Akshaya Mukul, *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2015).

² Hanuman Prasad Poddar, *Nari Shiksha* [Education for Women], 14th edn (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1966), 66.

to act on her behalf, laid claims to the collection of certain dues on a piece of land owned by their mistress.³

These two very different anecdotes come from separate sources—the literary and the vernacular on the one hand, and the legal and the official on the other. In fragmentary ways, they underline social histories of power relations between servants and employers in early twentieth-century Uttar Pradesh (henceforth UP). Mediating between domestic and public, these mundane examples are criss-crossed in other ways: in both, mistresses and servants are the chief characters; the mistress herself is silent as she is instructed by a male Hindu upper-caste publicist in one case, and in the other, the servants are supposedly speaking on her behalf; in one the servants are the objects, in the other they are the subjects; they are silent and almost invisible in one case, while ubiquitous, highly visible and speaking through their actions in the other.

This chapter juxtaposes representations of and suggestions regarding servants given to upper-caste, middle-class mistresses in Hindi didactic manuals, on the one hand, with some judicial cases and court trials in which male servants and their mistresses were the chief actors, on the other. Taken together, the two sources connect the mundane social histories of middle-class domesticity, in which disciplining of servants was a part of everyday life,⁴ with cataclysmic and sensationalist accounts involving servants, which were recorded in law courts. Looking into the vernacular and the official, the chapter indicates how they together offered varied layers of translation of regimes of regulation, surveillance and coercion, while also sometimes offering sites of discursive struggle and degrees of leverage. Carrying on a productive conversation with disparate archives, these commentaries of asymmetric power, along with repertoires of representation and circuits of production, highlight the intersections and contradictions between vernacular domesticity and colonial law. The passages between servants and mistresses in normative texts and judicial

³ *Emperor vs Ram Lochan and Ors.*, 6 December 1913, Allahabad High Court, available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1828029/> (accessed on 29 September 2016).

⁴ Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Nupur Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India', *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4, 1994, 549–62.

cases help in interrogating the private and the public, the familial and the material. The intersections between prosaic domesticities and exceptional court cases further underline the diverse social fabrics and competing claims of domination and resistance in histories of servants' pasts.

I argue that in the didactic manuals, the home and its domestic management were perceived as domains without property, law, state enforcement or democracy, which were guided by extra-economic relationships, sentimentality, compassion and familial governance. Didactic literature addressed this sphere where, along with a language of paternalism and punishment, there was in some sense a feminisation of words, expressions and certain people. Mistresses were told how to act and treat servants and in turn teach them how to behave. Equally, the servants also got a feminine form, as they were stripped of perceived masculinities and taught the virtues of normative femininity and docility. In a way, the virtues of servants were in women and mistresses, while the qualities of regulated womanhood and femininity were in servants. At the same time, through my examples from court records, I stress that the servants also moved spatially in the outer domain, occasionally acting on behalf of their rich mistresses, particularly widows. Here, the servants became the mediators and spokespersons of their mistresses in the material, public sphere of land and property. These transactions and negotiations, while signalling how servants became a medium for mistresses, also underline that in the process they sometimes became their own medium, expressing a degree of autonomy and certain leverage through law, property and courts. Acting on behalf of their mistresses, these servants periodically moved ahead of them, laying certain claims to materiality on their own terms and publicly contesting authority. The absent woman-mistress here became a means to advance the interests of servants. The spaces occupied by servants were thus fluid and their meanings contestable in different contexts.

A key source of this chapter is Hindi didactic literature of the early twentieth century. I address the vernacular print material as a significant, if ambivalent, site to write a social history of servants.⁵ Recalcitrant

⁵ For sophisticated discussions on the meanings of the vernacular in the Indian context: S. Shankar, *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the*

and hidden histories of servants' pasts and their representations can be gleaned not only by expanding arenas of history but also by shifting our attention and refashioning our archival sources to include materials that are often ignored or elided in historical research.⁶ Partha Chatterjee sees the vernacular as a discursive space, which is less alienated from the popular, and lyrically states that the vernacular indulges 'in the fabulous and the enchanted' and mocks 'the scientific rationality...of the academic.'⁷ At the same time, the vernacular is often not counter-hegemonic or liberatory in itself; it can also offer disquieting elements that affirm everyday power relations, as reflected in the fragmentary examples of servants' representations undertaken here. After all, representations of servants, to paraphrase Jacques Ranciere, are often 'embodied allegories of inequality'.⁸

The second source of this chapter comes from judicial registers, law and court cases, which became an important forum for constructions of new notions of caste, class, gender and religious identities and relationships in colonial India. Scholars have underlined the double-edged nature of law, whereby it could be accessed and shaped by a wide variety of interests.⁹ On the one hand, it became an instrument to justify colonial rule and the imperial project, whereby the British strove to differentiate themselves

Vernacular (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2013); Udaya Kumar, *Writing the First Person: Literature, History, and Autobiography in Modern Kerala* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016), 22–23, 180–82; Partha Chatterjee, 'Introduction: History in the Vernacular', in *History in the Vernacular*, ed. Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008), 1–24; Hans Harder, 'Urbanity in the Vernacular: Narrating the City in Modern South Asian Literatures', *Asia* 70, no. 2, 2016, 435–66.

⁶ Charu Gupta, 'Writing Sex and Sexuality: Archives of Colonial North India', *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 4, 2011, 12–35; Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁷ Chatterjee, 'Introduction', 21. For a critical view of the vernacular–academic binary, see: Prathama Banerjee, 'The Social Sciences in Post-1947 India', *Economic & Political Weekly* 43, no. 16, 2008, 22–25.

⁸ Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, tr. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009), 12.

⁹ Eleanor Newbiggin, Leigh Denault and Rohit De, 'Introduction: Personal Law, Identity Politics and Civil Society in Colonial South Asia', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 46, no. 1, 2009, 1–4.

from the 'personal and arbitrary rule of the Oriental despot'.¹⁰ However, even while claiming to eradicate 'backward' social practices, and treating everyone as equal, irrespective of class, caste, gender and religion, the law often ended up protecting the status quo, strengthening masculinities, reinforcing hierarchies, enhancing familial patriarchies, reaffirming brahmanical scriptural norms and establishing new social disciplines.¹¹ Further, from the late eighteenth century, in India as in Britain, master and servant laws were applied to, and labour contracts enforced upon, domestic, public, manual and service workers on behalf of urban and European employers.¹² The legal entitlements of servants were meagre and the court could often become a means to discipline recalcitrant servants. On the other hand, law was also an arena that offered a degree of democratisation and moments of leverage, resistance and subversion. Subalterns, servants, women and the marginalised could at times use the law to challenge and reject certain manifestations of the master's prerogative as excessive.¹³ It has been emphasised that servants were not an explicit concern of the judicial process and had a fragmentary and accidental presence in the registers of law. In a certain sense, they were both ubiquitous and invisible in judicial records, and their presence was

¹⁰ Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

¹¹ Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996); Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 1–54; Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998); Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India* (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009).

¹² Peter Robb, *Sentiment and Self: Richard Blechynden's Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 50–54.

¹³ Fae Dussart, "'Strictly Legal Means': Assault, Abuse and the Limits of Acceptable Behavior in the Servant–Employer Relationship in Metropole and Colony, 1850–1890", in *Colonization and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie (New York: Routledge, 2015), 153–71; Tanika Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009).

usually event related.¹⁴ And yet, the judiciary often recorded and preserved subaltern accounts and experiences, including those of servants, providing an arena to write subaltern-servants' histories. Judicial proceedings, witness accounts, and approver and informant testimonies of servants, even while incomplete, could transform criminal and civil cases into cultural texts of marginalised voices.

POLITICAL ECONOMIES AND PRINT CULTURES: IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVANTS

Before moving to my case studies, let me place the chapter in a larger context of changes in the political economy and the growth of print culture in early twentieth-century UP, and their implications for servants. The contentious socio-political economy of north India at the turn of the twentieth century left its imprint on representations of servants. It was a tumultuous period of decay and prosperity, insecurity and ambition.¹⁵ After 1857, there was a rapid expansion of improved means of organisation and communication, market production, law courts, English education, libraries, print and press, coinciding with a flourishing mercantile culture and a dynamic new middle class in UP.¹⁶ New job openings and professions in law, teaching and journalism provided new avenues for upward mobility. These substantial gains, borne along by Western influences on lifestyles and

¹⁴ Nitin Sinha, 'Ubiquity and Invisibility of Female Domestics in Colonial Archives,' Servants Pasts: European Research Council Funded Project 2015–18, 11 July 2017, available at <https://servantspasts.wordpress.com/2017/07/11/ubiquity-and-invisibility-of-female-domestics-in-colonial-archives/> (accessed 10 October 2017).

¹⁵ Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27–65; Gyanendra Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926–34: A Study in Imperfect Mobilisation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁶ Christopher Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 180–81, 386–93, 427–30; Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 180–83, 187–89, 199–207, 238–43, 338; Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24–28, 31–33, 37–39.

corresponding to judgements of propriety, civilisation and modernisation, gave the upwardly mobile a larger stake in the defence of hierarchies, and they evolved new ways of strengthening their claims over servants and their labour. Domestic servants became not only imperative for British households but also a status symbol for a substantial section of upwardly mobile indigenous classes.

Simultaneously, the colonial onslaught posed a serious challenge to many of the traditional occupations, leading to unprecedented migration and the weakening of hereditary employment.¹⁷ In spite of limitations, the interwar period did offer some opportunities for the subordinate castes, servants and the poor. Census records of 1921 and 1931 of UP point to domestic service as slowly becoming an important constituent of occupation in urban UP.¹⁸ It was noted in the 1931 census of the region that domestic labour had emerged as an important area of employment, particularly for relatively unskilled migrant workers, and that many midwives and vaccinators had even found their way into domestic service.¹⁹ In UP, male domestics continued to outnumber female servants well into the twentieth century. In major towns of UP, men far outnumbered women. The latter were mainly employed as midwives or sweepers. Men, who were part of the casual, informal labour market, were variously engaged in providing different kinds of household services in the region.²⁰ This was also because the public labour market in UP was becoming more and more crowded, with growing occupational conflicts, pressures on jobs and

¹⁷ A. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Change in a Northern Indian State, 1819–33* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India: United Provinces under British Rule, 1860–1900*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Gooptu, *Politics of the Urban Poor*; Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 78–79.

¹⁸ *Census of India, 1921: United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. 16, Part I: Report* (Allahabad: The Superintendent, Government Press, 1923), 156. *Census of India, 1931: United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. 18, Part 2: Imperial and Provincial Tables* (Allahabad: The Superintendent, Printing and Stationery, 1933), 216.

¹⁹ *Census of India, 1931: United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. 18, Part 1: Report* (Allahabad: The Superintendent, Printing and Stationery, 1933), 404.

²⁰ *Census of India, 1931: United Provinces, Part 1*, 407; Gooptu, *Politics of the Urban Poor*, 145; *Report of the Unemployment Committee of United Provinces, 1935* (Allahabad: Printing and Stationery, 1936), 137–64.

increasing economic insecurities.²¹ Migration, urbanisation, changing labour markets and a growing network of law courts and the judicial system led to greater visibilisation and classification of disputes involving servants and masters/mistresses, deeply impacting the materiality of servants' everyday lived lives. These involved, among others, cases related to wage labour, property and criminal intrigues.

The early twentieth century also witnessed the flourishing of a vernacular print culture in north India, and Hindi became the dominant print language in UP.²² Social reformers, caste-religious spokespersons and nationalists made use of press and print to disseminate their ideas among the wider public. However, in spite of the heterogeneous and fragmented nature of the Hindi print-public sphere, it was still largely controlled by the Hindi literati, men and women, who belonged to the brahman, bhumihaar, kayasth, agrawal, khatri and thakur castes,²³ who were also the main employers of servants. There was a blossoming of prescriptive texts in the Hindi vernacular, which took up intensive discussions on intimate matters, domesticity, home, family and normative ideals of womanhood. Written mostly by men, they had their readers marked out, as they chiefly addressed the functionally literate upper-caste, middle-class housewife. The caste, class and religious identities of the writers and readers of this literature provided a discursive space to understand the perceptions of indigenous Hindu middle classes and dominant castes regarding servants. The growth of print was utilised by didactic manuals to reiterate and further institutionalise power and hierarchies through their messages. In much of this literature, there was a conceptualisation of servitude through a language of discipline and benevolence, which expressed the anxieties and vulnerabilities of upper castes and middle classes to the material and

²¹ Gooptu, *Politics of the Urban Poor*; Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

²² Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Shobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012); Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 30–34.

²³ Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere*, 4.

symbolic instruments of their privileged status. Hindu publicists often constructed and sustained images of servants to write everyday unequal histories of the social self. These landscapes became the troubled sites where indigenous–domestic power relations came to be staged.

VERNACULAR DOMESTICITY: GOOD MISTRESSES, GOOD SERVANTS AND HAPPY HOMES

Scholars have repeatedly emphasised that the quest for an efficient and organised domestic domain was accentuated during the colonial period, as a section of Indian society felt they had lost out to the British in the material, outside world. The home and its private space increasingly became the inner core of national, Hindu order and a site of stability, with the ‘ideal woman’ as the harbinger of its spiritual essence.²⁴ In early twentieth-century north India, older resources of power and privilege were reshaped by the aspiring middle classes and upper castes, combined with new ideas about the organisation of domestic and social relations. Prescriptive books in Hindi became an important source for arbitrating appropriate social conduct and for tightening familial hierarchies. There was a flood of such books, which were principally addressed to Hindu middle-class housewives and became an important means to refurbish respectable domesticities, power, patriarchy and inequality, by disseminating normative images and prescriptions of behaviour.²⁵

In her phenomenal work on domesticity, intimacy and violence between servants and masters, Kristina Straub stresses that the subgenre of conduct or advice books constituted a significant share of the eighteenth-

²⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 120–21; Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

²⁵ Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community*, 123–76; Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), 413–20. Other regions in colonial India too saw a phenomenal growth in the publication of such advisory books: Mary Hancock, ‘Home Science and the Nationalization of Domesticity in Colonial India’, *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 4, 2001, 871–903; Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

century print market in Britain, and these works were infused with depictions of servants.²⁶ In early twentieth-century north India too, interesting connections were forged between the proliferation of didactic texts and the expansion of domestic service. The 'bazaar' expansion of the labour force, due to migration, increasing population and diversified occupations, multiplied concerns around the domestic. Instruction manuals came to mirror some of the anxieties felt due to a breakdown of familial networks in procuring servants and the presence of strange and unfamiliar servants in the household.²⁷

Feeding on such concerns, many advice books carried detailed instructions for housewives on how to behave with servants, admonishing them for sometimes not treating the servants properly and strictly advising a combination of compassion and control. Taken together, these measures ensured competent governance and a well-ordered home. Servants were in a certain sense a constitutive footnote of these didactic books. For example, chapters titled 'Naukaron se Vyavhar' [Etiquette with Servants]²⁸ or 'Sevakaon se Bartav' [Behaviour with Attendants] appeared in various guidebooks.²⁹ The housewife was repeatedly tutored to be charitable towards servants, while keeping them under constant vigilance and extracting maximum work from them.³⁰ Tied to domestic governance, this was part of her household duty and a critical part of her education. As she was to tutor her children, so she was to ensure the 'correct' conduct and

²⁶ Kristina Straub, *Domestic Affairs: Intimacy, Eroticism, and Violence between Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 5–6.

²⁷ Dalit and Muslim servants particularly came to be disparaged. For further details, see Charu Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies: Representation of Servants in Hindi Print Culture of Colonial India', *Studies in History* 34, no. 2, 2018, 141–63.

²⁸ Muhammadi Begum, *Stri Darshan* [Woman's View] (Benaras: Saraswati Press, 1937), 101–03.

²⁹ Balkrishnpati Vajpeyi, *Stri Sarvasva* [Everything on Women] (Agra: Ratnashram, 1934), 30–31.

³⁰ Chandrikanarayan Sharma, *Manavotpatti Vigyan* [Science of Human Origin] (Kashi: n. p., 1938), 234; Gupt 'Pagal', *Grihani Bhushan* [Ornament of the Housewife], 2nd edn (Kashi: Pannalal Gupt, 1921), 44–47, 83; *Chand*, January 1932 (Allahabad: Chand Press), 386. Also, Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity*.

decorous demeanour of servants with whom she associated. It was believed that servants, like children, needed constant guidance, supervision and domestic training. It was further argued that in the company of mistresses, female menials could learn some traits of cleanliness and civilisation and expand their talent.³¹ Much of the didactic literature also denigrated housewives who did not do some of the household work, especially centred on notions of care, with their own hands. The idle middle-class woman was disparaged. Yet servants were a status symbol and also regarded as necessary for certain tasks. There was thus a double dimension in the didactic literature. The household was a pedagogical space where women, mothers and mistresses had to be taught, who in turn had to be teachers not only of their children but of the whole household, including servants. The home and the domestic arena was an archival site that recorded history in the making,³² which was not only a space, but also a set of relations.

Prescriptions to housewives regarding servants were constantly reiterated, updated and reapplied. The handbook *Stri Sarvasva* [Everything on Women] asserted:

You should be polite in nature so as to ensure that servants stay in your home to do the work. Servants should not be thought of as servants. However, make sure that you extract proper work from them, while not leaving it entirely in their hands, as they can be undisciplined and cantankerous.³³

Another guidebook, *Grihani Bhushan* [Ornament of the Housewife], reiterated:

There is a huge dearth of good and efficient servants in the present day... Look after your servants and give them decent food and clothing... Your good behaviour towards them is important... At the same time, never confide in them and never discuss intimate details of your household with them... However, overall be good towards them. After all, there are many examples

³¹ 'Pagal', *Grihani Bhushan*, 7. It was equally important for the housewife to do household work, especially cooking, with her own hands. Thus, women of rich households were told not to outsource the job of cooking: Mukul, *Gita Press*, 363.

³² Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3–30.

