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Abstract

This article considers questions of patriarchy, masculinity, and male servants in Kolkata's culture of servitude. Through narratives of men servants and women servants, the "failure of patriarchy" is analyzed, set against hegemonic patriarchal ideologies and hierarchies. Contextualization for these narratives was provided by extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Kolkata, including a survey of 500 middle-class households. When women servants narrate their lives, it is inevitably the failure of patriarchs—fathers, husbands, and brothers—to perform their prescribed familial and social functions and duties that has led to their unfortunate circumstances. Thus, women servants end up taking on "patriarchal" responsibilities of supporting their households. Simultaneously, men servants express with resignation their own as well as their fathers', and often their sons', inability to properly make a living. Indeed, male servants think of themselves as failed patriarchs, dependent on stigmatized work to make a living, and feel doubly diminished. Finally, we examine how some male servants have reconfigured the patriarchy of servants through a reevaluation of the terms of work, status, and dependency.

Keywords

servants, servitude, men, masculinity, patriarchy, domestic work, culture, India, Kolkata

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A servant is not really a man; a servant is a servant.

Mila, woman employer, age seventy-two

Mila's remark, made in the context of a discussion about the presence of men servants in upper- and middle-class Kolkata households, encapsulates notions of masculinity and men servants that may be taken as givens in Kolkata's culture of servitude. From Mila's standpoint as an employer of an older generation, because of his status as not-man, a male servant may make beds, handle women's clothing, and otherwise occupy the intimate spaces of the home without provoking gender shame. In this article, we ponder questions of patriarchy, masculinity, and male servants, initially defined by a hegemonic domestic ideology that arose with the respectable middle classes—the *bhadralok*—and which persists to a significant degree in Kolkata's evolving culture of servitude, even as it is contested in different ways by some men and women servants. By "culture of servitude," we mean one in which social relations of domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres.¹ Through the narratives of both men and women servants, we analyze what can be termed the "failure of patriarchy" viewed through the framework of patriarchal ideologies and hierarchies as enacted in both employer and servant households.

Kolkata's culture of servitude had its origins in a colonial feudal patriarchy in which—in its idealized form—the employing family, and especially the patriarch, were meant to have ties of obligation and duty toward the families that served them. Patriarchy as a specific social structure and meaning system has created not only dependent women, children, and servants in Kolkata's culture of servitude but also "male losers"—male servants who have failed both in the world of home and in the world of work.²

It has been some time since feminist scholars jettisoned the analytical concept of patriarchy, only to reintroduce it as a loose descriptor rather than as a useful analytic frame.³ Although we agree that the conceptualization of patriarchy as a unitary universal phenomenon obscures more than it reveals, it is a necessary task to specify the multiple forms and loci of masculinist domination which prevail. We contend that in Kolkata, a particular, contextualized form of patriarchy, as a set of social relations imbued with meaning, has structured identities and social relations, while itself being a site of contention, resistance, and even mockery.⁴

When women servants narrate their lives, it is inevitably the failure of patriarchs—fathers, husbands, and brothers—to perform their prescribed familial and social functions and duties that has led to their unfortunate circumstances. Women servants in our larger study on which this article is based unanimously explained their condition as servants as an instance of the failure of patriarchy, manifested in the absence of protection by parents, brothers, or husbands: "I don't have parents to protect me—how much can I bear? If my husband were better, then

life would be tolerable.” The failure of patriarchy represents the involuntary or voluntary dereliction of fatherly or husbandly duty in terms of financial support and family security, obliging women to become servants because they are orphaned, abandoned by their husbands or in-laws, or married to men who cannot provide for them. Says Mira, the sole earner in her household and who works a double shift (part-time servant in five different households during the day and an ayah—nurse attendant—at night) in addition to cooking and cleaning for her husband and children, “It never occurred to me that I would have to work after marriage, but my husband is incapable.” Thus women servants end up taking on “patriarchal” responsibilities of supporting their households. When they envision what they would wish for their children, especially daughters, it is almost always a functioning, idealized patriarchal family—what Radha Kumar (1993, 125) has called “utopian patriarchalism”—where good husbands cherish and provide for their wives and children.

