


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Placement agencies for care-domestic labour: Everyday mediation, regimes of punishment, civilizing missions, and training in globalized India

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(Received 5 May 2020; revised 14 September 2021; accepted 14 September 2021)

Abstract

Survey data on Indian labour points to a rapid expansion of the care-domestic economy, currently the main employment avenue for urban women. Hitherto, studies on domestic service portray the unequal class structures of master–servant relationships and the escalating phenomenon of live-out and part-time hired help. This article shifts the focus to under-researched, yet increasingly visible, placement agencies, which regulate care-domestic markets and provide diverse services, from specialized ‘patient care’ to the training of subaltern communities. The article discusses how these service providers denote prominent shifts in skill sets, intra-household care arrangements, forms of medical assistance, and new (and old) mechanisms of authority. The ethnography expands our knowledge of everyday mediations around hiring and training between agencies, employers, and care-domestic workers in New Delhi. The article puts forward innovative conceptualizations of service provider approaches through juxtaposing the informal practices of local (or Indian) agencies with formalized and ‘civilizing’ agendas developed by Euro-American intermediaries. The formal–informal dichotomized framework of service provider relationships adds to critical scholarship that contrived dualisms which need historical scaffolding and nuanced engagement. I argue that, while informal and formal approaches appear markedly different for the care-domestic economy, they also overlap. Significantly, both approaches are unjustly weighted against the workers who lack the potential to democratize labour relations. Local agencies reinforce exploitative care-domestic relationships, while Euro-American intermediaries, who espouse modern values, formalization, and civilizing experiments, promulgate punitive regimes and stigmatized futures for their Indian subjects.

Keywords: Care-domestic labour; placement agencies; punishment; civilizing missions; training

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Introduction

In its simplest form, a placement agency is a service provider that employers can approach to hire care-domestic workers and through which workers may seek employment opportunities. For the management of the care-domestic economy, two approaches are conceptualized and form the subject of interrogation in this article. The first is represented by local (or Indian) agencies which retain the core characteristics of casualized, informal sector work. These local agencies offer informal care arrangements, which I call 'pay-as-you-go' services (my emphasis), that are symbolic of a sort of convenience, whereby users are absolved from long-term, tenured, or stable commitments.¹ The employer does not pay an advance for a specific amenity and the worker's employment remains undocumented and typically casual. Work arrangements in this model are based on oral agreements, adept mediation, and a hierarchy of labour roles. The second is a Euro-American (or expatriate) exemplar, whereby attempted formality with a civilizing mission is introduced into an otherwise informal sector. This is a purported model of modernizing labour relations that offers documentation practices and professional care-domestic work.

For most of the twentieth century, modernity has been characterized by attempts to formalize social relations.² Misztal outlines ideal features of formality that are reliant on official and legal roles, and structures of power.³ Post-colonial and postsocialist societies are generally more allied with informal economies and their unofficial open secrets, tacit rules, and hidden practice.⁴ In the sociological literature, following Goffman's conception of 'role distance', informality and formality are typically considered opposites.⁵ In two recent volumes, however, scholars have challenged the formal–informal dichotomy, emphasizing overlaps and interdependence across the world.⁶ These collections stress the value of informal practices as invisible yet central to human societies rather than as a disadvantaged residual of the formal economy.

¹ My understanding of 'pay-as-you-go' is inspired by the *Cambridge dictionary's* definition of a system in which you pay for a service, and you cannot use more than you have paid for. *Cambridge dictionary*, published online by Cambridge University Press 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pay-as-you-go>, [accessed 17 January 2022].

² Barbara Misztal, *Informality: social theory and contemporary practice* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. i.

³ Throughout I use Misztal's ideal features for denoting the terrain of formality. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴ Alena Ledeneva, *The global encyclopedia of informality* (London: UCL Press, 2018), Vol. 1, p. 1.

⁵ Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959). Misztal, *Informality*.

⁶ See the edited volumes by Alena Ledeneva that provide cross-disciplinary and cross-area enquiry. Ledeneva, *The global encyclopedia of informality*, Vol. 1; Alena Ledeneva, *The global encyclopedia of informality*, Vol. 2 (London: UCL Press, 2018). Equally, Tommaso Bobbio, in the context of Ahmedabad, India, urges us to explore the fickle separation between formality and informality to better understand such categorizations as 'flexible' and 'contingent'. Tommaso Bobbio, 'Informality, temporariness, and the production of illegitimate geographies; the rise of a Muslim sub-city in Ahmedabad India (1970s–2000s)', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2022, pp. 142–175. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2000058X>.

They also question the supposedly ‘unregulated’ nature of informal sectors,⁷ while critiquing the notion that formality plays into the hands of those it is meant to defend or represent.⁸ With regard to service providers and debates on the care-domestic economy in contemporary India, this article reassesses modernization claims and perceptions of formality as ‘good’ and informality as ‘bad’.⁹

Indian labour markets have historically been dominated by informality.¹⁰ Yet the studies of industrial labour by Holmström, Breman and Harriss in the 1970s–1980s were key to unlocking the rigid boundaries between formal and informal jobs.¹¹ From the 1990s onwards, Gooptu and Parry instrumentally portray how the formal sector is being ‘deformalized’.¹² The latter is reproducing inferior working conditions resembling those found in the precarious informal sector, while cheap contract labour has increasingly replaced the permanent workforce.¹³ At the same time, especially with the informal care-domestic economy having gained visibility,¹⁴ discussions around formalization have permeated feminist debates.¹⁵ The exploratory nature of these conversations is whether a framework for formalization, at its lowest bar represented

⁷ For the misconception of informal sectors as ‘unregulated’, see Ananya Roy, ‘Why India cannot plan its cities: informality, insurgence and the idiom of urbanization’, *Planning Theory*, vol. 8, 2009, pp. 76–87.

⁸ Ledeneva, ‘Introduction’, in *The global encyclopedia of informality*, Vol. 1, p. 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Nandini Gooptu, ‘Servile sentinels of the city: private security guards, organized informality, and labour in interactive services in globalized India’, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2013, p. 11.

¹¹ Mark Holmström, *South Indian factory workers: their life and their world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); M. Holmström, *Industry and inequality: the social anthropology of Indian labour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Jan Breman, *Patronage and exploitation: changing agrarian relations in South Gujarat, India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1974); John Harriss, ‘The working poor and the labour aristocracy in a South Indian city: a descriptive and analytical account’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1986, pp. 231–283.

¹² Gooptu, ‘Servile sentinels of the city’; Jonathan Parry, *Classes of labour: work and life in a central Indian steel town* (London: Routledge, 2020).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ The statistical visibility of the care-domestic economy has activated a flurry of research and advocacy. Data from India’s 2004–2005 National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) document a sharp rise in the number of female paid domestic workers and indicates that 3.05 million of the 4.75 million workers employed by private households were women. NSS 61st Round, July 2004–June 2005, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, New Delhi, Government of India. While reliable figures for household help remain unavailable for previous centuries, experts claim that the government-compiled NSSO data grossly underestimate the number of domestic workers who are part of the informal sector. See N. Neetha, ‘Contours of domestic service: characteristics, work relations and regulation’, *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2009, pp. 489–506.

¹⁵ Jayati Ghosh, Introduction, ‘Women workers in informal economy: which formalization strategies actually help?’ Conference, 30 November 2018, India International Centre, New Delhi. See also the report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), *Formalizing domestic work* (Geneva: PRODOC/ILO, 2016).

by a written contract, ensures better conditions for workers.¹⁶ The formalizing of casualized labour is indeed being attempted by embassies, placement agencies, hospitals, universities, and the corporate sector. Gooptu's work is salient for its minutiae of how labour in India's private corporate sector has meant vast mobilization, recruitment, and training of workers in a highly organized manner, usually involving the state.¹⁷ Under the neo-liberal ascendency, low-level marginalized service workers are now subjected to formal systematic training, grooming, and socialization, in a radical break from the past. Gooptu's caveat is that what is rendered as formalization is 'performed formalization'. She underscores how formal and informal processes exist within the same labour regimes. This article contributes to the theoretical contention that formal and informal approaches have their meeting points. Significantly for the care-domestic economy, both approaches reinforce inequalities for workers who lack the potential to democratize labour relations. The practices of service providers direct us to the immediacy of colonial legacies, exploitative work relationships, punitive regimes, and how the employers' class position remains privileged.