³³ Vajpeyi, *Stri Sarvasva*, 30.

in history where servants and maids have even given up their lives for their *swami* [master].³⁴

Atmaswarup Verma, editor of the Hindi daily *Milap*, in an article titled 'Gharelu Naukar' [Domestic Servant] that appeared in the magazine *Sudha* in May 1941, remarked that as a result of modern civilisation, the impact of British rule and the substantial growth of middle classes in India, there was now a ubiquitous presence of, dependence on and increasing indispensability of servants in many households. He went on to address the lament frequently voiced about the 'servant problem', that servants did not stay for long or that they were not honest. This problem, he suggested, could only be overcome through compassion, benevolence, sympathy and paternalism on the part of the employer. This was interwoven with a language of constant governance, discipline, control and subservience, which ensured the loyalty and labour of servants.³⁵ He put it succinctly: 'Once the scissors of compassion is used to cut the wings of the servant, he will never be able to fly'.³⁶

The combined language of magnanimity and discipline was crowned by representations of servants as mute sufferers and romanticised submissive beings.³⁷ Servants, it was pronounced, were simpletons who addressed their masters as *seth-sahib*, *babu-sahib* and *mai-baap* (terms reflecting the dominance and superiority of employers) and demanded nothing from them except some love and decent behaviour and in turn bestowed care unconditionally.³⁸ The curative impulses of reformers and writers, combined with the perceived need to constantly manage and govern servants, strengthened such representations. Symbols of deference particularly came to exemplify the ideal male servant. To make him 'fit' to

³⁴ 'Pagal', *Grihani Bhushan*, 67–69.

³⁵ Atmaswarup Verma, 'Gharelu Naukar' [Domestic Servant], *Sudha*, May 1941, 324–27.

³⁶ Verma, 'Gharelu Naukar', 326.

³⁷ There were some sensitive and romanticised depictions of servants in Hindi fiction as well. However, this essay is not touching on them.

³⁸ Bhagwandin Prasad, *Bhaichara* [Brotherhood] (Allahabad: n. p., 1915), 8; Shivnarayan Mishra, *Bahishkrit Bharat* [Outcasted India] (Kanpur: Pratap Pustakalaya, 1922).

serve, his supposed sexual excess was conditioned through surveillance. Exhibiting a domesticated and subordinated masculinity, he was embodied as asexual, emasculated and effeminate. Further, he was appreciated for his gentleness, child-like simplicity and affection.³⁹ The conjectural benevolence bestowed on servants by their masters was underlined.

The definitions of *naukari* (employment) and *seva* (to serve) were expanded to encompass a variety of meanings. The connotations of *naukari* became much more flexible and came to incorporate various occupations, including employment in factories and industries, work in unorganised labour markets, the constabulary, as agent or recruiter, small-scale artisanal production, military labour and domestic service.⁴⁰ There were also semantic shifts in the notion of *seva* in early twentieth-century India, as it acquired wider contours and came to be associated with *samaj seva* [social service], *desh seva* [patriotism] and philanthropic initiatives, as has been perceptively shown by Carey Watt.⁴¹ The domestic and private sphere also embraced *seva*. In the advice manuals, the sentiment was further entrenched and infused with new vigour. The fear of losing their status led the upper castes to glorify *seva*. It became a keyword for the performance and materiality of physical labour, as it normalised and naturalised 'cultures of servitude'⁴² and the servility of the *naukar*. The political-economic matrix of early twentieth-century UP made *seva* more respectable. A growing menialisation of service and contentious public and work spaces allowed one to come back to the language of *seva*, and for the marginalisation and absorption of

³⁹ Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016); Charu Gupta, 'Feminine, Criminal or Manly? Imaging Dalit Masculinities in Colonial North India', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 47, no. 3, 2010, 314–18.

⁴⁰ For details, see Ravi Ahuja, ed., *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013); Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Nitin Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India, Bihar, 1760s–1880s* (London: Anthem Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Carey A. Watt, *Serving the Nation: Cultures of Service, Association and Citizenship* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴² Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

unskilled workers in domestic work. Moreover, *seva* was perceived as a rooted form of dependence, particularly in rural contexts, where the attachment of the servants to the household and farm was firm and, in many cases, generational. Modern labour markets, circulatory practices, community-based networks and domestic labour contributed in marking *naukari* as the point of reference of work, salaried or waged, and *seva* as the idiom in which that work had to be performed. *Seva*, intertwined with the notion of fidelity, allowed for a redefinition of norms in which *naukari* had to be performed.

At the same time, urban spaces came to be seen as more litigious and cantankerous, where servants could go to courts and challenge their oppressor, which led to a firmer reiteration of *seva* as a trope and matrix for the servant. The romanticised notion of apolitical *seva* worked very well in such a context. Stringent critiques and apocalyptic warnings about dealing with menials functioned in tandem with their idealisation under the rubric of *seva*, also reflected in the fictional Hindi literature of the early twentieth century. Influenced by the reformist-nationalist project, a section of Hindi fiction refashioned the domestic realm by carving a different grammar of the master-servant relationship. Service was the form in which the poor and subordinate castes were put to labour, and in the case of the servant, personal subordination was critical. The bond between servant and master was defined by loyalty rather than money.

Infused with benevolent paternalism, instrumental morality and desexualised hierarchies, the relationship between master and servant was equated with that between parent and child, virtually vindicating inequality as a rendition of love. The book *Deshi Shishtachaar* [National Conduct] in its chapter titled 'Maalik aur Naukar' [Master and Servant] noted:

In Indian culture, the servant considers the master his father, while the master thinks of the servant as his son...The servant should consider the master's wife as his mother and his daughter-in-law and daughter as his sister.⁴³

These prescriptive books were thus constantly making pronouncements about the right kind of middle-class domestic life and household,

⁴³ Narsingh Ram Shukl, *Deshi Shishtachaar* [National Conduct] (Benaras: Bhargav Pustakalya, 1940), 142.

reiterating boundaries of servant–master relationships. The depiction of servants as submissive figures confined them as objects of charity, and in need of the benign intervention of their employers from above, for their improvement.⁴⁴ Scholars such as Wendy Brown and Amit Rai have underlined that a language of benevolence and sympathy is often a paradoxical and protean mode of power, a form of sociality and governmentality, a mechanism of differentiation and normalisation that ensures stability, whereby ideas of equality and justice are substituted with behavioural, emotional and personal vocabularies.⁴⁵ The representation of menials through idioms of kindness and affection was often meant to ensure their subservience, and effectively govern and control them. Exclusionary and unequal terminologies were built into lexicons of paternalism and altruism, which also aided in depoliticising the personal–social sphere of the home and detaching servant–master relations from political economy and power.

These sketches were also attempts to regulate the bodies of both mistresses and servants through a language of feminisation. The didactic texts reproduced and strengthened institutionalised hierarchies and discriminations through extra-economic relationships. Enveloped in the love and guidance of housewives, servants served their masters through emotional attachments and ties of affection. Good wives and good servants together ensured happy homes. Covered in idioms of ideal femininity, both could even be interchangeable categories having similar traits, as both served the head of the household in different ways. Home was represented as an overtly feminine turf, with domestic details as a prerogative of women and servants. The feminisation of servants was a powerful way to sketch exemplary servants and confine them to the non-economic tyrannies of the inner, domestic domain.

⁴⁴ Kumari Satyavati, *Stri Darshan* [Knowledge about Women] (Chapra: Gyanodaya Prakashan, 1932).

⁴⁵ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 16; Amit S. Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race and Power, 1750–1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), xi–xxi.

LAW AND ITS POSSIBILITIES: FEMALE MISTRESSES AND MALE SERVANTS

In much of the didactic literature discussed above, the figure of the servant did not have any voice. These textual prescriptions usually marked how the indigenous elites represented servants, often through a language of femininity and submissiveness. This literature was more about *as it should be* rather than how it actually was, often reflecting strategic alliances between colonial authorities, social reformers and nationalists,⁴⁶ to establish a degree of control over the subaltern servant. They provided little insight about the actual lived lives of servants. However, with the ascendancy of colonial rule, there was a transformation in the landscape of north India, as a new civic order was strengthened through the judicial system. Personal disputes now increasingly came to be settled through courts and not by force as the courts came to enjoy wide jurisdiction over all civil matters.

As remarked earlier, colonial law often favoured dominant brahmanical ideologies. It also usually upheld discrimination and hierarchy, readmitting the master's prerogative and power over the servant. Various debates around slavery and servants show the tacit understanding of many judges and magistrates that the master had a certain right of restraint and moderate chastisement vis-à-vis the servant.⁴⁷ For example, a 1912 case in the Allahabad High Court supported the master's narrative. Jumerat, a female servant, was employed in Jhansi by Mohan Lal in December 1907 to suckle and nurse his infant daughter until January 1910. However, she was not paid her dues. When she filed a case in the court in November 1910 to recover 150 rupees from Mohan Lal, the judge refused to entertain her plea under the specific article invoked in the application. Instead, he recommended that the case should fall under a different article of the same Act. He also gave his personal opinion that wet nurses could not 'properly come under the definition of household servant'.⁴⁸ Even though

⁴⁶ Hancock, 'Home Science and the Nationalization of Domesticity'.

⁴⁷ Singha, *Despotism of Law*, 150–51; Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law*.

⁴⁸ *Mohan Lal vs Musammat Jumerat*, 2 November 1912, Allahabad High Court, available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/601019/> (accessed on 30 September 2016). We do not know if in subsequent rulings his opinion became the legal norm of keeping wet nurses outside the definition of the domestic servant.

Jumerat lost, the case underscored that servants were going to court to fight for certain rights, and sometimes winning. For example, Bashirunnisa, a woman who was declared as a servant and cook of Khadim Ali, filed an appeal in the same court after his death in 1916 to claim her right to Khadim's property, stating that he had married her. The court upheld her appeal.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, there were various cases related to crime, intrigue and murder in which servants could be victims or witnesses. Cecil Walsh, the writer par excellence of crime stories set in colonial UP, and a judge at the Allahabad High Court, soon after his retirement in 1929 wrote the thriller *Indian Village Crimes*, in which he presented the fascinating case of the disappearance of a servant, Bhagwati, and the involvement of his mistress Musammat Janki Kuer in his possible murder, which unfolded as a complex, unsolved story of crime, passion and intrigue.⁵⁰

Such cases, however, are not within the purview of the present chapter. Instead, I wish to flag three fragmentary cases involving disputes over property, wealth and public spaces which came up in the Allahabad High Court in the early twentieth century. These cases revolved around the trusted male servants of female mistresses. My first case takes us to the banks of the *sangam* in Allahabad. The occupation of Krishen, who belonged to a class of priests known as Pragwals, was to receive pilgrims at the sacred confluence of the waters at Allahabad and to assist them in the due performance of the ceremonies attendant on their bathing, especially on the occasion of certain festivals. He used a flag with a certain emblem, which he fixed at a particular spot as a means of identification, for the benefit of illiterate pilgrims. On his death, his rights passed to his widow Musammat Kesar. The defendant in this case, Beni Madho, the confidential servant of the family, continued to serve the widow, taking over the ministering to the wants of the pilgrims. Kesar was close to Madho and made attempts to transfer some property to him by way of gift. However, she died in 1915. After this, Madho continued to welcome the pilgrims using the flag. However, the plaintiff in this case, Hira Lal, who inherited

⁴⁹ *Musammat Bashirunnisa and Ors. vs Buniyad Ali and Anr.*, 27 March 1919, Allahabad High Court, available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/434292/> (accessed on 5 October 2016).

⁵⁰ Cecil Walsh, *Indian Village Crimes with an Introduction on Police Investigation and Confessions* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1929), 64–83.

Krishen's property, made a claim to take over the business being carried on by Madho, even though Hira Lal too was continuing to do the same work and also to post the flag with the emblem in a nearby spot. This was mainly a dispute over 'brit jajmani' rights. The court ruled in favour of Madho, the servant, stating that Hira Lal had failed to establish any right over the soil of the pilgrimage site. Hira Lal's appeal was dismissed with costs in 1920.⁵¹

I move now to my second case, which came up in 1915. There was a land dispute between a *lambardar* (landlord) woman, Musammat Sarvi Begam, and another male co-sharer, Mehar Chand. Sarvi Begam's *mahal*, or portion of land, was divided into two. Her trusted servant, Sohan Lal, however, made all collections for the entire mahal in the name of his mistress, Sarvi Begam, and paid her the money. Sohan Lal was charged by Mehar Chand of criminal misappropriation. However, the Allahabad High Court acquitted Sohan Lal, stating that he had no dishonest intentions, and that he was acting under the orders and in the interests of his mistress.⁵²

My final case is the one referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Musammat Dhan Debi, a rich woman, owned a piece of land in the town of Kopaganj in Azamgarh on which a market had arisen. Dhan Debi's servants, Ram Lochan, Chandar Rai, Rupa and Gopi, were entrusted by her to collect dues as part of her *zamindari* (proprietary rights). In the process, they came into conflict with Rameshwar, who was appointed by the *baniyas* [merchants] and other dealers in Kopaganj to act as *chaudhri* [head] of the market, and was paid by them in return. The servants of Dhan Debi, however, wished to claim those dues themselves.⁵³

All these three cases have certain common threads. They are about power relations and conflicts between servants and dominant classes in the public domain, revealing the behaviour of both in the open space of the court. In all three, the male servants—Beni Madho, Sohan Lal, Ram Lochan, Chandar Rai, Rupa and Gopi—were acting, or at least claiming to act, on behalf of their mistresses—Kesar, Sarvi Begam and Dhan Debi.

⁵¹ *Beni Madho Pragwal vs Hira Lal*, 31 May 1920, Allahabad High Court. available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/72359/> (accessed on 10 October 2016).

⁵² *Sohan Lal vs Emperor*, 12 November 1915, Allahabad High Court, available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/123401/> (accessed on 10 October 2016).

⁵³ *Emperor vs Ram Lochan and Ors.*, 6 December 1913.

In each case they were charged by other men, and not their mistresses, of misappropriating funds or spaces or rights. And in all three cases, they were finally acquitted. In the latter two cases, the servants had been punished by the lower court and had appealed to the high court against the order and won. The high court condemned the charges brought against the servants.

These cases tell us something about the lived materiality of servants' actual lives and how they responded to the changing social, economic and legal contexts of their times. They challenge the monochromatic and dominant lens through which colonial judicial systems have often been examined. Revolving around servants as subjects, they reveal a zone of everyday contestation and adaptation in the legal arena, where the figure of the subaltern male servant was either claiming certain rights or defending his actions. This was a struggle for self-defence and survival, whereby the subaltern servant, even if fragmentarily and hesitantly, occasionally used the framework of the law to derail the unalloyed authority of others, and to creatively negotiate graded affiliations in order to produce benefits for himself. Such cases disrupted the surety of meanings accorded to hierarchical relationships in domestic settings. Through certain forms of leverage, servants were advancing their bargaining power in the context of highly asymmetrical relations by fighting some of their battles through the law. Servants had a presence in the colonial courts, and they were not immune to sometimes using the new legal forum to make counter claims. In turn, the courts could often be even-handed in adjudicating civil disputes involving servants.

Often the servants were claiming to fight on behalf of their mistresses, thus not directly challenging the mistress-servant hierarchy. At the same time, they were using the law to secure their own interests by presenting them as those of their mistresses. Here, the servants were wilfully and creatively using the legal framework for their own benefit, not by challenging the authority of their patrons, but by creatively conjoining their own interests with those of their mistresses. In other words, they came across as loyal servants and, using the legal framework, reworked notions of loyalty to also secure their own interests.

Such cases reveal that the material circumstances of the outer, public domain of servants' work, especially when they were acting in the name of their mistresses and claiming to express the latter's will, allowed for

certain transactions around land, money and economy, which could give servants some leverage. Entering public spaces and property disputes on behalf of their mistresses, they made certain claims on their own terms. The woman-mistress was overtly absent or silent here, and the servants were doing the work on her account. This expanded some possibilities for public articulations in the space of law, property and economy. While the voice of the mistress is overtly absent in these cases, they underline how widowed and even other rich women-mistresses occasionally developed close affinities with their servants, who became their chief confidants, middlemen and informers, acting on their behalf in public arenas. Scholars have pointed out how patriarchy and hierarchy became further entrenched in upper-caste, middle-class households in colonial India.⁵⁴ Intervening in that conversation, the lives of rich widows and mistresses sometimes push against such a narrative, pointing to a more complex terrain where mistresses exercised power and agency through servants. These mistresses entrusted their servants to secure goods and services on their behalf, with legal rights to collect money in their name. These zones of mutual dependence between servants and mistresses hinted at volatile and intimate relationships that were outside accepted norms.

Many cases involving servants in one way or another that went to the court divulged a messier and much more contested picture on the ground. They provide us with a rich archival source to write a social history of servants. The de-sentimentalised and detached rulings of the courts, which were seen as representing a degree of liberal space, created diverse, pluralistic responses to servant–master relationships. The law did not only subjugate; it also sometimes responded to alternative voices.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

The figure of the servant-subaltern has often been left out of mainstream historical narratives. However, as we expand our archival arenas, servants

⁵⁴ Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*; Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

⁵⁵ Preeti Nijhar, *Law and Imperialism: Criminality and Constitution in Colonial India* (London: Routledge, 2016).

become ubiquitous in everyday historical tellings. This chapter has explored the literary and the legal to study how the encounters between servants and mistresses took on different forms. Through these different idioms, contexts and approaches, it has shown how servants were both inside and outside a feminine narrative. The contrasting yet interrelated anecdotes of this chapter underline a cross-current, a back and forth movement, with servants mediating between the home and the outer space, and their domestic and public responsibilities making inroads into each other in distinct ways. Depending on contexts and mediums, the servant is an object, a witness, a victim and an actor. The inclusion of contrasting sites of the domestic and the public, the literary and the legal, the vernacular and the official not only helps in drawing fragmentary sketches of servants and mistresses, but also aids in mapping quotidian, everyday transactions between servants and mistresses. The servants were treated, and they themselves operated, differently, depending on their physical location and movement, pointing to the connections between sentimental and spatial geographies.

