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South Asia Research Notes

Spring 09

Cultures of Servitude

Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India

Raka Ray

Sarah Kailath Chair in India Studies,
Chair of the Center for South Asia Studies, and
Associate Professor of Sociology, UC Berkeley

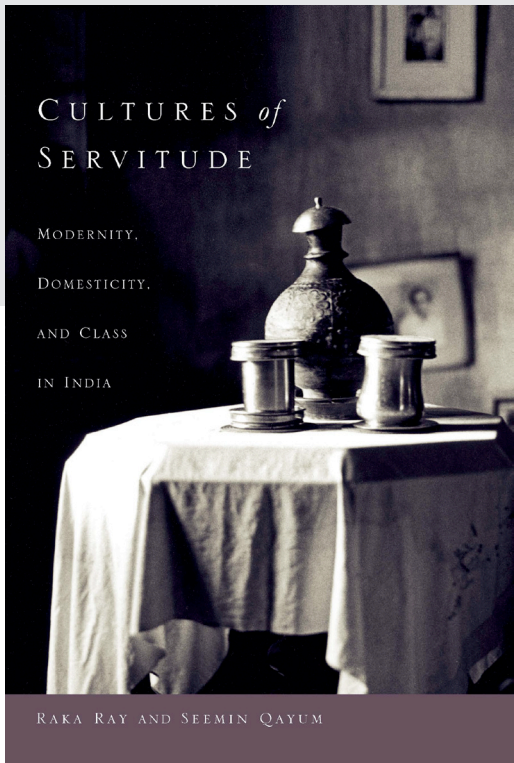
Seemin Qayum

Historical Anthropologist

SUMMARY

Domestic servitude blurs the divide between family and work, affection and duty, the home and the world. In *Cultures of Servitude* Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum offer an ethnographic account of domestic life and servitude in contemporary Kolkata, India, with a concluding comparison with New York City. Focused on employers as well as servants, men as well as women, across multiple generations, they examine the practices and meaning of servitude around the home and in the public sphere. This book shifts the conversations surrounding domestic service away from an emphasis on the crisis of transnational care work to one about the constitution of class. It reveals how employers

position themselves as middle and upper classes through evolving methods of servant and home management, even as servants grapple with the challenges of class and cultural distinction embedded in relations of domination and inequality. It is based on participant observation conducted on extended research trips over a period of five years (from 2000 to 2005); 52 oral histories with employers and 44 with servants in Kolkata and New York; and a survey of 500 households in Kolkata.



Stanford University Press

2009.

272 pp.

7 tables, 10 illustrations, 4 maps.

ISBN-10: 0804760713

ISBN-13: 9780804760713

Cloth \$65

ISBN-10: 0804760721

ISBN-13: 9780804760720

Paper \$22.95

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Raka Ray, (Ph.D. University of Wisconsin) is Sarah Kailath Chair in India Studies, Chair of the Center for South Asia Studies, and Associate Professor of Sociology and South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

Raka Ray's publications include *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India* (University of Minnesota, 1999, and in India, Kali for Women, 2000); "Women's Movements in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization and Autonomy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (with Anna C. Korteweg); *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, and Politics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, and in India, Oxford University Press, edited with Mary Katzenstein); and "Masculinity, Femininity And Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late Twentieth Century," *Feminist Studies* (26:3). She is the editor of forthcoming *Handbook of Gender* (Oxford University Press, India).

Notes on a multi-storied building in Kolkata

At any time during the morning, one hears the rhythmic sounds of carpets being beaten, the clang of pots and pans being washed, crying children being comforted, food sizzling as it fries, garbage being emptied, and the raised voices of women employers giving instructions to the servants and berating them for a job done sloppily or slowly or incorrectly. The doorbell rings incessantly as part-time servants, deliverymen, repairmen, and vendors of food and snacks arrive. The two or three hours following lunch are the only quiet period in the building; then with afternoon tea at five begins the evening routine, which persists until at least ten o'clock at night when the dinner has been eaten and cleared away and the beds prepared for sleep. Hence the workday for most full-time servants in Gitanjali is 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m and 5:00 p.m to 10:00 p.m.--typically more than a twelve-hour working day.



"When we were young, the maidservants came to us bare bodied [without a blouse], with no slippers, and with just a sari to wrap [themselves in]. Now you can't tell the difference between the servant and someone who is part of the family--they dress, use cosmetics, want to be like us-- before, they didn't have the money or the idea [that they could be like us]."— **Elderly employer to authors**

"Who will read this book? You won't really educate them [employers]. They are not good people. Your book won't teach them anything... I know what social problems are, but these people don't care. They will probably roll their eyes and say to you, 'Why are you writing about those people?'"

—**Female servant to authors**



The Unease of Employers Today

Kolkata's employers think of themselves as living in between a "feudal" and "modern" social order. The feudal order, to the employers, refers to a lost colonial world in which employers' income was from land rents derived from rural estates, and several generations of a family lived together in one house, usually under the authority of a patriarch. Ideally, the income from the land was enough to keep the family in comfort. The servants of such a family also came from the land, that is, from villages associated with those rural estates and from tenant families who would work for the employing family for generations. The relations between employer and servant were based on loyalty and obligation, and the employer acted as patron to the servant and his family. The servant in this picture lived with the family and was typically male, the quintessential family retainer. The feudal imaginary is both an ever-present source of nostalgia and a mode of being the middle classes believe properly belongs to the past.