It is the Euro-American (or expatriate) exemplars' attempted formalization that portends a transformatory agenda as they position themselves along 'modern service' industry labour patterns. They subscribe to ostensibly better ways of organizing labour through documentation, employment contracts, training courses, behavioural guidance manuals, and extrajudicial systems. Analogous with feminist enquiries, my interest lies in probing whether workers are involved in defining such formalization agendas. By scrutinizing formalization practices in employment relationships, the article initiates new modes of scholarly enquiry. Existing South Asia anthropological and sociological writings concentrate largely on informal hiring, the role of domestic servants in the formation of contemporary middle-class identity, and casteist and gendered employer-employee dynamics. As Dickey notifies, the presence of servant bodies in domestic spaces is emblematic of class status.¹⁸ Ray and Qayum exemplify how an ongoing class divide in local homes allows employers to normalize the control, domination, and exploitation of servants.¹⁹

Furthermore, the altering employment trend from live-in (full-time, where the worker resides with the employers family) to live-out (part-time, where the worker returns home after work hours) points to mounting, casualized, and impersonal labour relations.²⁰ With the trend towards live-out arrangements, employers' control over a servant's labour is being diluted.²¹ Even so,

¹⁶ The ILO informs that informality in domestic work is represented by an absence of employee status, lack of entitlements such as social security and paid annual leave, and virtually no written contracts or payslips. ILO, *Formalizing domestic work*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Gooptu, 'Servile sentinels of the city'.

¹⁸ Sara Dickey, 'Permeable homes: domestic service, household space, and the vulnerability of class boundaries in urban India', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2000, pp. 462–489.

¹⁹ Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of servitude: modernity, domesticity, and class in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also Kathinka Frøystad, *Blended boundaries: caste, class, and shifting faces of 'Hinduness' in a North Indian city* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of servitude*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

stereotypes of care-domestic workers as docile and helpless still tend to dominate media reportage and high-profile employer disputes.²² Through the 'bottom-up perspectives' of workers, this article demonstrates how, in certain instances, they reject modernizing narratives and specialized training courses within formal (civilizing) structures. The workers' actions against 'professional' mediation revoke assumptions of low castes and migrants as defenceless and compliant subalterns.²³ Even within the informal 'pay-as-you-go' system in which most care-workers navigate degrading work conditions, their resistance narratives deplete the employers' class position. Care-workers, from the proficient to the novice, not only demand better treatment in employers' residences, but even leave unsatisfactory jobs or proactively bargain for alternative arrangements. This article unveils how, across the formal and informal divide, workers and trainees exercise degrees of control and agency that may vary, but do not correspond with large-scale organized struggles.²⁴ Next, this introductory section appraises the historical backdrop of the colonial legacy and its civilizing missions and how it informs the present-day (globalized) milieu.

Master-servant relations date back to the pre-colonial and colonial periods.²⁵ As in many parts of the world, European colonialism altered the institution of domestic service in fundamental ways, while also introducing new complexities.²⁶ Under British rule, feminized domestic duties were interlaced with civilizing narratives²⁷ and British wives were expected to share and participate in the wider civilizing mission of empire.²⁸ The domestic worker and the management of 'master-servant relations' became central to this civilizing

²² Shalini Grover, 'Revisiting the Devyani Khobragade controversy: the value of domestic labour in the global South', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2017, pp. 121–128.

²³ Scott's oeuvre of 'everyday forms of resistance' reverberates strongly with the experiences of Indian care-domestic workers. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ By and large, however, the history of domestic servants in India is at a nascent stage. Two recent volumes, aptly called *Servants' pasts*, attempt to fill this gap by prioritizing servants' lives over those of their employers: Nitin Sinha, Nitin Varma and Pankaj Jha, *Servants' pasts: sixteenth to eighteenth century South Asia*, Vol. 1 (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019); Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma, *Servants' pasts: late-eighteenth to twentieth-century South Asia*, Vol. 2 (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019). See also the valuable contributions by Nitin Sinha, 'Who is (not) a servant, anyway? Domestic servants and service in early colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2021, pp. 152–206, and Swapna Banerjee, *Men, women and domestics: articulating middle-class identity in colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁶ Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Silke Neunsinger and Dirk Hoerder, 'Domestic workers of the world: histories of domestic work as global labour history', in *Towards a global history of domestic and caregiving workers*, (eds) Dirk Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Silke Neunsinger (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 1–24; Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: race and the intimate in colonial rule* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010); Sinha and Varma, 'Introduction', in *Servants' pasts*, Vol. 2, pp. 1–40.

²⁷ Alison Blunt, 'Imperial geographies of home: British domesticity in India, 1886–1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1999, pp. 421–440.

²⁸ Ralph J. Crane and Anna Johnston, 'Introduction', in Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner, *The complete Indian housekeeper and cook* [1904], (eds) Ralph J. Crane and Anna Johnston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. ix–xxvii.

aspiration. Imperial writers such as Steel and Gardiner urged colonial mistresses to regard the imperial home as the 'unit of civilization where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed, can learn their several duties'.²⁹ As Crane and Johnston note in their introduction to Steel and Gardiner, 'housekeeping' was conceived as a long-term project where 'a few generations of training shall have started the Indian servant on a new inheritance of habit'.³⁰ British domestic practices had to be underscored universally, so as to raise and uphold the high standards that were believed to be an inherent part of late Victorian culture.³¹

From the 1880s to the mid-1920s, British constructions of domestic workers began to appear ubiquitously in household guides. The prototypical household guide promoted practical advice aimed at helping British mistresses acclimatize to unfamiliar conditions in India. Blunt elucidates how these guides encouraged unequal relationships between British women and their servants.³² Their instructions shaped racial politics and attitudes on how to discipline servants, maintain social distance, and insist on one's supreme authority as employer. Colonial laws emphasizing control and extraction also impacted on master-servant relations. Sen describes how in the nineteenth century, employment laws such as the principle of contract, which had criminal implications, came into existence.³³ Beaton's work on comparative colonialism informs us on how a framework of legal pluralism was enacted across empires, whereby aggressive attempts to impose legal systems were tied in with efforts to retain elements of existing local institutions.³⁴ In turn, the responses of colonized groups included accommodation or outright rebellion.

In the years after India gained freedom from British rule, colonial configurations (legal and non-legal) have endured. Contemporary care-domestic labour contexts involving nursing, globalized care, and even tea plantation labour all point to the persistence of colonial legacies.³⁵ Post-1947, New Delhi, the capital city, housed the diplomatic and international community whose members continued to hire local domestic staff. With the economic liberalization policies introduced from 1991 onwards, the Indian economy ushered in new global markets, unprecedented foreign investment, and an influx of foreign nationals. The present-deployment of racialized labour by British and Euro-Americans is thus

²⁹ Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner, *The complete Indian housekeeper and cook* (London: William Heinemann, 1904), p. 16.

³⁰ Crane and Johnston, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Blunt, 'Imperial geographies of home'.

³³ In 1819 the East India Company passed Regulation VII introducing two separate provisions, one on labour and the other on marriage, which was developed further after 1857. Samita Sen, 'Offences against marriage: negotiating custom in colonial Bengal', in *A question of silence: the sexual economies of modern India*, (eds) Janaki Nair and Mary E. John (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000), pp. 52–77.

³⁴ Lauren Benton, *Law and colonial cultures: legal regimes in world history, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁵ Shalini Grover, Thomas Chambers and Patricia Jeffery, 'Introduction to the special issue: portraits of women's paid domestic-care labour: ethnographic studies from globalizing India', *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1–18.

not a recent phenomenon, but part of a historical continuum. With regard to Euro-American migration, opportunities have opened up in India for professionals, journalists, and entrepreneurs, and so have employment avenues with multinational companies, NGOs, schools, and the hospitality sector. The capital matrix, with its cosmopolitan ambience, has attracted 'expatriate' Euro-American families on short- and long-term sojourns. Many Euro-Americans label themselves as 'expatriates', while a handful also express discomfort with this epithet. Fechter maintains that while an expatriate, by definition, is a person who lives outside the country of their origin or birthplace, most global migrants are not referred to as expatriates.³⁶ In post-colonial settings, the term is mainly used for white migrants from Europe and North America.³⁷ Accordingly, 'expatriate' is veiled in white privilege and race-class-citizenship hierarchies. These historical forms of privilege and class identities are evident in post-colonial India.

Besides the formation of expatriate communities, India's post-liberalizing period has witnessed the rise of globally mobile local elites (Non-Residential Indians [NRIs] and mixed-race couples) and the new middle classes. A diverse global cross-section of employers also has a growing presence in Bangalore, Goa, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Pondicherry. Gooptu also discusses India's middle-class consumer revolution that has resulted in a surge in demand for suitably trained labour.³⁸ This demand reflects changes in middle-class domestic life such as the adoption of cosmopolitan food habits introduced by many NRIs, and overall shifting consumerist desires.³⁹ The present study allows us to augment cosmopolitan employer cohorts and care-domestic workers catering to global cross-sections within India's national boundaries.

