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# LOCATING THE SUBALTERN: AN ANALYSIS OF DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN MUGHAL IMPERIAL SERVICE

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## INTRODUCTION

The grandeur of the Mughal Empire incorporating its pan Indian extent, imperial palaces and magnificent architecture leaves an overarching impression upon historians and the populace so much so that the aura of splendour blinds us to the intricate network of interpersonal relationships that constituted the imperial court and the household. Although power relations and hierarchies in the Mughal court have been a subject of research for quite some time, power equations within the Mughal household and their subsequent influence on the imperial court have been a neglected space. A major reason for the failure to recognise domestic service as a different form of servitude is because often it is subsumed within the larger rubric of slavery, making it challenging to reconstruct its own history. Though these servile classes are ubiquitously present in the Mughal sources yet they are hidden in plain view due to the ideological leanings and historiographical trends that tend to focus on the larger narratives, often suppressing the voices of the subaltern. Recent studies have attempted to unveil the dynamism of the so called “unproductive” domestic sphere wherein the marginalized groups did exert certain agency and were not merely victims of subordination. In this paper, there are primarily two themes that I attempt to discuss- **the agency of the subaltern and the gendered aspects of master-servant relationship in the Mughal household**. The burden of my argument lies in the fact that the Mughal state and these domestic workers cannot be studied in isolation from each other as they were mutually reinforcing. These domestic servants were the backbone of the imperial structure and exerted if not more but equal influence on its proper functioning. A gendered analysis of the master servant bond reveals how notions of **patriarchy, objectification and sexuality** were masked under the garb of generosity and affection.

## DOMESTIC SPHERE, SLAVES AND SERVANTS

Once we appreciate the inter-relations between the household and the political process, we realise the difficulty in putting a precise meaning to the term '*domestic service*'.<sup>1</sup> Constructing boundaries between the public and private sphere further complicates the attempt to mark out the space for '*domestic service*' as the household was not merely a stagnant space rather it was abounding in productivity, innovation and was "*equally a primary unit for a host of economic activities*." **Ruby Lal** has drawn attention to the significance of domesticity as a political space, and has brought to light the extent to which the harem and the court constituted each other.<sup>2</sup> If domestic service is so evasive a term, the category of the '*domestic servant*' is just as elusive and imprecise in so far as the Mughal period is concerned.<sup>3</sup> The distinction between servants, slaves, marginalised groups and other servile communities is very hard to make as often the lines between them were blurred. Similar domestic services were being provided by servants, slaves and freed slaves, making it difficult to neatly categorise them. The predominance of the '*slavery category*' needs to be redefined in order to attempt to unearth a more graded past of servitude, especially of the domestic nature.<sup>4</sup> **Richard Eaton** and **Indrani Chatterjee** have argued that "the **barriers** between slave and non-slave status were often quite *permeable*" and hence, it is of utmost importance that they are understood in their specific context. Services rendered to the emperor by a noble and to the same Emperor by his domestic servant were vastly different in their real nature yet the theoretical rhetoric behind them was the same.<sup>5</sup>

## SOURCES OF UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC SERVICE

The voices and the realities of these servile groups comes to the forefront through a careful examination of the contemporary sources of Mughal India. Their past lies embedded in the

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<sup>1</sup> Shivangini Tandon, '*Elite Households and Domestic Servants: Early Modern through Biographical Narratives (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)*', *Servants' Past Vol. I*, 2019, 157

<sup>2</sup> Ruby Lal, '*Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*' UK Cambridge University Press, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Shivangini Tandon, '*Elite Households and Domestic Servants: Early Modern through Biographical Narratives (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)*', *Servants' Past Vol. I*, 2019, 157

<sup>4</sup> M. Sajjad Alam Rizvi, '*Domestic Service in Mughal South Asia*', *Servants' Past Vol. I*, 2019, 111

<sup>5</sup> Lubna Irfan, '*Nature of Slavery and Servitude in Mughal India*', *South Asian History and Culture Vol. 13*, 2022, 467

**primary accounts** composed by the royal elites and represent their perspective of these servants. One of the primary sources that give incidental yet useful information about the plight of these domestic workers are the **Tazkiras**- Biographies of the royal elites. However, extreme caution has to be exercised in handling in these sources as they tend to contain biases of their own and create discourses of power, reinforcing structures of dominance and control. The Mughal miniatures are also a source of reference for corroborating the textual evidences. Their importance cannot be emphasized enough as Abul Fazl mentions in his work, *Ain-i- Akbari*,

***“Man’s existence and the continuance of his life, depend on 5 things- a father, a mother, children, servants and food.”***

Empirical data attests to this claim as in 1595, there was an enormous increase in the expenditure on domestic services, accounting for about 8% of the total jama (net revenue) of the empire. Going by the references given in these sources, we can identify four categories of domestic labour operating within the Mughal household- **Khwajasaras (eunuchs)**, **Chelas (freed male slaves)**, **Sahelis (freed female slaves)** and **Concubines**. The last two categories would be discussed in the latter half of my paper.