In the didactic Hindi literature produced in the early twentieth century, servants were constitutive footnotes for defining middle-class, upper-caste housewives and mistresses. The servants and mistresses were often perceived here as homogenised, stable categories. These normative texts presented the home as a cocoon of idealised relationships, in which both servants and mistresses were domesticated and feminised. Guided by immutable identities, the voices of servants were often lost in this vernacular arena. The site of law, however, revealed a more fluid and unstable picture of contestation, as its public space could at times be moulded to provide a voice to the servant-subaltern. While the home turf and familial relations had to be monitored and controlled by the Indian elites, law was a much more public and malleable site that brought into view the intimate world of domesticity. Rich women, mistresses and widows often faced limits to their movement in the public arena. Servants became their voices, ears and feet, giving them a degree of subjectivity. While in the home space servants were largely infantilised, in the public arena they could be litigious and ungovernable, sometimes undermining the authority of their superiors. Transcending master narratives of the vernacular-didactic, servants did not always remain passive victims or voiceless.

7 | Caste-ing Servants in Colonial Calcutta

TANIKA SARKAR

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, I argue for a sharp focus on domestic service as a more or less self-contained category of labour—occasionally overlapping with, but not necessarily sharing, characteristics of other kinds of paid work. This helps clarify its specificities, its immense variability and the historical shifts that it has gone through. Second, I look at how caste-inflected work distribution has shaped master–servant relations in modern Bengali households. Finally, I move to an ambiguous category of Dalit servant in colonial Calcutta: the *mehtars* (scavengers/waste-cleaners/sanitation workers), who were Calcutta Municipal Corporation employees, but who also worked in private homes.

DOMESTIC SERVICE: THE ORDER OF COMPLEXITIES

On 21 May 2018, Delhi newspapers reported the grisly murder of Soni Kumari, a 15-year-old ‘maidservant’. An employment agency had brought her to Delhi from her Jharkhand village with the promise of a ‘high’ salary of Rs 6,500 per month for full-time work—a sum that they collected on her behalf. After three years, when she ‘demanded’ the money, the agency people hacked her into pieces and stuffed the body parts down a drain.¹ Six months later, however, the police found that the girl (not named in the news report) was actually alive, though she had been transported

¹ Shiv Sunny, ‘Girl Chopped in Twelve Pieces for “Demanding” Salary’, *Hindustan Times*, Delhi, 21 May 2018.

to Tamil Nadu by her agency and had been abused by her employers.² Another gruesome murder soon followed: another *adivasi* girl was killed by an agency.

A similar incident had occurred on 11 July 2017, though with a happier conclusion. A Muslim maidservant (being Muslim, she changed her name for the press), working part-time for several families at a gated, luxury apartment complex at Noida (in the National Capital Region), was accused of theft by one employer, who verbally abused and slapped her, impounded her mobile phone and prevented her exit from the complex. She sheltered overnight with another employer, until her husband and a large crowd of fellow domestic workers demonstrated angrily for her release.³

A pattern seems to emerge from these reports. Servants from marginalised communities suffer particular vulnerabilities. Full-time maidservants, isolated in a strange city, are completely at the mercy of their employer and recruiting agency, which is not the case for non-resident part-timers. Gated apartments can effectively become prisons.

On the other hand, employers are also frequently murdered by their servants.⁴ Between these two poles of class violence, moreover, we have a whole spectrum of relationships: from warm mutual dependence, sometimes carried over generations, shading into professionalised time/work-based relationships, and, at others, into just brief, casual contacts—especially where the employers are out at work all day. Sometimes, a relationship that begins with relative impersonality can evolve into one of dependence and trust. Furthermore, employment agencies triangulate the conventional master–servant duo. They constitute intermediaries within the domestic labour market in ways that are somewhat similar to the role of *sardars* in plantations, mines and factories. In the earlier practices,

² J. Anand Mohan and Somya Lakhani, 'She Read About Her Death, Then Decided to Go Back Home', *Indian Express*, 23 November 2018, Delhi, p. 1. The survival of the girl does not dilute the broad point about the risks inherent in agencies importing young girls and women from distant parts to unknown households and then controlling their earnings, with a very likely possibility of the use of violence.

³ Julien Brygo, 'India's Servants Revolt', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 2017. See also, Maya John, Smita Toppo and Manju Mochhary, 'Noida's DWs Take on the "Madams": A Report from Ground Zero', *Kafila*, 2 August 2017.

⁴ Samita Sen, 'Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work: Domestic Work in Bengal', SWS-RLS Occasional Paper 1, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2015.

either a head servant or in fact kin brought servants into the households they were attached to.⁵

The pattern, therefore, fragments before it can stabilise. It depends on too many variables: sex, nature of the work (full or part-time), employment terms (single employer or many), residential status (local or migrant), the master's residential situation (standalone apartment or gated community), recruitment process, and so on. What unifies this variety of factors is the absence of formal labour laws everywhere in India—except for the state of Chhattisgarh in contemporary times.⁶

The endless variables within modern master–servant relationships caution us against a single-axis explanation based exclusively on any of these binaries. Relations of production within a factory, or even in small informal sectors, appear to be relatively simple matters in contrast to domestic service, since the latter entails three orders of complexity. There are several possible forms of labour within the category, and each mutates to form new permutations and combinations. Within each, individual quirks of a particular relationship largely decide its nature, with personal conduct and inclination playing a greater role here than in other forms of paid work.⁷ The domestic labour market and labour relations are, therefore, highly distinct and specific forms of work.

In this connection, Kumkum Sangari's rather sweeping observations on women's domestic labour flatten its specificities—the more so since it is first contained within women's labour as a whole, which is then dissolved within an even wider generalisation about the women's conditions: as wife, mother, domestic servant, prostitute, widow, and in light of conjugal

⁵ In William Carey's *Dialogues Intended to Facilitate the Acquiring of the Bengalee Language* from the early nineteenth century (Serampore: The Mission Press, 1818), the *khansaman* acquires the role of recruiting other servants. In the Hindi story 'Bahadur', the brother-in-law of the male protagonist brings in the boy servant through his social network. See Nitin Sinha, Nitin Varma and Pankaj Jha, Introduction to *Servants' Pasts: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century South Asia*, vol. 1 (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019).

⁶ Sen, 'Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work', 8.

⁷ See the autobiography of Baby Halder, a maidservant, who worked in different households. She experienced harsh discipline and a very heavy workload in many of them, but a kind and fair master taught her to read, write and publish, took care of her children and treated her as an equal. Baby Halder, *A Life Less Ordinary*, tr. Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Zubaan and Penguin Books, 2006).

norms, education, and so on.⁸ This wide-open framework is based on a contrast between women's labour in the family—socially valued as non-alienated, selfless work—as against the paid work of servants, which is devalued.⁹

For pre- and early modern times, Uma Chakravarti, Rosalind O'Hanlon, Gyan Prakash, Indrani Chatterjee, Andrea Major, and many others, have shown that domestic slavery, bondage and domestic service together constituted a fuzzy continuum, a spectrum of unfree labour—each seeping into the others to produce a rather glutinous mix of household work.¹⁰ Servitude also spilled over into the master's extended kin network. Early modern racial and class relations between European masters and youthful Indian male servants could also be subtly reversed, when the master developed an intense emotional commitment to the servant, albeit within the terms of bonded labour.¹¹

As we move into modern times, a certain professionalisation emerges: waged service increasingly becomes the norm, servants sometimes work for multiple masters and households, and many remain in their own homes. But the separation is incomplete, and the cash payment of wage

⁸ Kumkum Sangari, 'The Amenities of Domestic Life: Questions on Labour', *Social Scientist* 21, no. 9/11, 1993, 3–46.

⁹ Mary. E. John questions the contrast she makes between valued and devalued female labour in 'The Problem of Women's Labour: Some Autobiographical Perspectives', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 2, 2013, 177–212.

¹⁰ On blurred boundaries between slavery, bondage and servitude, see Tanika Sarkar, 'Bondage in the Colonial Context', in *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India*, ed Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney (New Delhi: Sangam Books Ltd. 1985), 97–126; Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Andrea Major, 'Enslaving Spaces: Domestic Slavery and the Spatial, Ideological and Practical Limits of Colonial Control in Nineteenth-Century Rajput and Maratha States', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 46, no. 3, 2009, 315–42.

¹¹ Michael H. Fisher, 'Bound for Britain: Changing Conditions of Servitude, 1660–1857', in *Slavery and South Asian History*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 187–209. On the huge array of Indian servants in the European households, see Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

is qualified by expectations of in-kind payments built into the wage and its mode of payment.

Sen and Sengupta show that even part-time workers in contemporary Kolkata—usually combining employment in several households—seek advantages from, as well as challenge, ‘paternalist middle-class ideologies and practices’. ‘Pragmatic intimacy’ characterises the relationship, though ‘a dominance of the paternalist family idiom’ disrupts contractual labour relations and the relative autonomy of workers. Workers, too, construct relationships of reciprocity with employers, in order to ‘minimize conflict, ensure their own safety, facilitate a flow of benefits, and achieve a measure of dignity’.¹² It seems, then, that both masters and servants strengthen the rhetoric of paternalism, as a pragmatic bargaining chip.

Much of the work on Bengal has focused on women servants. But a contemporary survey shows that Kolkata continues to be under a long tradition of hiring children, aged 8–10 years, for domestic work.¹³ Some of these children work alongside their mothers as informal servants. Others work as full-time wage earners whose salaries are collected by parents. The figure of the child-servant complicates the self-image of the employer, who cannot afford to appear as an employer of child labour due to both modern moral and legal conditions.

Seemin Qayum and Raka Ray, on the other hand, include male servants in their study. Kolkata still has the highest proportion of servants per household in India, according to the 1991 Census, and 33 per cent of them are men. Qayum and Ray explore what happens to the gender identity of male servants in a work situation that is fast becoming feminised. Their survey of 500 households between 2005 and 2008 shows that male servants suffer from a severe deficit of masculinity in their self-perception, as a result of being forced to do work that is normally designated to women. Women servants reinforce this sense of lack when they blame their own servitude on the failure of male patriarchal responsibilities.¹⁴

¹² Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta, *Domestic Days: Women, Work, and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 40, 177.

¹³ Sachetana, *Lives of Domestic Workers: A Report*, SWS-RLS Paper 2, School of Women’s Studies (Kolkata: Jadavpur University, 2015).

¹⁴ Seemin Qayum and Raka Ray, ‘Male Servants and the Failure of Patriarchy in Kolkata (Calcutta)’, *Men and Masculinities* 13, no. 1, 2010, 111–25.

I now include an unusual personal experience—an accidental piece of fieldwork—to expand this point. In the summer of 1980, my husband and I were strolling through the large Vivekananda Park near the South Calcutta Lakes one evening when we noticed a makeshift stage and a small crowd watching a play. We were warmly invited to join them in what we soon realised was a play about servants' lives. It was scripted, directed, enacted and watched entirely by local servants. Sly allusions to actual employers abounded and were enjoyed uproariously by the audience, who frequently turned towards us—unwitting spectators from the master class—to relish our discomfiture. A small drama of class war, which unfolded outside the enacted drama and which, in turn, dramatised a class conflict situation, took place that evening on a Calcutta street.

The plot depicted masters and mistresses who abuse male and female servants by overturning hierarchical propriety with attempts at cross-class intimacy. This leads to sexual overtures and temptation, loss of chastity and complete moral disorder. The servants become feeble caricatures of the robust rural men they used to be, and maidservants transit from virtuous rural wives to pampered urban sexual appendages.

The reversal of class and gender roles, and distortion and loss of conventional masculinity–femininity norms constituted the worst form of oppression and degeneration in the play—not hard, ill-paid work. Intimacy, rather than cruelty, emerged as the symbol of class exploitation. Sexual overtures and inverted images of gender performance were depicted as the most repugnant elements. It seems that the servants in the play would have been more comfortable with the rhetoric of paternalism than otherwise masks class exploitation; in other words, they would prefer the normal forms of class exploitation.

THE TOUCH OF CASTE

Contemporary ethnographies provide far thicker descriptions of masters and servants than do historical sources. Colonial censuses for Calcutta indicate that domestic service was more widespread in Bengal than in the rest of India, and it gradually became the largest preserve of paid female work. In 1897, Ambicacharan Gupta wrote in a popular domestic manual: 'There is no way a *bhadralok* can function for a moment

without a servant.¹⁵ In 1911, servants constituted 12 per cent of the entire workforce.¹⁶ They were mostly men then, especially in households that could afford only one servant. We do not know if they were full-time servants. The 1931 Bengal Census recorded a huge increase, especially for women workers who outstripped male servants by 4 to 1 in proportion to the population.¹⁷

Despite a slew of nineteenth-century regulations for organising master-servant relationships in all other fields of work, domestic service was left beyond law's purview. The Second Law Commission had, interestingly, advised that domestic service should be made contractual along with marriage. The advice was ignored in both cases.¹⁸

While the relationship between law and regulation on one hand and domestic service on the other, even in its absence, was quite complex, the other axis of the relationship—between paid domestic work and caste—was also not easily defined, at least not within the discursive techniques of colonial governmentality. For instance, censuses of the late nineteenth century did not correlate menial work with caste.¹⁹ We know how many male and female servants came from which religious communities, but we have no idea of which caste was put to what kind of work. We need, therefore, to engage with literary narratives for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and that has the opposite problem: an embarrassment of riches. It is problematic, moreover, to use literature unthinkingly as a historical 'source'. Assuming its transparency as a mirror for the past and isolating 'facts' from literary strategies and narrative techniques does great violence to textual integrity.

Yet, literature's value is immense. Caste relations composed the very air that kept the Bengali social world breathing, and authors were deeply embedded inhabitants with finely honed habits of observation. They recreated lived experiences with more accuracy and vividness than

¹⁵ Cited in Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity*, 1.

¹⁶ E. A. Gait, ed., *A Census of India*, 1911, vol. 1, Part 1, Ch. 1x, Subsidiary Table, VIII (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1913), 440–41.

¹⁷ A. E. Porter, ed., *Census of India*, 1931, vol. 5, Part 1 (Delhi: Manohar, 2001, facsimile edn), 260.

¹⁸ Sen, 'Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work', 30.

¹⁹ I owe this point to Nitin Sinha.

colonial censuses—or ethnographies—could. Very little sense of political correctness existed in this set of textured literary representations that could have silenced the caste factor: caste was too pervasive, and Bengalis far too ideologically conditioned by its rules, for authors to even want to question their own assumptions and accounts.²⁰

Before slavery was abolished, caste decided the price of slaves. A young kayet or kayastha woman—considered generally to be high caste, even though disputes continued till the late nineteenth century about their real status—fetched Rs 40–100, but an untouchable *chandal* woman could be bought for as little as Rs 10–20.²¹ Servants retained their caste status even after enslavement, and caste decided their functions. High-caste servants cooked and managed childcare and they often enjoyed a fictive kinship with the master's household. A Bengali slave-owner had a slave nursemaid in the mid-nineteenth century whom he called his second mother. Her children were married off at considerable family expense.²²

Hierarchies among servants continued in the nineteenth century. Rabindranath Tagore's memoirs recall his childhood in the late 1860s, when his opulent household left childcare entirely to servants, mostly high caste. Their disciplinary regime remained a bittersweet memory in his late life. He might, however, have slightly exaggerated their absolute despotic (*bhrityatantra*) rule over children in order to exempt himself from the larger power relations at play within the family. While he described a regime of total austerity in diet and dress that servants imposed on the children, he also remembered the imaginative resources from folk culture that they brought: songs and verses that he would not otherwise have heard within his highly cultivated family, marked as it was by classical tastes.²³

Others in the family had kinder memories. His nephew, the artist Abanindranath Tagore, recalled his love for his personal nurse, Padma.²⁴ His niece, Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, hardly ever even met her high-

²⁰ Perhaps because of this, Swapna Banerjee's account of servants in Bengal uses fiction abundantly. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity*.

²¹ Sarkar, 'Bondage in the Colonial Context', 101.

²² Krishnakumar Mitra, *Atmacharit* [An Autobiography] (Calcutta, 1946), 13.

²³ Tagore, *Jibansmriti* [Memories of My Life] (Calcutta: Vishwabharati, 1912), 21–24.

²⁴ Abanindranath Tagore and Rani Chanda, *Jorasankor Dharey* [Next to Jorasanko] (Calcutta: Vishwabharati, 1940), 14–15.

achiever literary mother in her infancy. Her intimate circle was composed entirely by women servants, starting with her wet nurse.²⁵ It seems that Rabindranath continued the caste-based division of work and wages in his own household. In a letter to his wife, he suggested that she hire a ‘respectable Christian’ maid as seamstress for Rs 8 per month, while paying a cook a daily salary of Re 1 because he was a brahman.²⁶

Precisely because of the relative intimacy, respect and power that brahman servants were allowed, their caste identity had to be carefully vouched for. In the anonymity of the metropolitan city, caste identities became notoriously elusive, and the standard signs of caste seemed dangerously interchangeable. In a short story written in 1906, Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay describes a brahman master looking for a cook.²⁷ ‘Are you really a brahman?’ he asks a prospective candidate. ‘Many wretched Hadis and Doms (that is, lowest of untouchables) also wear the sacred thread these days in Calcutta and pretend to be one... Let me test you, can you recite the *Gayatri Mantra*?’²⁸ The man obliges, but the would-be master is still unhappy: ‘How can one tell? Now that it [the mantra] is in print, anyone can buy it for practically nothing and memorize the verse...OK, recite the chant that is learnt at the sacred thread ceremony. That can’t be found in a printed book.’ Incidentally, the master also employed a part-time maidservant, clearly from a lesser caste. She does enter the kitchen, but only to light the stove. Cooking must be done by a brahman.