Placement agencies such as the Euro-American (or expatriate) exemplar is capitalizing on emerging markets and the colonial vestiges of trained labour. In their quest to formalize domestic service, their initiatives contribute to a civilizing mission that includes, for instance, the training of subaltern communities in service occupations. The antithesis of the 'white expatriate versus local employer' dichotomy is a prominent feature of their effort to modernize labour relations. Underlying this binary, the white employer is perceived as the bearer of modern values that are associated with more formalized and progressive work practices. Local elites and local agencies are contrasted as feudal, with their cultures of servitude producing 'indentured servants'.⁴⁰ This 'white

³⁶ M. Fechter, 'Living in a bubble: expatriates' transnational spaces', in *Going first class? New approaches to privileged travel and movement*, (ed.) Vered Amit. EASA Series, Vol. 7 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 33–52.

³⁷ Mawuna Remarque Koutonin, 'Why are white people expats when the rest of us are immigrants?', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2015, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/13/white-people-expats-immigrants-migration>, [accessed 17 January 2022].

³⁸ Gooptu, 'Servile sentinels of the city'.

³⁹ Nandini Gooptu and Ranjan Chakravarty, 'Skill, work and gendered identity in contemporary India: the business of delivering home-cooked food for domestic consumption', *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2019, pp. 293–314.

⁴⁰ 'A guide for hiring domestic staff', unpublished document for customers (New Delhi: Expatriate Company Manual, 2009), p. 3.

expatriate versus local employer' dichotomy is firmly ingrained within the international and diplomatic communities. A Euro-American model of labour relations sharply accentuates the power of one social group through the binary of Western modernity versus Indian traditionalism.⁴¹

The advent of care-domestic services needs clarification in relation to earlier and alternative care-labour arrangements. Traditional servant recruitment avenues usually entail informal, albeit sometimes elaborate, hiring mechanisms through rural and urban networks.⁴² Nowadays, placement agencies, which are regarded as more expensive, are in demand because they offer quick services for eclectic care-work, such as looking after babies, the sick, and the elderly. This shift implies that workers must be able to handle hybrid care-related tasks. In India, caregiving has been confined mainly to the domain of the family and some private institutions. As emphasized by Samanta, Chen and Vanneman, kin support remains the cultural expectation and multigenerational living arrangements are greatly desired.⁴³ Contrastively, middle-class migration to big cities for employment has also affected urban household relations and composition. As De Neve elucidates, the routes to middle-class status have diversified since the early 1990s, with new groups and castes joining the ranks of this stratum.⁴⁴ The demand for paid home-care services has risen in Indian cities because of changing family structures, altered demographics, and the entry of women into the paid workforce. Given the lack of urban infrastructure, such as limited child-care and old-age facilities, families are in need of paid assistance. New Delhi has seen the emergence of some old-age homes that now fully function in affluent neighbourhoods. Yet those who can use their class privilege begin the outsourcing of labour requirements by hiring residential care-workers.

The links between care work, domestic labour, and feminization are now widely acknowledged worldwide.⁴⁵ In India, the feminization trend started in the 1930s and was consolidated by the 1960s.⁴⁶ Feminist research has a long

⁴¹ This echoes Laura Bear's insightful work on colonial railway colonies whereby officials tried to create differences between Europe and India, while also securing the distinction between European modernity and Indian tradition. Laura Gbah Bear, 'Miscegenations of modernity: constructing European respectability and race in the Indian railway colony 1857–1931', *Women's History Review*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1994, pp. 531–548.

⁴² Vegard Iversen, 'Institutional and network-driven barriers to labour market entry: a small exploratory study of low and un-skilled markets in (and around) Delhi', unpublished memo (New Delhi: World Bank, 2009).

⁴³ Tannistha Samanta, Feinian Chen and Reeve Vanneman, 'Living arrangements and health of older adults in India', *Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, vol. 70, no. 6, 2015, pp. 937–947.

⁴⁴ Geert De Neve, "'Keeping it in the family": work, education and gender hierarchies among Tiruppur's industrialist capitalists', in *Being middle-class in India: a way of life*, (ed.) Henrike Donner (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 73–99.

⁴⁵ Bridget Anderson, *Doing the dirty work? The global politics of domestic labour* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000); Naila Kabeer, 'Marriage, motherhood and masculinity in the global economy: reconfigurations of personal and economic life', Institute of Development Studies, Working Paper 290, October 2007, pp. 1–71

⁴⁶ Sinha and Varma, 'Introduction', in *Servants' pasts*, Vol. 2. Samita Sen and Nilanjana Sengupta, *Domestic days: women, work, and politics in contemporary Kolkata* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

tradition of highlighting how women are associated with the 'reproductive sphere'.⁴⁷ This body of work, which accentuates the gendering of care, also points to its routine devaluation and invisibility. Women are perceived as quintessential family carers and hired help, with their 'soft' skill sets naturally suited for reproductive work. The commodification of care through social differences (for example, hired help as classed, gendered, racialized, caste, and colonial subjectivities) has facilitated debates on the crisis of care and global care chains (GCCs).⁴⁸ Recent India-based studies affirm that domestic labour in certain measures has become conflated with care work and other identity-based niches in the employment sector.⁴⁹ Domestic work may also be marked by ambiguity, with workers having to perform a range of undefined and unexpected tasks.⁵⁰

To meet the demands for feminized labour, numerous local placement agencies currently operate in India's National Capital Region (NCR).⁵¹ According to Neetha, during the time of her research in 2009, there were 800 to 1,000 placement agencies in the NCR—now there are certainly more.⁵² Many agencies are run autonomously, without state regulation, and chiefly through informal channels. Neetha observes that responsibility for and control of everyday care, traditionally the preserve and responsibility of extended families, has shifted to agencies. The latter are filling a demand–supply gap in the labour market and exercise a great deal of authority.⁵³

The rest of this article is organized as follows. I first outline the ethnographic setting and the methodology. I then describe how local (or Indian) agencies have established informal services and forms of mediation. This section also examines the thematic cross-cultural contrast of Euro-American formal practices. The sections that follow explore the dominance of disciplinary measures by both types of agencies. The final part traces the 'Good Housekeeping' domestic service training course, through which members of a rag-picking community are being educated to assume domestic labour identities. The conclusion restates how informal and formal approaches both reinforce inequalities for workers.

The ethnographic context

My data on placement agencies are from varied periods in 2011, 2014–2015, and two months in 2018, with the study conducted in New Delhi. The names

⁴⁷ Sen and Sengupta, *Domestic days*; Kabeer, 'Marriage, motherhood and masculinity in the global economy'; Anderson, *Doing the dirty work?*

⁴⁸ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, 'Migrant Filipina domestic workers and the international division of reproductive labor', *Gender and Society*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2000, pp. 560–580.

⁴⁹ Grover, Chambers and Jeffery, 'Introduction to the special issue: portraits of women's paid domestic-care labour'.

⁵⁰ Thomas Chambers and Ayesha Ansari, '*Ghar mein kām hai* (there is work in the house): when female factory workers become "coopted domestic labour"', *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 141–163.

⁵¹ The National Capital Region (NCR) covers New Delhi and the surrounding districts of the states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan.

⁵² Neetha, 'Contours of domestic service'.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

of all placement agencies and respondents, and the contents of materials such as domestic service guidance manuals, have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality. I examined services where the care-workers are usually part-timers. Other local New Delhi placement agency models follow a live-in employment system for domestic workers involving a one-time advance commission ranging from INR10,000 to INR20,000 (approximately US\$154–308). I contacted multiple agencies through private birthing hospitals, but I mainly explored the 'Kavita Agency', a typical unregistered service provider. Two other local Christian agencies, 'Sarah' and 'Steven', gave me access and allowed me to observe their practices, and their proprietors became part of the study. The Kavita Agency, however, was the most responsive, as they facilitated introductions to employers and care-workers that led, in turn, to numerous other contacts. Some agencies have anywhere between 250 and 500 women workers, so with just 60 to 100 employees the Kavita Agency is relatively small. The proprietors are a husband and wife (who is a nurse). The couple runs the agency from their residence in a lower middle-class colony. Several agencies like the Kavita Agency have developed in this manner, functioning with a blurring of the lines between 'home' and 'work'.

The next type of placement agency is exemplified by the Euro-American enterprise whose forte is the supply of domestic labour and an engagement with training. Supervised by a director and her accompanying Euro-American team, they refer to themselves as an autonomous private company and a 'social enterprise'. In everyday communication, they deploy the term 'expatriate' when referring to foreign nationals who employ domestic workers in India. To anonymize this Euro-American social enterprise, I use the designation 'Expatriate Company'.