### **EUNUCHS- THE THIRD GENDER**

These were also referred to as **Khwajasaras**, a Persian term denoting men whose sexual organs had been castrated. They were employed in the Mughal imperial court and household as slaves, servants and administrative officers.<sup>6</sup> This void made them the perfect choice to guard the harem, a place where the women of the household lived. They were primarily responsible for screening the entrants to the harem and the items that could be allowed inside the harem. Though their divergent sexuality put them in an ambiguous position in the Mughal setup, yet they formed the **chief link** in exchanging information between the household and the court.<sup>7</sup> The eunuchs have been looked down upon by several contemporary scholars for they possibly engaged in gossip that had an impact on the political, public and private life of the Mughals. Some of these eunuchs were

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<sup>6</sup> Lubna Irfan, <https://servantspasts.wordpress.com/2019/08/12/third-gender-and-service-in-mughal-court-and-harem/>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*,

held in high regard and earned the titles of *Nazir*, *Aitbar* and *Aitmad* that reflected their loyalty and dedication towards their masters. Khwajasara Wafadar was sent by Adbullah Khan, a noble of Jahangir's reign to govern the province of Gujarat., testifying to their important positions.

However, it wasn't in absolute terms that the eunuchs rendered loyalty and service. We do have instances of these eunuchs transgressing the boundaries of their service and overstepping their authority. As per Italian traveller, **Niccolo Manucci's** records, "*women sought sexual services from the eunuchs who used their tongues and hands in the most licentious manner.*" There is another reference during Aurangzeb's reign when a eunuch was murdered for having an affair with a woman in the harem. However, during Aurangzeb's reign, security had been breached by two men who entered the harem. This breach had been committed under the knowledge of Roshanara Begum but it was the head eunuch who was blamed for this serious crime and immediately relieved of his duties. After careful examination, one can possibly say that the practice of '**othering**' the eunuchs because of the absence of their 'non-man' nature and their psychological and physical valence could have triggered them into doing acts beyond their power. This could have led to breeding of feelings of animosity and revenge after suffering unjust treatment and persecution at the hands of the nobility and emperor. I would like to argue that seeing them as a potential threat to their masculinity and the patriarchal setup, these eunuchs were dismissed from their service and more females were given the responsibility of guarding the harem. Such an arrangement would have come up with growing demarcation of male and female sections and stricter rules of purdah observed by ladies of the harem. <sup>8</sup> **Shadab Bano** gives us two instances that enforce the above point. As per the description of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Mughal noble harem by Rizqallah Mushtaqi, states that eunuchs were not allowed after a certain point and not allowed to mix with women. Mughal miniatures from Akbar's reign also depict only female forms in the interior of the harem, something that is corroborated by Abul Fazl's description of Akbar's Zenana, guarded by "sober and active women."

These incidents can be analysed from a dual perspective- **agency of the servants and gender**. In the former, one can see that these marginalised groups were not simply objects of subordination,

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<sup>8</sup> Shadab Bano, '*Eunuchs in Mughal Household and Court*', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 2008, Vol.69, 417-427

rather, they were exercising authority at their own level and defying the norms of comportment set by their masters. There were multiple power hierarchies in existence that defined their actions. In the case of latter, they were in a sexually disadvantaged position and were made to pay for their so called “sins” when their acts of defiance threatened the patriarchal setup of the Mughals and in order to assert their manly authority over both females and the eunuchs, a number of stringent measures were taken to keep their breaches and advances in check.

