

6

Beyond Work

The Social Lives and Relationships of Domestic Servants under Danish Rule in Early Colonial Bengal¹

SIMON RASTÉN

INTRODUCTION

On the night of 9 August 1833 in the Danish² colonial town Serampore, Buxoo, a *syce* (stable attendant) working in a European home, tied up the *durwan* (gatekeeper) of the same household in the stable. Buxoo had been drinking heavily and was determined to teach the *durwan* a lesson by beating him up. Although Buxoo eventually changed his mind and set the *durwan* free, he was accused in Serampore's criminal court for his violent behaviour towards a fellow domestic servant.³ During the interrogation, Buxoo admitted his act but explained that he had caught the *durwan* stealing grain from the horses and furthermore found him in 'an unseemly relationship with another *syce*.'⁴ However, due to the lack of any proof, he had to withdraw these charges. The fact that the employer was at home that evening when the *durwan* was tied up spoke against

¹ In addition to the editors of this volume, I would like to thank Niels Brimnes, Silke Holmqvist, Bolette Frydendahl Larsen, Niels Nyegaard, Mikkel Venborg Pedersen and Karen Vallgård for commenting on earlier versions of this chapter.

² Until 1814, Denmark–Norway was a dual monarchy and many colonial officers, soldiers and merchants were Norwegians. However, for the sake of clarity and because this chapter is mainly occupied with the post-1814 period, I use here the terms Denmark, Danes and Danish.

³ West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata (WBSA), Danish Records (DR), vol. 23, Faujdary, no. 95/1833. The police vs Buxoo Sais.

⁴ *Ibid.* Author's translation from the Danish.

Buxoo's explanation, since he could immediately have reported the durwan's apparent misconduct to their common master. The Danish judge thought it more likely that Buxoo 'was driven by revengefulness and sought to defame his fellow servant, who had been instructed by his mistress to keep an eye on the stable attendants in order to prevent them from stealing grain from the horses.'⁵ Consequently, Buxoo was sentenced to 14 days of public service in Serampore's penal institution.

Buxoo's case is one of the many that are found in a series of Danish administrative records from Serampore, which have hitherto been left untouched by scholars. These archival records were handed over to the British colonial administration in 1845 when Denmark sold its Indian possessions to Britain.⁶ The records, which are kept today in West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, all relate to Serampore and consist of property registration books, public auction lists, wills and proceedings from the *diwani* (civil) and *faujdary* (criminal) courts, covering primarily the period from the 1820s to 1845. While English and Bengali are sometimes used, most of the more than 20,000 pages are written in Danish in Gothic script, and many volumes have over the years been severely damaged by moisture and ink corrosion. The linguistic and practical difficulties of reading the sources probably explain why they have not previously been explored, despite their potential of adding new knowledge to the history of both Bengal and Danish colonialism, hereunder perspectives on common servant lives such as Buxoo's. Based primarily on these colonial archives, this chapter explores the social lives and relationships of Serampore's domestic servants both within and beyond their workplace. It shows possible ways of gaining insight in individual lives, despite the methodological challenges of working primarily with colonial records that provide only indirect access to servants.

On a global level, the last few decades have witnessed an increasing number of historical studies on domestic servants.⁷ However, despite the

⁵ Ibid. Author's translation from the Danish.

⁶ The remaining records from Serampore's Danish administration were either brought to Copenhagen, where they are found today in the Danish National Archives (DNA), or destroyed.

⁷ Raffaella Sarti offers the best summary of it. Raffaella Sarti, 'Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers: Fifty Years of Research on Domestic and Care Work', *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 2, 2014, 279–314.

interest in subaltern perspectives that have influenced much research on South Asia and placed marginal social groups in the centre of investigations, studies dealing directly with the social lives of servants on the Indian subcontinent are still scarce. This is not to say that servants are completely absent in the historiography of South Asia, but when they have been included in studies, it has mainly been to illuminate other matters and not as objectives in themselves. Scholars on bonded labour have, for instance, touched upon the topic due to the fluidity that often existed between servants and enslaved domestic workers.⁸ Focusing on British colonial laws and regulations of the domestic sphere, others have looked at the legal framework that influenced the lives of servants in both European and indigenous households.⁹ Following this interest in families, private space and gender perspectives, it has been demonstrated how British colonial homes functioned as important 'units of civilisation', closely intertwined in the exercise of imperial power.¹⁰ In other words, the colonial home can be understood as a microcosm of the Empire, which places domestic servants as central subjects of a larger civilising mission. Perhaps the most comprehensive study of such a household is found in Peter Robb's work on the British surveyor and architect Richard

⁸ Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, eds, *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Margot Finn, 'Slaves Out of Context: Domestic Slavery and the Anglo-Indian Family, c. 1780–1830', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19, 2009, 181–203; Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

⁹ Durba Ghosh, 'Household Crimes and Domestic Order: Keeping the Peace in Colonial Calcutta, c. 1770–c. 1840', *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3, 2004, 599–623; Radhika Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic: Criminal Law and the "Head of the Household", 1772–1843', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 3, 1996, 309–43.

¹⁰ Alison Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4, 1999, 421–40; Fae Dussart, "'That Unit of Civilisation' and 'The Talent Peculiar to Women': British Employers and Their Servants in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 22, no. 6, 2015, 706–21; Indrani Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-Nurses and Memsahibs in Colonial India', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 3, 2009, 299–308.

Blechynden, who kept a detailed diary from 1791 to 1822 when he lived in Calcutta.¹¹ Based on Blechynden's diary, Robb gives a vivid description of the daily intimacies and conflicts in a typical European home, hereunder information of a number of individual servants.

Nonetheless, irrespective of the differences in approaches, the one aspect all the above-mentioned studies have in common is the focus on employer–servant relationships. But while the figure of master or mistress was definitely pervasive, other types of relationships were also part of servants' everyday social interactions and experiences. By looking at a wider range of relationships, both at households and outside, we can better position ourselves to avoid any essentialisation of servants either as solely oppressed subjects completely shaped by the rules and diktats of their masters (and law) or as ever-active agents of their destiny. As discussed in this volume, domestic servants have often fallen between categories such as workers, bonded labourers and members of the employer's household, but disregarding their legal status and how they were perceived in society, their lives consisted of more than serving a master.¹² Many had their own households and families to take care of and despite often possessing limited means, they were able to socialise in different ways. I argue here that rather than treating the employer–servant relationship as the single defining structure of servant lives, we need to broaden the approach if we are to understand the history of servants better. These other relationships unfolded both within and beyond the household and were not always immediately accessible to the employer's eyes. Therefore, this chapter does not limit itself to the boundaries of the workplace but instead keeps servants at the centre of the study and follows them to various other spatial sites such as bazaars and gambling houses.

¹¹ Peter Robb, *Sentiment and Self: Richard Blechynden's Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter Robb, *Sex and Sensibility: Richard Blechynden's Calcutta Diaries, 1791–1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter Robb, *Useful Friendship: Europeans and Indians in Early Calcutta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014). On Blechynden's servants, see especially Robb, *Sentiment and Self*, chs 3 and 4.