The Expatriate Company was originally established to provide services for newly arrived foreign nationals in New Delhi. Over time, as they came into contact with local elites and other mixed-race families who requested well-trained domestic workers, they have expanded their clientele. Since 2011, the company has also offered their franchise to other partner organizations, which diligently follow the Expatriate Company's 'formalized labour relations' framework. The Expatriate Company gave me access to their offices and generously shared institutional files and their training curriculum and domestic service guidance manual. I engaged in participant observation across their multiple offices and conducted interviews with the director, agency staff, trainees, and new recruits. Aside from these respondents, I conducted independent conversations with a range of Euro-Americans and locals to explore their cultural attitudes towards hired help. Such topics about hiring, domesticity, and punitive measures also pervade social media spaces and online parenting forums.

Two frameworks of service-provider relationships

The informal approach

Local agencies have established a structure of authority in which wages are predetermined. In the pay-as-you-go system, female care-workers identify

themselves as Delhi-based Scheduled Castes, as Christians, and as migrants from Bihar, West Bengal, and various other states in South India. They look after babies, sick patients, the disabled, and the elderly. This specialized work, known as 'patient care', covers a broad spectrum such as post-operative care, assistance with handling newborns, and looking after colicky babies. Such work is classified as either 'skilled' or 'unskilled' and is structured through a ranking of labour roles. At the Kavita Agency, the highest paid skilled worker is a medical nurse who works a 13-hour day or night shift; she earns anywhere from INR800 to INR1,000 for one shift (approximately US\$13–15). Next in the hierarchy is the trained attendant (*didi*) who has some work experience and skills related to caring; she earns INR 500 (approximately US\$8) for a 13-hour day or night shift. The lowest paid worker is an unskilled attendant (*didi*), who earns INR400 (approximately US\$7) for the same work hours. Unskilled attendants are new entrants who learn caregiving skills through basic training offered by the agency. Many employers liken their care-related work tasks to those of less-skilled domestic workers. Unskilled attendants whose labour is in demand often clean and cook for employers. As they rank lowest in the hierarchy, they may also be hired to aid a medical nurse during day or night shifts. Agencies separately earn INR1,000 per month (approximately US\$15) as a commission, which is paid to them by the employer at the end of the month. If a worker quits their job, takes leave, or exhibits unreliability, the employer is not obliged to pay the commission or can deduct amounts accordingly. As such, these services epitomize convenience and flexibility (even for workers), whereby a binding, long-term agreement between the employer, the agency, and the worker is not imperative.

Across local agencies, what is of relevance is the proprietor's responsibility towards, and willingness to engage in, skilful mediation. If an employer is disappointed with the behaviour or performance of a care-worker, the proprietor will replace the worker within 24 hours, as this falls within their domain of responsibility. Such prompt replacements are considered a major bonus for employers, given the difficulties of locating proficient care-workers independently. Crucially, if the employer has a grievance against the care-worker, the proprietor intervenes in the matter. This is best exemplified through the informal mediation process I observed between the male proprietor of Kavita Agency and one of their customers, Mandakini. As we shall discern from their conversation, the politics of work and intimacy is routine in instances of mediation.⁵⁴

Employer: Nowadays, Puja, our nurse, comes in late for work and has overall become unreliable. As I work long hours away from home, I depend on Puja for looking after my ailing father.

Proprietor: We will sort this out for you. Our workers know that if they become unreliable, we stop recommending them.

⁵⁴ Employer's home, 15 May 2014, New Delhi.

Employer: Can you explain to Puja that she should also be more polite to my elderly mother? We treat her like a family member.

Proprietor: She has no business being rude when you pay her well and treat her as family.

Proprietors have entered the private domain of family life and a major part of their role is to assist the employer. Normally, the proprietor remains loyal to the employer. Such mediation, offered by lower-class proprietors to upper-class employers, is deemed valuable in influencing labour and kin relations. Everyday work tensions are being addressed and the boundaries of relationships are being reworked by entwining discourses on emotional labour, discipline, intimacy, and professionalism that are class based. Mandakini, who purportedly treats Puja like a 'family member' and believes she is paying high wages for a full-time medical nurse, feels that the latter expresses inadequate gratitude. The proprietor reassures Mandakini and remains in direct communication with her. Such reassurances offered by agencies are comforting for employers. Mediation favours the class position and class interests of the employer-customer in intra-household care arrangements.⁵⁵ In this mediation narrative, the proprietor later spoke to Puja on the phone from Mandakini's home. Using the idiom of 'family member', he managed to get a commitment from Puja that instances of unreliability on her part would not be repeated. For sustaining paid care, the deployment of kinship terminology in local homes has an underlying strategic purpose that masks power relations. Elevating the care-worker to the status of a 'family member' is emphasized to ensure deference and loyalty towards the employer. Banerjee notes, however, how both employers and workers may make use of affective kin epithets (such as 'family member') to maximize their respective advantages.⁵⁶ By endorsing the 'family member' epithet, I observed how Puja strategically assuaged allegations of unreliability, assuring Mandakini of her loyalty to her mother (who she claimed was like her 'own mother'). Sen notes how part-timers in Kolkata try to mediate relationships of reciprocity with employers to prevent conflict, disquiet, and achieve a measure of dignity.⁵⁷

As shown in the case of Puja, proprietors are cognizant of the complexities of casualized labour associated with care-domestic employment. Everyday mediation largely involves placating employer anxieties, reprimanding and cajoling workers, and revoking oral agreements. The labour fluidity of care-work is linked to many structural factors. Gendered household responsibilities and working-class survival strategies exacerbate female workforce instability. The workers may be unhappy with the employer (for example, with a patient

⁵⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁵⁶ Supurna Banerjee, 'From "plantation workers" to *naukrānī*: the changing labour discourses of migrant domestic workers', *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 164-185.

⁵⁷ Samita Sen, 'A pragmatic intimacy? Familiarity, dependency and social subordination', in *Pratyaha: everyday life worlds, dilemmas, contestations and negotiations*, (eds) Prasanta Ray and Nandini Ghosh (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2016).

who is cantankerous) or they may have received a better offer from another competing agency that fortifies their bargaining power, thus widening their employment options. They are aware that agencies offer quick replacements, so if they are unhappy with the work, they can find another employer. For example, Christian nurses are not always among the most impoverished and often come across as mobile, ambitious, and assertive. Even newly arrived migrants who seek jobs as untrained attendants are making choices and exercising forms of resistance and their right to new replacements. They may also bargain for lighter workloads and request financial assistance for transport costs or extra meals while working long hours. Soni, who was caring for a frail patient, asked her employer (the patient's daughter) for additional travel money. The allowance would enable her to travel by auto-rickshaws and not buses, so she could be on time every morning. In another instance, Kamlesh requested extra tea and slices of bread in the evening, asserting that the alternative was to visit the market for a snack break. Afraid that Kamlesh would 'disappear' for an hour, her employer immediately provided her with an evening snack. Unskilled attendants (*dīdīs*) may also vocally question the proprietors' hierarchical ordering of labour roles (skilled versus unskilled) whereby they receive the lowest salaries, while nurses are the highest paid. Alternatively, nurses claim to have confronted agencies for being overworked and underpaid. It is essential to reiterate that care-workers and migrants are not passive victims in the care-domestic economy, and to recognize their agency, not just as part-timers, but also as actors engaged in market exchanges and struggling against class domination.

When the employer and the care-worker build a trustworthy working relationship, they may desire autonomous arrangements and may no longer want to be part of pay-as-you-go services. Commonly, it is the care-worker who accentuates loyalty by suggesting that the employer hire them independently and not through the agency. This can be accompanied by threats of quitting and moving on to another family. If the employer sympathizes and acquiesces, the authority of the agency can be overturned. Likewise, the employer may also prefer not to deal with agency regulations, pre-determined wages, and their watchful gaze. The craftiness of employers is evident, as they will inform the agency that a care-worker has disappeared or quit, when in reality she has not. Agencies are aware of such employer tactics, which they often go on to expose. Given that the pay-as-you-go service-providers are not governed by advance commissions or written or legally enforceable contracts, nothing comes out of such confrontations and exposés except discord.⁵⁸ This reflects the informal nature of the pay-as-you-go framework, one in which employers and care-workers who cannot be held accountable wilfully participate in keeping open secrets.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Alternatively, some agencies who procure one-time advance commissions for live-in workers, ranging from INR10,000–INR 20,000 (approximately US\$154–308), have been dragged to court and police stations by employers for fraud (for example, by keeping the money and not sending a worker) and forms of trafficking (that is, luring women from rural areas to work in Delhi).