Simultaneously, and no less strikingly, men servants express with resignation their own as well as their fathers’, and often their sons’, inability to properly make a living—be it from the land in the natal village or in Kolkata’s offices and factories. Considered demeaning work for both men and women, domestic service is especially so for men despite—or perhaps because of—the historical preference for male servants. Indeed, male servants think of themselves as failed patriarchs, dependent on stigmatized work to make a living, and feel doubly diminished. Above all, they bitterly regret that their wives must work, and fear that their children will follow in their footsteps and become servants in turn. Finally, we examine how some male servants have confronted this “crisis of masculinity,” and reconfigured the patriarchy of servants through a reevaluation of the terms of work, status, and dependency.

Studying Kolkata’s Culture of Servitude

Kolkata, a major metropolis of South Asia and once the colonial capital of British India, has been an intellectual and cultural center for social reform, nationalist, and labor politics for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the capital of the state of West Bengal, which had the largest proportion of servants of any state in India according to the 1991 census and in which male servants comprise 33 percent of the servant population, coupled with the presence of different kinds of servants and types of households, it is a prime site for understanding domestic servitude.⁵ Although domestic servants in India have historically been both male and female, women and children have come to dominate the ranks of this occupation in India, which reflects the secular trend toward more female labor-force employment coupled with worsening economic inequality.⁶ However, the transition from primarily male to primarily female domestic workers has happened relatively recently in Kolkata, rendering the issue more salient than in other cities where male servants are ever more invisible.

We argue that underlying Kolkata's culture of servitude are three premises with origins in a feudal imaginary: first, that servants are essential to a well-run and well-kept household; second, that servants are "part of the family" and bound to it by ties of affection, loyalty, and dependence; and third, that servants comprise a class with distinctive lifestyles, desires, and habits.⁷ Employing the concept "servitude" allows for capturing the persistence of forms of dependency and submission in relations of what is today, for the most part, paid domestic work. We treat the nexus of labor relations that is domestic servitude as an institution rather than as an occupational category, as would be implied by the terms "domestic service" or "domestic work," and use "servant" because of its popular usage in India. Even though the Bengali term *chakor* (servant) has been, by and large, replaced by the term *kajer lok* (person who works), the English words servant and maidservant have not been replaced by some equivalent of "paid domestic worker."

The evidence for this article is derived from the larger research project that involved participant observation over a period of five years from 2000 to 2005 combined with a survey of 500 households and over 80 oral histories with employers and servants in Kolkata, and specifically on analysis of interviews with 12 men servants and their contexts.⁸ The employers and servants were initially located through work, family, and friend networks, and those interviewed provided leads for subsequent contacts. Servants chose the place where they would be able to meet us—in the homes where they work, servants' quarters in the case of live-in servants, or in their own homes in nearby *bastis* (slums). Interviews with employers were almost always conducted in their homes. In addition to the dozens of households we observed in different parts of the city, we conducted an intensive study of the social world of servants in an upper middle-class apartment building where it was possible to engage with servants at work and at home, with their children and their friends; about half of the men servants who are the focus of this article lived and worked in this building.

In the larger study, we analyze two generations of employers, both men and women and ranging from lower middle to upper middle class, and four categories of servants: (1) servants who as individuals or families have remained with the same family for generations, and can be called "family retainers," and are usually men; (2) live-in servants who reside in the home of their employers; (3) full-time servants who work up to a 12-hour day in the same home but live elsewhere; and (4) part-time workers who usually work for two or more hours in each of several homes per day, and are almost exclusively women. In our survey, each and every one of the 500 households employed at least one servant, including the 38 percent of our respondents who earned less than Rs 10,000 per month (about \$US 222). In ordinary middle- or lower middle-class homes that can afford only one part-time servant, she will not usually be assigned child care or cooking responsibilities. In these homes, part-timers are hired to take over the least desirable everyday jobs, such as washing the dishes or cleaning the floors. Time and time again, employers identified washing dirty dishes and pots as the most menial and lowly of household tasks, identified

as this chore is with ritual pollution, and this was overwhelmingly borne out by the survey in which 75 percent of the servants perform this function.⁹