¹² I wish to thank the organisers Olivia Robinson and Sacha Hepburn as well as the participants of the conference 'Beyond the Home—New Histories of Domestic Servants', Oxford, 7–8 September 2017, for inspiring discussions on how to include activities taking place beyond the workplace in the writings of servants' histories.

In doing so, I draw inspiration from the classic ethnographic technique defined by George Marcus as ‘to follow the people.’¹³ However, working with historical documents as the key source of information, rather than with interviews and participant observations, raises other methodological challenges. Nineteenth-century servants—whether European or Indian—have rarely left letters, diaries or memoirs of their own, and historians generally depend on the narratives and correspondences of the masters and mistresses. These are primarily occupied with life within the household and the ‘hidden’ relations that existed beyond the employer–servant relationship are therefore difficult to reconstruct on this basis alone. To follow servants beyond the workplace, we therefore need to combine the masters’ narratives with other types of sources. Censuses—also used in this study—can be helpful in establishing overall patterns and structures, but to move closer to the smaller scale, judicial court records are particularly useful sources because they contain fragments of individual servants’ lives. Read carefully, the court cases from Serampore reveal bits of information on the daily lives and struggles of a number of domestic workers; clues on intra-servant hierarchies and conflicts, theft, sexual relationships, friendships and leisure activities that evolved both in private and public spaces. Moreover, by looking at the ways servants argued and defended themselves in court, the cases open up for an understanding of their knowledge of existing laws and practices, in other words, their legal consciousness.

Methodologically, however, the fragmented nature of the records makes it difficult to construct full life stories or biographies of individual domestic workers. Servants pop up here and there, but they tend to disappear again just as randomly, and the archives are generally silent about many types of common daily life experiences. That said, this methodological problem is not unique to servants in colonial South Asia but applies to the great majority of people living in the early modern world. This basic premise means that the available sources need to be approached critically to shift the perspective from the inherent dominant narrative. To achieve this, it is crucial to understand the situation the sources were produced in.

¹³ George E. Marcus, ‘Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, 1995, 95–117.

First, the archives from Serampore were originally created by the Danish colonial administration for the purpose of keeping order in town as effectively as possible with a minimum of resources.¹⁴ In order to minimise bureaucracy, only what was considered to be most necessary for the case was written down and the court proceedings do not include the primary ‘voices’ of the interrogated but consist merely of the judge’s summaries of their statements. Thus, the proceedings are highly normative and biased because the cases had already been concluded when they were written down. Second, the records only give access to the persons who crossed the line and were prosecuted in court, which raises questions of their representativeness. Most of the criminal cases involving servants thus relate to European households, although these constituted a minority in Serampore. Indian employers—especially from the upper class—on the other hand were reluctant to involve the Danish legal system in cases about their servants, probably because they feared that public exposure would jeopardise the dignity of the family if they were asked to testify in court.¹⁵ While the civil court is full of suits between Indians, the relative absence in the criminal court of servants working in Indian households suggests that Indian families solved domestic problems in privacy.

Despite these limitations, the Danish court records open up to information on individual lives that is not found elsewhere. As argued by Elizabeth Kolsky, the courtroom can be viewed as ‘a site of exchange and interaction, a place where subject populations could sometimes speak truth to power’.¹⁶ Whether servants also speak *the* truth in court is a different question and one that lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

¹⁴ For general discussions on colonial archives as technologies of ruling, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Based on cases from the Northern Provinces in the same period, Radhika Singha has shown that the Indian elite was generally reluctant to share information on domestic matters with the colonial administration; Singha, ‘Making the Domestic More Domestic’, 315, 329. Similar to Singha’s examples from British India, Indian upper-class families in Serampore also refused to let their women register in the official census (DNA, Rentekammeret, Danske Afdeling, Tabelkommissionen: Folketælling, Frederiksnagore [Chamber of Finance, Danish Department, The Commission for the Collection of Statistical Tables, Serampore census], 1840).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Kolsky, ‘Introduction’, *Law and History Review* 28, no. 4, 2010, 973–78.

When referring to criminality and criminal acts, I am therefore following the definitions and classifications found in the contemporary sources without attempting to discuss the moral implications of these. Obviously, the colonial government was in the privileged position of being able to both define and judge what was criminal, but—in the words of Carlo Ginzburg—historians should avoid the temptation of disguising as judges and ‘try to reenact the trials of the past.’¹⁷ Building on this tradition of reading court records against the grain, this chapter illuminates the lives of domestic servants from diverse perspectives. It starts by defining Serampore’s servants and outlining the legal and structural frame under which they worked in the Danish colonial settlement, then moves on to investigate their lives within the employer’s household, and finally shifts attention to the different relationships and social activities that unfolded in spatial sites beyond the workplace.

DEFINING SERAMPORE’S DOMESTIC SERVANTS

Serampore was established as a Danish trading post in 1755 under the official name Frederiksnagore. Formally, the settlement was administered under the government of Tranquebar, the main Danish settlement in India located in present-day Tamil Nadu, but because of the vast distance, the local town council possessed a large degree of autonomy.¹⁸ In comparison to nearby British Calcutta, Serampore was a minor provincial settlement but with more than 10,000 inhabitants in the early nineteenth century, it was nonetheless counted as one of the largest towns within the Danish-Norwegian monarchy. Workers, craftsmen, missionaries and merchants were attracted by the opportunities in Serampore and, similar to Calcutta and other European trading posts along the Hooghly River, the settlement became a multi-ethnic and multi-religious town. In fact, ethnic Danes

¹⁷ Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian’, *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1, 1991, 90.

¹⁸ For studies on Tranquebar, see Esther Fihl and A. R. Venkatachalapathy, eds, *Beyond Tranquebar: Grasping across Cultural Borders in South India* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2014); Esther Fihl, ed., *The Governor’s Residence in Tranquebar: The House and the Daily Life of Its People, 1770–1845* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2017).

constituted a small minority of only 20–30 individuals and the European community was never larger than a few 100 people.

Similar to Calcutta, the urban growth and economic development in Serampore generated a demand for domestic service. In 1840, a census of the total population was carried out and it shows a large number of servants, categorised under different names such as ayahs (maids and nurses), bearers, *chowkidars* (watchmen), cooks, coolies, concubines, durwans, *khansamans* (house stewards), *khidmutgars* (waiters/table attendants), *malis* (gardeners), *sircars* (accountants), syces, washermen/women and water-bearers.¹⁹ In total, the census contains 10,258 individuals in 2,420 households and includes the following information for each person: name, sex, caste, age, marital status, religion, profession and relative state in the family.²⁰ As the different names and subcategories suggest, servants did not form a homogenous group. Work tasks and salaries were dissimilar, but perhaps more influential was the way they lived. In this regard, the domestic servants found in the census can broadly be divided into two groups: (1) servants who lived and worked in the household of their employer and (2) servants who had their own independent homes and provided regular domestic service to other households. The two different situations obviously influenced the employer's possibilities of controlling the employee and thereby the degree of freedom an individual servant experienced.