⁵⁹ Ledeneva, 'Introduction', Vol. 1, p. 1.

Contrastively, as we notice through the mediation narrative of Mandakini and Puja, employers may be reassured by the informal mediation offered by agencies and may consider their interventions a feasible route for negotiating the necessities of care-work. The breakdown of relationships, such as that between Mandakini and Puja, suggests that the informal regulatory framework rests upon service provider relationships that can be strengthened, reversed, reinvented, resisted, or manipulated. However, the impression that informality may convey being 'unregulated'⁶⁰ is not entirely supported by the case of local placement agencies whose hierarchical labour roles and pre-determined wages may encourage workers and employers to enter into (other) even more informalized arrangements. Unlike local agencies that invoke their authority through informal practices, the influence of the formal approach lies chiefly in documentation practices, as I describe next.

The formal (civilizing) approach

The Expatriate Company adopts a different means of organizing labour from that followed by local agencies. The first and largest category of workers who register with them are English-speaking. Workers in this category have roughly 10 to 12 years of schooling and have acquired a specific skill set.⁶¹ These English-speaking workers have had a brush with certain formal labour practices (for example, reference letters and employment contracts).⁶² The second category comprises a more varied set of workers, some who are also Hindi-speaking, seeking employment in the households of expatriates, diplomats, and NRIs. In the third category are subaltern groups who are being recruited as trainees via mobilization in slum colonies and whose skill sets are being reinvented for the global cross-section of employers.

The Expatriate Company's key formal approach lies in prioritizing documentation in the hiring process. An employment contract for hiring workers (accompanied by reference letters) is being encouraged, as opposed to oral agreements that are the mainstay of local agencies. In the Expatriate Company's manual (2009), which serves as a guide for hiring domestic staff in India, the importance of a contract or job description is strongly emphasized:

For many centuries Indian families have employed domestic staff in their homes and still do today. However, these staff are far removed from the foreign nationals' concept of employed staff and in fact could more accurately be described as indentured servants. They will live with the family and work 24/7 {non-stop without a break}. They will be fed, clothed and given an allowance rather than a salary. They will have no Employment

⁶⁰ Roy, 'Why India cannot plan its cities'.

⁶¹ Shalini Grover, 'English-speaking and educated female domestic workers in contemporary India: new managerial roles, social mobility and persistent inequality', *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 186–209.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Contract detailing their hours of work, overtime, terms and conditions of employment and extras such as conveyance or rents stipends. To all extent and purposes, they must be at the beck and call of the household at all times of the day and night and be prepared to do whatever task is given to them.⁶³

Representing foreign nationals as enlightened subjects and Indians as the opposite, the manual creates categorical binary opposites of Western modernity and Indian traditionalism.⁶⁴ The company's usage of 'indentured servants' that points to live-in workers who are with a local family 24/7 (a phrase implying 'non-stop without a break') is not altogether an apt description of the range of labour relations that abound in the care-domestic economy, especially for part-time workers. As we have seen, live-out and part-time employment that is based on market rates constitutes the present trend in many Indian cities.⁶⁵

Besides this misrepresentation in the manual, the Expatriate Company's line of argument is that employment contracts facilitate greater professionalism in work relationships. Contracts enable employers and workers to achieve mutually beneficial agreements and conditions of employment such as leave of absence and termination of service. The manual also asserts that well-defined contracts enable a degree of formality that discourages worker unreliability. Contracts can become a reference point when disagreements arise, and worker incentives and perks can be scripted in the text to discourage unreliability. At the same time, the manual persuades the employer (and not the worker) to draw up appropriate, self-made contracts that cover wide-ranging matters related to the boundaries of affective ties, personal hygiene while cooking, bonus requirements, and periodic reviews of the worker's conduct. As such, manuals recommend that deterrents and punitive dimensions be incorporated into contracts. Such instructions contradict the 'mutuality' angle of contracts and point towards control mechanisms. Contracts imply a route for disciplining workers and securing control over them. As Sen argues, contracts in the colonial era implied that the worker was a legal inferior.⁶⁶ Through the use of a 'performative' contract, this colonial trend is being replicated by employers and the company.

The drafting of successful and failed contracts came to my notice when queries relating to client-domestic staff surfaced in the two separate offices of the Expatriate Company. In the first, I witnessed an exasperated expatriate client (an entrepreneur from France) expressing deep frustration in fathoming the nature and functioning of informal domestic employment in India.

As a foreigner, I would like more input. What is the average salary of a live-in maid who is provided with food and lodging? How involved are

⁶³ 'A guide for hiring domestic staff', p. 3.

⁶⁴ See Bear, 'Miscegenations of modernity'.

⁶⁵ Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of servitude*.

⁶⁶ Sen, 'Offences against marriage'.

employers in helping with matters beyond the salary, that is, health insurance and family crisis?

The company offered the French lady advice on wage rates (which they opined was 'professional advice' on their part), accentuated 'boundary maintenance' (that is, how to emotionally distance oneself from the everyday affairs of domestic staff as stated in their manual), assisted with the drafting of a contract, and finally took a commission. Their advice points to an impersonal contractual relationship, discouraging employers from entangling themselves in their workers' private lives. Next, at the second office, I encountered a local client interviewing a candidate for the position of a part-time maid. The client and the candidate were in the midst of a heated argument. The maid wanted work hours that would allow her to finish work at 6 pm sharp, so she could return home to her children. These hours, however, would prevent the client and her family from having a late dinner with hot *rotis* (Indian unleavened bread). Following this skirmish over work hours, the maid candidate refused to sign a contract with the company. She asserted, with defiance, that she would be better off with another (kinder) employer who would let her off at 6 pm. As nobody could force the candidate to work for the local client, the Expatriate Company withdrew their negotiations.

Contracts, as the Expatriate Company opined, replace the sort of informal mediation generally pursued by local agencies (for example, in the case of Mandakani and Puja). Contracts are not drafted on a legal or quasi-legal basis. There are foreign national respondents who have not used the services of the Expatriate Company, but are in possession of self-made contracts, which are kept neatly in plastic folders or pasted on fridges and kitchen walls. There are, however, questions around the validity of these contracts, as conveyed to me by Mary, a highly experienced domestic worker. Her recent employer, a diplomat from the United States Embassy, made her sign a contract when he hired her. He did not involve the Expatriate Company. To advance formalization practices, the signing of employment contracts by domestic staff is now mandatory in the United States Embassy in India. Ultimately, the diplomat never shared the contract with Mary, nor did he ever refer to it. Mary 'felt let down', as the annual bonus that he had included in the contract and which she had signed was never paid to her in the two years of her service. She warned her network of worker-friends employed by expatriates and in embassies about this 'betrayal' and how contracts must be taken more seriously.

During my fieldwork, I did not come across any legal positions or instances of contracts being contested by either employers, workers, or placement agencies in Indian courts. Given the high legal costs, protracted justice system, and time needed to seek legal redress, workers rarely hire lawyers. Yet if relationships between employers and workers sour or break down, the company, which receives an advanced commission (anywhere between INR1,000 to 5,000 [approximately US\$15–69]), is obliged to resurrect or renegotiate the contract or find replacements. The most common breach of trust is when an employer does not pay the employee's monthly wage. While normally the

company privileges employer narratives, in cases where wages are abdicated, they do not. This happened to Ramesh, a cook, who turned to the company when his local employer refused to pay him. With Ramesh's salary details printed in his contract, the company aided him and not the employer, as his request for mediation and the monthly wage constituted a legitimate demand. As intermediaries, the company's role also echoes those of pay-as-you-go services, whereby informal persuasion tactics are the route for resolving skirmishes.

Additionally, the company negotiates certain rights for workers via employment contracts, aligning these with 'modern' service ideologies. Consider this statement by the company's proprietor when I visited their office:

Employers must provide, a proper bed, and [allow] the use of a toilet. Local employers and expatriate employers who negate these conditions will be politely told to leave our office. This is our policy.⁶⁷

This admonition, as I noticed, is imparted not in the manual but when potential employers come to register themselves or make enquiries. Potential employers of all nationalities are forewarned about certain legitimate rights that ideally should be incorporated into employment contracts. Domestic workers have expressed how they favour contracts that include decent work hours, overtime pay, and bonuses. The same applies to monthly holidays and extra money for festivals. Workers confirm that such rights are taken seriously by employers if they appear in the written contract. Despite the asymmetrical angle of the performative contracts under discussion, workers can exercise some agency by listing timetables, bonuses, holidays, and the use of in-house toilets and modern amenities. They can also negotiate certain incentives and perks (for example, tuition fees for their children). In actuality, those contracts centred on incentives and perks do intimate trust and loyalty on the part of workers that go well beyond rigid and punitive contractual agreements. Rosy, a maid, defended such contracts, arguing that, unlike in local homes where domestic workers are treated like 'slaves', a contract signifies dignity. The company is aware that contracts deliver in some instances, while equally they may make little difference on the ground (for example, Mary's case with the American diplomat).