Household-based master–servant relationships are, indeed, the first and most enduring school where different generations learn to produce and reproduce caste and class. They are also a place where power may get somewhat befuddled by intimacy. In that enclosed space, the maintenance of purity–pollution taboos and hierarchies becomes exceptionally complex and delicate. Till at least the middle or late decades of the twentieth century, and maybe even now, brahman cooks—called

²⁵ Sarala Debi, *Jibaner Jharapata* [Leaves from a Life] (Calcutta: Rupa edition, 1975).

²⁶ Cited in Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity*, 62–63.

²⁷ Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, ‘Amar Upanyas’, 1906—*Prabhat Kumar Galpa Samagra* (Kolkata: SBS Publications, 2015), 114–16.

²⁸ This is the sacred chant that was orally taught to brahman men alone for daily recitations. Print culture, however, made it available to all buyers.

Thakur (literally, the lord) if they were men, and *Bamun didi* or *Bamun meye* (elder sister or daughter) when women—were the most privileged of domestic servants, merging easily into the larger kinship network of their masters. They enjoyed rarity value in the nineteenth century since brahman servants, especially women, were relatively thin on the ground. They were mostly young widows abandoned by their family. Most interestingly, non-brahman high-caste cooks could be found in some nineteenth-century households, but later they were replaced by brahmans. This could have been a result of growing rural distress, driving even brahmans into domestic work, or a growing purity consciousness among masters, or both.

The kitchen being a repository of maximal purity, cooking was ideally the brahman's task since masters from all castes could safely eat the food they prepared. Wherever possible, though, the mistress cooked. In a mid-nineteenth-century, high-caste landlord family in eastern Bengal, for instance, the young wife Rashesundari cooked meals for 26 people twice a day, all by herself, from the age of fourteen. The family employed nine maidservants but only one helped the mistress with the rest of her housework and even she did not cook. Others worked outside the home, being of 'lower' castes. Nonetheless, these were the only non-intimidating companions the fearful young bride found in her new home, and they became her playmates. Later, secretly teaching herself to read—which was totally forbidden to women—she would read to them in secret.²⁹

The appearance of hired cooks and nursemaids, especially in urban homes, worried social guardians. It seemed to leave women with far too much leisure, which apparently they misspent in reading undesirable and immoral romances, and indulging in useless new pursuits such as embroidery. The servant-pampered, modern, educated woman who neglected her true vocation as wife and mother—of cooking and nursing—was lampooned in numerous nineteenth-century domestic conduct manuals. More modernist worries strengthened patriarchal anxieties: servants would defy hygiene and *bhadralok* conduct, they would leave the household filthy in a physical and a moral sense. If servants were an

²⁹ Tanika Sarkar, tr. and ed., *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), 199.

unavoidable necessity, then the wife must learn how to monitor them, they said—thus pedagogising mistress–servant relations.³⁰

In the female lifecycle, as far as housewives were concerned, the young bride could be the most vulnerable person in the patrilocal household—more so than even the inferior servants who were, after all, familiar with the ways of the family. As we know from multiple autobiographical anecdotes, wives sometimes shared the subordination of servants, thus developing a mutual empathy and near-friendship in the process. Sometimes, the bride would be socialised in her new role by a maidservant who mediated between her and the senior mistress. The absolute polarity between maid and mistress that Sangari suggests gets confounded by such crossing of class lines at certain domestic conjunctures, built on variables that could be generational, lifecycle stages and the internally differentiated status of both maid and mistress. So, while a young Rashesundari played with and confided in non-brahman lesser maids, we have also seen the power that brahman maids wielded over younger mistresses.

Urban households were often small and firmly clock bound. For a single mistress of childbearing age, childcare and getting the husband's *officer bhat*, or lunch, before he sets off for the office were difficult to combine, and the need for high-caste servants became acute. That enhanced the latter's power and control among urban middle classes. In an autobiographical novel set in the early twentieth century, the brahman cook is a powerful and abrasive figure. Though she chides the young mistress constantly and unfairly, the wife obeys her, knowing that Bamun didi is the senior mistress's deputy and, unlike herself, enjoys 'complete freedom of speech'.³¹ In a short story about an urban household in the early twentieth century, a daughter-in-law complains: 'I would have preferred to cook myself, rather than work under *Bamun Thakur*, it makes for far more work. Mother-in-law has taught them too many luxuries... too often he demands betel leaves and nuts, tea, even food at night, that we cook for him.'³² Even in a highly

³⁰ Tanika Sarkar, 'The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal', *Studies in History* 8, no. 2, 1992, 221–23.

³¹ Ashapurna Debi, *Drishya Theke Drishyantare* [Changing Scenes], in *Shera Paanch ti Upanyas* [Five Best Novels] (Calcutta: Shabda Granthan, 2007), 151.

³² Ashapurna Debi, '*Palankashayini*' *Dashti Upanyas* [The Bedridden Woman] (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1999), 617.

westernised family, which had a Muslim cook to make special meat dishes for the master, a brahman prepared food for the mistress, even though she was highly educated and modern. The Anglicised family called the cook *Bamun-pishi* (auntie) and paid due regard to her status.³³

Such absolute emphasis on the servant's purity relaxed later, though it did not go away. In Delhi in the early 2000s, a Bengali brahman family that diligently observes purity–pollution norms otherwise, was forced to employ a non-brahman maid since the mistress was a working woman. Work divisions that had depended on caste blurred under the exigency, and the maid cleaned, swept, mopped and washed—work reserved for low castes. But she also cooked.³⁴

Domestic service contained complex layers of stratification, caste and nature of work being mapped onto one another, and all decided by the level of purity/pollution associated with various forms of work. In fact, domestic work sheds very useful illumination on the subtle niceties and endless convolutions of caste distinctions. A novel situated in the mid-1940s describes a progressive upper-caste family whose mistress asks the kitchen maid about her caste.³⁵ It turns out that she is a Mahishya, from a 'clean' Shudra caste. The mistress is relieved: 'That's alright. There is no problem if you chop vegetables and grind spices. But when you ask for water to drink, I will pour it out from above, without touching you.' The maid being a part-timer, she is then asked about the caste of her other employers, and she replies: 'Why are you bothered? Wherever I may work, when I come here, I change my clothes and clean myself before I grind your spices. How can I ask other masters about their caste, they won't take that well.' At this point, a younger mistress tells the maid to shut up as she is grinding spices and her spittle may fall on them when she talks. Abashed, the maid asks if she should throw the spices out. The pragmatic mistress says no, but she warns: 'You should have covered your mouth with a cloth. What shameful, filthy sinfulness! ... it is tantamount to killing a brahman if you talk when grinding spice.'

³³ Shudha Mazumdar, 'Chapter 1', in *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, edited with an introduction by Geraldine Forbes (New York: East Gate Books, 1989).

³⁴ Baby Halder, *A Life Less Ordinary*, 108.

³⁵ Bani Basu, *Ashtam Garbha* [The Eighth Birth] (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2000), 59–60.

Thus, the relatively 'clean' Mahishya was allowed into the kitchen, though not to cook, and always under strict restrictions. Dirty utensils and dishes, soiled by hands and mouths, were considered to be carriers of great pollution, hence their washing was left to even lowlier servants who would never be admitted into the kitchen. They sat out in the yard and washed the utensils which would then be washed again by a higher-caste person before being restored to the pure kitchen space. In a novel about an immediate post-Partition bhadrakol refugee colony in Calcutta, for example, we find the same practice continuing even in a communist refugee household.³⁶

Elsewhere, in an early twentieth-century rich rural brahman household, a 'low Shudra' milkmaid had left the milk jug on the kitchen veranda where washed dishes were stacked. When the careless daughter-in-law carried the dishes into the kitchen, it seemed that she had polluted the entire kitchen since the dishes were lying near the jug, which had been touched by a Shudra woman—pollution being carried by proximity, and not just by touch. She was ordered to empty the entire kitchen, wash all utensils, smear them with purifying cow dung, wash them again and then have a purifying bath herself. To have almost touched the jug that a *shuddoor* had touched was tantamount to eating food from her mouth.³⁷

As for servants from even 'lower' rungs, the experiences of Manoranjan Byapari, an untouchable Namashudra ex-servant, as recounted in an autobiography that he has recently published, are edifying.³⁸ He worked under a brahman doctor, and looked after his cattle. He ate outside the house, from a cheap and broken tin plate, and food was flung at him from a distance by the mistress, so that she would not have to touch him or his plate. He slept in the cowshed. Later, he worked as a helper to a high-caste cook who prepared wedding feasts. He was advised to conceal his caste to retain his job. He was cruelly flogged when his caste was exposed at a brahman household.

³⁶ Sabitri Ray, *Badwip* [The Estuary] (Calcutta: Nabapatra Prakashan, 1972), 105.

³⁷ Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Pather Panchali* [Song of the Road], first published 1929, in *Bibhuti Upanyas Samagra* [Collected Novels by Bibhutibhushan], vol. 1 (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 2005), 73.

³⁸ Manoranjan Byapari, *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* [Story of a Chandal Life] (Kolkata: De Publications, 2016), 48–115.

CLEANING FOR OTHERS, LIVING IN SLUMS?

Under the rural *jajmani* system, sweepers and other servants were expected to serve the whole village. Disputes, however, occurred about their precise status in the nineteenth century. At the Mymensingh Zilla court in 1864, two plaintiffs charged Keenkar Nye, the barber, with a lapse of stipulated duties: he would not shave the men since there had been personal enmity between them. The *munsif* agreed with the prosecutors, citing a 1825 precedent, and making an interesting distinction between 'special servants' who were attached to a particular master and were free to move to another, and a 'public servant' who did not have that option since he was bound to serve the entire collective and could never leave an individual out of his services, which were 'general'. The obstinate barber appealed to the Calcutta High Court. Justices Shumboonath Pandit and Bayley adjudicated in his favour the following year.³⁹ Clearly, the urban judges chose to ignore the rural *jajmani* traditions. The debate on who is a 'domestic servant', however, was never completely settled. The 1891 census brought sanitation workers within the category of domestic servants, even though they had already been absorbed within the Corporation workforce from the 1870s.⁴⁰

Mehtars cleaned latrines in homes and in streets, removed animal refuse and carcasses from roads, and later also cleaned the city's drainage system. They belonged to the larger category of municipal 'scavengers', along with sweepers, coolies and *muddafarash*, men who cremated human and animal corpses. All four categories were untouchables, segregated from society by dreadful pollution taboos, the mehtar especially so.

If the kitchen was the purest of spaces, where only family members and brahmans could prepare food, then the latrine—the dirtiest and most polluted domestic space—was reserved for mehtars. These two parts of the household—the kitchen and the latrine—demarcate the two ends of the service relationship discernible in one household. But even here, the servants' entry was framed by careful restrictions. Older Calcutta

³⁹ A. A. Sevestre, *Reports of Cases, at the Calcutta High Court, Appellate Jurisdiction, on Appeal from the Lower Courts of Bengal*, Part 1 (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Company, 1865), 8: 9–10.

⁴⁰ Sen, 'Slavery, Servitude and Wage Work', 30.

residential buildings usually had an iron spiral staircase that connected with the outermost room—the latrine—on every floor from outside. This ensured that their cleaners would not enter and pollute any other rooms.

Homes without this clever appurtenance did allow mehtars inside, but only after ensuring that nobody came within touching distance. Amiya Samanta, now a retired Bengali police official, recalls how he was once severely chastised by family and neighbours: he had handed over the mehtar's salary to him instead of throwing the cash on the ground to be picked up. Even if their hands did not actually touch, he was still contaminated by the horizontal spatial connection⁴¹

The Corporation pulled them into the municipal workforce from the 1870s, though they continued to clean private latrines and receive additional payments from individual homeowners. They straddled, therefore, the home and the street, the private and the public; they were domestic servants as well as government employees. Nandini Gooptu, discussing untouchable municipal labourers in Uttar Pradesh towns, thinks that becoming government employees, however meanly paid, did bring untouchables a measure of self-esteem.⁴² Their pollution stigma continued to shadow mehtars in streets and in homes. Nonetheless, institutionalisation as public servants, and a corporate identity as urban workforce, did gradually introduce a sense of collective strength.

Censuses relegated scavengers to Dom and Hadi castes, the lowest of the low, even among untouchables—*Hadir Haal* or the condition of Hadis being a conventional Bengali description of absolute wretchedness. These people traditionally removed human and animal waste from village homes and roads.⁴³ Contemporary Bengali records, on the other hand,

⁴¹ Amiya Samanta in discussion with the author, 2 January 2017.

⁴² Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2001.

⁴³ P. J. Marshall, 'The Company and the Coolies: Labour in Early Calcutta', in *The Urban Experience: Calcutta—Essays in Honour of Professor Nisith R. Ray*, ed. Pradip Sinha (Calcutta: South Asia Books, 1987), 26; A. E. Porter, ed., *Report on the Census of India*, vol. 6, Parts 1 and 2 (Calcutta: Central Public Branch, 1933), 112; H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), 92; Subol Chandra Mitra, ed., *Saral Bangla Abhidhan* [An Easy Bangla Dictionary] (Calcutta: New Bengal Press, 1909), 1280.

call them *dhangars*.⁴⁴ The term, according to several nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources, was originally applied to Kol Adivasis from the Chhotanagpur region. An 1844 painting of Calcutta scavengers by Colesworthy Grant shows them in attire that was typically worn by Kols, with a particular style of topknot and a rope tied several times around their waists (Figure 7.1). They stand with spades in ankle-deep water, obviously engaged in draining marshes. Early nineteenth-century missionaries travelled with Calcutta scavengers to their Chhotanagpur villages to set up missions.⁴⁵

We can reconstruct a probable temporal sequence for the formation of the mehtar-scavenger category by connecting various waves of workers coming into the city over time. The three villages that constituted early Calcutta would have been served by local Dom and Hadi mehtars. As the city grew with an enormous building spree in the eighteenth century, and continued to expand till the mid-twentieth century, demand for night soil removal also grew exponentially. An influx of migrant labourers from Chhotanagpur Adivasis then joined in the work sometime in the early nineteenth century. Censuses, as well as contemporary Bengali dictionaries, describe mehtars as forest-dwelling *junglees*, *ashabhya* and *Anarya* people: uncivilised, beyond and below the Hindu caste order.⁴⁶

Once tree-felling and marsh-draining work slackened off, dhangars turned to other urban occupations. Since tribal people were definitionally outcastes, waste removal would have been a reasonable option for them after their original urban functions became somewhat redundant. Afterwards, as waves of north Indian migrant labourers poured into Calcutta from the late nineteenth century onwards, many joined the ranks of dhangars/Doms/mehtars, as they turned to manual scavenging. But till at least the 1860s, tribal people predominated: 'Dhangars and other hill tribes who do such important though dirty work in the drainage of

⁴⁴ Haricharan Bandyopadhyay, *Bangiya Shabdakosh* [A Bengali Dictionary], vol. 1 (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1966, reprint), 1115.

⁴⁵ Marshall, 'The Company and the Coolies'. I am grateful to Dr Sangeeta Dasgupta for bringing the painting to my notice and pointing out the topknot and the belt which she identified as Kol dress, and to Dr Uday Chandra for the information about missionaries.

⁴⁶ Mitra, *Saral Bangla Abhidhan*, 1280; Bandyopadhyay, *Bangiya Shabdakosh*, 1155.



FIGURE 7.1: Scavengers of Calcutta

Source: © British Library Board, Anon and Colesworthy Grant, *A Series of Miscellaneous Rough Sketches of Oriental Heads*, first published, 1846, BL/IOC/APA, P 2553.

Calcutta.⁴⁷ Some scavengers were a few caste notches above them. From the later period, we find reference to one Bala, a Chamar who tried to block the scavengers' strike of 1928.⁴⁸ Chamars, an untouchable tanner caste, were ritually somewhat superior to Doms or Hadis.

The very sight of mehtars was profoundly repugnant to upper-caste Corporation ratepayers. Bishnunath Motilal, a Bengali gentleman, wrote

⁴⁷ Anon., *Five Hundred Questions on the Condition of the Natives of India: A Paper Read Before the Royal Asiatic Society, London, June 19, 1865* (London: Truber and Co, 1865), 1.

⁴⁸ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 June 1928.

to municipal authorities in great horror in 1837 that mehtars could be seen on the roads 'at all times of the day'. The sight, he complained, turned the stomach of well-born Bengalis, especially after they had enjoyed a good meal.⁴⁹

A short story by Rabindranath Tagore, written at some point between the two strikes of 1928, is a tale about an elderly mehtar and his small grandson who are returning from work, freshly bathed and cleanly dressed. As they pass a crowd of temple-goers, and inadvertently brush against them, their tell-tale broom and pail give away their caste, and pious pilgrims pounce on them to lynch them. The apolitical husband of an ardent Gandhian activist wants to rescue them but the Gandhian wife puts her foot down: 'Had they been Hadis or Doms, we could have taken them away. But they are Mehtars!'⁵⁰ Pulled out of various untouchable castes, mehtars seem to have constituted a distinct, work-based category that was far lower than any of their original components. So, a new 'lower depth' was added to the caste hierarchy, drawing upon, yet surpassing, the initial stigma.

Things did not change much after Independence, or even after the Left Front government established its long stint of unbroken rule in West Bengal. Manoranjan Byapari was offered a janitor's job in a school in South Calcutta in the 1980s. Janitors were not yet elevated to the more respectable *safai karamchari* designation, and were still called mehtar/*jamadar*. They were not allowed into teashops but were served tea outside, in earthen cups; being polluted by their mouths, these would then be thrown away. Byapari describes the mountain of refuse that faced him, as the school had been without a cleaner for some time. He names several different kinds of faeces, old and new, normal-looking and sick, choking the toilets. Some of it was heaped up into a hillock, some had liquefied into a viscous pool, full of worms, flowing all over the floor. Nose covered with a cloth, and broom in hand, he launched his daily attack on 'that ocean of piss and shit'—having to 'crawl, wade and swim through filth'.⁵¹

⁴⁹ S. W. Goode, *Municipal Calcutta: Its Institutions in Their Origins and Growth* (Edinburgh: Calcutta Corporation Publications, 1916), 168.