### **MASTER- SERVANT RELATIONSHIP AND THE AGENCY OF THE SERVILE**

The network of relations that sustained the social order in Mughal India was frequently articulated in terms of master-slave relations.<sup>9</sup> The relationship between the master (malik) and the servant in Mughal South Asia has been discussed in various genres of Indo- Persian historical writings: juristic texts, moral digests and auto/biographical writings (Tazkirahs).<sup>10</sup> Different aspects of this relationship have been focused upon in each of these genres. The first one deals with issues of contract, wages and seclusion with respect to domestic servants within the households. The second one discusses ethical and moral norms of domestic service which is based on an interdependent relationship between master and the servant. The third category reveal aspects of personal and emotional relationship, which the authors reminisced. The norms set out in the Tazkirahs, serve to legitimate imperial domination, but more importantly **perpetuate social hierarchies**, in particular the distance that separates the ruling classes from the subjugated subjects.<sup>11</sup>

Forces of resistance and domination are intrinsic to any power relation. However, we need to understand that the master-servant relationship is **not solely composed of absolute dominance and subjugation**. There are softening forces on both sides of the divide that balance out the extremities. **Sunil Kumar** argues that, “Often lost in the gloss of the loyal, obedient or the incarcerated servant is the considerable amount of independent agency that subordinates created

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<sup>9</sup> Shivangini Tandon, ‘Elite Households and Domestic Servants: Early Modern through Biographical Narratives (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)’, *Servants’ Past Vol. I*, 2019, 161

<sup>10</sup> M. Sajjad Alam Rizvi, ‘Domestic Service in Mughal South Asia’, *Servants’ Past Vol. I*, 2019, 106

<sup>11</sup> Shivangini Tandon, ‘The Presence of the Marginalised in the Life Sketches of the Ruling Elites: Slaves, Musicians and Concubines in the Mughal “Tazkirahs”’, *Social Scientist*, May-June 2015, Vol.43, 65-75

for themselves.<sup>12</sup> This argument is also supported by **Shivangini Tandon**, who argues that “in the process of engagement of the socially inferior groups with the dominant elite culture, they negotiated with the elite normative system and exploited its silences and ambiguities to their ‘minimum disadvantage’.” A careful scrutiny of the Tazkiras furnish considerable emotional investment on the domestic servants. The master-slave relations were imbued with a lot of attachment and even intimacy on both sides.<sup>13</sup> One of the reasons, perhaps, for this lies in the fact that in the prevailing norms of manliness, marked by consumption and connoisseurship, domestic servants or slaves were necessary for the maintenance of the norms of civility and deportment.<sup>14</sup>

**Jawhar Aftabchi's** work titled *Tadhkirah al-Waqi'at* is a memoir in the form of a **tazkira**, authored by an attendant who served as **Humayun's ewer-bearer**, offering a personal account of events during the Mughal emperor's reign. The text accords significance in the light of representing the voice of the domestic servants and an account of their perspectives on the contemporary events. It can be read as a first-person account of a servant who tried to trace a progression in the construction of the self in terms of loyalty, service and entitlement to the royal favours.<sup>15</sup> Aftabchi presents himself as a devoted attendant to his master, while simultaneously elevating and praising his master's status. He described himself as a *banda* (slave) and considered his employment at the royal court as a divine favour.<sup>16</sup> Being the ewer-bearer, he had the master's faith and the close proximity to him when they were on the move, made their relationship dynamic which gave him considerable agency to make claims and demands, as opposed to an idealised, uni-dimensional one. He mentions an instance when the king's entourage had gone on a camping expedition in the woods and he had successfully managed to kill a deer, post which he asked the emperor to give him one leg as a reward which he granted. He was subsequently assigned the role of revenue collector for the pargana of Haibatpur. The text shows Jauhar's upward social mobility as a result of his loyalty. Though the master obviously exercised absolute sovereignty in negotiating the terms of service, looking at these texts from the perspective of repetition, memory

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<sup>12</sup> Sunil Kumar, 'Theorising Service with Honour', *Servants' Past Vol. I*, 2019, 228

<sup>13</sup> Shivangini Tandon, 'Elite Households and Domestic Servants: Early Modern through Biographical Narratives (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)', *Servants' Past Vol. I*, 2019, 162

<sup>14</sup> Rosalind O' Hanlon, 'Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, No. 1, 1999, 47-93

<sup>15</sup> M. Sajjad Alam Rizvi, 'Domestic Service in Mughal South Asia', *Servants' Past Vol. I*, 2019, 124

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 125

and communication, we can notice the dynamics of **self-construction and self-representation**.<sup>17</sup> The relationship of subordination was internalised in his relationship, yet it did not dissolve his identity.