At the same time, the company has moved forward in acknowledging the usefulness of informal labour strategies and cultural differences, without the validation of contracts. This is apparent from a conversation that I had some months later with the proprietor:

It is not that domestic workers cannot find a good local family. Many locals cover everything from education costs to marriage expenses. They offer long-term security that expatriates simply cannot. A 'good' local employer is better than an 'average' expatriate. We do not register anyone who states a preference for working only with expatriate

⁶⁷ Interview with the director of the Expatriate Company, 5 April 2011, New Delhi.

employers. Expatriates are transient employers of global domestic labour.⁶⁸

The proprietor's views nuance the 'expatriate versus local' employer binary as constructed and boldly presented in the manual's opening pages. The Expatriate Company's unexpected pluralistic views about local employers are the result of the team's eventual contact and interaction with New Delhi's affluent global cross-section stratum beyond service care for expatriate households. They have also grasped that the limitations of certain forms of Western formal labour approaches in the Indian milieu. Over time, the company has understood the labour dynamics and material culture of local families. We discern how their approach towards formality is fluctuating or is less rigid; notably, they now value certain informal modes of social security that locals offer. They articulate certain advantages of being employed in a local household, invalidating the tenor of obdurate dualisms and stereotypes. They begin to see the merits of a moral economy (local homes) versus a financial economy (transient expatriate homes). For the colonial period, Robb and Sinha discuss how trust and sentiment played a bigger role than contractual relations.⁶⁹ The company realizes the advantages of informal approaches based on ideals of trust, loyalty, and sentiment, while attempted formalization, with its less impersonal contractual agenda, may not have the long-term vision it projects. This leads the company to display a healthy scepticism, thus reassessing the notion that formality is good, and informality is bad.

Domestic service guidance manuals and regimes of punishment

With New Delhi housing the largest international community in India, manuals or guides for contemporary domestic service have been prepared by prominent diplomatic missions, notably the British High Commission and the United States Embassy. These manuals, available to embassies and Euro-American residents, cogently establish the 'otherness' of India to the white population. The Expatriate Company's customer manual is a post-colonial project that retains the language and ideals of the colonial past. It foregrounds the power of the one and only Western-led hiring enterprise in India's capital. Previously, the American Women's Association (AWA) of the United States Embassy in New Delhi had kept inventories of domestic staff since 1947 (that is, independent India). In terms of transferring ownership, the AWA inventories were passed on to the Expatriate Company in 2009. The maintenance of previous and contemporary inventories as official records undeniably establishes the company's authority, sovereignty, and resource base in New Delhi. Domestic staff who had interactions with the AWA before 2009 reveal that they were permitted to report, or at least convey, employment-related grievances to the American in charge. The AWA would

⁶⁸ Interview with the director of the Expatriate Company, 7 October 2011, New Delhi.

⁶⁹ Peter Robb, *Sentiment and self. Richard Blechynden's Calcutta diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sinha, 'Who is (not) a servant, anyway?'

act as a mediator; nevertheless, they consistently supported punishment regimes in the form of blacklisting.⁷⁰

The opening text of the Expatriate Company's customer manual is analogous to the preamble of an imperial household guide;⁷¹ the meticulous advice is designed to assist foreign nationals bridge the vast cultural gap they face. The Expatriate Company's manual promotes the disciplining of domestic workers by laying down various 'dos and don'ts'. As part of the 'dos', moral policing, such as surveillance through random security checks in servants' quarters, is advocated. As with imperial household guides that encouraged the exercise of power and authority over native servants, there are no discussions in the Expatriate Company's manual about modes of redressal for resolving the grievances of domestic workers (for example, the unfairness that Mary encountered with her diplomat employer). Yet the manual does urge introspection on global wage inequalities, contending that competitive salaries ought to be paid to workers. Foreign nationals are not dissuaded from paying 'high' salaries, but it is argued that wages should be regulated. Overall, the contents of the customer manual are biased in favour of the employer, strengthening the latter's class position, bargaining power, and authority. The potential for democratizing labour relations for Indian subjects does not seem to have been attended to in the Expatriate Company manual. We may argue that the manual excludes workers from the formalization agenda as it appears to be a 'top-down' (colonial) set of employer–employee guidelines.

What is more, the customer manual has darker undertones, such as instructions to safeguard employers against criminality on the part of domestic workers that takes the form of extreme punishment. According to recent Indian state labour directives, employers are required to register the personal details of newly hired domestic workers with the local police. As a response to terrorism and criminality, the state now invests heavily in surveillance and has made police verification mandatory. The Expatriate Company's manual endorses these precautions, contending that employers must be protected from any worker who has violated their trust. This violation could be through acts of stealing, petty cheating, and delinquency. The Expatriate Company keeps archives of domestic workers' histories in the form of 'bio-data', proof of identification, comprehensive medical records, and employer reference letters (the official records passed on by the AWA). The safety of employers is ensured by adhering to a disciplinary policy of 'blacklisting' workers, as declared in the manual.

Please tell [organization's name] about your bad experiences so that we can either make a note on a candidate's file or add their details to our blacklist.⁷²

With this team of Euro-Americans functioning as the vanguards of moral policing, the archival portfolios I examined have the word 'blacklisted'

⁷⁰ Grover, 'English-speaking and educated female domestic workers in contemporary India'; Sam Miller, *Delhi: adventures in a megacity* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010).

⁷¹ For example, Steel and Gardiner, *The complete Indian housekeeper and cook*.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 17.

stamped over the photograph of an 'errant' worker. The rationale for maintaining records on blacklisting is to protect employers. As described by Sinha and Varma, this practice of policing dates to the colonial period when domestic workers were cast out and shamed through 'character chits'.⁷³

Perhaps the instrument of verification in itself is not an issue: character chits were used in the early colonial period, and informal neighbourhood- or community-based inquiries existed later. What is symptomatic of the abuse of power is the asymmetry that is embedded in the act of verification. Do servants get to verify the past conduct of their new masters? Do they have the option of checking police records to discover if masters and mistresses have been accused of wage theft, beating or summary firing? The answer is no.

In present-day India, by establishing its sovereignty, the Expatriate Company has created its own moral and punitive universe that rests on colonial practices, which, in turn, has grave consequences for blacklisted workers who may never be hired again by a Western employer. Mary explicated how blacklisting may have a devastating impact on domestic workers. Her deceased peer Vimla was on an embassy 'blacklist' and died shortly afterwards. Mary was unable to establish the connection between Vimla's death and her blacklisted identity but conjectures that depression or suicide may have led to her ultimate death. Mary and other workers insinuate how unfair incidences of blacklisting destroy domestic workers' lives, as they find themselves excommunicated. Alternatively, an American employer client supported the company's policy of blacklisting and conducting security background checks by drawing on international comparisons. She claimed that if a worker was negligent in the United States, the legal system would at least facilitate the dispensation of swift justice and ensure the possibility of suing the worker or the agency. Blacklisting and institutionalized filing serve a similar purpose in Delhi, functioning as an extrajudicial justice system in the Indian context. Contrary to the American client's reasoning, there are other American citizens in New Delhi, especially long-term residents and those married to locals, who disagree with disciplinary sanctions. An expatriate parenting blog has prohibited posts that blacklist, asserting that online humiliation serves no purpose. The thought-worlds of expatriates and mixed-race couples are not always homogeneous. At best, workers resist the culture of blacklisting via sympathetic employers, while circulating cautionary advice may deter peers from working for an unkind employer.

The informal approach: Exploitative regimes and caste-class prejudices

Local pay-as-you-go agencies do not blacklist in the manner outlined above. Despite repeated complaints of care-worker absenteeism, local proprietors do not enforce disciplinary sanctions that mimic those of the Expatriate Company. Local proprietors may assure employers that they do so, but this

⁷³ Sinha and Varma, 'Introduction', in *Servants' pasts*, Vol. 2, p. 20.

is disingenuous, as they explained to me that workers deserve another chance and consequently they are often placed with other employers. Sharda, who had been accused of stealing, was working five houses away from the home of her erstwhile employer. The proprietor of Kavita Agency argued that it was a fresh start for her. Such replacements allow agencies to make their earnings through new clients (INR1,000 or US\$15 per month). The Kavita Agency does sometimes issue caveats about the character of certain workers to potential employers and, in turn, employers may insist on oral references. In such instances, verifications, informal blacklisting, and vilifications on the part of agencies can come into play. Local agencies bestride employers and care-workers through forms of manipulation.

