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Delhi, domestic service and women from 1911 to 1926

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the dynamics of domestic service in colonial Delhi. This research will show the importance of women as domestic servants in both British and Indian households in India during the colonial period, how domestic service became a reservoir for women to work in this sector, and what other major developments made this service relevant for getting dignified status in society. This paper will also identify the relationships of both employer and servant. The central themes of this paper will be focused on how one woman created hierarchy by showing herself as different from the woman belonging to the working class, how one woman replaced the place of her mistress in exchange for money in a household without questioning the patriarchy. In short, I will try to draw a picture of domestic service and its important role in Indian households including British Households and analyze to what extent social, cultural, and economic changes affected the area of domestic service in the initial stage of the 20th Century.

Keywords: Domestic service, colonial Delhi, slavery, women domestic workers

Introduction

The rise of gender studies scholarship, which started in the late 1970, has created an alternative account of women in response to the traditional writings created in the public domain, dominated by men. In these writings labour, gender and subaltern historians paid little attention to the realm of domestic service. Large numbers of women worked in this predominantly informal sector, which easily provided the space for exploitation in the private sphere. As a result of domestic service sector's inherently informal nature, it is difficult to understand the relations of employer and servant. In this paper, I will examine the active engagement of women in domestic service and what were the direct and indirect events that created more space for women in the sector of domestic service.

Domestic worker, domestic helper, domestic servant, manservant or menial. These are all terms for a person who worked within their employer's household. Domestic helpers performed variety of household services for an individual or a whole family, from providing care for children and elderly dependents to learning and household maintenance. Other responsibilities may have included cooking, laundry, ironing, shopping for food and other household errands. Through my research, I show the importance of often overlooked domestic servants, their roles at their workplaces, and the interconnections among domestic labour, migration, gender and caste. We see that domestic workers in the early twentieth century were very different from our present period. Modern innovations in technology have changed the reasons for their hire and how they fulfill their duties.

While there is lack of literature on the history of domestic workers, sources reveal that domestic servants have always had an active role in Indian households during ancient time, medieval, and modern periods. I am particularly interested in their presence and role in colonial period. For this research I have taken both primary and secondary sources in my consideration.

Delhi as a British capital

Delhi at this time was under the development condition because from 1911 it was going to become the capital of British empire and all the administrative, political and judicial bodies of the Government were about to settle in Delhi now. Work of Narayani Gupta gives a detailed account of Delhi where preparations were on ultimate stage and different kinds of arrangements were happening, especially for the Delhi Durbar. Facilities were being established for the same purpose.

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“Electricity, like the waterworks and the drainage scheme, came to Delhi in 1902 as a side result of the Durbar, Fanshawe, discussing the subject of the introduction of electric lighting in the East (!), dismissed it as an unnecessary extravagance ^[1]. For these kind of expenses, municipality of Delhi district had to manage everything and “in 1914 the municipality was informed that no more imperial grants would be given, because municipal finances were bound to increase with the raising volume of trade after the capital was shifted. But expenditure galloped ahead off revenues. Municipal taxation, increased a few years earlier, could hardly be raised again. Whatever extra taxation was now levied on the lower classes, as had happened earlier ^[2]. Raised taxation among people, led the situation of protest against the illegal methods of tax collection. “The transfer of the capital sparked off a sudden rise in the cost of living. This was further aggravated by the war ^[3]. This would have played some role in reducing the domestic servants in households of Delhi because census of 1911 shows that in the decade of 1901 to 1911 people engaged in this service were decreased by this time. Raised taxation would have made difficult to manage the expenses of home for the people of Delhi now. Author also explains that at that time “Delhi’s splendid isolation was coming to an end- politically, and also ethnically (with the increasing number of Punjabis and Bengalis coming to end). From this time onwards, Delhi became increasingly part of India, though many of its people did not quite shed their sense of being a different breed and their general indifference to national politics ^[4].”

Does Domestic service share some features of slavery?