⁵⁰ 'Samskar', May 1928; Rabindranath Tagore, *Galpaguchha* [A Bunch of Tales] (Calcutta: Vishwabharati Publications, 1994 edn), 646–49.

⁵¹ Byapari, *Itibritte Chandal Jiban*.

From 1703, mehtars were employed to clean European quarters and streets in the White Town. Later, they served the entire city of Calcutta. From 1760, they were supervised by the Director of Conservancy, which provided four bullock carts for European and two for Indian quarters, for garbage cleaning. By 1802, more carts were added and two depots now housed them. Mehtars took out rubbish from private homes to load into municipal boats at Nightsoil Ghat near the Old Mint at night. Boats then dumped all this into the Hooghly river. But most waste was simply abandoned into the nearest ditch, pond or gutter. This was notwithstanding the cholera epidemic of 1770, when more than 70,000 Calcutta residents—many of them Europeans—died, and piles of human and animal carcasses rotted on the roads;⁵² and despite Wellesley's Minute of 1803, which underlined the dangers of such a disposal system.⁵³

Once epidemics came to be medically connected with waterborne infections, the city fathers had to act. In the 1870s, grandiose pipe network construction for waste disposal and for clean water supply was undertaken by chief sanitary engineer Clark. Thirty-eight miles of brick sewers and three miles of pipe sewers were soon laid, and massive funds raised to provide a piped supply of clean water. Refuse was now taken out, through municipal depots, pumping stations and waste treatment centres, to the Salt Lakes, about 3 miles from the city, and connected by Bidyadhari river to the Sundarbans. This was until the early twentieth century, when the river became moribund, creating yet another crisis in waste disposal.⁵⁴ From the early twentieth century, middle-class homes were connected with drains through septic tanks, though manual night soil collection was legally—and only notionally—abolished as late as the 1980s.⁵⁵

⁵² James Ranald Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1837), 9.

⁵³ Goode, *Municipal Calcutta*, 1–13.

⁵⁴ On the history of the river, which gradually died due to siltage in the early twentieth century, see Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya, *From Marsh to Township East of Calcutta: A Tale of Salt Water Lakes and Salt Lake Township* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1990); Christine Furedy, 'From Waste Land to Waste Not Land', in *The Urban Experience*, 147.

⁵⁵ P. Thankappan Nair, 'Civic and Public Services in Old Calcutta', in *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. 1, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990), 232–40.

It was the city poor alone who were hopelessly left out of the loop of urban development. In the age of urban improvement, nothing changed for those who still loaded buckets of filth with their hands and carried night soil on their heads to the municipal dumps. When Corporation trucks began to carry garbage to the Dhapa Square Mile landfill in eastern Calcutta, 'sickly smelling' foetid waste was spread out every day by bare human hands to raise the ground level.⁵⁶ Municipal garbage carts found slum lanes too narrow to enter, and scavengers could not afford to pay night soil and garbage cleaners, while public latrines were very few. Human waste, consequently, festered on their doorsteps. It is ironical that what they removed from the city took permanent residence where the scavengers were forced to live.⁵⁷

In 1878, Calcutta had a total of 39,756 houses listed. Only 5,400 were connected with sewers and 11,496 houses made private arrangements to remove their waste. The Corporation employed 1,100 scavengers to clean the rest, and they also cleaned underground drains and the 68 public toilets in the city. Mehtars and sweepers also removed the vast deposits of animal excreta from streets (all transport throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries being animal-driven).⁵⁸

Their monthly pay in the 1870s varied between 8 annas for cleaning houses that paid an annual Corporation rate of Rs 50, and Rs 8 for those who cleaned houses paying Rs 5,000 a year.⁵⁹ In 1928, communists prepared a monthly budget for the average Corporation scavenger: their pay was between Rs 10 and Rs 14. Those who worked a double shift had higher wages. Over these 50 years, wages had, indeed, gone up but prices of essential goods went up far more. Mehtars' monthly expenditure now came to more than Rs 12, which included payments for rice, lentils and oil for food, drinks and soap—the last two being essential items, given

⁵⁶ The only eyewitness account that I have found of this grisly manual scavenging comes from a nineteenth-century English tourist: Edmund Mitchell, *Thacker's Guide Book to Calcutta: Its Highways and Bye Paths* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Company, 1890), 206.

⁵⁷ Martin, *Notes on the Medical Topography*, 21.

⁵⁸ Memorandum of the Army Sanitary Commission, 1878, in *Parliamentary Papers, East India, 1878–9*, 176–80.

⁵⁹ Memorandum of the Army Sanitary Commission.

the nature of their work—fuel, rent and interest on loans, and bribes to sardars or middlemen who recruited them and decided on their leave and re-employment. No surplus was left for medicine or education for children, or for old age or accidents—and for all of which their employers made no provision. They lived in slums without electricity, ventilation or water supply; paid exorbitantly high rents; had no leave entitlement or death benefit for the family, even when a death occurred through Corporation negligence. They cleaned underground drains clogged with noxious fumes, and many drowned and died of suffocation as they worked without protective gear, gloves or masks—as they still do.⁶⁰ Interestingly, even though the communists observed this, they did not include safety measures in their later charter of strike demands.

Two scavenger strikes in 1928 forced the Corporation to set up a special committee in 1933 to investigate, for the first time, scavenger conditions. They found that wages had remained at the same level. About 2,000 mehtars lived in Corporation barracks while the vast majority rented single, unventilated 25-square-foot hovels that barely had room for a string cot. Sometimes they were as small as 13 square feet, where a whole family lived and cooked. The committee recommended aprons for mehtars, maternity leave for *mehtarani* women, a winter blanket for outdoor scavengers and a raincoat for gully pit ‘boys’ who cleaned drains. They also suggested cheap stores with provision for credit. They found it ‘deplorable’ that scavengers’ rooms adjoined Corporation stables for bullocks, that water supply was extremely meagre, and that one latrine did for 60 people.⁶¹

Swarajist nationalist Corporation councillors proudly claimed that they had set up four Corporation schools. But scavenger children were not admitted there. In 1946, K. P. Chattopadhyay, Corporation education officer, suggested in despair that Christian missionaries should be invited to teach them. Obviously, no one else was prepared to do so. The Corporation did not maintain service records and treated these people as casual, daily wage workers even if they had spent a lifetime in the work.⁶²

⁶⁰ ‘Meerut Conspiracy Case Proceedings, Prosecution Exhibits’, 545–48 (10), National Archives of India, Delhi.

⁶¹ ‘Meerut Conspiracy Case Proceedings.’

⁶² K. P. Chattopadhyay and Gautamshankar Ray, eds, *Municipal Labour in Calcutta* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1947), 12.

There was no concern at all about mehtars' safety, and there is none to this day. In 1907, a mehtar drowned while cleaning a manhole, and Nafar Kundu, a middle-class youth, died as he tried to save him. Satyandra Nath Datta, an eminent poet, dedicated a poem to Kundu and the Bengal's Lt Governor had a memorial built for him.⁶³ No one mentioned the mehtar who had died, nor was a count maintained for such deaths, nor were safety devices provided.

Mehtars, however, were not resigned to their fate and they keenly resented nationalist Corporation authorities. Relations between the two parties had long been strained. In October 1907, at the height of the Swadeshi movement—Bengal's first anti-colonial mass uprising—large numbers of mehtars, dhangars, sweepers, and so forth, 'set upon nationalists at Beadon Square, beat them up and robbed them as they preached the Swadeshi message'.⁶⁴ In April 1928, during the Howrah scavengers' strike, a Swarajist municipal councillor was once again 'set upon and assaulted' by workers.⁶⁵

RESISTANCE: FROM HOME TO STREETS?

Up to the mid-nineteenth century, privately hired mehtars collected waste from individual homes, which allowed them some bargaining power. But an Act of 1863 centralised cleaning operations under Corporation *tolla* mehtars. It fixed wages and put scavengers under *sirdars* licensed by the municipality. With a rapid municipalisation of night soil services in the 1870s, they lost their earlier leeway, and, in 1877, they went on strike in protest. They spread rumours among municipal sweepers who turned up for work that they would be eventually packed off to the West Indies by Corporation authorities as indentured coolies. They also sent off emissaries to district municipalities to spread the strike.⁶⁶ This was mehtars'

⁶³ Satyandra Nath Datta, 'Nafar Kundu' and 'Methar', first published in *Kuhu O Keka* [Cries of the Cuckoo], 1907, reproduced in his *Kabita Sangraha* [Peacock: A Collection of Poems] (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 180.

⁶⁴ Sumit Sarkar, 'Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation', in *Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha, vol. 3 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 38–94.

⁶⁵ Intelligence Bureau, *Report on the Political Situation and Labour Unrest for Seven Days Ending 18 April 1928*, Intelligence Bureau Archives, Kolkata.

⁶⁶ Goode, *Municipal Calcutta*.

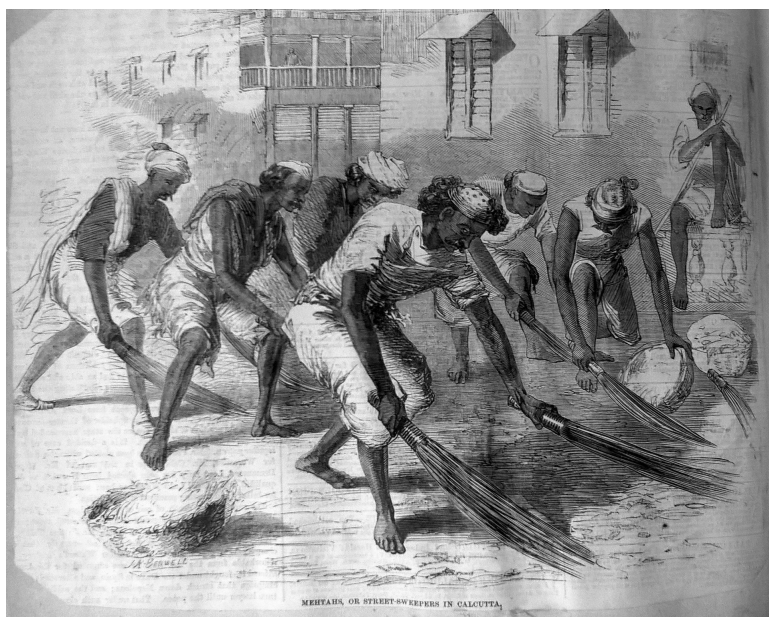


FIGURE 7.2: Mehtars or Street Sweepers in Calcutta

Source: © British Library Board, Henry Winship Scrapbook, British Library, Photo 798.

first collective public appearance in the history of Calcutta (for a visual illustration of sweepers working in the city, see Figure 7.2).

There was a second, brief strike in May 1924, again before the emergence of unions. Mayor C. R. Das, stalwart Congress leader, met the strikers and offered them a lot of facilities along with a wage rise. These proved to be empty promises but the nationalist press made much of Das's magnanimity in meeting the mehtars. The mehtars themselves would have seen it as a major victory for their collective protest. For the first time in Corporation history, the mayor himself—undisputed leader of the Bengal Congress, moreover—was forced to come face to face with people whom the municipality and the Congress had ignored all along, and to talk to them in a conciliatory manner.⁶⁷ Press reports—inevitably,

⁶⁷ *The Statesman*, 26 June 1928, recalled the 1924 events. Many of their grievances, such as bribes exacted by sardars, were repeated in 1928.

given the unprecedented encounter—briefly made mehtars into important public figures.

The All Bengal Scavengers' Union was formed in 1927. Prabhabati Dasgupta, an independent trade unionist working entirely on her own, was the first to build connections with scavengers, through persistent and personal contacts established painstakingly at their *dhabas*. This was an audacious activity for a rich, highly educated, upper-caste woman who transgressed several class, caste and gender taboos in the process. Called *Dhangar-Ma*, or mother of scavengers, she became union president. The bulk of the union personnel was provided by the Worker's and Peasant's Party (WPP)—the mass front of the newly formed Communist Party of India. Dharani Kanta Goswami from the WPP was its secretary and Muzaffar Ahmad emerged as a remarkably dynamic union leader.⁶⁸

Although sporadic strikes had already prepared the ground, those of 1928—extraordinarily well organised—broke new ground. It was the critical moment in mehtar class consciousness, as 1928 was followed by a steady spate of strikes for the rest of the colonial period, despite frequent defeats or half defeats: in 1933, 1935, 1940 (two successive ones in March and August), 1943 and 1945.⁶⁹

Communists, however, ignored their caste completely. Caste never played any role at all in their historical or social understanding, nor in their ideological discourse. This was surely a product of their own caste privileges, since all their Hindu union leaders were upper caste. It was a form of caste-forgetting that could only have been possible for privileged castes.

There were two strikes: one between 4 March and 9 March, involving 9,000–10,000 scavengers, and another between 25 June and 5 July, involving 3,000. The first strike happened when the Corporation was under Swarajist rule and J. N. Sengupta was mayor.

The nationalist-led Corporation cracked down very hard on strikers. Hundreds of workers were beaten up mercilessly as they sat on pickets. They were threatened, blacklegs were promised the earth, and scavengers

⁶⁸ For more on this, see Tanika Sarkar, 'Dirty Work, "Filthy Caste": Calcutta Scavengers in the 1920s', in *Working Lives, Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, ed. Ravi Ahuja (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013), 174–206.

⁶⁹ Chattopadhyay and Ray, *Municipal Labour*, 8–9.

were excluded from local cheap shops and from receiving credit and, worst of all, from water supply. Public latrines were closed to men and women on strike. Notwithstanding such constraints, the strikers proved to be highly resolute. Even better-off scavengers, who cleaned the homes of Europeans, ignored blandishments of preferred treatment and joined the pickets. When sirdars or jobbers were approached to provide an alternative labour supply, they confessed that they just could not find the men.⁷⁰ During the June–July strike, Swarajists had lost their control over the Corporation, and the new lot of officials could count on government support to import blacklegs in bulk from distant locations. Yet, they still could not find a large enough supply to replace men and women on strike.

During the seventeen days of the two strikes, the fundamental importance of mehtar-scavengers to Calcutta life became manifest as garbage choked the city and the entire urban public appealed to the Corporation to negotiate with them. Clearly, unlike all other labour strikes, which involved employers and employees of a particular factory or industry, this one—by the most degraded of public servants—alone could bring the city to its knees.

Both strikes ended in failure. The scavengers had, at the most, bargained for a bit of a wage increase—Re 1 per month—and non-victimisation. The second strike ensured that an enquiry committee would look into their grievances, though it yielded no practical remedy. Public memory proved remarkably short and the city was happy to forget them as soon as things returned to normal. They failed in 1928 and they failed in later years too.⁷¹

Yet, strikes publicised the faces, names and words of the mehtars. An official report on a meeting observed that a ‘stout mehtarani’ sat next to the main speaker, and it was because of her vigorous and shaming words from the podium that workers finally decided to continue the strike. Ram Nagina, a very vocal worker, advised scavengers to use violence without hesitation if they were attacked.⁷²

There was an old tradition behind mehtaranis’ words of protest—words that came out of yet another liminal occasion: ritual inversion ceremonies,

⁷⁰ Intelligence Bureau, *Weekly Reports*, March to July, 1928.

⁷¹ For a fuller account of the 1928 strikes, see Sarkar, ‘Dirty Work, “Filthy Caste”’.

⁷² ‘Meerut Conspiracy Case Proceedings, Bengal and Bihar Speeches’, P 1926 (T), National Archives of India, Delhi.

or *shongs*, when subalterns carried out public processions, making fun of urban bosses with their rough music and pantomimes. An early twentieth-century song by a mehtarani of the Calcutta Corporation is worth citing at length, being a rare example that actually got recorded. It reveals their sense of professional and collective strength, their absolute irreverence towards Corporation *babus*, their masters, their mockery of a world that denigrates them. It is a song where the world is turned upside down.

My name is Hari Mehtarani
I am the grandma of the municipality
If anyone accuses us of being abusive
We quit work in unison
Our caste is well bonded.
But the Babus are different
They shamelessly lick the half-eaten plates of Sahibs
And then they retort 'Don't touch us, mehtarani'
Oh! we will wed Brahmin priests.⁷³

The song has been dated loosely as a composition from the early twentieth century. It does seem to exude the confidence that arises out of strikes, so it could well belong to the late 1920s, the time of the strikes. Their public degradation and their absolute distance from caste proprieties gave mehtaranis a stridency and an earthy boldness that were both linguistic and political.

We may say that the year 1928 initiated a brief parallel life for mehtars, one that was the Other of their despised everyday existence. Once they went on strike, depriving the city of essential services that no other caste would provide, the value of their work came briefly to be recognised. As domestic servants, caste had been their manifest identity. As Corporation employees, a class identity began to form. Strikes, as we have seen, added a third dimension. It made them union men and women, an integral part of the urban working class.

⁷³ Collected by Tinkari Sur in his *Teensho Bochhorer Kolkata* [Kolkata Across Three Centuries], cited in Anindita Ghosh, *Claiming the City: Protest, Crime and Scandals in Colonial Calcutta* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 94.

Agency and Domestic Workers

LUCY DELAP

When the lives of domestic workers are investigated by historians and other scholars, a common theme that emerges is the agency of domestic workers, understood as ‘the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act’.¹ There are structural asymmetries of power in paid-for domestic labour, which play out on the intersecting terrains of ethnicity, race, migrant status, gender, age, social class, and so on. A well-developed historical literature has emerged which charts these structuring experiences, and assesses the forms of constraint and opportunity they imposed.² Whatever the constellation of factors shaping experiences of labour, it has proved tempting to frame conclusions in terms of the (varying) powers domestic workers possess to order their lives and, more specifically, to contest stigma and resist employers’ attempts to control their labour—the narrative that Lila Abu-Lughod critically terms the ‘romance of resistance’.³

Despite the questioning of the coherence of self and its experiences in postmodern-influenced literature, historians have persistently sought

¹ Laura Ahearn, ‘Language and Agency’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30, 2001, 112.