As for local employers, I found a handful of them articulating the notion of ‘pragmatic morality’ (my emphasis) versus ‘punitive morality’ (my emphasis). Compared to some expatriate employers, local employers claimed to be pragmatic when their workers took food items home without permission (for example, vegetables, spices, and grains). Local families profess that they are being practical in accommodating or overlooking such incidences of stealing because of the shortage of suitable domestic staff. These employers stress the unreliability and elusiveness of domestic workers, mirroring Ray and Qayum’s reflections on the ‘demise of loyalty due to casualized labour relationships’.⁷⁴ In my view, the pragmatic morality viewpoint is hyperbole, for indignant domestic staff had many tales to recount of how local employers randomly check their handbags and the resultant ignominy and humiliation. Some of the incidents workers narrated reveal that they have been falsely framed for theft. Besides, local employers have begun to engage in forms of surveillance and blacklisting through online verification on social media websites. They post warnings online about fired workers, alleging that the latter stole or lied. Below a maid’s profile picture, a harsh comment like this may appear: ‘Please be careful her face does not suggest positive vibes [sic]’. Social media offers unlimited space and opportunity for harassment; unequal class relationships can hence be firmly maintained even in cyberspace.⁷⁵

Local proprietors also engage in considerable manipulation and blame-shifting. For example, the proprietor of the Kavita Agency concedes that a 13-hour work shift for workers is taxing but places the onus for such a demanding schedule on the employer. He argues that the employer becomes dependent on a specific worker for handling a nebulizer, administering medicines, or putting a colicky baby to sleep. The work hours of the part-time schedule are exceedingly long and resemble the schedules of live-in workers. Shorter hours, holidays, and increments are permissible if the care-worker can persuade the employer—some care-workers do manage to negotiate these concessions successfully. Having built a trustworthy bond with the employer family, a care-worker may find that she is favourably placed and valued for her labour. The worker’s complete dedication to the employer family is also a route for improving material prospects and fulfilling wider

⁷⁴ Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of servitude*, p. 100.

⁷⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*.

aspirations. Another way in which care-workers find a way out of the impasse of protracted schedules is by taking one or two months off, after working without a break. By and large, workers confirm that care-work is so strenuous that many of their peers fall ill, suffering headaches and back pain. Many say they have no choice, as they are single mothers or family breadwinners. When I asked the Kavita Agency proprietor about the long-term effects of exhaustion and illness, he once again shifted the blame onto the employer.

At the same time, local agency proprietors discourage employers from 'over-indulging' care-workers. Some nurses have complained that highly educated employers treat them 'like a low-paid servant'. Appearing for work in a uniform is not sufficient to gain nurses recognition of their skills, nor does it always gain them respect; rather, it mirrors what has been identified in the anthropological-sociological corpus as unequal master-servant relationships. Many nurses, like household 'servants', negotiate invisibility, low status, stigma, and spatial segregation within residential spaces; employer class anxieties pervade the ostensibly specialized 'patient care-economy' that is associated with higher wages.⁷⁶ While local agency proprietors and local elites vigorously deny caste-class distinctions, the reality is quite different. Both reinforce caste-class prejudices, for example, they do not endorse a mandatory weekly holiday, because 'perks', I am told, eventually 'spoil' care-workers. The proprietor of the Steven Agency retorted: 'Employers should make care-workers work all the time, otherwise they fall out of the habit of working.' Demanding that a worker labour until the final hour (24/7 or 'non-stop' work) perpetuates a culture of overwork and no rest. There seems to be minimal attempts on the part of local agencies to reduce the exploitation of workers, some of whom are ironically labelled as 'family members'!

Domestic service training courses: Subaltern modernity and skilling

The Expatriate Company as a service provider also embraces the customers' (or employers') demand for trained labour. By articulating the 'marketable' language of specialized knowledge, the training they offer is 'developmental' in nature as well as 'commercial'. They see the former as a larger, durable project within the civilizing narrative of initiating grass-roots interventions that will benefit subaltern communities by enhancing their social status through improving their career trajectories. This includes involving low-caste and migrant men who are also being trained for domestic roles similar to those performed by paid women workers. In actuality, the company is also profiting from a vast labour pool because there is an employer demand for hybrid skills and a growing focus on entrepreneurial cultures in the new economy.⁷⁷ The commercial training courses requested by expatriate, NRIs, and local elites

⁷⁶ Panchali Ray, "'Is this even work?': nursing care and stigmatised labour', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, no. 47, 2016, pp. 60–69. Ray discusses the dynamics of nursing labour in India, as well as the stigma nurses and care-workers face.

⁷⁷ Nandini Gooptu, 'Introduction to the special issue: skill development in India', *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2019, pp. 241–248.

for their domestic staff and new trainees impart specialized knowledge in cookery, hygiene, and first aid. Such courses are aimed at developing the skill sets of trainees, as well as upgrading the existing skills of experienced domestic staff.

With regard to commercial courses such as ‘cookery’, the company’s trainers are aware of the globalized cuisine preferences of expatriates and local elites, and their requirements for trained domestic staff. Cookery courses focus on baking (see [Figure 1](#)), especially cakes and breads, and on continental dishes such as pasta sauces and soups. The company is eager to generate novel job profiles (for example, ‘experienced cook’), connecting subaltern trainees recruited from slums and villages to economic opportunities in India. Migrants undergo training in Hindi and other vernacular dialects, while translations of English recipes are provided. The new trainees embody multiple marginalities: they may be uneducated, belong to the Scheduled Castes, or are migrants. The training allows for restructuring the supply of skilled labour to match the demand for expertise. In this way trainees who are not the typical English-speaking worker may even be able to find work with expatriate families.

I now scrutinize the developmental training by detailing the ‘Good Housekeeping’ course that somewhat reflects the Victorian values of ‘home management’.

Training as a symbol of modernity: Good housekeeping on a ‘film set’

In partnership with a Christian organization, the Expatriate Company’s trainers are engaged in an experimental project to transform young, low-caste rag-pickers, both men and women, into domestic workers.⁷⁸ As conveyed by the Christian organization, rag-picking is mostly an inherited occupation or service category, dominated by children in the age group of five to 18.⁷⁹ It entails the collection of rubbish, refuse, plastic, metal, and glass from roadsides and other public spaces. With a combined missionary zeal, the Christian organization and the Expatriate Company want to present rag-picker youths with alternative livelihood options. They believe that paid domestic labour offers better prospects and is less hazardous than refuse collection, especially as rag-pickers work in deplorable conditions. Instilling new identities and options through training courses is an effort towards this occupational shift. The company has chosen to offer ‘Good Housekeeping’, a course instructing trainees on managing a good home, with cleanliness and orderliness presented as moral values. The ‘Good Housekeeping’ course mirrors the language of instruction that colonial mistresses adhered to (see [Figure 2](#)).⁸⁰

⁷⁸ There is nothing new about the nature of Christian missionary work and civilizing missions, which date back to the nineteenth century. See Jana Tschuren, ‘Training a servant class: gender, poverty and domestic labour in early nineteenth-century educational sources’, in *Servants’ pasts*, Vol. 2, pp. 109–139.

⁷⁹ See also ‘Lost childhoods: the case of India’s child rag pickers’, *Yuvaonline*, 13 June 2018, available at <https://medium.com/@yuvaonline/lost-childhoods-51d230dd8769>, [accessed 17 January 2022].

⁸⁰ See the vision of training in Steel and Gardner, *The complete Indian housekeeper and cook*.



Figure 2. An exemplar of the ‘Good Housekeeping’ course in which the trainer gave instructions on how to clean a kitchen and articulated how ‘the home is our foundation in life’. Source: Author’s personal archives, 2015.

Trainer (Question): What would you do if you broke something valuable like a glass?

Trainee (Answer): We would say sorry and that it will not happen again.

For the trainees and their clients in modern-day urban India, ‘Good Housekeeping’ is not about creating a fundamentally new type of domestic worker, but about buttressing ideals about being a faithful domestic worker. The trainers demonstrate a performative language of obedience, docility, hierarchy, and restraint. Gooptu conveys how the training of private security guards, which is projected as professional, is not transformative, for it merely reproduces the subservience of master–servant relationships.⁸¹ While retaining notions of subservience, ‘Good Housekeeping’ is nevertheless aimed at enhancing skills and imparting degrees of professionalism. The socialization of workers is in line with upper-caste and class norms, whereby pre-existing

⁸¹ Gooptu, ‘Servile sentinels of the city’.

inequalities are interlaced with marketable skill sets. 'Good Housekeeping', then, strategically resonates with the etiquette and deportment of the employer class (that is, privileging the employer's cultural background over that of the worker's). For example, apologizing for breaking a glass and having to say sorry should be in a form and language that is relatable and acceptable to the employer.