If we consider the historical work on the issue of domestic workers, we need to trace its background first. Whether domestic service has its relation with slavery or not, this thing can be understood through the developments that have come in this area of service with period of time. We don’t find domestic servants like today in ancient and medieval time period. It was very much clear that people used to extract work from their agricultural labour or women of the house used to complete all house tasks. Work of Uma Chakravarti shows the roots of domestic service in ancient time with the help of old texts like Rigveda, Arthashastra, Jain and Buddhist literature to show the presence of domestic servants in Indian houses. She has mentioned the description about that how rich Indian families were very much involved in taking their services in Agricultural fields and in domestic tasks as well.

In another section of her work Uma Chakrawarty explains about the female slaves, the value attached with these women slaves was much higher than the males one, in *vedic* society. References from the Chandogya upanshad shows that these females were listed with the cattle, gold, houses as a part of the wealth of their owner. They were movable and transferable part of the property. A pertinent evidence from the Buddhist Literature distinguishes between the work of wife and the work of dasi in a household. Dasi had to do all the hard work attached with domestic tasks like fetching water, working in the fields and other menial jobs. In one incidence one daughter in law refused to be cowed down and put the burden of this work on slave girl. In this way the heavy burden of domestic labour was usually done by the dasis who were mainly involved in doing house work as an obedient servant.

Presence of servants in the house for full day, used to provide grounds at different point of time. one example can be analyzed from the Buddhist texts where one dasi wanted to check the temperament of her mistress and she woke up late three mornings in succession and anger of her mistress burst upon her servant, she was beaten brutally and mistress gave her a vicious blow on the head. “Kali the slave woman then showed her blood spattered head to the neighbours and effectively put an end to the myth of the gentle temper of her mistress ^[5]. This examples shed light on the possibilities of exploitation of female slave or servant and specially when working under the eye of her male master, “there is another heart-rending account of a dasi called Rajjumala who had been badly abused from childhood ^[6]. These female slaves were more vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence. They were authorized to be used as a living object and providing every kind of benefits to their employers. She has strained to explain different kind of servitude those were present in Indian Households. Those used to coexist with different kind of relationship with their employers being under one roof.

In medieval time also slaves had important role in the royal palaces and houses of elite class in society. For getting the references of medieval time we can look at the texts like Tajkiras (biographical dictionary) of Mughal time belonging to sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. This text gives description that how domestic servants became necessary to maintain civility. “Tazkiras communicate a more complex picture of master slave relationship in aristocratic household in which objectification went in hand with subjectivity: violence co-existed with emotional attachment and intimacy ^[7]. Priyanka Khanna also shows that National archives of India having several documents of the sale and purchase of slaves in Mughal period. In one incident there is evidence of selling a four years girl in Delhi on 18 February 1763. There used to be considerable investment of emotions on the slaves in the domestic establishments also. One more paper written by Geetanjali Tyagi discusses the numerous domestic attendants in the Janani Deori of modern Jodhpur region, this place was associated with the Rani of the palace. These attendants used to serve their rani with different kind of services. Category of this group consisted of wet nurses, female drummers, priests, female barbers, female tailors, cooks etc. these servants used to belong different castes and with specific services. David argues that these attendants were extremely loyal to their ranis. Ranis also used to spend their lots of time with them. These servants used to play an important role in the palaces and lives of ranis.

Another piece of writhing by Jessica Hinchy shows that not only males and females were engaged in the domestic service but third category of gender also involved in the domestic work. Author has showed that how the segments of slavery and discipleship had been intersected in the Hijra Household. Middle class Indian and colonial accounts suggest that many hijras had slave origins. These Hijras used to serve their guru on learning dance and music from them. This asymmetrical relationship creates a situation of indebtedness for the disciple, which is often repaid through acts of *guru Seva* (service) a kind of counter gift. In a same way it was obligatory for hijras chellas to give his domestic labour in a household and gurus were responsible to provide food, clothing and other health and wellbeing materials. Gayatri ready tells that “these chellas used to massage the feet of their gurus and cared for them when they were sick”

[8].

