

DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN COLONIAL INDIA

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Domestic service is a ubiquitous aspect of India's historical past, yet this theme has attracted very little research attention. **DOS, A EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL STARTING GRANT** funded project (2015-18) took a fresh look at this topic, focusing on the period between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, approximately the time of British colonial rule in India.

Although the project covers a wide spectrum of themes from within the long timespan of colonial rule, it indeed also goes back in time to the early modern to contextualise the nature of changes and continuities that led up to those. Indian households of all sorts had a variety of servants and slaves in their domestic set-up, which gradually changed with the consolidation of colonial rule by the early nineteenth century. The occupational fluidity and mobility which servants had enjoyed in precolonial times petered out, to be replaced by a more formal and contractual nature of relationship. A series of regulations were passed by the colonial state, which in essence formed the core of the master-servant relationship. The first such regulation for the settlement of Calcutta was introduced as early as 1759, just after the battle of Plassey in 1757. This set of regulations shaped the relationship around the themes of wage, absence, neglect of duty, always making the breach of contract a criminal offence for servants but the non-payment of wages a civil offence for masters.

However, the pervasive presence of servants in South Asian lives both in the past and present also requires to go beyond the law and regulation to understand how the relationship actually reproduced itself. How did masters and mistresses command servants beyond the institutional frameworks of law? Many a provision of legal formulations were never fulfilled. For instance, right from the 1759 regulation to all the subsequent ones, the colonial state pledged to set up a servant registration office, but even European masters failed to send their servants for such a

registration. The 'informal' means of physical chastisement and other forms of punishment - ranging from blackening of face to being seated on an ass and paraded in the town - were resorted to by the masters. This kind of public retribution against social marginals and women is not unheard of even in contemporary times. The project has tried to understand both the legal frameworks of master-servant relationships as well as other social and moral forms of regulation. What role did the use of language, gestures and speech play in the making of this relationship? Did objects such as liveries and badges matter? There were extensive regulations on how masters such as magistrates could not put their domestic servants on public duty related to their offices.

A study of domestic service and servants opens up the intimate history of social relationships and explains the 'legally constituted but formally absent' long history of regulation of domestic work, which is a matter of global concern in present times. At the same time, the study of master-servant relationships sheds light on the messy formation of the state and public order.



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