The **chelas** as stated above, were the free male servants and the ones who witnessed royalty up close. They did enjoy a number of favours and had acquired certain agency, Jawhar being one of them. However, not all servants enjoyed the same privileges and there seemed to be a hierarchy in operation amongst the servile classes that determined their economic position. The complexity of social relations reveals that the structure of service and submission in Mughal times was multidimensional and layered.<sup>18</sup> The servants employed in the maintenance and upkeep of horses were favoured against sweepers, water carriers and grass cutters. This brings in the important point of existence of power hierarchies even among the servile classes that gave greater agency to some while the majority still had to bear the brunt of inhuman treatment. These chelas were not simply passive recipients of dominance and subordination, rather they asserted themselves to some agency and negotiated better terms for themselves. Sadly, the same cannot be said for many other domestic servants. Though we have Jauhar's narrative from the side of the servile, but it does not represent the voice of the entire subaltern. Rather, it recounts the experiences of only the privileged servants while the voice of the lowest rungs continues to remain silent.

## **FEMALE SLAVES AND CONCUBINES**

Indo-Persian and vernacular sources testify to the presence of female slaves in the Mughal household. The elite households were fluid and open ended and were marked by the incorporation of servants, slaves and concubines into the structure, organization and meanings of the household.<sup>19</sup> These female slaves were mainly purchased as a category of domestic servant and were the lowest level of the graded domestic service. These slaves helped with the household

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 129

<sup>18</sup> Lubna Irfan, 'Nature of Slavery and Servitude in Mughal India', *South Asian History and Culture* Vol. 13, 2022, 475

<sup>19</sup> Shivangini Tandon, 'The Liminals in the Mughal Households', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 2017, Vol. 78, 380-385



chores and were also **sexually exploited** by their masters who had the ‘right to demand anything’ from them. The growing repugnance towards the institution of slavery led Akbar to issue his order in 1582 when he manumitted all his slaves who would then be free to choose their mode of service. As per **Lubna Irfan**, “the process of these slave girls becoming sahelis might have begun during Akbar’s times, but its application to female slaves is ambiguous.” Slave trade continued alongside the employment of female slaves in households as historical evidence suggests. The real change came when Nur Jahan manumitted all the female slaves from the harem and arranged their marriages with the chelas of the imperial court.<sup>20</sup> The change in nomenclature did not necessarily change the nature of work expected from them and those who did not marry still continued to live under the “protection of the emperor” becoming mere objects for sexual pleasure.

**Concubinage** also became a strong institution under the Mughals. Though they are said to have enjoyed greater authority, respect and dignity in the Mughal harem, yet the Islamic law Sha’ria puts them in a vulnerable space. As per the law, the legal wife of the husband had the right to sell of the concubine if she posited as a hindrance in her ways or her position threatened the wife. Only exceptional cases of certain concubines actually wielding power and authority can be seen as was the case with **Mahamanga**. This brings me to the question that though in the name of generosity and care, on a superficial level it was shown that steps were taken to improve the lives of these slaves but actual evidence speaks otherwise. We do not find any instances of these servants actually negotiating their agency or space or even gaining the affection of their master in the master-servant relationship. A gendered understanding of power and hierarchies puts these female servants and slaves at the receiving end of violence and sexual harassment while the royal primary sources shroud this reality under the **garb of liberation and freedom**.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through my paper, I have attempted to unearth the position of the domestic servants who on the outside, seem merely as powerless victims. The domestic household of the Mughals was a space

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<sup>20</sup> Lubna Irfan, ‘*Nature of Slavery and Servitude in Mughal India*’, *South Asian History and Culture Vol. 13*, 2022, 474

full of hierarchies, agency and dynamism with the servants playing an indisputably important role in its functioning. The household was as much a vibrant and active sphere as the royal court and in turn influenced the imperial court. These marginalized groups formed the bedrock of the Mughal Empire and sustained it. While there is a greater need to acknowledge the contribution of these domestic groups in the functioning of the Mughal state, it is also equally imperative to take cognizance of the fact that gender biases dominated every type of power relation. It is only when we begin seeing the mundane life of the subaltern with much greater details and attention, can we move beyond the simple and neat histories that we like to construct and produce histories that give equal opportunity to both the stakeholders.

It is in this complex commingling of factors, agencies and spaces that one begins to re-examine the extant biases while examining domestic service under the imperial court. What emerges out of this study is not a homogenous categorisation of imperial domestic servants but a domain highly contested amidst the overlapping domains of power, hierarchy and disputed claim of spaces.

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