In the work of Margott Finn “slaves out of context: domestic slavery and the Anglo-Indian family c. 1780-1830. In her work she has argued how British Govt. was pretending from accepting the existence of slavery in India and indirectly they were legitimizing hiring of Indians to serve them even after abolition of slavery in 1833. Domestic slaves in Hindu and Muslim households were very much present and they used to do sweeping, cooking, and cleaning etc. this statement clearly shows how British govt. tried to show slaves in India as an ancient practice of keeping labourer for household services. “The parliamentary papers British observes now declared that domestic slavery in India, as practiced by Indians themselves was not really slavery, but rather the indigenous way of managing normadic family relationships and household labour [9]. Slaves master relation as parent and child master and apprentice or even that of parent and child in respect of power and coercion. Ravi Ahuja argues that this was kind of acceptable form of unfree labour in Britain and its empire. Above discussion about the slavery and domestic servants help us to understand the complicated relation of domestic service with slavery where servants were always present in Indian households and after the colonization of India, they gave their presence in British households also. Keeping

servants for the completion of daily tasks of a household in colonial households was not a new thing but India had its own roots for using the labour of servants from different purposes and at different point of time. This service not only including males and females but also third gender including Eunuchs were also very active in providing services to their Gurus. What can be observed through the above description that domestic service never kept one form, but has developed and changed according to the social, economic and cultural needs. People have shaped this sector of service according to their convenience and used the services of servants for their own comfort.

General Information about domestic service

Further a separate chapter is given on occupation or livelihood of the population of Punjab province. Where details of domestic service are mentioned. All the occupations were categorized under different class and sub-class with different group order. Domestic service was under class D (miscellaneous), where 57 persons out of every 1000, were engaged in the sub classes of domestic service per mile. it is interesting to see that domestic service was also divided into two or three orders. This number consist more than the numbers of Calcutta where only 15 persons were supported by domestic service per mile.

Table 1: Punjab and Delhi

Group no	Occupation	Population supported in 1921	Population supported in 1911	Population supported in 1901	Percentage of variation 1911-1921
	Domestic service	662,791	507,727	594,872	+30.5
181	Cooks, water carriers, doorkeepers, watchmen and other indoor servants	615,766	476,505	568,010	29.2
182	Private grooms, coachmen, dog boys etc.	45,482	31,222 for both group 182 and 183	26862 for both groups 182, 183	50.6 for both group 182 and 183
183	Private motor drivers and cleaners	1543			

Source (s): Data adapted from census of India, report 1921, Punjab and Delhi, p.p. 385.

From the above table it is clear an evident that a reduction in domestic service came from 1901 to 1911 which was about 87,145 approximately one lakh. And an increase was recorded in 1921 with 30.5%. One more point can be noticed that persons were mainly engaged in indoor services like especially in group no 181. This tells that families were needing more persons for indoor services rather than outdoor services. This is why till 1921, 615,766 out of 662,791 servants alone doing work in group no 181 and remaining proportion of the servants were indulged in the group of 182 and 183, comprising services like private grooms, dog boys and private motor drivers and cleaners.

In Punjab Province a reduction was noticed in the population, mostly working in the class D and this contraction had been occurred by 39 per cent with in last 10 years. This decrease may be noticed due to the rise in the taxation in Delhi because as Delhi was going to become capital of British Government, arrangements were made for the new settled political, administration and judicial settlements and municipalities were the main bodies to prepare this place suitable and convenient like Calcutta and burden of this funding was put on the residents of this urban area and probably this would have been the reason that people were not able to hire more or less domestic servants in their houses. On the other hand, an increase was noticed in the sub class ‘exploitation of the surface of the earth’ and besides its numbers doubled in extraction of minerals.

Construction work also attracted people from different location for the employment.