Resistance by rag-pickers during training

Whether these attempts to convert rag-pickers into domestic labourers were effective was revealed on the last day when I was witness to a major confrontation between the trainers and the trainees. The female rag-pickers had gone home after the first day and reported to their family members that they had been primarily taught to clean toilets during the training sessions. It seemed that the trainees' entire focus had shifted to the cleaning of Western-style toilets. With their kin members expressing fury, the female rag-pickers were strongly urged to discontinue the training immediately. What I saw as part of the 'Good Housekeeping' course was a backlash against the imposition of domestic worker identities. The rejoinders of these rag-pickers raised anxieties over honour and shame. As we shall see, the American trainer then engaged in energetic refutations of the trainees' misconceptions about the nature and demands of domestic jobs.

Rag-pickers in unison: Our families prefer us to be rag-pickers. Domestic workers are expected to clean toilets, but rag-pickers do not do such work.

American trainer: What is wrong with cleaning toilets? In Western countries, most people clean home toilets. Being a domestic worker is not just about cleaning toilets.

Female rag-pickers: In our community, women do not venture out to work in other people's houses because it is considered shameful. If we are to work in the homes of other people, we will be the first in our community to break the trend.

American trainer: Gain courage by accepting domestic work. You are not doing anything disrespectful.

Outcome: The training was discontinued after this confrontation.

Based on my analysis of the 'Good Housekeeping' course, gendered concerns over honour, shame, and caste practices (that is, the cleaning of toilets implies Untouchability) seemed to matter more than the acquisition of 'attractive' marketable skills. The rag-pickers' collective defiance is a way of dissociating themselves from skills sets that they link to an occupation they consider more stigmatized than their own work involving the collection of rubbish and refuse. The company's trainers had not fully grasped the caste and

gendered sensitivities around local meanings of work, with all the stigma and shame they represent. There is a clear disengagement between simplistic ideas about 'skilling' that will lead to new identities and career trajectories, on the one hand, and the realities of how jobs are socially experienced and stigmatized, on the other. Formal training and its long-term transformative agenda are simply not enough to make certain jobs acceptable or to enhance social status. In addition, the modern training was steeped in historical legacies and the prejudices of social hierarchy,⁸² legacies that the Western trainer was able to ignore by framing the training in terms of 'high standards' in 'domestic cleanliness' in which Western practices are uncritically accepted as universal.

During an interval in the training course, an adolescent told the American trainer that he would rather be a driver or a company employee because both these occupations are better paid and have higher status. The training course was merely 'timepass' (literally 'a way to kill time') for him.⁸³ Qayum and Ray have portrayed the crisis faced by male domestic workers in residential settings, as their masculinity is called into question; they are, after all, performing many feminized tasks.⁸⁴ Echoing parallel views, the representatives of the Christian organization privately agreed that young men are less interested in pursuing domestic labour as an avenue of employment given its association with gendered domestic roles, intimate work, and emotional labour.

The mismatch between the civilizing mission with its focus on Western standards and the reactions of the rag-picker trainees is something that the trainers had not expected and hence the training was terminated. Young rag-picker trainees are not agentless and training courses, such as the one described above, may not achieve their intended purpose, either as a civilizing experiment or as a selling point for trained labour or in defining the agenda for formalization. The commercial courses on cookery and first aid seem to be less contentious with regard to concerns over pollution and more gender-neutral offerings. Chiefly, Figure 1 depicts a sanitized version of the commercial cookery course which counters pollution travelling through utensils, and dirt and close bodily contact posing less of a conundrum.

Conclusion

My engagement with multiple ethnographic sites brings out the complex facets of everyday mediation, authority, labour binaries, and current Indian globalization subjectivities. By proposing comparative approaches for service-provider relationships, this article has attempted to probe their relationship with formality and informality. The new service providers epitomize convenience (the informal approach) and professionalism (the formal approach). The

⁸² Crane and Johnston, 'Introduction'.

⁸³ For 'timepass as chronic waiting', see Craig Jeffrey, *Timepass: youth, class, and the politics of waiting in India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁸⁴ Seemin Qayum and Raka Ray, 'Male servants and the failure of patriarchy in Kolkata (Calcutta)', *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2010, pp. 111–125.

road to mediation encompasses varied tactics of bargaining, such as placating employers and reprimanding workers. For employers, the nascent trend means that proprietors take responsibility and influence labour relations in domestic settings, which lends comfort to service users. Overall, mediation still favours the employer-customers' class position.

I have argued that as pathways, attempted formalization and informal approaches are not polarized entities (they have meeting points) and yield similar inequalities for workers. The notion of informality as denoting entirely 'unregulated practices' does not ethnographically correspond with the pay-as-you-go model. The informal approach is supported by hierarchical labour roles and pre-determined wages that workers and employers may want to disregard. Likewise, the expatriate formal approach leans on informal strategies for mediation and conflict resolution. Regarding unjust practices, the pay-as-you-go model is inclined towards blame-shifting and manipulation. Proprietors dismiss mandatory holidays and workers' claims of physical fatigue, and are unapologetic about a care-domestic agenda that encourages overwork and caste-class prejudices. The Expatriate Company is a post-colonial project fostering performative contracts to be coalesced with extrajudicial means of disciplining and punishment. They have defined formalization practices for their Indian subjects by excluding the voices of the latter, producing a hierarchical model. The evidence overwhelmingly establishes that the company and its multiple franchise partner organizations offer limited potential for democratizing labour relations for workers. With the company espousing contracts as part of professional work practices, there is some leeway for workers to negotiate their demands, although written contracts make little difference (legally) on the ground. Overall, the company's attempted formalization is a privatized partnership with employers replicating colonial practices and class inequalities.

As observed, the company's moral compass begins to shift when they reconsider their binaries (expatriate versus local employer) and begin to officially accommodate and value informal approaches that rest on a moral economy of trust and sentiment as opposed to impersonal contractual relationships. On the part of the company, this is a major modification altering the assumption that 'formality is good' and 'informality is bad'. Msztal rightly advocates an optimal balance between formality and informality, arguing for the need to avoid sharp dichotomies between the particularism of personalized relations and the impersonality of formal structures.⁸⁵ She claims this balanced relationship can create a more imaginative approach to transformations in modern societies. For the Indian care-domestic economy, we are yet to see basic legislation that recognizes workers' rights, allowing them to overcome their invisibility and marginality in the first place. The feminist debates around formalization and unionization do highlight that the visions of the protagonists who represent India's care-domestic economy (that is, the workers) need to be assimilated into policies. Otherwise, formalization, as

⁸⁵ Msztal, *Informality*.

shown by Gooptu, remains a mere pretence, unrepresentative of real material changes.⁸⁶

Another substantive finding is that workers' agency may vary across formal and informal employment contexts. It is within the formal framework that workers may be completely debarred from finding work again in an expatriate household. The formal framework is strikingly punitive and less flexible, while informal approaches may be more conducive to fluidity and resistance⁸⁷ (for example, the quick replacements that agencies offer to workers may fortify their bargaining power). At the same time, our 'Good Housekeeping' ethnography also reveals that the trainees revolted against the imposition of domestic worker identities. As in the colonial period, 'natives' responded to legal pluralisms and imperial practices either through accommodation or, as in this case, outright rebellion.⁸⁸ I have elucidated how contemporary workers use the 'weapons of the weak' to conform and resist wider punitive structures and class domination.

Acknowledgements. I am very grateful to the two anonymous referees of MAS for their extensive and robust comments. A special thanks to Patricia Jeffery, Thomas Chambers, Geert De Neve, and George Kunnath who offered detailed feedback on previous drafts. Jayati Ghosh kindly invited me to a stimulating conference on formalization strategies in New Delhi in 2018. I am indebted to Malini Sood, Nandini Gooptu, and Vegard Iversen for their generous guidance.

Competing interests. None.

⁸⁶ Gooptu, 'Servile sentinels of the city'.

⁸⁷ Ledeneva, *The global encyclopedia of informality*, Vol. 1.

⁸⁸ Benton, *Law and colonial cultures*.

Cite this article: Grover, Shalini. 2022. 'Placement agencies for care-domestic labour: Everyday mediation, regimes of punishment, civilizing missions, and training in globalized India'. *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (6), pp. 1901–1929. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000585>