Since domestic workers in much of the world today are primarily female, domestic service has appeared to be synonymous with women's work. Moreover, domestic work itself is overwhelmingly considered women's work and is devalued as such, and because of its association in India and elsewhere with dependency, servility, dirt, and pollution, further degraded. Precisely because the "domestic" is seen as a distinctively female realm, the presence of men—limited but ongoing—in Kolkata's culture of servitude questions the assumption of the gendered separation of spheres. It is the case that the ideal servant of Kolkata's feudal past—typically a male, live-in, family retainer who stayed in service for his life—has been increasingly replaced by a female, live-out, part-time domestic worker. Yet many employers express an unwavering preference for male servants—a sign of status historically—even as their numbers decline, especially to serve as bearers (butlers), factotums (employed to do all sorts of work), or cooks. Thirty-year-old male employer Vijay rationalized this preference in the language of skills and psychology: "If you look at the skill content required in cooking—it is much higher than in, say, washing the dishes. Any old person can wash the dishes. The male psyche calls for a more skilled job." Clearly, even though both men and women work as domestic servants, they are not interchangeable in the eyes of employers. Furthermore, employers and servants alike recognize a gender division of labor in which certain domestic chores and duties are considered more suitable for women than men, and servitude as such—not only stigmatized work but being at the beck and call of employers—"unmanly."

Bhadralok Patriarchy

Kolkata's evolving culture of servitude is inserted in patriarchal hierarchies that operate on multiple levels within both employing and serving households. Contemporary household ideologies hark back to the emergence of Kolkata's bhadralok culture and patriarchy in the nineteenth century, the bhadralok being the respectable, educated, upper caste, middle and upper classes. The bhadralok strategically deployed "the woman question" as part of the nationalist challenge to British colonial rule. Although the details of this process are beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that the bhadralok created a world in which middle- and upper middle-class women were relegated to the domestic sphere and had the overall responsibility for managing typically joint family households while deferring to their husbands' ultimate authority. Civilized protection for women was to be found within the confines of the home and family. Unprotected women—including poor or low caste women who were obliged to work outside of the home—were exposed to the moral and social opprobrium of the public gaze and were therefore by definition uncivilized and shameless. A potent and pervasive domestic ideology and practice were constructed whereby dutiful women, duly protected, attended to the needs of their husbands and children in the home. This hegemonic ideology was carefully

nurtured as the *bhadralok* consolidated themselves as the new middle classes in the late nineteenth century, and keeping servants became an indispensable marker of class status. As the maximum domestic cultural expression of the dominant class, this had widespread influence across social classes and castes, yielding what Kumkum Sangari (1999, 307) has called an “astonishing consensus” around domestic labor, domesticity and the domestic sphere. The losers in this consensus were those women without protection and those who could not afford to stay at home—women who were thereby excluded from the domestic sphere and proper domesticity—and, we would add, those men who were unable to provide protection.

Indeed, the situation of women servants in Kolkata clearly corresponds to the imperatives of the dominant ideology that women should work for a wage only if obliged to do so out of economic necessity; normally, they should be maintained by fathers and husbands as part of the latter’s patriarchal familial duties. This ideology has been sustained by the material conditions of a labor market in which the expansion of female employment has been in the worst-paid service occupations. Thus “marriage and motherhood remain the most reliable route to security” for both working and middle-class women (Standing 1991, 163-165). Across the board, women servants in our study expressed a strong preference for marriage and staying at home as wife and mother over working outside of the home. For women servants, the security of marriage may be a hollow promise; and yet the combination of poor working conditions and hegemonic domestic ideology serves to heighten the need to avoid having to work outside the home—even for those who have no choice.