Other details were observed, which mainly emphasized on the decreased numbers of people, those were involved in domestic service, can be understood through the percentage which was perceived as the largest decrease by 69 percent, and it has occurred in insufficiently described occupations(sub class XI). The general conclusion that may be drawn from the above description is that “it has been possible to classify occupations, with greater certainty at the present census by transferring a good many of the unspecified occupations of the past census to their proper heads; that class D, which embraces the menial and baser occupations, has suffered most form the heavy mortality during the decennium just ended, and that industries which include unclean professions, have also suffered to a comparatively large extent, while trade has lost little. But the data in the census of 1921 shows the increase in the number of domestic servants and variation from 1911 to 1931 was +30.5% and by this time 78.9 percent persons were engaged in the occupation.

Domestic service (sub-class X) has also as many dependents as workers. Here again, every member of a family, who is capable of work takes up some sort of service reducing the number of dependents to a minimum. These two sub classes have the highest percentage of actual workers of the classes, too D (miscellaneous), which includes the two sub classes

above alluded to, has as many as 49 percent. Of actual workers against the provincial average of 39^[10].

Females who were working in the sub class of domestic service had 291 in numbers on 1,000 males. The other sub group of domestic service shows the considerable increase of private grooms, coachmen, etc. by 16 per cent. But other sub classes of domestic service had gone down from 5,68,010 to 476,505. Census tells that this variation would had been occurred due to the increased pay of private servants. Water carriers were mostly present in larger towns to serve the water works for their employers. Another idea about the society revealed with this information that by this time people were not able to keep many servants as they could 20 years ago, and the majority of them have to go without any.

Domestic servants were on 52 order number and they were constituting 21 percent, employed in the cities and selected towns and working as actual workers.

Occupations of females in Punjab Province

Females were primarily working in three ways, first they were doing work independently, secondly, they were assisting their male partners in work and third male and female of the household were working together. Information given in the census shows that females were selling vegetables, working in salt mines, few were working as operatives in factories. Data is given below where they were engaged in the Work that comes under the category of domestic service.

- Females as Bakers-739
- Tailors- 339
- Sweepers, scavengers, etc. 764
- Midwives, vaccinators etc. 1745
- Cooks, water carriers 316

Above data shows that females were engaged in considerable numbers as midwives and vaccinators and secondly as bakers and as cooks and water carriers they were comprising comparatively less number by this time.

Females from Anglo Indian caste were the women who were comprising a very good presence in domestic service with the number of 242 on 100 males. Good numbers of female in domestic work from *Anglo-Indian* caste suggests their sufficient and good knowledge of English language, this fact would have helped them to get hired more in figures than Indian females in English households. Because language was an important parameter for keeping servant in households, especially when they were supposed to be hired as Ayah or Nanny of their children. Most of the time of European children spent with the servant and memsahibs were always afraid of about the possibility where children could learn indigenous words and language from their ayahs. Second caste which had women in fine numbers was Jhinwar. Women from the castes like Arora, Brahman, *Mali* and *Armenian* were not doing domestic service in satisfactory statistics till 1911.

Table 2: Subsidiary Occupations of females by sub-classes, and selected orders and groups

Occupation	Number of actual workers in male and female		Numbers of female per 1,000 males.
	Males	Females	
Sub class X domestic service	196,830	57,263	291
Cooks, water carriers, doorkeepers, watchmen and other indoor servants	181,195	57,263	316
Washing, cleaning and dyeing	58,837	8,636	147
Barbers, hairdressers and wig makers	92,446	12,520	135

Source (s): Data adapted from census of India report 1911, vol. XIV, Punjab Province Occupations of females by sub-classes, and selected orders and groups, subsidiary tableVI, p.p. 537-538.

Above table shows that women were actively engaged in the work of cooking, water carrying for the bathroom and kitchen use, washing even as barbers. If we see their numbers on 1000 males they seemed to work more in the category 1 where they were actively working in the indoor

services of a household. One more thing that may be assessed that till 1911 males were in more numbers engaged in domestic service than females, they consisted of 196,830 and female only 57,263 were present for the domestic tasks.