Although most categories of servants are found in both of these groups, a quantitative analysis of the census reveals certain patterns.²¹ Syces and ayahs lived, for instance, mainly in the household of their employer, who was generally a European. Durwans, maidservants and a category simply termed 'servants' also resided in their employer's home, but they were concentrated in relatively few wealthy families of European or Bengali origin. Among the domestic workers who lived independently, bearers and coolies (if we consider them as providers of regular domestic service)

¹⁹ DNA, Serampore census, 1840.

²⁰ Apart from this, some farmland called Pearapore, situated one-and-a-half miles from Serampore, was under Danish jurisdiction. The inhabitants of Pearapore were counted in a separate census and are not included in the mentioned figures.

²¹ The following conclusions are based on a count of all domestic workers and the sizes of their households.

constituted the largest number, but many cooks and malis also had their own households. Washermen were likewise independent and must have provided service to several different households. Similarly, sircars, with a few exceptions, also lived independently with their own families. One-half of the khansamans lived in the households of a few wealthy Indian merchants and landowners, where they were probably involved in the family business, and the other half had private homes. The independent sircars and khansamans in several ways stand out from the other domestics. Judging from the sizes of their households, they were quite wealthy and some even had engaged their own servants. They were, in other words, both servants and employers.

At the other end of the spectrum and living and working under very different conditions, we find a group of 'house slaves'. Export of slaves was officially abolished in 1745 in the Danish settlements in India but one could hereafter still legally purchase slaves for 'domestic use'.²² Domestic slavery persisted therefore, and in 1790 it was not remarkable to find the 'slave girl Rosetta' living in the household of the Danish governor in Tranquebar.²³ The official census from 1840 does not make use of the category 'slave', but we can see from other sources that bonded domestic labour still existed in nineteenth-century Serampore, although the practice was in decline. In a will from 1841, the Catholic Mrs Hannah Measures, for instance, bequeathed Rupees 100 to her 'servant girl Maria D' Rozario commonly called Dominga'.²⁴ The amount was to be administered by Mrs Stoppard, who should also inherit Dominga as well as her 'offspring' Paul. Dominga is referred to as 'servant girl' in the will and 'ayah' in the census, but there is no doubt that she and her son were legally owned like any other property.²⁵

²² Kay Larsen, 'Danmark og Slavehandelens Ophævelse' [Denmark and the Abolition of the Slave Trade], *Historisk Tidsskrift* [Historical Journal] 10, no. 4, 1937, 106–08.

²³ DNA, Det kgl. ostindiske Gouvernement [The Royal East India Government], 1447A-1447B, Mandtal over Indbyggerne i Tranquebar og Landsbyerne [Census of Tranquebar and Its Villages], 1790. On the life of Rosetta, see Louise Sebro, 'Everyday Life between Private and Public: Governor Families and Their Servants', in *The Governor's Residence in Tranquebar*.

²⁴ WBSA, DR 70, Registry books.

²⁵ DNA, Serampore census, 1840.

As demonstrated by Margot Finn in a study of Anglo-Indian families in British India, the distinction between enslaved and free servants was often—deliberately or unintentionally—obscured by the employer/owner.²⁶ By the nineteenth century, it was no longer considered appropriate to own a ‘slave’, but the practice nonetheless still persisted under new names. Although domestic servants and slaves lived and worked closely together, there was a crucial difference between their respective possibilities of shaping their own lives. Servants were free to resign and leave their service—provided they had given the required notice—whereas domestic slaves were considered the legal property of the head of the household and were liable to be transferred or sold in public auction, depending on the owner’s will.²⁷ The differences between independent khansamans and bonded ayahs illustrate the problem of defining ‘domestic servants’. When referring to servants in this chapter, I therefore follow a very broad definition: workers (bonded or free) who served in or provided service to a private household.

THE DANISH COLONIAL FRAMEWORK

Upon first arriving in India, many Danes, in line with other Europeans, were struck by the great number of servants they met. Judging from contemporary statistical material, there was probably not much variation in the proportions of servants in Denmark and India respectively, but the way servants were used by European and Indian elites to state their status in public displays contributed to the impression of extravagance.²⁸

²⁶ Finn, ‘Slaves Out of Context’. For other studies on slavery in British India, see Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law*; Chatterjee and Eaton, *Slavery and South Asian History*; Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire*.

²⁷ Finn, ‘Slaves Out of Context’, 187.

²⁸ In 1840, domestic servants constituted 10.4 per cent of the population of the Danish capital Copenhagen and 14.6 per cent of Denmark’s total population (*Befolkningsforholdene i Danmark i det 19. Aarhundrede* [The Population of Denmark in the 19th Century], Statistisk Tabelværk [Statistical figures], 5, Litra A No. 5 (Copenhagen: Statens Statistiske Bureau [Statistics Denmark], 1905), 171–72). Due to differences in categories and ways of counting, the census from Serampore cannot be immediately compared with the census from Denmark. However, an estimate including the different categories as well as coolies and washermen shows that domestic servants constituted approximately 13.5 per cent of Serampore’s total population.

For instance, one of the wealthiest Indians in Serampore, the merchant and landowner Raghuram Goswami, had 50 servants in his household. And in the house of an equally influential merchant, Rajkrishno Dey, 49 servants were recorded in the census. Serampore's Danish doctor, Joachim Otto Voigt, most likely referred to these families when he described the sight of the local rich *babus* on their evening promenade, surrounded by servants in deep admiration and subservience.²⁹

The number of specialised servants in one's household was definitely an important marker of social status. To Europeans, keeping domestic servants was therefore also a method of establishing themselves as members of the ruling class. Yet, being white did not necessarily mean being rich. A large number of Europeans in India were in fact underprivileged and had to struggle to keep up a reasonable standard of living.³⁰ Although lacking the financial means, many would still feel obliged to keep a number of servants in order to demonstrate their social position to both Indians and fellow Europeans.³¹ Even to the leading Danish civil officers in Serampore, the expenses for keeping the expected domestics were a substantial burden. The Danish secretary and judge in Serampore, Frederik Emil Elberling, who arrived in Serampore in 1835, recalled in his memoirs his initial reluctance to adapt to Anglo-Indian customs:

Tiemroth [a Danish civil officer serving in Serampore] claimed that it was absolutely necessary for me to employ a number of different servants. After countless objections, I finally ended up employing five people; a khansama with 6 Rixdaler [Danish currency] monthly, a cook with 6, a *maitre* [waiter] with 3½, a washerman with 3, a mali with 3½—in total an expenditure of 22 Rixdaler. I did not wish to acquire a palanquin or a horse as I thought I could manage well with my legs and an umbrella when going out during the day. But already the following month I had to acquire a

²⁹ Joachim Otto Voigt, 'Medicinsk Topographisk Beskrivelse af det Danske Etablissement Frederiksnagor (Serampore) og Bemærkninger om de der herskende Sygdomme' [A Medical Topographical Description of the Danish Settlement Frederiksnagor (Serampore) with Remarks on the Prevailing Diseases], *Bibliotek for Læger* [Library for Doctors] 18, 1833, 28–29.