We argue that ascription to patriarchal discourse and practice within servant households grants a certain cultural legitimacy to the working class family, even as women are relatively powerless to enforce patriarchal support and protection (Stern 1995, 305). Women servants are considered and, indeed, consider themselves particularly ill-fated because not only are their menfolk incapable of sustaining them or their children, but they must work outside of the home. The implications of the failure of patriarchy in the lives of women servants and their families are multifarious, and women attempt to compensate for the painful gap between their lived experience and the expectations of a dominant ideology that demands that women tend to their homes, husbands, and children. Many seek to create a home life of their own under circumstances that militate against it.

Paromita finds herself in a cycle of failed protection. Not only was she widowed young and left with a small child but her now grown-up daughter has been deserted by her husband. Paromita is the sole support and protector for her daughter and grandson: “Here I am—I have no parents, no husband; my daughter’s life is a disaster. I can only depend on myself. My daughter has nobody. If I die, she has nobody.” Yet Paromita made a conscious decision not to do live-in work, in order to practice a domestic ideology of her own, and has done full-time live-out work for thirty-five years: “I’ve never done *raat/din* [night/day or live-in] work. I like to go home.” In this context, women’s servanthood is rarely seen as a question of their own failure, but rather as Paromita concluded, “Men don’t want to work. They just want to hang

out, go to the cinema, drink and mistreat their wives.” This sentiment is echoed by employers such as Suniti, an upper middle-class widow who lives alone in a flat, who declaimed, “Women are workers, men are drunks.” In this sense, both male servants and the husbands of women servants are failed men and patriarchs, and their very masculinity is questioned. Male servants because the demeaning domestic—read as feminine—tasks they must perform compounded by the very characteristics that make them good servants—loyalty, subservience, lack of initiative, placing the employer’s family before his own—make them failed patriarchs. And husbands of women servants because they cannot support their wives and are, therefore, in the terms of many employers and wives, “useless”—and their masculinity undermined.¹⁰ Thus, employers and women servants are unhappily joined in their condemnation of the failure of working class patriarchy, with censure in the first case and reproach in the second. The inept and hapless working class man has become the abject subject of Kolkata’s modernity.

The Lament of Failed Patriarchs

If the essence of domestic service is subservience, then it is a job that runs counter to hegemonic ideas of masculinity, both *bhadralok* and other (Rubbo and Taussig 1983). Male domestics recognize that theirs is clearly a bad job, an awareness that coincides with popular opinion that less demeaning jobs for men can readily be found. Men who work as servants have found employment at what is generally considered the bottom of the urban occupational ladder, above begging and menial, casual labor such as transporting loads on their backs or pulling a rickshaw, but well below other working class jobs such as factory and office work. Some of the older generation of male servants regret that the job is being progressively de-skilled as domestic service becomes an increasingly feminized and task-driven and part-time occupation, and consequently consider it even less desirable for men than it was previously. Hence male servants, enmeshed in a discursive web of their making, struggle to make sense of their positionality in spaces that are demarcated as both feminine and inferior.

Held up against the *bhadralok* model, male servants who work as cooks, factotums, or sweepers—cleaners—fail as men on several counts. *Bhadralok* were and are considered men of culture and education, professionals if successful, and clerks if not—but *bhadralok* never work with their hands. In a caste-inflected social structure, manual labor is customarily associated with menial work or servitude. *Bhadralok* occupational privilege is matched by patriarchal privilege at home. The *bhadralok* naturally assume responsibilities as protector and provider of their households and, in turn, are served by their dependents. Aspiring *bhadralok* are vigilant about not compromising their status. A young, university-educated peon (lowest level office staff) at one of Kolkata’s premier companies, while fulfilling duties such as photocopying, sending faxes, and running errands, refused to perform another typical task, serving tea, since he was himself served tea at home. He declined *puja* (holiday) bonuses for similar reasons of patriarchal status, indicating that he was the

one to give such bonuses to others in his household. As this young man's liminal case exemplifies, *bhadralok* standing means engaging in independent (*swadhin*) rather than dependent (*paradhin*) work, refusing menial labor, and being able to support and protect a household.