Table 3: Occupational subsidiary number of actual workers 1921 Occupations of females by sub classes and selected orders and groups

Group	Occupation	Males	Females	Numbers of females per 1,000 males
167	Domestic service	226,286	52,619	233
181	Cooks, water carriers, doorkeepers, watchmen and other in-door servants	207,806	52,619	253

Source(s): Data adapted from census of India report 1921, Punjab and Delhi, Occupational subsidiary table VI^[11] number of actual workers 1921, Occupations of females by sub classes and selected orders and groups, p.p.379.

Females in domestic service reduced to 52,619 in 1921 from 57,263 in 1911. While numbers of male increased from 196,830 in 1911 to 226,286 in 1921, doing domestic work.

Women as ayah or nanny of children of the house

Ayah was the person who used to be recruited as personal servant for the children of the family. They were very much present both in the households of Indian and British

households. For getting one fare example of involvement of ayah in an Indian household through the work of Swapna M Banerjee “men women and domestics” she has taken family of Tagore family in focus of her study and has portrait the domestic lives of Bengalese people. She has shown that how servants were treated differently from European households in Indian households. One illustration made by Sarla Debi Chaudhurani sister of Rabindranath Tagore shared her experience with her maid where she regrets that “she never

knew what a mother's affection was, Sarala Debi recorded in a tone of despair how her maid's lap became the mother's lap for her" ^[12] children of houses had strong affection with their servants.

The situation of nanny in British households can be taken into consideration with the work of Margaret Macmillan. Her analyses can give us some information about the situation of ayah and position of her work in the lives of Europeans. "Almost all British mother, even the poorer ones, had either nannies or ayahs to help look after their children ^[13]. Upper class families sometimes imported European nannies and governess, but they were expensive and apt to get homesick. For Europeans mother language and accent was a matter of concern which can transmit in the baby with time, there was a serious danger that they would pick up native ways of thought. Other fears were including that these ayahs used to give more care to the child more than their own parents.

This tells that ayah was important person or women to handle the children of a family but treatment given to them was different from the Indian household in European household. She used to bring up the child with more care and love and used to get an important place in the hearts of these children's memories later.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through this paper an attempt is made to show the importance of women as domestic servants in both British and Indian households in India during the colonial period, how domestic service became a reservoir for women to work in this sector, and what other major developments made this service relevant for getting the dignified status in society, Identify the relationships of both employer and servant will be the focus of my study. The central themes of this paper are focused on how one woman created hierarchy by showing herself as different from the woman belonging to working class, how one woman replaced the place of her mistress in exchange of money in a household without questioning the patriarchy and how and when women became an important segment of migration with time.

I have ended this paper with 1926 because in this year slavery convention was held on and slavery was defined as "the status or condition of a person over whom any or all powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised!" ^[14]

This convention defined the slavery a situation where someone tries to control other person in a manner that they would be controlling such thing they own. This convention brought some laws to suppress the slave trade and severe penalties for slave-trade and slave holding. This convention and its rules would have been definitely affected the domestic service to some extent. This convention recognized the grave evils that may result from the forced labour and derogatively tried to ban on this kind of labour, "all necessary precautions, particularly where the laourers belong to the less advanced races 'to prevent conditions analogous to those of slavery from resulting from such employment ^[15]. All kind of slavery shares the features of forced labour which include agriculture, construction, mining, prostitution and domestic work. Forced labour is the most common element of modern slavery. It is the most extreme form of people exploitation. Forced labour affects the people from vulnerable background like migrated labour, poor people, unemployed persons who are need for a job etc. domestic servants are also vulnerable because they

work in private space and are usually abused and punished on small mistakes. Sometimes they are forced to work more against their wills. Although slavery has been abolished but attempts are still made to convert a servant into a slave till yet.

In short, I have tried to draw the picture of domestic service and involvement of women in this service. An effort has been put to show its important role in Indian households including British Households, and to analyze that to what extent social, cultural and economic changes affected the area of domestic service in initial stage of 20th Century.

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