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## N. Sinha u.a. (Hrsg.): Servants' Pasts

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*Servants' Past*, volume 2 (late eighteenth to twentieth century), repositions servants as historical subjects. Seemingly organised into a structural-institutional and a discursive section, a deeper reading of the essays reveal that almost all the contributions weave in the material with the discursive and the everyday with the eventual providing a deeply satisfying reader experience. To cover a period of one and a half centuries without any jarring oversight, the editors espouse a non-linear chronological approach. While most essays hint at this dialogue between the past and the contemporary, Grover, Sen and Sarkar's essays draw this out through sharp delineation of continuities and breaks. Sarkar's essay discusses how avoidance practices were legitimately embedded in labour relations and adhered to as part of such paid domestic labour. Discourses of cleanliness are touched upon in Grover's essay. This has a special resonance in the times of COVID-19 with renewed discussion of purity-pollution under the guise of hygiene and distancing, treating workers as dirt.[1] The non-rigid approach to temporality allows the volume to escape the black-box of an unchanging monolithic past and an ever-changing present while still allowing readers to look for meaningful patterns.

Reviewing this volume as a "historically informed sociological account" (p. 1) of domestic labour, this could just as easily have been a history of households in colonial and postcolonial India, their making, unmaking, their changes and continuities, viewed as a worksite and a site of intimacy and examined in relation to the socio-economic world beyond. The domestic servant is not a passive onlooker but an important actor both as an individual and as an occupational category. Chakraborty

unpacks how the category of *ayah* as a construct of gender, race and inter-racial dominance was central to the construction of a desexualised imperial household. Servants as emblems of respectable domesticity is seen in other essays too. Tschurennev examines this in a productive combination of history of education with that of colonial domesticity. Kumar demonstrates that the ideal household was to be constructed through gendered instruction graded in race and class terms, not just for the domestics but also for their mistresses such that an “appropriate grammar of mistress-maid relationship” (p. 187) can emerge. The more recent grammar of service updated to include modernization and professionalization in the Anglo-Indian households of contemporary Delhi does not so much replace the values of loyalty, servility and inequality, but rather renders these invisible (Grover).

The volume deserves credit for drawing out the household in all its complexity. The household is not just the intimate inside but is constituted in its interaction with the outside through law and courts (Varma, Gupta), public schools (Tschurennev), streets (Sarkar) or simply by the servants' ability to traverse both (Kumar). In her sharply written interjection, Sen challenges the neat binaries through which the transactive and the affective are categorised by foregrounding the messiness in the inherent connections between trafficking, slavery and marriage in the constitution of domestic labour whether waged or unwaged. The embedded violence, domesticated and naturalised as the patriarch's authority, left untouched by the state and fuzzy in the laws means that slavery continues to be embedded in domestic work (also see Sarkar). Tschurennev also points to interconnections between domestic work and marriage by using a life-course approach. Kumar demonstrates the links between the site of labour and site of intimacy by providing glimpses into servants' own households as contrasted to earlier readings of them being purely embedded within the employers' household.

But to claim that the contributions remain limited to exposition of the household will be inaccurate. In his essay, Varma reads life-trajectories of *ayahs* as competing versions of historical narratives of different scale – the local/intimate and the trans-regional/political. Re-reading, for example, testimonies long acknowledged as emblematic of coolie labour to throw open questions of gendered labour, respectability as well as performance of personhood, the essay challenges such binaries of scale. A consistent gendered labour focus is yet another important contribution of this volume. While institutional structures and norms of respectability put in place to ensure appropriate gendered performance are mentioned in most of the essays, some of the essays draw out their messiness and contradictions. Chakrabarty shows the norms around working lives of *ayahs* challenge their neat binaries with *bibis* and therefore between sexual and non-sexual domestic labour. The intersection of class and gender in the two sources used by Gupta plays out in two distinct ways – the domestic of the didactic literature is feminised whereas in the outside domain of her judicial sources it is the voice of the male servant that can be heard as a representative of a mistress who remains mute.

The quarrels I have with this volume are few. Given its wide expanse, the volume lacks a sustained focus on political economy. While the introduction sets up a larger political economic context in terms of demands and availability of types of jobs, one wishes to read a bit more on specificities on wages, changing household economies, migration, marketability of skill in the essays. These details are not absent but not as sharply drawn out. But perhaps that is pushing the material to tell another story. I rued the absence of a systematic naming/labelling exercise. Servants as an occupational category remains greatly heterogeneous across and during different time periods. The essays talk about *naukar*, *chakar*, *sevak*, maids and they talk about *naukri*, *chakri*, *seva* and waged and unwaged

domestic work as well as synonymity of working class women and women as domestic servants. Servants emerge variously and interchangeably as social and work category. Given the rich data and its regional spread, the semiotics and genealogy of naming, while undoubtedly being a massive exercise, would have been a bonus that only such expansive yet located volumes can offer us.

Methodologically the essays use various kinds of source materials from traditional archival sources – government reports, laws, judgements with literary texts and visual materials as well as interviews and newspaper reports. Essays like Sen's skilfully combine close reading and reading against the grain of the sources. Varma's creative appraisal of subaltern lives deserves a special mention for its methodological innovation as does Gupta's deftness in bringing together literary and legal sources to show continuities and disjuncture. Further the contributions are consistently intersectional showing how race, caste, religion, and gender constructs the servants' class. The contributors remain honest to their material. Rather than claiming to retrieve the servant's voice there is an implicit recognition that such representations are multiply mediated through bureaucracy, authorial voices and sometimes simply translation.

Delap in her theoretically rich second interjection urges us to demystify the romance of resistance and to read domestic workers as subjects of history armed with specific knowledge and tactics, with agency which might not always be straightforward. Likewise, the essays resist the temptation of reading agency of the servants outside of or as resistance to the structures of power within which they are located. They do not seek to recover the authentic voice, but read domestic worker as an actor within a particular socio-political context and milieu. And it is this creative reading that allows for workers' subjectivity to emerge, placed within a network of allies, kin and opponents thus going beyond the limited intentionality of the source document. The acknowledgment of domestic servants not as abstracted labour but as people in myriad shades, flawed, lazy, clever, and loyal makes *Servants' Past* a very important intervention placing its main actors from the footnote to the centre-stage of labour history.

Note:

[1] Sara Dickey, *Permeable Homes. Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India*, in: *American Ethnologist* 27/2 (2000), pp. 462–489, p. 462.

## Zitation

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