These are standards which few working class men can attain and are essentially beyond the reach of male servants. Factory or office employment, recognized as relatively independent and decent work, is the prized working class job but not easy to find in liberalized and globalized Kolkata. Such work may allow men to be more independent, without necessarily providing enough income to support wives and families. Yet there is no job that fails to meet these standards as thoroughly as domestic service, and thus the men engaged in this work are often profoundly bitter and frustrated.

Men often end up as servants after failing to find or keep less dependent jobs, typically having started their working lives as young migrants sent to Kolkata by families faced with land scarcity and rural crisis. As middle-aged and elderly men reflecting upon their lives, they narrate sequences of misfortune, failed promises, and personal shortcomings that only the next generation may overcome. Although some men servants were initially reluctant to discuss their problems with us, it was the concept of *koshto* (to suffer) that transformed their silence into speech, as exemplified by the case of Lakshman, an elderly family retainer. Lakshman, who is now over sixty years old, has been working for the same family for fifty years. When he was a boy of ten, his parents sent him to work as a servant in a large joint family home in North Calcutta ("a man from the village brought me here"), since their land in Orissa was insufficient to sustain the entire family. "When I was young, I didn't have enough to eat in my village. So my mother said to that man, 'Take him and put him to work in a good home.'" Lakshman liked Calcutta as a boy, for his first impression was that people were nice and food plentiful. He lived and worked in Calcutta, returned briefly to his natal village to get married when he was twenty-six years old, but continued to live with his employers while his wife stayed in the village. While his wife was alive, he saw her once or twice a year.

As he told us his story, Lakshman spoke in a distant and flat tone, reporting his losses and decisions as if they had happened to someone else:

Who did you leave behind in the village?

My mother.

Only your mother? No brothers and sisters?

Oh yes, I had sisters; they were married off. I was the youngest. And then I came here [Calcutta] to Dadu's house, and then my mother died and I never saw her again. We were on holiday with the family in Hazaribagh when I got the news. I went back to the village to perform the last rites.

Didn't you have anyone of your own in Calcutta?

When this family became like my own, I forgot about everything else.

How did they make you their own?

When my mother died, I thought, “I have another mother and another father,” and in this way I forgot the others. When my mother died, I thought to myself, “I will make these my own people.”

So you decided this?

Yes, I did.

Yet when asked whether he had experienced suffering, Lakshman became animated for the first time; his account switched seamlessly between his suffering as a servant, a son, a father, and a poor man.

Servants suffer because we work and work for the *babus* [masters] all our lives, and yet we are left with nothing. Once I left home, I never saw my mother again. . . . I have no son, only a daughter; if I had had a son, would I still be doing this? Would I not have had a place to stay? Of course cooking hurts my body. It hurts a lot, especially in the summer without a fan (there was a fan but they took it away), but I suffer the most because I have no land. I suffer because it is hard work; it’s my fate, my fate to suffer like this.

The lament of failed patriarchs operates simultaneously on multiple levels. Lakshman laments fate, the pain of hard work, the subservience to the *babus*, his personal losses still felt keenly after decades, and ultimately, “most” of all, the absence of the land that might have sustained his family and his masculinity, and provided an alternative to servitude.

Arun, nearing seventy years of age, is about to complete thirty years of service to the same family as a live-in servant. He was the youngest son of eight children, born in a district east of Kolkata to poor farmers who, having little themselves, had to farm other people’s land to make ends meet. As the youngest, he was able to study through the fourth grade, and still a young boy, became a soldier in the underground struggle for Indian independence. After several years of guerilla warfare, his father, increasingly afraid for his son’s safety, helped him escape to Calcutta where he joined his older brother. Arun’s summary of the next fifty years of his life is an account of his failure to keep a succession of jobs through lack of skill, illness, or sheer bad luck. Unlike Lakshman, he did not start out his working life as a servant but having tried farming in his native village, did factory work in Calcutta and contract labor in different places in northeastern India, and finally began working as a cook some three decades ago. His starting wage was Rs 80 and is now about Rs 550, most of which he, like Lakshman, sends back home to the village to support his wife, who does not work outside the home. His children, three sons and two daughters, are adults now; the daughters are married, and his sons show no signs of supporting their parents. Nearing the end of his working days, he admits: “I have lived my life with my head bowed—I have lived *paradhin*—but I will not bow my head at the end of my life.”