³⁰ See Harald Fisher-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and 'White Subalternity' in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009).

³¹ Dussart, 'That Unit of Civilisation', 710–11.

horse with a syce and a hay driver with 9 Rixdaler on the advice from the doctor and others. After this, my total expenses to domestics as a single person were 44 Rixdaler or almost half of my first salary.³²

Although being critical, Elberling eventually followed the advice from more experienced colleagues and hired a number of servants, hereby displaying himself as a respectable representative of the Danish government. His decision to acquire a horse was influenced by Dr J. O. Voigt who, like his contemporary British colleagues, was occupied with the task of improving the depressing mortality rates for Europeans in India. In 1833, Voigt published a medical topography of Serampore in which he gave a description of the many health hazards one had to overcome, including extreme weather, dangerous miasma and unhygienic streets.³³ Voigt believed that Europeans needed to adapt slowly to the foreign climate by taking certain precautions such as adjusting the diet and clothing, and he claimed that much illnesses were caused by a general reluctance to change old habits. However, there were limits to the adaptation and in an increasingly racialised nineteenth century, the prevalent medical theories emphasised the physiological differences between Europeans and 'natives'. Physical work and exercise in the tropics were, for instance, considered harmful to European constitutions and were to be avoided. The fear of falling ill thus influenced the decisions to hire servants that could help with all types of manual work and transportation.

We know unfortunately little about the process of recruiting and how the actual negotiations of wages and work conditions took place in Serampore. According to Danish law, until 1854 servants were allowed to change position only twice a year, under the condition that they had given prior notice and obtained the necessary permission.³⁴ In eighteenth-century Tranquebar, a similar but less strict rule functioned, which made

³² The National Museum of Denmark (NMD), Memoirs of Frederik Emil Elberling. Author's translation from the Danish.

³³ Voigt, 'Medicinsk Topographisk Beskrivelse af Serampore' 18, 1833, 1–66; 19, 1833, 1–39; 20, 1834, 281–359.

³⁴ For an overview of the different laws and orders that regulated domestic servants in mainland Denmark, see Anette Faye Jacobsen, *Husbondret: Rettighedskulturer i Danmark 1750–1920* [Master's Rights. Rights Cultures in Denmark, 1750–1920] (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008).

it possible to shift workplace each quarter.³⁵ In 1785, the Danish colonial government of Tranquebar found it necessary to implement further regulation because it had become a problem that ‘domestic servants abandon their service on the quarter day without prior notice and hereby leave their masters in difficulties of hiring new servants’.³⁶ The new regulation made it mandatory for servants wishing to leave to give notice before the 15th of the last month before the quarter day. If they failed to do so, they had to pay a fine to the government and repay one month’s salary to their employer. If they were not willing to pay or incapable of paying, they would be punished corporally. Although intended to control servants, the 1785 regulation also mentions certain responsibilities of the employer: ‘any inhabitant of this place is obliged to give the same notice in cases of dismissal or, if failing to do so, cannot claim back the advance paid for the following quarter.’³⁷ The last sentence suggests that servants in Tranquebar were paid in advance every three months and overall the local colonial servant laws secured better and more flexible working conditions than in Denmark. However, it is not clear whether the regulations from Tranquebar were also implemented and valid in Serampore.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Danish colonial administration was, like its British counterpart, reluctant to intervene in what were considered as private spheres or purely indigenous matters. In 1777, the Danish Crown took over the settlements from the Danish East India Company and a few years later the judicial system was reformed with the aim of improving the ‘rights and justice ... for every European, Indian, inhabitant or stranger, regardless of nation, religion or rank’.³⁸ In practice, this meant that the Danish administration thought it necessary to maintain a plural legal system; one court for Europeans and another for Indians. In Tranquebar the indigenous civil court was known as *sorteretten* (the Black Court) and the equivalent in Serampore was called the *catchery*,

³⁵ Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai, Danish Records, vol. 13039/3, Publication Book (15.02.1779–15.07.1824), Regulation dated 17.02.1785.

³⁶ *Ibid.* Author’s translation from the Danish.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ DNA, Kommercekollegiet, Ostindiske sekretariat 1777–1797 [[Chamber of Commerce, East India Secretariat 1777–1797], 925, Judicial Regulations, 8 January 1781. Author’s translation from the Danish.

a Danish variation of the Hindi word *kutcherry*. Whereas all civil cases involving Europeans would be taken to the European court and judged under Danish law, 'pure' Indian cases were referred to the catchery court where they were to be settled by arbitration led by a Hindu pundit or a Muslim mullah, according to the religion of the involved persons. All criminal cases, however, were subject to common Danish law regardless of one's ethnic or religious background.

During the eighteenth century, the Danish reluctance to interfere with the Indian social order meant that most civil cases were solved in arbitration. However, an increasing number of unsettled suits and appeals were brought forward to the Danish judge, and it gradually became clear to the administrators that the government could not avoid taking direct responsibility for the Indian population.³⁹ From the 1820s, this development is reflected in a number of judicial reforms, which positioned the colonial administration in a central role. In Serampore, the judicial regulations from 1823, for instance, appointed a Danish judge to preside over the catchery court.⁴⁰ Additionally, a number of local police regulations that clearly challenged the boundary between private and public spaces were enforced.⁴¹

Concerning domestic servants, one of the regulations was rather unusual; according to judge Elberling, 'a master was prohibited to punish his servants for any offence committed'.⁴² Unfortunately, a written example of the actual decree does not seem to have survived among the Danish

³⁹ For examples from Tranquebar, see Niels Brimnes, *Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India* (London: Curzon Press, 1999). For a study on the change in Danish policies of colonial rule in India, see Kristoffer Edelgaard Christensen, 'Comparing the Colonial State: Governing "the Social" and Policing the Population in Late 18th Century India and Denmark', in *Rethinking the Colonial State* (Political Power and Social Theory, vol. 33), ed. Søren Rud and Søren Ivarsson (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 47–79.

⁴⁰ DNA: General-Toldkammer- og Kommercekollegiet, Indisk kontor, journalsager (The Board of Customs and Trade, East India, journal files), volume 3270.

⁴¹ Simon Rastén, 'Serampore i Briternes Skygge 1808–45' [Overshaded by the British: Serampore 1808–45], in *Indien: Tranquebar, Serampore og Nicobarerne (Danmark og Kolonierne)* [India: Tranquebar, Serampore and the Nicobar Islands (Denmark and the Colonies)], ed. Niels Brimnes (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2017), 298–333.