The modern imaginary encompasses the universe employers believe, for better or for worse, they ought to inhabit today--a social order still taking shape, whose contours are being uneasily but pragmatically filled--where employers no longer live off the land but are employed by the state or private enterprises and live in apartments rather than mansions. The joint families of the past are nucleated, and relationships with servants--now typically female, live-out, and often part-time--are based on the wage contract.



Kolkata's culture of servitude is powerfully shaped by three premises with origins in the feudal imaginary. First, servants are essential to a well-run and well-kept household; second, servants are "part of the family" and bound to it by ties of affection, loyalty, and dependence; and third, servants comprise a class with distinctive lifestyles, desires, and habits. While the first premise remains unchallenged, employers must face the difficulty of managing servants in a small apartment, given emerging notions of privacy. With the second premise, the rhetoric of the modern wage contract only partially replaces the rhetoric of love, leaving both employers and servants dissatisfied. The third premise, based on caste and class distinction, is one that is most challenged by servants themselves, and while many employers accept that a more democratic order is better, a servant who is in full knowledge of her rights is difficult to maintain!

A survey of 500 middle-class households in Kolkata

Number of servants per household	(%)
1	62.4
2	28.4
> 2	9.2
Servant type	
Households with live-in servants	25.0
Households with live-out servants	75.0
Home of live-out workers	
Bastis in Kolkata	62.8
Outside Kolkata	30.0
Age of worker	
Under 15 years	4.4
15<->20	8.2
21<->30	22.8
31<->40	34.6
Over 40	30.0
Family status of workers	
Single	11.0
Married	70.0
Divorced/widowed	19.0
Landownership of worker	
No land	53.6
Only homestead (w/o arable land)	17.0
Some land	29.4
Tasks done*	
Wash dishes	73.8
Clean house	72.6
Cook	26.4
Provide child care/elder care	9.8
Run errands	43.4
Number of homes worked in	
1	27.8
> 1	72.2
Total monthly wage**	
< Rs 500	21.4
Rs 501<->1,000	53.2
> Rs 1,000	23.2

* Percentages do not total 100 because workers may perform multiple tasks.
 ** Percentages do not total 100 because 7 workers did not receive any wages.



Seemin Qayum (Ph.D. University of London) is an anthropologist who has worked on 19th- and 20th-century cultural and social history in Bolivia and ethnographic research in India. Based in New York, she has been a consultant to a number of national and international organizations in the fields of environment, development, gender, and culture.

Dr. Qayum's publications include: *The Bolivia Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke University Press, in process, co-editor); "Grappling with Modernity: India's Respectable Classes and the Culture of Domestic Servitude," *Ethnography* 4:4, December 2003 (with Raka Ray); "Nationalism, Internal Colonialism and the Spatial Imagination: The Geographic Society of La Paz in Turn-of-the-Century Bolivia," in James Dunkerley, ed. *Studies in the Formation of the Nation State in Latin America* (2002); *El Siglo XIX en Bolivia y América Latina* (1997, edited with Rossana Barragán and Dora Cajías), and *De teratenientes a amas de casa: Mujeres de la élite de La Paz en la primera mitad del siglo XX* (1997, with Rossana Barragán and María Luisa Soux).

The Center for South Asia Studies (CSAS) at the University of California, Berkeley is one of the world's foremost centers for research and programs on South Asia. CSAS works with faculty members, graduate students, community members, private institutions, and non-profit organizations to deepen understanding of the region and to create new generations of scholars of South Asia. One key area of focus at CSAS is research about and programmatic activities on contemporary South Asia, examining closely issues like democracy and democratic reform, reduction of inequality, and social development.

Praise for CULTURES OF SERVITUDE

"Brilliantly observing domestic servitude in urban India, Ray and Qayum note the differences in the shift from rural to urban, big houses to small flats, and long-term family retainers to more temporary employment. They offer a compelling argument for looking at the microscopic interactions of domesticity to reveal the broader truths of contemporary capitalism and modernity."

—Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, University of Southern California

"Cultures of Servitude is a beautifully written, empirically rich, and theoretically sophisticated study that rethinks the relationship between class formation and domestic servitude in the globalized economy. Exposing the complex interactions between domestic workers and their employers in the context of the dramatic social changes that have transformed India in recent decades, it bristles with fresh insights and complicates our understanding of the ways in which class distinction is enacted and reproduced subjectively within the intimate sphere of the household. Ray and Qayum deploy a series of revealing comparisons: over historical time (from feudal to modern India), gender (from male to female servants), generation (from the old to the new middle class), space (from large houses to modern apartments), and work relations (from live-in retainers to quasi-contractual servants) to produce an original and compelling analysis. A must read for sociologists of gender, work, and globalization."

—Ruth Milkman, University of California, Los Angeles

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University of California at Berkeley

10 Stephens Hall
Berkeley, CA 94270
southasia.berkeley.edu
510 642 3608

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