Fifty-year-old Sunil, born in central West Bengal into a farming family with barely any land, also sees himself as having failed. By age fifteen, he had begun

working in an eyeglass factory in a town near his village, and eventually moved to Kolkata where, because he was Brahmin, he was given a job cooking in religious festivals. He then found a regular job as a cook for a family with whom he worked for twenty-five years. Quiet and bespectacled, Sunil acknowledges his failure as a father and as a husband:

We have no choice, and we have to keep going. Somehow we have to keep going because we have absolutely no savings. The girls have to be married and I am afraid we can't afford to keep them in school much longer. There is no future in this work. What if I fall ill? In any case we have to pay all the doctor bills ourselves. I am growing old and yet I cannot manage to do anything for my girls—we have no house but we have daughters with no one but me to look after them. If I could just find a way out. If I only had a little education, I would have been able to get some kind of job. In my family, my wife is the first wife to work. I am the only weak one of the lot. All my brothers and cousins have *pukka* (real, solid) houses and their wives don't work. Mine is the only one that has to work.

Sunil's failure as a patriarch, in his eyes, stems not only from the fact that his wife is obliged to work outside the home and his inability to build a future for his daughters, but from the shame of being a servant himself. Balai is another middle-aged servant whose wife also works as a domestic. Balai's parents-in-law do not know that their daughter works outside the home and they think he is a driver (*chauffeur*)—a job that that is perceived as having more dignity and more independence. Drivers occupy an intermediary space between dependent and independent work since they are skilled and work outside the home. Balai knows that his own daughter also tells her friends that he is a *chauffeur*. He is embarrassed, but understands his daughter's reluctance to acknowledge the less than *bhadra* (civilized) work he does.

These themes appear repeatedly in the lament of male servants, especially of those who do not have sons, for within the rules of patriarchy, sons may share their fathers' burdens. As Lakshman explains, "If I had had a son, would I still be doing this? I don't have a son so I have no one to call my own; after all my son-in-law cannot be my own." He would have never let his daughter work as a servant, sacrificing himself instead; now that she is married, he cannot assume that she and her husband will look after him in his old age. Yet as Arun's case shows, fathers cannot necessarily rely on sons. Arun is bitterly disappointed in his sons, whom he classifies as "useless," and does not believe will look after him once he stops working.

In a slightly different situation Raja, who is a long-time factotum for an upper middle-class couple, does not know whether to be proud or anxious about his sons. He worked doubly hard so that his sons would never have to become servants, giving them the opportunity to study and train for a trade, but now he worries that they are too soft to do any hard work at all. For working-class fathers, as Sennett and Cobb (1972, 125) argue in their fine analysis in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, the overriding motivation for sacrificing themselves for their children is to ensure that

the children will not be like them. Whether they have managed to protect and support their own families, Arun, Lakshman, and Raja are joined in their fears that—despite their sacrifices—the next generation may not after all achieve the elusive benefits of independent work and an idealized patriarchy.

Reconfiguring the Patriarchy of Servants

Even as male servants lamented being trapped in cycles of dependency and failure, a reconceptualization of the nature of dependent work, and the conditions for supporting and protecting a household, emerged in their stories. Within an unfavorable context, male servants were able to consolidate their position as heads of households through the revaluation of the terms of work, status, and dependency. In this revaluation, lowly or undesirable tasks become ordinary work; individual aspiration gives way to familial responsibility, and the condition of servitude is offset by employer reliance on servants.