² For a wide-ranging summary of this literature, see Rafaella Sarti, ‘Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work’, *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 2, 2014, 279–31.

³ Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women’, *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1, 1990, 41–55; see also Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 21.

to excavate meaningful, accountable interventions by historical subjects.⁴ Inspired by James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), there has been a repeated tendency for the literature on domestic workers as 'subalterns' to conclude that agency is possible within this often marginalised sector, and to celebrate the creativity of domestic worker resistance even if this remains at the level of 'infrapolitics'.⁵ Controlling tactics such as manipulation of pay, choice of language formats, control of dress, courtship, leisure and access to kin, and multitudes of other impositions and infringements have been more available to employers than their servants. But servants and other kinds of domestic workers were never just victims, or precarious workers who suffered alienation and commodification. They were also conduits of indigenous knowledge or of tactics of worker organisation; their mediation of classed and raced environments often granted them considerable power to manipulate, shape and distort the knowledge and interventions open to their employers. They had, as Sherry Ortner has termed it, 'agency of (unequal) power'.⁶

How satisfying is this observation? More precision and reflection can help us think more creatively and productively about the very different forms that agency might take. Lynn Thomas has recently accused historians of complacency in asserting research findings that demonstrate the agency of their subjects—particularly relevant, she feels, to those working on

⁴ On the critical reception and uses of ideas of agency, see Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4, 1991, 773–97, and David Gary Shaw, ed., 'Agency after Postmodernism', theme issue, *History and Theory* 40, no. 4, 2001.

⁵ J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). See Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen, 'Historicizing Domestic Workers' Resistance and Organizing', *International Labor and Working Class History* 88, 2015, 4–10; Dina Mansour-Ille and Maegan Hendow, 'From Exclusion to Resistance: Migrant Domestic Workers and the Evolution of Agency in Lebanon', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, no. 3, 2018, 1–21. Clare Anderson has argued that archives are only likely to offer partial and biographically decontextualised glimpses of subaltern agency, and thus subalternarity is usefully reconceived as a 'socially contingent process rather than a category of identity'. Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6.

⁶ Sherry B. Ortner, 'Specifying Agency: The Comaroffs and Their Critics', *Interventions* 3, no. 1, 2011, 79.

women, and especially women marginalised by their race, caste, national origin or labour market status. Showing resilience, choice and enterprise among our historical subjects is, she argues, a kind of 'safety position', one unlikely to be challenged by other historians, and one that makes for a predictable kind of history. Faced with assumptions about the victim status, passivity or fractured worker consciousness in relation to domestic workers, it remains important to assert agency, and to avoid what have been longstanding characterisations of demoralised or brutalised workers who, as Engels memorably suggested, could be seen as 'precisely as much a thing without volition as water, and is subject to the laws of nature with precisely the same necessity; at a certain point all freedom ceases'.⁷ Nonetheless, Thomas has helpfully pushed us to go beyond a simple counter-insistence on the possibility of worker or feminine agency.⁸

Sherry Ortner has argued that we might supplement the familiar 'agency of power' with what she terms 'agency of intentions'. What she has in mind are diffuse forms of 'culturally constituted projects, projects that infuse life with meaning and purpose'. With 'subaltern' female workers in mind, she argues that 'agency of intentions' stems from 'desires that grow out of their own structures of life', rather than being reducible to an experience of domination or resistance.⁹ This seems to be a helpful approach to capturing the wider commitments and aspirations of domestic workers—to their own life fulfilment, to material savings, to projects arising out of their kin relationships or their cultural interests. But the schema Ortner proposes is just a starting point. I argue below that work on affect, improvisation and material culture is helpful in refining further the forms and strategies of agency. And following Walter Johnson's important intervention on agency in relation to the historiography of slavery, we might ask ourselves what kind of personhood we are envisaging for our agentic historical subjects? Are we quietly relying on a kind of liberal autonomy of self, which allows agents to exert their will and individuality? Ortner's account of intentions may rely on a historically specific form of liberal self-development and (rational) intentionality. How could we

⁷ F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, tr. Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 130.

⁸ Lynn M. Thomas, 'Historicising Agency', *Gender & History* 28, no. 2, 2016, 324–39.

⁹ Ortner, 'Specifying Agency', 80, 81.

better historicise our accounts of domestic workers, to explore the kinds of selves which may better capture the experiences, disengagements and performances of *bibis*, *ayahs*, maids and cleaners?¹⁰

LATERAL AGENCY

A productive starting point for an expanded approach to agencies might be the idea of lateral agency. This concept has been developed by critical queer theorist Lauren Berlant, who describes it as ‘agency without intention’ and ‘a mode of coasting consciousness within the ordinary that helps people survive the stress on their sensorium that comes from the difficulty of reproducing contemporary life.’¹¹ This stress on the ordinary meshes well with the everyday sites of labour and reproduction that characterise domestic work. And while Berlant focuses on the contemporary late capitalist moment (the era she characterises as marked by the attritional ‘slow death’ of the structurally disadvantaged), her work has the potential to inform historical perspectives. Berlant seeks to shift our attention away from selfhood, intentionality and personality, realms she characterises as ‘compelled pseudovereignty’, to focus instead on practices and appetites. Rejecting the heroic and melodramatic narrative of resistance, Berlant instead focuses on laterality, a shift she variously terms interruptive, dispersed or ‘spreading out’.

For domestic workers, lateral agency might encompass the detachment that Selina Todd has described among domestic servants, or the laughter that I have stressed in one of my other works.¹² It might reside in the forms of relief and small pleasures domestic workers could take in domestic routine, in fantasy, in forms of imagined ownership or self-suspension. It might help us understand Mrs Macafferty, who entered domestic service in 1917 from her working-class home in Wales. She was interviewed in the 1970s as part of an early British oral history project and recalled her entry

¹⁰ Walter Johnson, ‘On Agency’, *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, 2003, 113–24.

¹¹ L. G. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 18.

¹² Selina Todd, “Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain,” 1900–1950, *Past & Present* 203, no. 1, 2009, 181–204; Lucy Delap, ‘Kitchen-Sink Laughter: Domestic Service Humor in Twentieth-Century Britain’, *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 3, 2010, 623–54.

into domestic work as an experience of compulsion—but one motivated by a fantasy she shared with her siblings of helping their mother: ‘the only thing was for us to be servants we couldn’t do anything else, we used to dream that we could buy her a fur coat.’¹³ As Berlant has noted, fantasy might moderate or rework a sense of powerlessness. Far from being a form of false consciousness, this might be a powerful recasting of the meaning of labour.

Mrs Macafferty had previously worked as a help while still at school and had made her preferences plain in acts of outright resistance: ‘we had to wash the dishes and things like that. But I used to run away when I was in the middle of washing the dishes ’cos I didn’t like it.’ She went on to work as general servant to a family who owned a post office, and she resented the ‘dirty’ work she had to undertake: ‘I had to clean all their shoes and everything, I wouldn’t do that now.’ At a historical distance of around 50 years, the older Mrs Macafferty took the opportunity to make clear her retrospective refusal of stigmatised forms of labour. She also, however, recalled a pleasure that accompanied her work, which she found in song. Having been compelled to leave school early, she still punctuated her labour by music, within the framework she had experienced at elementary school: ‘I used to try and teach myself the *sol-fa*, the modulator on my own while I was washing the dishes and putting them on the shelf.’¹⁴

The singing or piano-playing servant is a recurrent cultural trope in British ‘servant question’ texts of this period, perhaps because love of music was understood as an assertion of cultural equality and selfhood. For the employing classes, this was often found humorous in relation to servants. We might read Mrs Macafferty’s singing as a form of mild resistance to her labour, and thus as an ‘agency of power’. As a ‘life project’, her musical impulses could also be a good candidate for an ‘agency of intention’, in Ortner’s terms. Her efforts to learn what was probably the ‘Curwen modulator’, a musical notation system that was widely used in Welsh schools, re-awakened the hopes and aspirations for self-betterment that she associated with school. But these two readings might also miss

¹³ Paul Thompson and Trevor Lummis, *Family Life and Work Experience before 1918, 1870–1973*. [data collection]. 7th Edition. UK Data Service, 2009. SN: 2000, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-2000-1> (accessed on 12 February 2018), interview 210.

¹⁴ Thompson and Lummis, *Family Life and Work Experience*.

what could be read too as a form of lateral agency; Mrs Macafferty's direct pleasure in music gave her solace and helped her rationalise a life that she summed up in her 1970s interview as 'the drudgery of work. It's always been the same drudgery but with different people.'¹⁵ This oral history source is richly suggestive of the multiple forms of agency which might coexist in a single action, episode or historical source. Fantasies and forms of taking pleasure might be interwoven with acts of resistance and intention.

Lateral agency might also be exercised through deploying institutions or regulations against their grain. Consider, for example, the letter written by Mrs Gray, the mother of a domestic servant in 1930s' Britain, to a national union organiser, Edgar P. Harries. Mrs Gray recounted her efforts to see the employer of her daughter, and to gain recompense for her daughter's abrupt sacking:

I have never seen Madam from the day she engaged my daughter I went down to see her on the Wednesday of the same week as she finished Joan on the Friday but she would not give me an interview but sent Matron to me and she told me that Joan must finish on the Friday as Madam had already engaged another maid and I told her if that was so I expected Madam to pay my girl a month's wage in respect of notice.'¹⁶

This source demonstrates the crucial importance of kin in mediating the employment relationship, reminding us of the need to see domestic workers as remaining connected to their existing social and familial networks, rather than isolated within bourgeois or elite homes.

Mrs Gray was not able to get the wages she felt her daughter deserved, and she was articulate about the inequalities of resources that explained this: 'I don't think it's right that she can go to her solicitor and say unjust or untrue things and knowing she is at fault and I because I'm poor must submit to her lying accusations about me I have not talked about her to no one except my husband.' This might be read as simple defiant resistance, demonstrating agency in (unequal) power. But Mrs Gray's

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mrs Gray [she does not sign her full name, so this is simply what the archive tells us about her], 5 Feb 1938, personal correspondence to E. P. Harries, secretary of the Organisation Department of the Trades Union Congress, Britain. Modern Records Centre, Warwick University, 292/54.76/5.

letter also reveals the surprising uses to which it was imagined the law might be put. She asked Harries: 'do you think I should write and advise her to take proceedings against me so I can get my side of the story told as I resent the accusations strongly as I cannot afford to take a summons out and pay for a solicitor as my husband is unemployed.'¹⁷ Eliciting a defamation suit against her was welcomed by Mrs Gray as a means of getting a public voice. She was clear about what was due to her in moral terms, but also her inability to marshal sufficient resources to obtain a direct legal victory; she hoped instead to be given a reactive platform.¹⁸ This example of how those without resources might hope to engage the legal infrastructure by provoking it to take action against themselves can offer an example of lateral agency, more proactive and strategic than the *sol-fa* of Mrs Macafferty, but nonetheless an attempt, as Berlant might term it, to interrupt and laterally engage the legal system.

AMBIVALENT AGENCY

Mrs Gray had written to a representative of one of the relatively rare experiments with domestic worker unionisation in modern British history.¹⁹ Labour historians have often focused on the ways in which the agency of those with relatively few resources can be fostered by collective solidarity, with unions often assumed to be a foremost site and technique.

¹⁷ Mrs Gray, personal correspondence to E. P. Harries.

¹⁸ As Carolyn Steedman's work has emphasised, the law was a resource that was regularly and eagerly accessed by servants at historical moments when they understood it as supporting their legal personhood as 'employed'. It has thus provided, and imposed, particular genres of agency. Steedman's eighteenth-century sources indicate greater access to legal agency than was available to servants in the twentieth century, after the withdrawal, among other factors, of the right of settlement. Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14, 30.

¹⁹ On British experiments with domestic worker unions, see Laura Schwartz, "'What We Feel is Needed is a Union for Domesticity Such as the Miners Have': The Domestic Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland 1908–1914," *Twentieth-Century British History* 25, no. 2, 2014, 173–92; and Laura Schwartz, *Feminism and the Servant Problem: Class Conflict and Domestic Labour in the British Women's Suffrage Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Forms of collective solidarity for domestic workers did emerge in a variety of temporal and spatial contexts.²⁰ But they did not always take a format that was congruent with conventional labour organising. The organisation that Mrs Gray had written to was founded in 1938 in the unusual format of a top-down initiative, led by officials of the British Trades Union Congress (TUC). Where unions were usually founded at the grass-roots or workplace level, and subsequently built up membership until a national affiliation could be sustained, TUC officials were sceptical that this could ever be the route by which the fragmented and feminised domestic workers could be organised, despite repeated earlier efforts to unionise domestic workers in Britain.²¹ The 1938 Domestic Workers' Union (DWU), which was only active for a few years, was sparked by an influx of European migrants into British domestic service in the 1930s, which had prompted resistance from indigenous workers. This, TUC officials felt, was an appropriate moment to intervene among workers. Officials believed that servants lacked solidarity instincts but might respond to the perceived direct threat of foreign workers in the British labour market.

The DWU turned out to be premised on assumptions that undercut the possibility of agency among domestic workers. Not only was there an implicit commitment to resisting non-indigenous workers, but the whole project was founded on paternalism and even contempt. An organiser of the Union, John Smith, addressed the wider community of union members to ask for their support in unionising female workers he described as

²⁰ See, for example, Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen, eds, 'Historicizing Domestic Labour: Resistance and Organizing,' Special Issue, *International Labor and Working Class History* 88, 2015; Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, ed., *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity: Understanding the Globalisation of Domestic Work, 16th–21st Centuries* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004); Vanessa H. May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie, eds, *Colonisation and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015). Despite this scholarship, the perceived relative scarcity of domestic worker unions has led to the marginal interest in domestic servants as workers in many labour history literatures.

²¹ L. Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Schwarz, *Feminism and the Servant Problem*.

‘ignorant of what they should receive for their labour. [Domestic workers] are the obvious prey of “cheap labour” sharks. They tend to depress the already low standards by reason of their different sense of wage values.’ In trying to drum up support for the DWU, he deployed paternalistic fears of the sexual vulnerability of female servants, which he euphemistically termed ‘grave moral danger’: ‘Think what that would mean to you if it were your own daughter and assist the committee in this effort.’²²

The sexual connotations of service, and the feminised gender profile of its workers, structured and constrained the forms of agency that could be offered by collective action and labour organising. In the mid-twentieth century in Britain, servants were more likely to turn to the solidarities of their kin and friendship networks, as Mrs Gray’s letter on behalf of her daughter suggests, than to the union, though the subsequent attempts to form unions of domestic workers indicate that this remained an avenue of potential. ‘Ambivalent agency’ might capture these tentative, and even self-belittling or self-defeating, forms of agency. Siân Pooley’s recent work on children’s contributions to the provincial press in late nineteenth-century northern England has explored the idea of ambivalent agency more fully. She argues that children drew on a narrative format that followed ‘each assertion of agency with a clause to emphasize the limits that circumscribed action’.²³ She links this format to a strategy widely visible in children’s writings, of evoking ‘littleness’, a characteristic that could indicate powerlessness and the imposition of adult constraint, but also a cue for the agency of deploying a comic or ‘cute’ voice, asserting moral equivalency, or strategies of distancing, imaginative self-projection, self-disguise and disregard. Pooley stresses cultural and literary formats, but the idea of ambivalent agency seems capable of a wider variety of formulations. In Britain, for example, under conditions of expanding literacy, popular access to the law, forms of labour regulation and democratisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ‘ambivalent agency’ can capture something of the affective and psychic formulations of how domestic workers could influence their lives and labour.

²² John Smith, 292/54.76/9, Modern Records Centre, Warwick University.

²³ Siân Pooley, ‘Children’s Writing and the Popular Press in England, 1876–1914’, *History Workshop Journal* 80, no. 1, 2015, 93.

With this in mind, we might reflect further upon the spiritual and moral agency assumed by those whose lives might be shaped by faith as well as by materiality or power inequalities. As Caroline Walker Bynum has argued, religious practices and objects represent, and might enable, complex forms of agency; this seems a productive area in which to extend our understanding of the experiences and meanings of domestic labour.²⁴ Much of the literature on domestic work is surprisingly secular in its concerns, leading us to ask what kind of investments might have produced this disengagement with religion. This is in keeping with the call by various scholars, including Joan Scott, for us to think more deeply about the kinds of psychic structures of affect, desire and meaning which might be read as underpinning agency, and which might be at play in forms of religious observance and faith.²⁵

DISTRIBUTED AGENCY

One more suggestive avenue for thinking about agency is offered by the idea of ‘distributed agency’. N. J. Enfield has noted that agency is capable of being distributed among multiple individuals, and that the unit of agency might sometimes be the social or ‘compound person’.²⁶ This kind of distributed agency might be found in the collective actions of trades

²⁴ See Caroline Walker Bynum, ‘The Animation and Agency of Holy Food: Bread and Wine as Material Divine in the European Middle Ages’, in *The Materiality of Divine Agency*, ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten and Karen Sonik (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 70–86.

²⁵ Joan W. Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). Suggestive work in this area, though often with undifferentiated accounts of women’s agency, includes Valerie C. Yap, ‘The Religiosity of Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong’, *Asian Anthropology* 14, no. 1, 2015, 91–102; Nurchayati, ‘Bringing Agency Back In: Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia’, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 20, no. 3–4, 2018, 479.