⁴² NMD, Memoirs of Frederik Emil Elberling. Author's translation from the Danish.

records and further details such as the terminology and the intentions behind are therefore not available. Nonetheless, Elberling served as judge and showed a keen interest in Indian law and we may assume that he was well acquainted with the local rules and practices.⁴³ In Elberling's description of the regulation, the prohibition applied to all types of physical punishment. If this was in fact true, the regulation conflicted with the general Danish law that gave a master the right to chastise his children and servants with a stick or by birching, provided it did not cause severe injuries or health threats.⁴⁴ Although many alterations were made to the original Danish law from 1683, the right to corporally punish servants was in fact not removed in mainland Denmark until 1921.

The regulation was just as remarkable in the context of British India where Europeans widely used their rights to chastise servants even for the smallest causes. Although this extensive violent behaviour was criticised by some, it was generally accepted as a necessary means of keeping order in the household.⁴⁵ That a regulation existed on paper, of course, does not imply that private chastisement of domestics did not happen in Serampore, but the fact that hundreds of cases involving servants ended in the colonial court system suggests that it must have been in force and to a large extent respected. Instead of physically punishing a servant for disobedience, theft or neglect of duty, many employers chose to make use of the legal system and brought the cases forward to the criminal court. This did not mean that domestics would necessarily escape physical punishment. Supplementing a sentence to the jail or work in the penal institution, it was common to receive between 10 and 50 strokes with a rattan cane.

⁴³ Frederik Emil Elberling collected information on Indian law practices and later published *A Treatise on Inheritance, Gift, Will, Sale and Mortgage: With an Introduction on the Laws of the Bengal Presidency* (Serampore: Serampore Press, 1844).

⁴⁴ Jacobsen, *Husbondret*; Dorte Kook Lyngholm, 'Pligten til Lydighed: Tjenestefolk og Landarbejderes Retsstilling på Danske Herregårde i 1800-tallet' [Absolute Obedience. The Legal Status of Servants and Workers on Danish Estates in the 19th Century], *temp: tidskrift for historie* [temp: Journal of History] 7, no. 13, 2016, 27–59.

⁴⁵ Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic', 329–31. However, some Europeans crossed the line and were prosecuted for domestic crimes; see, Ghosh, 'Household Crimes and Domestic Order'.

NAVIGATING WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD

As the initial case between Buxoo and the durwan illustrates, life as a domestic servant could be hard and even dangerous. Rivalry and struggle for power within the household were part of everyday life and the criminal court proceedings reveal several similar cases of intra-servant conflicts. That these conflicts arose among fellow servants does not mean that the employers were completely absent. As in Buxoo's case, the strife was often provoked by the employer's wish to monitor and control the servants. This was done by appointing special trusted servants to oversee the work in the household and report any irregularities; a system that obviously created an environment of suspicion.

Domestic work was formally divided rather rigidly between different specialised servants, whose place in the social hierarchy of the household was defined mainly by the proximity to and relationship with the employer. The highest status was normally ascribed to the khansaman who worked as a house steward and head servant with the overall responsibility for running the household. Another important person was the durwan. Although physically located at a greater distance from the employer, the durwan controlled the gate and thereby held important knowledge of everyone's coming and going. A British observer described in 1843 the durwan's role in Calcutta as follows:

The *dirwan* [durwan] is one of the most important, and certainly the idlest servant of the establishment. He has a little room, or lodge, adjoining the gates of the compound, and no one should be able to enter or leave it without his knowledge. If thoroughly honest, and I never heard any just cause of complaint, he is a very efficient guardian of your property, and a check upon the irregularity of the other servants.⁴⁶

Like the khansaman, the durwan could act as the employer's right hand, a role that often made him unpopular among his fellow servants. The division of work naturally influenced the hierarchies between servants, but it was nonetheless possible to challenge the given order. When Buxoo tied

⁴⁶ George William Johnson, *The Stranger in India; or, Three Years in Calcutta*, 2 vols, vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1843), 44.

up the durwan in the stable, he clearly transgressed the servant hierarchy. Despite being a stable attendant, who was usually considered to be low in the hierarchy of the household, he demonstrated his unacceptability to the durwan's control. Lying away from the living quarters, the stable was one of the few places that could have provided a private setting to the servants and this was Buxoo's space.

Servants were an integral part of the household, whether living within the employer's premises or visiting daily to provide their service. As demonstrated by Swati Chattopadhyay in her study of the colonial architecture in Calcutta, the European villas of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not have separate domains for servants and residents. This lack of defined boundaries within the house contributed to the prevalent negative European representations of domestics as being a nuisance more than a help.⁴⁷ Navigating through this intimate space while appearing non-intrusive was not an easy task, which is why experienced servants who understood their roles and duties were in great demand. Fae Dussart has noted that British households in colonial India functioned as smaller units in a larger imperial mission and has shown how British women regarded it as a special duty to 'civilise' their Indian domestics by teaching them about British culture and customs.⁴⁸ It must be added to this that an element of upbringing in dealing with domestics was not exclusively confined to European households. Most servants in India came from the lower social strata and to serve in a middle- or upper-class brahman family correspondingly involved knowing a set of religious and social rules they were not necessarily familiar with.⁴⁹

Whether working for Indians or Europeans, a servant could easily get involved in conflicts within the home. In 1834, several domestic servants

⁴⁷ Swati Chattopadhyay, 'Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of "White Town" in Colonial Calcutta', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, no. 2, 2000, 154–79.

⁴⁸ Dussart, 'That Unit of Civilisation'.

⁴⁹ See Swapna M. Banerjee, 'Down Memory Lane: Representations of Domestic Workers in Middle Class Personal Narratives of Colonial Bengal', *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 3, 2004, 681–708; Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domestics: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

were forced to choose sides when they were caught in an episode of marital violence in a European household in Serampore. In the criminal court, James Blechynden was accused of having 'hit his wife with a heavy window pole, causing a serious wound behind her left ear.'⁵⁰ James was the illegitimate son of Richard Blechynden and, as Peter Robb's work shows, this was not the first time he made trouble or acted violently.⁵¹ James had earlier flogged and beaten up his servants, and as a young man, his general conduct had often caused his father great concern.

Before the attack, Mrs Blechynden had visited her uncle in Calcutta with whom James believed she had an affair, and when she returned to Serampore in the evening, she found the main gate locked. When James refused to let her into the house, she ordered one of the servants who had accompanied her to climb through a window and open the gate. On noticing this attempt, her husband attacked the servant with a stone and drove him out of the house again. In the meantime, a tailor who was working in the house opened the gate and Mrs Blechynden entered. The couple started arguing and when James got even more upset, Mrs Blechynden ordered the present servants to hold him down. Trying to avoid this, James turned his anger towards the servants and began striking them so they had to flee and get assistance from the police. The police officers arrived just in time to see James grab a window pole and knock down his wife. In the subsequent court case, James claimed that he had hit his wife by accident when trying to defend himself against the attacking servants, thereby shifting focus to the usual suspects. However, the fact that James had earlier spent a year in a mental hospital in Calcutta spoke against him. So did the severity of his attack, which the examining doctor argued could easily have caused the death of his wife. James Blechynden was therefore sentenced to four weeks in jail, while all servants escaped further charges.