Raja, while resigned to being a servant, expressed a calm acceptance of all labor as labor—including the commonly reviled task of washing dishes—and even a certain satisfaction in a job well done:

There is no task that is the worst. Madam doesn't make me do things after all—I do them myself. If I see something dirty, I call the sweeper to clean it or I do it. I don't mind washing the dishes either, though I don't do it all the time, just in the evening, after the sweeper leaves. I have pride in my work and don't want to leave the kitchen dirty for *sahib* [master] to see when he makes the tea for himself in the morning. What is there, on the other hand, to like? I work because I have to. I neither like nor dislike anything.

Yet Raja is perhaps an exceptional case, with achievements few of his fellows can hope to attain—all with the help of generous and appreciative employers. Despite his concerns about his sons' capacity to make a decent living, as mentioned above, he has managed to educate them, as well as send his younger brothers to university and find them employment in local government offices, acquire land and a house in a district south of the city from whence he commutes everyday, and support his wife (who works at home as a seamstress). Raja's employer also validates his masculinity, expressing a clear preference for him over any female servant who, she says, would tend to "embroil" employers in personal problems. Because he takes pride in his work, is efficient, attentive, and reserved, Raja is indeed the "perfect servant."¹¹ And yet this does not preclude simultaneously coming to terms with the nature of his work and within its limits, fulfilling to a significant degree his patriarchal responsibilities.

Kamal lives in the servants' quarters in an upper middle-class block of flats with his wife—who does part-time work there—and daughter. He is another male servant who has made his compromises with dependent work and with dependence on an employer for food and shelter. By holding his widowed employer's ignorance and neglect of the household in contempt he reverses the relation of dependency, "She knows nothing and understands nothing, not even where things are kept. She asks me

everything.” In Kamal’s eyes, his employer’s reliance serves to dilute her power over him; in effect, he feels in control of the household, and could even be seen to occupy, in a peculiar way, the place of the man of the house. Kamal’s dominance of the domestic realm is reflected in his appraisal of even the most menial and feminized tasks as “simply work”:

I don’t feel I have any [problems] really. This is simply work. And no work is bad. One has to survive. Many think, “there is no dignity in this work.” I don’t have that attitude at all. If I can do it well and earn enough money, then I am willing to do anything . . . I don’t agree that there is a difference between this and other work. Some feel “*ghenna*” [disgust] that a man should do “*barir kaaj*” [housework], but not me. People think sweeping, mopping, and washing dishes are women’s work. But why shouldn’t all people do everything? If my wife is not at home and I don’t have the money to pay someone to [do a domestic chore] for me, then must I not be able to do it for myself? I find that 99% people feel disgust, but I am not like this.

Kamal recounted that his wife at one point wanted him to leave live-in domestic service to become a driver—that is, more skilled, more independent work “outside.” He learned to drive and got his license, but then decided that he preferred live-in work for a lower salary and servants’ quarters to the uncertainty of finding a driver’s job for higher pay but also having to find a place to live plus the attendant expenses. He once did find a job in an office, but did not take it up for the same reason—he would have far greater expenditures given the cost of rent, food, electricity, water, and transport—and would give up the security and benefits of working “inside.” Similarly Raghu, another live-in servant with a family, also realized after getting his license that with a driver’s salary he would not be able to find a place to live in the city.¹² In his case, his employers gave him a raise, hired his wife, and looked after his children to prevent him from quitting. As Kamal corroborates, “What would make me choose the “outside”? Here my daughter is safe. She is learning so much, getting so much help from everyone [the residents of the building]. Who will do this for her on the outside? I could not. All I want is for my daughter to get a decent job. If she can also make a good marriage, then even better.”

Both Kamal and Raghu, in the end, determined that they could best fulfill their familial duties by remaining within the confines of dependency and servitude—what to others is disgusting and to them is simply work—rather than opting for the precarious independence of “outside.” We certainly do not want to overstate the significance of Raja, Kamal, Raghu, and some others’ reconfigured understandings that have allowed them to come to terms with their socially stigmatized daily labor and to recognize their capacity to support their families in adverse circumstances. Yet it is precisely in making decisions that others may consider shameful but allowed them to fulfill their duties toward their children, that they have been able

to reconfigure their own patriarchy to deflect failure. In so doing, in pondering the nature of domestic work, they make all labor decent and of value.