²⁶ N. J. Enfield, ‘Distribution of Agency’, in *Distributed Agency*, ed. N. J. Enfield and Paul Kockelman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10–11. On agency as distributed in networks of ‘actants’, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Patrick Joyce, ‘What Is the Social in Social History’, *Past & Present* 206, no. 1, 2010, 213–48.

unions, discussed above, but might also be enacted in less conventional forms, such as Bronwyn Tarr's study of how 'large social networks' might attain agency through music and dance.²⁷

Research on domestic labour and workers has found a productive focus in looking at material culture, and this is an area where our thinking on agency might be extended. Numerous scholars have noted that the tactile, physically demanding and symbolically demeaning nature of the 'dirty' work of domestic labour creates powerful relationships with the tools and material environments of such labour.²⁸ As Carolyn Steedman has argued, servants

spent half their life cleaning, scouring, pounding, washing, scraping, chopping, cooking, making...things. They knew their contours, and their crevices, the place dirt collected in them; knew their interior spaces, and what was and was not seen of them; they knew cracked china and bent forks, the difference between the appearance of cleanliness and the back-and-forth movement of the human body with the rag that produced it in actuality.²⁹

Workers themselves were sometimes characterised as extensions of material objects—British domestic workers of the mid- to late twentieth century were frequently referred to as 'Mrs Mopps', for example, in reference to a character from a well-known BBC radio comedy, *It's That Man Again*, as well as evoking a tool of floor cleaning. As Janet Hoskins has argued, the reduction of a person to an object can be a 'depreciation of their humanity'.³⁰ But the relationship to the material environment achieved through activities of purchase, ownership, gifting, maintenance and discard can have more complex effects and affects. Servants who

²⁷ Bronwyn Tarr, 'Social Bonding through Dance and "Musiking"', in *Distributed Agency*, 151–58.

²⁸ For a suggestive account that links material culture, and particularly the preparation of food, to the establishment of colonial authority, class status and servant-keeping, see Dianne Lawrence, *Genteel Women: Empire and Domestic Material Culture, 1840–1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

²⁹ Steedman, *Labours Lost*, 348.

³⁰ Janet Hoskins, 'Agency, Biography and Objects', in *The Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Kuechler, Mike Rowlands and Patricia Spyer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016), 74–84.

scrubbed steps or polished silver sometimes felt that they owned them; and the gifting economies of servant-keeping households were often more complex than unidirectional paternalism, with servants offering gifts or taking informal ownership of objects. The agency of domestic workers can be theorised as distributed among objects—in Steedman's account, it is the carrots that 'suggest and make the cook enact the next operation: they *need to be* topped and tailed, peeled and sliced'.³¹

Distributed agency is operationalised, extended and sometimes constrained through being located in physical spaces such as kitchens, outhouses, basements and attics.³² Material and spatial environments shape what (historical) actors can do, and turn human labour into symbolically and practically significant interventions. A more systematic recognition of this focuses our attention on the objects, practices and spaces of domestic labour. The *scale* of this attention is necessarily variable; we might think in terms of the very local—domestic spatial layout, everyday shopping journeys, worker location in villages or cities—to the larger canvas of movement across regional and national borders.³³ We might also add to this a focus on environmental factors in thinking about how agency might operate in material contexts, which are shaped by the interactions of humans with air and water quality, animals, transport systems, and so on.³⁴

³¹ Steedman, *Labours Lost*, 352.

³² David Featherstone and Paul Griffin, 'Spatial Relations, Histories from Below and the Makings of Agency: Reflections on the Making of the English Working Class at 50', *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 3, 2016, 375–93.

³³ On how worker agency might be obscured at the national level but emerge more clearly through local studies, or through global perspectives, see Austin McCoy, 'Bringing the Social Back: Rethinking the Declension Narrative of Twentieth-Century US Labour History', *Social History* 41, no. 1, 2016, 1–13; Helma Lutz, *The New Maids: Transnational Women and the Care Economy* (London: Zed Books, 2011); J. H. Momsen, ed., *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service* (London: Routledge, 1999).

³⁴ D. M. Navarrete and C. N. Buzinde, 'Socio-Ecological Agency: From "Human Exceptionalism" to Coping with "Exceptional" Global Environmental Change', in *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, 2nd edn, ed. Michael Redclift and Graham Woodgate (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010), 136–49.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, agency has collective and individual registers, narrative and emotional strategies, and can be evoked, blocked or enhanced through networks that might span families, material culture, and imagined or mediated communities. Agency is rooted in systems of power and of intention, and might take forms that are lateral, ambivalent and distributed. As Purnima Bose has argued, 'no system of domination is entirely capable of determining or even predicting the range of subject positions that arise within it.'³⁵ There are forms of agency that can be exercised in conditions of structural inequality, but which are not reducible to forms of resistance and domination. 'Salvific narratives' that aim to 'rescue' marginalised historical actors and restore them to a position of strength and agency are insufficient. Our approaches to domestic workers and their labour are likely to throw up contests for control and resources, but we need to take this as our starting point, and to go further in probing and assessing the kinds of agency that might be exercised in historically and spatially specific systems of power.

In these short reflections, I have offered some examples drawn from archives of oral history, where domestic workers were given opportunities to voice their views and describe their experiences. This offers rich resources to the historian; but the kinds of agency explored here do not rely on archives of so-called 'subaltern voices'. Domestic workers in different contexts are not always given the pre-eminence that they took in the British oral histories of the 1970s, in which social class was the paramount problematic. Nonetheless, by locating agency in a wider variety of formats, it becomes possible to attribute it without necessarily having direct access to domestic worker testimony. This has the potential to inform studies of more historically distant periods, as well as settings where such testimony rarely appears in the available archives.

³⁵ Purnima Bose, *Organizing Empire: Individualism, Collective Agency, and India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 10. See also Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', 793, and Carolyn Steedman's focus on the 'gaps and spaces in any ideological system that allow people to find their own thoughts on the difference between what is, and what is asserted to be'. Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 223.

The elucidation of forms of agency should be taken as a heuristic intervention rather than a set of analytically precise categories. As Ortner has argued, different forms of agency can be inseparable in practice; moreover, reading agency at a historical distance is always likely to require creative interpretation.³⁶ This brief set of reflections can only point to some suggestive avenues, and alternatives will likely also emerge. Nonetheless, an enriched typography of agency can help us take up Berlant's stimulating invitation to 'think about agency and personhood not only in inflated terms but also as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality, bourgeois dramatics, and lifelong accumulation or self-fashioning'.³⁷

³⁶ Ortner, 'Specifying Agency', 81.

³⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 99.

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Index

- Abanindranath Tagore 246
Abdar 52, 83
Abolitionism 48, 50
Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 48
Abuse 20, 83, 106, 125, 167, 176, 244
Achara 32
Act of 1843 169
Act of 1863 260
Adivasi(s) 240, 254
Africans 117
Agency 2, 21, 24, 29, 32–34, 76, 86, 112, 124, 158, 173, 189, 236, 265–78
 ambivalent 271, 273
 collective 36
 distributed 274, 276
 employment 239
 feminine 267
 forms of 270, 273–74, 277–78
 issue of 33
 lateral 32, 268, 270–71
 of intentions 267
 of power 267, 269
 placement 112, 177
 recruiting 240
 servants' 34, 36
 spiritual and moral 274
 strategies of 267
 system 173
 without intention 32, 268
Agricultural labour/labourer 166, 211, 214
A Harlot's Progress 52
A Lady's Dressing Room in Calcutta 53–54
All Bengal Scavengers' Union 262
Allowance 133, 167
 monthly 133
 usual 167
All-rounder 29–30, 31, 139–42, 145–46, 149–51, 153–62
ayah/nanny 150
domestic worker 146, 150–51
employee 145
fantastic 150–51
female 29–31, 139, 141–42, 149–51, 154
housekeeper 150–51, 159
Indian 153
maid(s) 31, 150
multi-tasking abilities 154
nanny 150–51, 153–54, 160
Anglo-European households 27
Anglo-Indian
 children 42, 66, 68

- domestic manuals 55
- domestic retinue 52
- family 43, 53–54, 57, 64, 66
- homes 31, 35, 42, 66, 74, 77, 105
- households 24, 30–31, 43, 52–53, 64–66, 70, 80, 82–84, 88–89, 100, 105, 119
- identity 53
- moral/morality 47, 53
- wives 53
- women 56
- writings 62
- Apprenticeship(s) 132, 133, 135, 136
- Aristocracy 44
- Armenians 117
- Āśram* (commune) 211
- Attendants 9, 51, 102, 201, 211
- Austerity 201, 246
- Ayah*–child affective ties 162
- Ayah*–child dyad 61
- Ayah* (maidservant) 9, 18, 26–27, 41–43, 53–75, 79–85, 87–92, 95–107, 118–19, 121, 146, 162, 268
- all-rounder 150
- colonial 43, 64
- full-time 151
- Hindustanee 79–81, 87, 95, 104–06
- identity 100
- Indian 43, 57–61, 63, 68, 70–71, 74–75, 97–98, 121
- Mussalmanee 79, 83, 100, 104
- Portuguese 65, 81, 99, 112, 119, 135, 137
- romanticisation of 62
- South Asian 55, 65
- travelling 67, 75, 92, 101, 104
- Ayah*–memsahib dyad 43
- Baboe* (Javanese/Balinese nursemaid) 42
- Baḍī dāi* (senior maid) 13, 189–95, 197, 216
- Baksheesh* (voluntary reward) 7
- Balvant Bhumiḥār* 190–91
- Bandi* (concubine/slave-woman) 80, 104
- Bārin* (lower-caste woman) 187
- Bawarchi* 52
- Bearers 9, 18, 185
- Benevolent Institution (BI) 116–20, 122–26, 129, 131, 133, 135, 138
- Bengal Census (1931) 245
- Bhadralok* 114, 244, 248, 251
- Bhisti 52
- Bhītar 201–02
- Bhuvaneshvar Mishra 190
- Bibi(s)* (local mistress) 6, 31, 41–44, 45–47, 50, 62, 64–66, 68–71, 268
- South Asian 44, 65
- Biography 13, 56, 76
- Bombay 11–12, 18, 50, 109, 112, 115, 123–24, 132, 136
- Bombay Education Society (BES) 123–28, 130–38
- Bride 171, 192, 194, 203, 248–49
- Britain 52–53, 59–60, 67–68, 71, 75, 105, 111, 113–14, 124, 163, 221, 226, 270, 272–73
- British
 - abolitionism 50
 - children 53, 55, 124
 - domestic service 272
 - family 61, 64, 70
 - home(s) 62, 135
 - households 64, 111–12, 137, 147, 223
 - housewife 133

- identity 65
- imagination 47, 70, 130
- imperialism 48
- labour 272
- liberty 48
- mistress 54, 148
- moral shame 47
- mother 71
- national identity 48
- oppression 72
- politics 130
- Protestantism 48
- public resentment 59
- Resident(s) 44–45
- rule 70–71, 228
- ruling class 44
- settlement 64
- sexual exploitation 72
- upper-class domesticity 109
- wives 47
- women 44, 46, 53–54, 69
- British and Foreign School Society (BFSS) 113–14, 116–17, 122–23
- British India 67, 113, 164, 176
- British Trades Union Congress (TUC) 272
- Bungalow 64
- Burra-sahib* (officer) 54
- Calcutta 15, 33, 49–51, 64–66, 73–75, 85–88, 103–04, 114–16, 118, 129, 135–36, 239, 263–64
- Calcutta Municipal Corporation 239
- Cantonment 73, 84
- Caste(s) 3–4, 17–18, 24–25, 34–35, 46–47, 82, 94–95, 111–12, 118–19, 141–42, 187–88, 207–08, 236–37
- conscious 100
- hierarchy 30, 256
- high 246
- identity 30, 208, 216, 247
- low- 119, 152
- norms 25, 100, 119
- rituals 106
- untouchable 256
- upper- 4, 13, 25, 111, 187–88, 208, 215, 218, 224, 236–37, 250, 255, 262
- Census 223, 243–46, 252
 - Census of 1891 252
 - Census of 1931 223
 - Census of 1991 243
- Chakar 6
- Chakri 9
- Chamar 255
- Chānd* 197, 202–03, 205
- Chandal 246
- Character 20, 34, 48, 84, 123, 142, 146, 186, 189, 192–93, 195, 207–08, 213, 215–16, 275
- chits 20
- native 34
- Charity 66, 109, 111, 116, 118, 130, 137, 231
- Chastity 55, 244
 - loss of 244
- Chaudhri* (head) 234
- Chawkidar* (watchman) 149
- Chhota hazri* (breakfast) 64
- Child/Children 17, 31–32, –51, 61–71, 92–93, 103, 134–35, 145–53, 160–62, 215–27, 229–30, 243, 273
 - Anglo-Indian 42, 66, 68
 - British 53, 55, 61, 124
 - half-caste 41, 46–47, 50, 69
 - memsahib's 135
 - trafficking of 174–75

- Child-rearing 147–48, 160
- Chinese 117, 150
- Chobdar* 52
- Chores
 - domestic 166
 - household 149, 187, 204
 - housework 151
 - multi-tasking 162
- Civic voluntarism 133
- Class
 - conflict 244
 - consciousness 262
 - exploitation 244
 - politics of 130
 - privilege 213
 - reversal of roles 244
 - ruling 44
 - working- 110, 112, 122–23, 128–29, 137, 144, 268
- Class–race distinctions 147, 158, 161
- Coin 67
- Colonial
 - archives 7
 - bureaucracy 6
 - bureaucratic institutions 8
 - domesticity 110, 146
 - enquiry commission 24
 - governments 42
 - households 30, 43, 119, 137
 - housewife 111
 - labours 57
 - law 17, 172, 218, 232
 - manuals 26
 - nurseries 121
 - official policies 43
 - order 9
 - rule 4, 17, 72, 220, 232
 - society 110, 130, 137
 - stereotyping 120
 - underclass 115, 121
 - urban centres 18, 114
 - urban underclass 116
- Colonial India 64, 110–11, 121, 138, 168, 183, 220, 236
- Colonialism 6, 77
- Concubine (slave-woman) 31, 41–44, 70, 166, 170
- Conflicts 37, 121, 137, 158, 195, 223, 234, 243–44
 - class 244
 - occupational 223
 - zamindari 195
- Contractual servant 54–55
- Cook 9, 63, 91, 100, 119, 149–56, 233, 247–51, 276
 - full-time 149
 - live-in 153
 - part-time 150, 154
- Coolies 8, 26, 74, 79, 90, 92–93, 95–97, 252, 260
- Corruption 7, 52, 59–60
 - financial 59
 - moral 52
- Crime 23, 48, 178, 233
- Criminalisation 20
- Cultural representations 42–43
- Culture 3, 14, 24, 44, 77, 140, 149, 154, 189, 195, 222, 229–30, 246, 267, 277
 - master–servant 149
 - material 14, 267, 275, 277
 - Mughal 44
- Dāi* (maid) 13, 28, 189–95, 197, 216
- Dalit 239
 - servant 239
- Darzi* 52
- Dāsī* 187, 194, 201

- Debt bondage 167, 169
- Dehumanisation 214
- Desh seva** (patriotism) 229
- Dhangars 254, 260
- Dharma (ethics) 213
- Dhobin* 28–29
- Dhobi* (washer-man or laundry person) 52, 149
- Dhye* 9
- Charles Dickens 127
- Didactic treatises 29
- Discipline and Punish 114
- Divorce 21–22, 24, 171
- Divorce trial 21–22
- Domestic
 - conduct manuals 248
 - labour 8, 18, 31, 62, 109, 122, 128, 131, 136–42, 144, 149, 165, 179, 230, 240–41, 274–76
 - manuals 53, 55, 64
 - respectability and morality 41, 47, 53, 70, 72
 - slavery 41, 48, 51, 70, 165, 169–70, 172, 242
- Domesticity 26, 30, 79, 105, 109–11, 130, 144, 152, 160, 184, 218, 237
 - colonial 110, 146
 - upper-class 109
 - vernacular 218, 225
- Domestic labour–sexual labour
 - continuum 42
- Domestic servant 2–4, 24, 35–37, 52, 77–78, 93, 109–10, 120–22, 134–37, 165, 183–86, 195–96, 241, 264, 270
 - all-rounder 146
 - gender composition of 27
 - wages 93
- Domestic service 1, 3–5, 15–16, 29–30, 54, 75, 110, 121–22, 135–37, 144–45, 158–59, 204, 239, 241–42, 272
 - forms of 18
 - identification of 3
 - implication of 5
 - paid 54, 128, 174
 - professionalisation of 29
- Domestic work 3, 5–6, 26, 53, 78, 106, 172–73, 175–76, 204, 230, 248, 250, 268–69, 274
 - feminine 53
 - feminisation of 26, 29
 - meaning of 32
 - notion of 32
 - paid 3, 5–6, 133, 163, 173, 245
 - private 15
 - wage-based 32
- Domestic worker 15, 28, 119, 139–40, 142–46, 161, 172–73, 188–89, 206–08, 265–68, 275–77
 - all-rounder 146, 150–51
 - female 143–44, 149–50
 - full-time 149
 - husband–wife 149
 - invisibility of 206
 - low-caste 119
 - market for 144
 - paid 28, 140
 - transnational 151
- Domestic Workers' Union (DWU) 272–73
- Domination and the Arts of Resistance 266
- Doms* 247, 253–56
- Dooriya* 52
- Dowry 64
- Durwan* (guard) 87