In a similar case about loyalty, a servant in an Indian household was put in a difficult situation. One evening in 1834, when the sircar Shreedhor Bundopadhya was running an errand in Serampore for his employer, he was suddenly attacked and dragged into a house.⁵² The assailant appeared

⁵⁰ WBSA, DR 23. Author's translation from the Danish.

⁵¹ On James Blechynden, see especially Chapter 6 in Robb, *Sentiment and Self*.

⁵² WBSA, DR 23, Faujdary, no. 46/1834.

to be Sibnarain Bysack, a brother of Shreedhor's employer, Ramnarain Bysack. In court, the unfortunate Shreedhor explained that he had been locked into a room where Sibnarain had threatened to beat him up and ordered his durwan to use his sword against him, which was only prevented by the arrival of the police. All the involved persons were then brought to the catchery to give their testimonies. Consequently, it was revealed that the misdemeanour was related to an ongoing civil court case between the two brothers. Shreedhor, who had earlier served Sibnarain Bysack, had been called to testify but failed to appear. As it was a duty to testify when called upon by the court, Sibnarain defended himself by stating that he had only intended to help the police by escorting Shreedhor to the catchery. The judge, however, found it suspicious that Sibnarain had kept Shreedhor locked up for more than an hour when he could easily have brought him directly to the catchery, which was situated less than 10 minutes from his house. This suggested that Sibnarain had sought to influence a key witness by the use of force. Shreedhor, on the other hand, admitted that he had tried to avoid the court by hiding in his house because he feared his testimony would harm his present employer. Even though Shreedhor could actually have been punished for not appearing in the court, the judge seemed to understand his difficult position and instead sentenced the Bysack brothers a fine each; Sibnarain for trying to influence a witness and Ramnarain for not bringing his servant to the court and thereby failing to live up to his responsibility as the head of the household.⁵³

Attempting to avoid being drawn into the conflict between his former and present masters, Shreedhor simply chose to disappear; a strategy that proved to be successful. This, however, was not a possible option for the domestics in the household of Blechynden, who were forced to choose sides in a marital conflict and consequently ended up attacking their rightful master. The durwan was almost beaten up by Buxoo, most likely because he was simply trying to keep an eye on the stable as he had been ordered to by his employer. Navigating within the household was difficult and servants were often caught in conflicts where they had to choose between being loyal to the employer or to a fellow servant. To assume

⁵³ On the obligations and rights of the head of the household in British India, see Singha, 'Making the Domestic More Domestic'.

that there existed a given alliance between servants is to take for granted that servants naturally felt part of the same (class-conscious) group. But while friendships and solidarity between servants were of course possible, the hierarchical structures within the employer's household stimulated internal competition, which could easily lead to hostility.

LOVE AND LEISURE: GAMBLING, DRINKING AND FRATERNISATION

Considering the subordinate character of their employment, domestic servants in Serampore possessed a relatively large degree of freedom, allowing them to retain a well-developed network across the town. The servants who had their own independent households were of course under less control of their employer, but the ones who resided at their workplace were also able to leave daily and meet in each other's houses or at the bazaar. Some even lived in quasi-marital relationships with other servants of neighbouring households.⁵⁴ These types of relations were usually accepted by the employers, who benefitted by receiving the latest news and gossip from the town through their servants. This was especially important to European women, whose access to the outside society was restrained by the prevalent cultural norms. For them, domestics functioned as informants, cultural brokers and valuable links to the Indian world.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, while some of the servants' contacts could be useful to the employer, others posed a threat not only to the individual household but also to the public order. Many of these relationships were centred on gambling houses in Serampore. According to a royal Danish order from 1753, betting of money on chance-based games played with cards, dices or similar was illegal.⁵⁶ The prohibition applied to taverns, public and private houses, and the King's intent was, 'out of love and paternal care',

⁵⁴ WBSA, DR 23, Faujdary, no. 113/1833.

⁵⁵ Nupur Chaudhury, 'Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India,' *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4, 1994, 550.

⁵⁶ Royal order, 6.10.1753 (O. A. Borum, H. Jacobi and Poul Plate, eds, *Dansk Lovsamling 1665–1890* [Danish Session Laws 1665–1890], vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1930), 26–29.

to protect weak citizens from wasting their earnings.⁵⁷ The regulation also covered Serampore and therefore gambling was practised in secret in private houses. The police sometimes revealed these hideaways and thanks to the subsequent court cases, it is possible to shed some light on the different activities that unfolded there.

Gambling normally took place among small groups of people who met in private homes, usually under cover of the night. In some cases, the gambling houses were managed by women, for example a widow seeking an alternative income, but the players and visitors were exclusively men. The houses functioned as meeting places for many different people and were frequented by Europeans, Indo-Portuguese and Indians, who all had one thing in common: they came from the lower social strata. However, judging from the court cases, domestic servants seem to have been particularly active customers of these illicit places. They sometimes gambled together with fellow servants in the houses where they worked, but as this involved a large risk of being caught, it was more common to meet outside the employer's household.

In 1835, a gambling house run by Mony Mussulman was brought to the notice of the police and Mony was arrested along with six other people.⁵⁸ When the police arrived at Mony's home, four people were playing and drinking while two others were acting as watchmen. Having seen the police approaching, the companions turned out the light and escaped through a backdoor, but soon after they were all captured. The captives had been playing a dice game called *jurmist* and several coins were found on the table. As payment for hosting the gamblers, Mony received money for purchasing luxury commodities such as oil, tobacco and cake. In order to sentence the accused, the judge needed to demonstrate in court that the game they had played was completely based on chance. From this and similar cases we therefore know the rules of some of the popular games, as these were recorded in detail in the proceedings. Especially, a game played with cowries (sea shells) and known in the Danish sources as *soloi* was widespread.⁵⁹ The purpose was to predict how many shells would

⁵⁷ Ibid. Author's translation from the Danish.

⁵⁸ WBSA, DR 23, Faujdary, no. 129/1835.

⁵⁹ Ibid., Faujdary, no. 122/1834.

land with the open side upwards when thrown by one of the players. The person who had chosen the right number would then win all the bets. In another popular game, known in the sources as *jorbitjur*, a person placed an amount of stones in the fist and the fellow player then had to guess if the number of stones was equal or unequal.⁶⁰

Mony was eventually charged for ‘running a late night gambling house for several young people, including some domestic servants’.⁶¹ Two of the persons arrested were only 13 years old. In his final sentence, the judge pointed out that Mony’s offence was aggravated by her role in ruining the morality of two underage boys. The paternalistic thoughts that characterised the original prohibition from 1753 were thus still important. The colonial government viewed gambling as a threat that could potentially undermine the moral fabric of the society and the gambling houses were seen as centres of various activities that threatened the established order of Serampore. A lucky bet could provide the winner with new possibilities, but losing a game, on the other hand, could result in devastating debts, forcing the unfortunate person to seek alternative incomes. Being a domestic servant with a low salary, the opportunities to solve situations like this were limited and the most obvious solution was to steal from the employer’s household.