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Notes

1. We follow the elaboration of culture of servitude in Ray and Qayum 2009.
2. Compare Steve Stern's analysis of the contradictions of patriarchy and public and private spheres in colonial Mexico, "The facile assumption that the history of public life, a political arena of broad import populated mainly by male historical actors, is sharply demarcated from the history of private life, a social arena of narrower concerns populated mainly by women, family, and male losers, begins to look like an artifice whose foundations require critical reexamination" (Stern 1995, 9).
3. Compare feminist scholars such as Carmen Diana Deere who may initially reject "patriarchy" in favor of looking at "gender relations as an arena of potential conflict and struggle," but whose analysis is predicated on something called "patriarchy" (Deere 1990, 18 and passim).
4. We take due note of the caveat in the following commentary: "The assumptions made today about the natural—and proper—organisation of family life can be shown to have arisen in particular historical circumstances. The definitions of motherhood, childhood, fatherhood, the representation of the home as a 'haven in a heartless world,' have been forged out of veritable ideological and legal campaigns, and are subject to constant renegotiation as needs and circumstances change" (Harris 1984, 138).
5. The latest census data for this occupation are from the 1991 census since the relevant results of the 2001 census were not available at the time of writing.
6. The 1971 census showed that there were 675,878 domestic servants in India, of whom only 251,479 were women. A decade later, the picture was quite different, with the 1981 census reporting that at least 807,410 people worked as domestic workers in India, evenly divided between 402,387 men and 405,023 women. By 1991, the census reported 270,835 men and 460,279 women working as servants. Needless to say, the numbers of servants in India have been historically severely undercounted (Government of India 1971, 1981, 1991).
7. We use the term "feudal" because employers and, in fact, most middle- and upper class people in Kolkata constantly use the term to summon up the past—in contrast to the "modern" present.

8. Given the paucity of large-scale studies of servants and employers in India in general and in Kolkata specifically and the inadequate census data, we organized a survey of 500 households in three middle-class areas of the city, covering both apartment buildings and detached homes. In each neighborhood, households were randomly selected from voter lists, and one employer and one servant were separately interviewed in each household. We solicited basic information about servant wages, hours, tasks, castes, landholding, and place of origin; employer income, occupation, household structure, and number of servants; as well as more qualitative issues involving servant and employer preferences about domestic work.
9. The main caste distinction insofar as domestic work tended to revolve around those who cleaned bathrooms and performed other ritually impure tasks, especially washing dishes (once someone has eaten from a plate, it becomes polluted). The question of servant caste has indeed depended historically on occupation and task, though in Bengal, castes have been less associated with hereditary occupation groups than in other parts of India. One would expect servants to be lower caste precisely because they are lower in the class and race hierarchy, but this is only partially true in Bengal. Indeed, cooks in traditional Bengali Hindu households were almost exclusively Brahmin through the mid-twentieth century. Today, by and large, servants are lower caste; our survey, for example, shows that more than half of the servants are scheduled caste (corresponding to the British colonial “schedule” of the many caste groupings that fall below the four main castes of the Hindu system [Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra], a term that was adopted by the Indian national state after independence).
10. This is also echoed in Roy (2003, 193), “Our husbands are useless so they might as well be dead.”
11. As defined in the film *Gosford Park*, “What gift do you think a good servant has that marks them apart from the rest? It is the gift of anticipation. And I am a good servant. I am better than good, I am the best, the *perfect* servant” (Fellowes 2002, scene 139).
12. The real estate developers, architects, and urban planners we interviewed agreed that with a salary less than Rs. 10,000/month (\$US 222)—compared to the Indian average income of Rs. 1687/month (\$US 37.50)—a family of four cannot afford to live in twenty-first-century Kolkata and must settle for outlying areas. Thus Raja, for example, who makes well below Rs. 5000 could only obtain a house in the 24 Parganas district outside of the city.

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