- East India Company (EIC) 44–46,
59–60, 65, 68–69, 163–64, 166
- Eden, Emily 56, 74, 97, 99, 102
- Edith and Her *Ayah* 70
- Education 32, 110–15, 121–23,
125–26, 128–32, 137, 144, 175,
177, 222, 226, 242, 259
female 137
moral 125
- Education of the poor 32, 111, 113,
121, 126, 137
- Effie and Her *Ayah* 70
- Emily 56, 69, 74–75, 97–104
- Employment 1, 3, 9–11, 19–20,
46, 66–67, 74–75, 83–86, 100,
118–19, 122–23, 131, 163, 173,
239–41, 243, 259, 270
agency 239
illegal 173
- Endowments 89
- Eurasians 113, 115, 119–20, 123,
130, 138
- European Female Orphan Asylum
122, 135
- Exploitation 15, 42, 56, 59, 60, 69, 72,
125, 179, 203–04, 244
class 244
immoral 59
sexual 42, 69, 72, 179
- Female 8, 20, 49–52, 79–83, 91,
94–96, 99–100, 105–06, 118,
121–24, 148–51, 161–62, 206–08,
223, 244–45, 272–73
education 121, 129, 137
labour 26
lifecycle 249
- Feminisation 8, 15, 26, 28–29, 219,
231
- Forced labour 169, 179
- Galee* (abuse) 83
- Gardener 153
- Garha* (son of a slave woman married
to a free man) 167
- Gender 9, 22, 32, 77, 121, 131,
136–37, 148, 165–66, 184, 207–08,
243–44, 262, 273
profile 273
roles 184, 244
- Girls 32, 41, 56, 64, 80, 94, 103, 112,
122–26, 138, 166–67, 173, 176–78,
191–92, 239–40, 270
adivasi 240
Caffre 94
slave 167
young 32, 49, 64
- Gita Press 217
- Gwalin 28
- Hadis 247, 253, 255–56
- High Court 217, 232–34, 252
- Hindi 20, 23–24, 144–45, 153, 183–84,
195, 215–16, 224–25, 228, 237
- Hindu 48, 56, 65, 80, 164–65, 170,
188–91, 195, 198, 201–04, 210,
216–18, 224–25, 254, 262
middle classes 224
wife-woman 204
- Home (s)
Anglo-Indian 31, 42, 55, 66, 74,
77, 105
British 62
formation of 110
imperial 54
management of 78
middle-class 152, 173, 178, 189,
257

- private 10, 239, 257
- urban 20, 178, 248
- working-class 110
- Hookabardar* 52
- Hookah* 44–45
- Household
 - Anglo-European 27
 - Anglo-Indian 24–26, 30–31, 43, 52–55, 64–66, 70, 80, 88–89, 91–92, 100, 119
 - aristocratic 52
 - Boileau 94
 - British 64, 111–12, 137, 147, 223
 - colonial 30, 43, 119, 137
 - expatriates' 30
 - labours 42
 - laws of 172
 - memsahib 109, 137
 - native 28–29, 56, 89
 - pre-colonial 30
 - South Asian 44
 - woman 195
- Housekeeper 50, 122, 149–51, 153, 159
- Housemaid 136–37
- Housewife 110–12, 133, 147, 208, 224–27, 231, 237, 249
 - British 133
 - British-colonial 111
 - colonial 111
 - Indian 111
 - middle-class 110, 224
 - upper-caste 111, 224
 - working-class 112
- Humiliation 15, 203–04, 207
- Identity 2, 4, 11, 22, 30, 48, 50, 65, 72, 90, 100, 151, 179, 192, 208, 216, 243, 253, 264
- Anglo-Indian 53
- ayah 100
- British 65
- caste 30, 208, 216, 247
- invocation of 95
- national 48
- professional 4
- social 2
- Immorality 72, 138
- Imperialism 48
 - British 48
- Impure/outcaste 65, 83, 209
- Indian Penal Code (1860) 169
- International Labour Organization 173
- Intimacy 102–03, 141, 158, 201, 225, 243–44, 247
 - cross-class 244
- Jaat* (caste) 65–66
- Jamadar* 256
- Jews 117
- Jharkhand 174, 176–78, 239
- Jharkhand Labour Commission 176
- Jobbers 11, 263
- Judicial archives 21, 24, 36
- Juhoorun 74–75, 79, 89–97, 104
- Jūṭhan* (leftover food) 210
- Juvenile Justice Act 178
- Kaamchor* (lazy) 34
- Kabadiwala* (a person who recycles paper) 149
- Khansaman* 52
- Khidmutgar* 52, 64
- Kinless-ness 168
- Kinship 81, 168, 171, 246, 248
- Kitchen pure 251
- Kolkata 60, 154, 179, 243

- Labour/Labourer 8, 18, 30–31, 41–43, 70–71, 89–91, 106, 130–31, 51–54, 160–66, 208, 271–77
 agricultural 166, 214
 bonded 242
 colonial 57
 domestic 8, 18, 31, 41–43, 53–56, 109, 131, 136–42, 153, 165, 179, 240–41, 265, 274–76
 emotional 71, 136, 146, 151, 156–57, 162
 female 26
 forced 169, 179
 forms of 18, 31, 168, 172, 241, 269, 273
 gendered 140
 household 42
 manual 79, 149, 151
 municipal 253
 sexual 41–42, 50, 79
 strikes 263
 unfree 242
 waged 30
- Landlord 165, 234, 248
- Lathials* 7
- Laundī* 187, 194
- Laws 2, 16–19, 23, 49, 79–80, 93, 110, 164, 174–75, 192–93, 207, 218–22, 251, 273
 master–servant 110, 172
 rule of 48
- Legal 6, 12, 49, 64, 85–86, 164, 172, 217–18, 221, 235–37, 243, 260, 271
- Liberty 48
- Lifecycle 5–6, 249
 female 249
- Liminal occasion 263
- Literary 2–3, 21, 53, 61, 183–84, 208–09, 214–18, 237, 245–46, 247, 273
 British 61
- London 49, 51, 75, 82, 88, 97, 102, 116–17, 123, 156
- Loyalty 4, 36–37, 147, 193–95, 207–08, 228, 235
- Madras 12, 18, 50, 109, 115
- Madras Military Male Orphan Asylum 115
- Mahadevi Varma 207, 209, 214
- Maid/maidservant 13, 31, 33, 41–43, 50, 62–64, 83, 102, 135–36, 178, 186–91, 201–04, 270
 English 97, 102
 full-time 240
 kitchen 250
 live-in 91
 native 54
 part-time 8, 28, 247
 senior 13, 187, 189, 194, 216
- Maid–mistress relationship 190
- Malays 117
- Male servants 8, 27, 29, 84, 112, 233–34, 242–43, 245
- Mali* (gardener) 52, 149
- Malin* 28–29
- Mammy 42
 black 42
 romanticisation of 42
- Marriage 17, 45–46, 73–74, 85, 125–26, 128, 131, 164, 167–72, 188, 190–91, 245
 customary transactions in 171
- Mary Martha Sherwood 55–56, 62–63, 69–70
- Mashalchi* 52

- Mass uprising 260
- Master/mistress–maid/servant relations 1–3, 23, 32–33, 110, 145–46, 183–84, 195, 212, 230–31, 249
- Mauritius 74–75, 79, 91–93, 96–97
- Mehtar/Mehtaranee/Mehtarani* (sweepers/waste cleaners/scavengers) 10–12, 52, 94, 106–07, 153, 204, 207–08, 223, 239, 252, 253–64
- street 261
- Memsahib 42–43, 59, 62, 69–70, 84, 109, 111–12, 121, 198
- Anglo-Indian 42
- British 53, 57
- children 135
- Christian 55
- contemporary 56
- households 109, 137
- missionary 55, 70
- Memsahib–ayah dyad 70
- Menialisation 3, 229
- Menservants 44, 52–53
- Merchant 66, 132, 188, 234
- Indian 188
- vessels 132
- Michel Foucault 114
- Microhistory 21
- Mistress (es) 15, 41–42, 54–55, 67–68, 85–86, 106, 157–58, 198, 201, 231, 248–51
- British 54, 148
- European 79
- good 225
- Japanese/Balinese 42
- local 41
- Mistress–servant hierarchy 235
- Mlechha* (impure/outcaste) 65–66
- Modesty 55
- Christian 55
- Mohur* (coin) 67
- Moosulman/mussalmanee/Mussulman/Mussulmanee* 79, 82–83, 94–95, 100, 104, 117
- Moral 2, 26, 41, 43, 57, 109, 134, 183, 201, 243–44, 248, 273–74
- contradiction 213
- corruption 52
- crisis 43
- education 125
- labour 62
- motives 48
- order 26, 31
- politics 41
- shame 47
- Moral–sexual threat 201
- Mother 64–68, 71, 98–99, 104, 135, 161, 207, 230, 241, 246–48, 269–70
- British 71
- Motherhood 67, 121
- Muccadams* (jobbers) 11
- Muddafarash* 252
- Mughal 41, 43–45, 52
- aristocracy 44
- aristocratic households 52
- Municipal
- employees 10
- labourers 253
- scavengers 252
- servants 12
- sweepers 11, 260
- workers 12
- Municipal Servants Act 11–12
- Music 150, 264, 269–70, 275
- Nabobi/Nabob* 58, 109

- Nanny 135, 144, 146, 148–51,
153–54, 157, 159–60
all-rounder 150–51, 153–54,
157, 160
Indian 153
Natal alienation 168
National Education Society (NES)
113–14, 123, 126
National Sample Survey Organisation
(NSSO) 140
Naukari (employment) 229–30
Naukar/Naukrani 6, 32, 187, 217, 229
Nautch 44, 45, 69
Needlework 118, 122, 125, 129–30
Neighbourhood 20, 23, 106, 145, 149
Nika (marriage) 170, 171
Norms 16, 95, 119, 161, 221, 236,
244, 250
masculinity–femininity 244
purity–pollution 250
Nursemaid 42–43, 53, 64, 119, 246,
248
Nyai (Javanese/Balinese mistress) 42
- Oliver Twist 127
Oppression 72, 178, 244
British 72
Orphan 32, 56, 110, 115, 124–25,
127–28, 130, 136
European 110, 130, 133
female 124, 130
military 115
Orphanage 46, 109, 112, 116, 122,
124, 130
military 46, 109, 116, 124
Outcaste 65, 83, 209
- Painting 45, 57, 61, 63, 102, 254
Palanquins 44
Paniharin 28, 29
Pankahs 44
Paternalism 14, 212–14, 219, 228,
243–44, 272, 276
reformist 212–14
Patna 75, 84, 86, 88–89
Patriotism 229
Patronage 7, 13–14, 30, 36, 81, 105,
187
Pension 7, 61, 166
Politicisation 11
Politics 9, 11, 120, 130, 173, 183–84,
197, 209
British 130
class 130
electoral 173
emancipatory 209
moral 41
nationalist 11
placement 133
trade union 11
Portuguese 43, 49–50, 65, 81, 99,
104, 112, 115, 117–20, 125–26,
129, 135, 137
ayahs 65, 81, 112, 119, 135, 137
cooks 119
Poverty 109, 116, 176, 211, 213–14
travails of 214
Prabhabati Dasgupta 262
Prahasan (satire) 195, 204, 215
graphic 215
visual 195
Prayaschitya (penance) 66
Print 29, 53–54, 184, 219, 222, 224,
226, 247
satirical 53, 54
Professionalisation 10, 29, 242
Property 69, 89, 166, 171, 177,
191–92, 219, 224, 233–34, 236

- zamindari 191
- Proprietary rights 234
- Prostitution 125, 172, 175
- Public institutions 8–9, 15
- Punkah* (hand-drawn fan) 102
- Punkhawala* 14
- Purdah/Pardā* (veil, seclusion) 44, 194
- Purity 42–43, 50, 55, 59, 61, 70–71, 247–48, 250
 - consciousness 248
 - sexual 71
- Purity–pollution norms 250

- Queer 268

- Rabindranath Tagor 246, 256
- Race 29, 47, 70–71, 109, 141–42, 158, 161, 267
- Racial
 - dividend 138
 - purity 43, 50, 55, 59, 61, 70
- Racism 6, 42, 47, 135
- Raiyat* (tenant) 211
- Rambriksha Benipuri 210
- Ramoonnee 73–75, 79, 84–89, 91–92, 104
- Regulation 12, 59, 125, 172–73, 218, 245, 273
- Religion 17, 22, 47, 126, 131, 164, 221, 274
 - morality and 126
- Religious marker 82
- Remarriage 171
- Resentment 59
- Resistance 33–34, 70, 158, 219, 221, 265–70, 272, 277
- Respectability 43–44, 54, 57, 67–68, 71–72, 83, 95, 126, 184, 193, 213
 - social 71

- Reward 7, 98, 102
 - voluntary 7
- Richard Blechynden 65–66
 - diaries 66
- Rights 17, 60, 163–64, 171, 175, 233–36
- Ritual 66, 106, 136, 190
 - caste 106
 - inversion ceremonies 263
 - pollution 152
- Rosina 56, 74–75, 79, 97–104
- Rural wives 244

- Śabd-citra/rekhā-citra* (sketch) 207, 209–10, 215, 231
- Sabiā* 207–10, 214
- Samaj seva* (social service) 133, 229
- Sangari, Kumkum 241, 249
- Sarala Debi Chaudhurani 246
- Schooling 111, 113–15, 120–21, 131, 138
- Scott, James 266
- Seclusion 44
- Second Law Commission 245
- Senior maid 13, 187, 189, 194, 216
- Serais* 9
- Servant
 - as supplement 190
 - contractual 54–55
 - Dalit 239
 - domestic 2–4, 20, 36, 42, 77–78, 120–22, 134–37, 183–86, 198, 213–14, 270
 - full-time 245
 - good 225
 - hierarchies 52
 - Indian 27, 55, 61, 98, 103
 - invisibility of 13
 - live-in 122

- live-out 8
- male 8, 29, 64, 112, 218, 245
- wage 167–68
- Servitude 16, 18, 43, 52, 83, 154, 168, 224, 243
 - slavery and 16, 18, 43
- Sevak* (one who serves) 32
- Seva* (service) 32, 217, 229–30
- Sex 43, 50, 52, 156, 180, 241
 - slavery 52
- Sexism 6
- Sexual
 - advances 94
 - anxieties 43
 - appendages 244
 - exploitation 42, 69, 72, 179
 - harass 94
 - intimacies 49, 65, 69
 - labour 41–43, 50, 54, 61, 79
 - moral/morality 53, 66, 69
 - norms and behaviour 95
 - opportunities 46
 - overtures/tension 244
 - perversion 52
 - preference 66
 - purity 71
 - relations 70
 - stigmatisation 29
 - threat 53, 201
- Sexuality 55
- Shame 19, 47, 50, 115
 - moral 47
- Shastras* 49
- Shudra 250–51
- Slave 6, 41–43, 54–57, 70, 80, 97, 164–72, 187, 213, 246
 - girl 167
 - trade 48, 49
 - transatlantic 48
 - woman/women 57, 167
- Slavery 2, 6, 16–18, 41–43, 75, 163–65, 178–80, 232, 267
 - domestic 41, 48, 51, 70, 165, 169–70, 172, 242
 - sex- 52
- Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 48
- Slave–servant–concubine continuum 42
- Social
 - death 168
 - guardians 248
 - networks 30, 86, 91, 100, 105, 275
 - order 110, 114
 - respectability 71
 - role 34
 - service 133, 229
 - status 4, 6, 95, 105, 147, 213, 215
- Society for the Education of the Poor 112, 123
- Soontabardar* 52
- Spatial/Spatiality 13, 142, 149, 237, 253, 272, 276
- Spinsters 89
- State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR) 176
- Stigma/stigmatisation 29–30, 37, 253, 256, 265
 - sexual 29
- Strikes 11, 33, 255–56, 259–64
- Temptation 125, 244
- Tension 36, 90, 98, 152, 158
 - productive 36
 - work-place 158
- Thakur* 248–49
- That Man Again* 275
- The Ayah and Lady* 55, 62

- The Baboo and Other Tales* 68, 70
- The History of George Desmond: Founded on Facts which Occurred in the East Indies* 69, 70
- Town 8, 11, 43, 64, 73, 84, 262, 272
- administrative 8
 - cantonment 73, 84
 - hill- 64
 - mofussil 64
 - presidency 43, 45
- Trade union 11, 262, 272
- politics 11
- Traditions 52, 64, 171–72, 243, 252, 263
- patriarchal 64
- Trafficking 49, 170–79
- children 174–75
- Underclass 115–17, 121, 216
- Christian 117
- United Kingdom 156
- United States 153, 157
- Urban
- Christian underclass 117
 - homes 20, 178, 248
 - household 112, 249
 - sexual appendages 244
 - underclass 116
- Vakeel* (legal advisor/councillor) 23
- Verification 20
- act of 20
 - instrument of 20
 - police 20
- Vernacular 22, 66, 116, 218–20, 224, 237
- Bengali 66
 - domesticity 218, 225
 - elementary instruction 116
- Hindi 224
- literature 66
- Wage 3, 11, 32–34, 55–57, 80–82, 104–07, 131, 161–62, 172–73, 210, 273
- arrears 33
 - caste-based division of 247
 - daily 259
 - exchange of 105, 169
 - legislation 173
 - minimum 173
 - pending 95
 - prescribed 18
 - servants' 18, 93, 167–68, 186, 242
 - stipulated 210, 215
 - theft 21
- Watchman 149
- Wellesley's Minute of 1803 257
- Widows 64, 89, 106, 115, 168, 219, 236–37, 248
- Wife 29, 54, 67–69, 93, 133, 171, 197–200, 230, 241, 256
- Anglo-Indian 53
 - British 47, 54, 57, 68–69, 148
 - English 67
 - Gandhian 256
 - modern 206
 - rural 244
 - working-class 121
- Wife-woman-mistresses 204
- Wife-woman/women 187–89, 195, 197, 204
- Hindu 204
 - Indian 204
 - middle-class 204
- Woman/Women 10, 28–29, 41–47, 56–57, 79, 81–84, 118–19, 156, 176, 178, 184–89, 191, 267

- Anglo-Indian 56
- British 44, 46, 53–54, 69
- educated 248
- Eurasian 65, 121, 138
- household 195
- ideal 204
- Indian 43, 46, 50, 53, 56, 61, 69, 72, 139, 206
- Indo-Portuguese 65
- low-caste 152, 187
- modern 248
- native 54, 135
- servant-pampered 248
- slave 57, 167
- South Asian 41, 45, 62, 68, 70–71
- upper-class 123
- wage-earning 118
- white 53, 84, 147
- working 122–23, 129
- writing 56
- Work
 - caste-based 247
 - definition of 30
 - manual 106, 136
- Worker(s)
 - bonded 168
 - non-indigenous 272
- Worker's and Peasant's Party (WPP) 262
- Zamindar/Zamindari 192, 211, 213
 - conflict 195
 - households 6–7, 190–91
 - property 191
 - proprietary rights 234
 - retainers 192
 - tricks and manoeuvrings 191
- Zenana 47, 172