Sometimes the division between a gambling house and a brothel was fluid. But in contrast to gambling, prostitution was not considered a legal offence, and in the 1840 census, prostitutes—162 in total—are listed in line with any other occupation. Winning a game of *soloi*—or stealing from the employer—could mean a rare chance for a domestic servant to visit a brothel. For instance, in 1824, when Aglu Musselman, who worked for Mr Emerique, got away with a large amount of money from his employer’s house, the first thing he did was to seek out a prostitute with whom he could spend the night.⁶² Others were more inventive in their attempts to find female company. In his memoirs, Elberling recalls how his khansaman Kadir once creatively managed to seduce a young Muslim girl from Serampore: Under the pretext of seeking a *maitresse* (concubine)

⁶⁰ Ibid., Faujdary, no. 73/1833.

⁶¹ Ibid., Faujdary, no. 129/1835. Author’s translation from the Danish.

⁶² WBSA, DR 20, Faujdary, no. 46/1824.

for Elberling, Kadir had found a girl and made an agreement with her mother. When the mother went to purchase some cakes at the bazaar in order to celebrate the newly established contract, Kadir used the time effectively and seduced the daughter. When the act was revealed, Kadir was prosecuted at the criminal court where he had to defend himself before the judge Elberling, who awkwardly also happened to be his employer.⁶³ As the actual court proceedings are missing from the records, we know the story only from Elberling's personal memoirs. According to Elberling, Kadir admitted during the trial that he had never received an order from his employer but simply made up the story as an excuse to gain access to the girl, whose beauty was well-known in the town.

Kadir was consequently sentenced to imprisonment. His main crime was not that he had seduced (or perhaps raped) a young girl and ruined her family's reputation, but rather that he had used his employer's name to his own advantage. This was not only a breach of confidence but potentially also harmed Elberling's integrity as the head of the household, as he was supposed to be capable of controlling his own servants. The fact that Elberling was the town judge and a leading figure in Serampore made the offence even worse. Kadir had served several of the principal Danish citizens in Serampore for many years, first as a cook and later as a khansaman, and hereby climbed the social ladder. The case is therefore also an example of how domestic servants could gain personal advantages by benefiting from their master's position in society. This was accepted as long as it did not directly affect the employer.

Whether based on paternalistic ideas of saving weak souls or pragmatic attempts to reduce crime, the Danish administration endeavoured to put an end to the illegal gambling houses. Sometimes the houses were easy to locate and identify because of the accompanying forms of sociability; the combination of alcohol and gambling led to arguments and fights, which attracted attention from the neighbours. But the police also worked more systematically and put suspects under long-time surveillance and collected evidence before they decided to raid a gambling house. Nonetheless, the risk of being revealed and eventually punished was not enough to prevent people from taking part in the illegal activities, because the gambling

⁶³ NMD, Memoirs of Frederik Emil Elberling.

houses held important functions to the users. If we look at the houses from the perspective of domestic servants and others from the lower social strata of society, they were places for socialising, laughing, making friends and maybe exchanging experiences of working conditions, and they were centres of entertainment and leisure, which, apart from gambling, included drinking, smoking and even sexual relations.

CHARGE AND COUNTERCHARGE

Living and working as a domestic servant in Serampore involved many risks and temptations and one could easily end up in the criminal court, either as witness or accused. Figures from the earliest remaining volumes of sentences from the catchery court, covering the years 1823 to 1826, show that out of 50 criminal cases, domestic servants were involved in 20.⁶⁴ Ten years later, the same pattern is found with servants represented in 17 out of 51 criminal cases.⁶⁵ Overall, this suggests that domestics were involved in nearly 40 per cent of all criminal cases (see Table 6.1).

TABLE 6.1: Criminal Court Cases with Accused Domestic Servants*

<i>Charges</i>	1823–26	1833–35
Fraud and theft from employer**	17	10
Theft from others	2	
Violence		2
Gambling		3
Handling stolen goods		1
False testimony/not showing up in court	1	1
Total cases with domestic servants	20	17
Total cases	50	51

Notes: *The table shows court cases where domestic servants were under accusation. Some of these cases included several servants, but each of these cases has been counted as one and listed here accordingly. Therefore, the table does not indicate the actual number of servants involved in criminal cases.

** Includes cases where the accused servants left service without prior notice and took away with them valuables from the employer's household.

⁶⁴ WBSA, DR 20. The pages covering 1823 are only partly readable.

⁶⁵ WBSA, DR 23.

Among the court cases involving servants, the most extraordinary from this period was a case about a large burglary gang consisting of more than 30 people.⁶⁶ At the court in 1835, the gang was found to be responsible for almost every burglary committed in Serampore over the past four years. According to the local *thanadar* (Indian police chief), the head of the gang, Panscowry Mootchy, was known to be a notorious thief, but still the scale of the offences came as a surprise. While most of the criminal cases in the Danish records consist merely of a few pages, the case about Panscowry's gang covers more than 50 pages and each of the offences are described in detail. The burglaries more or less followed the same pattern. First, a small group would meet in Panscowry's house to plan the act. The house was located in the British territory just outside Serampore and because of Panscowry's reputation, he was actually prohibited to cross the border. In this phase, it was important to gather detailed knowledge about potential locations. This could, for example, be information on where certain valuables were kept in the house or when the owners were away to Calcutta, leaving the home unattended; types of knowledge that were easily available to domestic servants. The gang seems to have been well prepared before committing each burglary and Panscowry afterwards paid back a part of the loot to his informants. But servants were not only functioning as informants, they were also part of the inner circle of the gang. In 1831, some cloth, a silver-coated hookah and several notes—altogether worth 700–800 rupees—were stolen from the house of a Neelmony Chatterjee. The burglary was proved to have been committed by Panscowry together with Goluck Coyburt who had earlier served Neelmony and knew where the valuables were kept and how to enter the house without being noticed by the guard.

In the court case, it was important for the judge to decide how the loot had been shared between the parties involved because the sentence was ruled according to the value of the stolen goods. As there was no doubt about Goluck's involvement, the only way to argue his case was therefore to try to downplay the size of his share. In the court interrogation, Goluck admitted having received the hookah, some of the cloth and 24 rupees in cash but denied having knowledge about several other objects. Most

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Faujdary, no. 51/1835 and DR 24, February 1836.

of the other accomplices, however, spoke against Goluck and it became his words against theirs. While Goluck claimed that Panscowry's mother had taken parts of the cloth, the others claimed that Goluck had had new clothes made for his child from the item in question. At the time of the burglary, Goluck was living together with a Sobul Dolaul in the backhouse of the rice merchant Juggernaut Delaul—who was also under charge for the handling of stolen goods—and he was making his living by finding customers to Delaul and other rice merchants from the nearby area. But although Goluck was no longer in the service of Neelmony—which would have aggravated his offence—he was still considered to have violated the trust of his former employer and this clearly influenced the judge, who found that there was 'not much reason to believe his statements'. Consequently, Goluck was sentenced to two years of public work 'in iron', 30 strikes with the rattan cane and subsequent expulsion from the Danish territory.

Goluck's case was rare in Serampore because the restricted area of the settlement generally made it difficult for this scale of organised crime to remain unnoticed by the authorities.⁶⁷ As shown in Table 6.1, the majority of cases involving servants was of a different kind; fiddling with the accounts, fraud, theft from the household and leaving the service without notice are typical charges found in the records. For instance, Guy Musalman, another of Elberling's servants, was charged for having purchased an old saddle at the bazaar, replaced it with a completely new one from his master's household and subsequently gone to Barrackpore to sell the latter.⁶⁸

In another typical case from 1824, 25-year-old Ms Flora, who served in the house of Mr Mendes, had suddenly disappeared from her service, taking with her a silver necklace and a bracelet.⁶⁹ In a similar case, Ms Poran Cauranny, who served as a concubine in the house of a Lucky Borthumy,

⁶⁷ In contrast, in the surrounding British territories, many gangs working in similar ways existed in the same period; Sumanta Banerjee, *The Wicked City: Crime and Punishment in Colonial Calcutta* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009); Sumanta Banerjee, 'Urban Technology and Changing Forms of Crime in Early Colonial Calcutta', *Social Scientist* 38, no. 3/4, 2010, 25–36.

⁶⁸ WBSA, DR 25, Faujdary, no. 116/1839.

⁶⁹ WBSA, DR 20, Faujdary, no. 17/1824.

abruptly left Serampore with a selection of jewellery and clothes and fled to nearby Konnagar in the British territory.⁷⁰ Both Flora and Cauranny were caught by the police soon after and prosecuted. Leaving the service without notice was in itself a criminal offence and the cases further raised doubt about the ownership of the items they had brought with them. However, what is interesting in this context is that they defended themselves in court with similar arguments. While Ms Flora explicitly claimed that Mr Mendes had hit her, Poran in her defence simply stated that her master had treated her badly. It is not the purpose here to speculate the actual truth of these statements, but the fact that they made it into the court proceedings demonstrates that allegations of violence and ill treatment were legitimate claims that had to be considered by the judge, even when put forward by female domestics.⁷¹ By raising counter-allegations, an accused servant raised doubt about the employer's integrity and conduct. As the person's 'character' and 'vita ante acta' (the life before the act) were important factors in deciding the final verdict, any suspicion that could be raised about the employer naturally strengthened the servant's case.

In another case, one Cornelius Baptiser was accused of having left his service as khidmutgar in the house of Mrs King, taking some silverware with him. During the interrogations, it came out that Cornelius Baptiser had earlier been known under an entire list of different names: Kuxtabux, Lalloo, Junoo, John and Buxoo. His back had 'clear marks from an earlier severe corporal punishment', he was wanted for theft in the French settlement Chandernagore and he had recently disappeared with a banknote worth 25 rupees from another house where he had served.⁷² His job as Mrs King's khidmutgar had lasted only four days, indicating that he had simply used his position to gain access to her valuables. All this of course clearly spoke against Cornelius, to use that name, and the judge concluded that there were very strong indications of his guilt.

⁷⁰ WBSA, DR 20, Faujdary, no. 46/1824.

⁷¹ On the low status of women as witnesses, see Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's Death', in *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009), 271–303; Ghosh, 'Household Crimes and Domestic Order'; Elizabeth Kolsky, 'The Rule of Colonial Indifference: Rape on Trial in Early Colonial India, 1805–57', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4, 2010, 1093–117.

⁷² WBSA, DR 23, Faujdary, no. 130/1834. Author's translation from the Danish.

Nonetheless, Cornelius was set free due to lack of evidence. During the questioning, he kept denying having any knowledge of the lost silverware and although he admitted leaving his service, he claimed that he had informed his fellow servants about the decision. According to Cornelius, his leaving was triggered by the bad treatment by Mrs King who 'in the most severe manner had scolded and flogged him for breaking a glass.'⁷³ Although this was strongly denied by Mrs King, the judge was not able to find substantial evidence of any of the conflicting statements and finally had to dismiss the case.

The systematic use of similar counter-allegations found in the court cases involving domestics shows that servants in Serampore were well aware of their legal rights, particularly the regulation that prohibited physical punishment and violence. Despite the almost invisible borders and the close links between Serampore and the surrounding British territories, entering the Danish town also meant entering a different judicial system and this seems to have been well-established knowledge.⁷⁴ The cases further demonstrate that charges from the employer alone were not sufficient to convict a servant. Yet, the agency of the servant clearly had its limits. Independent charges against the employer were rarely raised by servants and the allegations typically came up as part of the defence in other cases. In such situations, the servant was already placed in a defensive position as the accused and not the accuser.

CONCLUSION

Domestic servants in the Danish trading town Serampore did not form a homogeneous group. They consisted of more than a thousand individuals and spanned from bonded labourers and ayahs living in European homes to independent khansamans and sircars with own large households. Their

⁷³ Ibid. Author's translation from the Danish.

⁷⁴ Until 1830, Serampore's asylum laws made it possible for bankrupts to settle in the town to avoid prosecution in the British territories, but with the intention of increasing the population, the Danish colonial authorities generally turned a blind eye to other types of violations too. Simon Rastén, 'Serampore, det nye Handelscentrum 1755–1808' [Serampore: The New Trading Centre 1755–1808] in *Indien*, 246–73, and Rastén, 'Serampore i Briternes Skygge 1808–1845'.

work life and living conditions differed in various ways, which makes it difficult to make broad generalisations or even speak of servants as a category. Some challenged the hierarchies and order of the households they were working in, some stole from their masters or were involved in organised criminal networks; others lived regular lives, had their own families and even their own servants.

Irrespective of these differences, the one thing they had in common was that their social lives were not confined only to the site of the workplace. The relationship to the employer was unquestionably important and often caused conflicts, but domestic servants were part of other social networks and relationships as well. This counted both for the many servants who lived independently and the ones who resided in the home of the employer. Their social interactions stretched out beyond the workplace, and it was possible for most servants to move rather freely and socialise at the daily market or—at night—in places like Serampore's illegal gambling houses. If we are to understand the lives of domestic servants better, we need to follow them to different spatial sites and seek to unravel relationships that were often hidden to the employer.

Methodologically, it is challenging to analytically foreground these other types of relations for which the sources are scanty and fragmented. Domestic servants in early nineteenth-century India have rarely left written material behind and historians to a large extent have to rely on their employers' narratives, which—if servants are mentioned at all—deal mainly with life within the workplace. However, by supplementing these sources with information from colonial court records, it becomes possible to stitch together various small clues and gain insight into the social lives as well as legal consciousness of individual servants. Furthermore, including perspectives that are not confined to the master–servant relationship helps to avoid stereotyping and opens up to a more holistic and multi-sphered understanding of servants' history. Although being regulated by the employer and colonial laws, servants also lived their lives beyond work.

