Archaeological Evidence of South Asian Domestic Workers Place and Space

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ABSTRACT

Architectural evidence of servant presence in households is a common practice infiltrating not just South Asia, but almost every part of the world. Viewing this presence from an archaeological standpoint examines the existence of a serving class within upper class households, and tells us a lot about social structures related to power and inequality. Specifically, living and working quarters within these households are very distinct and reflect how they live and their general presence within their employer's household. Although colonization and colonial existence within and involving South Asia is an impactful factor to the indentured servitude industry, the presence of 'help' living within Indian households is a culture of its own that is alive and well and has its own contributing intricate factors in how it is maintained such as a caste system. Acknowledging colonialist presence, it has made indentured servitude common practice within many parts of the world in the terms of how it may be viewed now, but this social structure system could also exist without it. An example of colonial context is Indian indentured servitude within South Africa happened due to a labor shortage after the abolishment of slavery and to escape poverty and famines resulting from British colonial rule ("Indentured labour from South Asia (1834-1917) | Striking Women", n.d.). Noting that indentured servitude in other regions evolved because slavery ended, slave quarters and their archaeology contributes to this study of servant household examination. By analyzing the material culture this practice has both left behind and presents itself as today, most commonly seen in the quarters used to house these workers within the employer/enslaver's household, we can learn about domestic servant's daily lives and places within society.

Around 4.75 million people within India remain unseen and unheard as their status in society establishes.[1] This group of people are domestic workers, working within households of individuals wealthier than themselves. Within South Asian household culture, there is a notable presence of domestic servitude that reflects cultural systems in place relating to socioeconomic power, gender inequalities, and the caste system. Domestic servitude, intertwined with the system of caste, are present both historically and in the present, in countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Afghanistan.

[1] Cherylann Mollan, "Why India Fails to Protect Its Domestic Workers despite Decades of Abuse," *BBC*, February 12, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp3j0e79q52o.

This paper will focus on these institutional practices within India. Domestic work specifically refers to cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Each of these tasks emphasize the almost invisible presence of domestic workers within South Asian homes as these jobs do not require very much contact with the family the worker is employed by. This includes kitchen spaces and places of living such as bedrooms within employer's households. These spaces exemplify class social structures that not only transcend modern South Asian domestic servitude, but also highlight this practice in the past, making it comparable to other places in the world. By examining the history of domestic servitude within India using the archaeology of domestic worker's place within upper class homes, we can examine the underlying structures of power that uphold rigid hierarchical class systems throughout South Asia. Studying archaeological evidence of the presence of domestic workers within the spaces they occupy and how domestic workers are treated is important because servant and helping occupations still exist today within many cultures due to systems of power reinforcing unfair practices of the past. Domestic servitude has been influenced over thousands of years in South Asia by changing political and religious climates, colonialism within the 18th-19th century, and modern-day discussions surrounding its ethicality. Its commonality is largely in reflection of the caste system. The caste system is a form of social stratification, based in Hinduism but branching off from this religion to form its own entity that is intricately intertwined into societies within and outside of South Asia. Many countries within South Asia use the caste system.

Domestic servitude takes form in two ways: live-in servitude or a commute to the employer's home. Live-in domestic workers remain in small rooms of the house of their employer. This is usually out of the boundaries of where the members of the family would be seen, making it so the domestic worker's presence can go unacknowledged by the family. Commuters most commonly live in makeshift, temporary housing that the Indian government often destroys, leaving the people who live in these spaces without a home and in overcrowded communities. For domestic workers who are in this situation, they are facing housing insecurity. Their temporary housing are in areas away from the homes they work in and are reflective of their position in social class. In big cities such as Delhi, the Indian government has destroyed many poor urban communities by bulldozing the sites, stating that they are "encroachments" to the city[2]. The government destroys these homes as they deem them as disruptors to public architecture such as the Barapullah drain in Delhi resulting in the destruction of the Madrasi Camp[3]. The Madrasi Camp housed poor migrant workers who contribute to Delhi's "economy through jobs in sanitation, domestic work, and construction"[4]. The government overlooks the urban poor's pivotal role in society though. Maya John, a labor historian at the University of Delhi and

[2] Anuj Behal, "Delhi Slum Demolitions: Who Is Left Behind?," Frontline, July 10, 2025, https://frontline.thehindu.com/society/delhi-slum-demolition-drive-madrasi-camp-evictions/article69792100.ece.
[3] Anuj Behal, "Delhi Slum Demolitions: Who Is Left Behind?,"
[4] Anuj Behal, "Delhi Slum Demolitions: Who Is Left Behind?,"

Convenor of the Gharelu Kamgar Union (Domestic Workers' Union), explains that because domestic work is in such high demand, it is a field in which people who are in financial need usually seek out.[5] Therefore, domestic housework is cheap to employ, making this a readily available resource for middle class and wealthy Indian families to hire. Culturally, it is expected and reinforced by social pressures to have a domestic worker within your household to reinforce your financial status and to show that you can afford this kind of help.[6]

The domestic servitude sphere mainly affects one half of the population more than the other: women. Women are financially vulnerable within India, making them more susceptible to becoming domestic workers. According to the Financial Inclusion Index provided by *The Reserve Bank of India*, there is financial gendered discrimination against women across South Asia.[7] Within India, legal equality for women is protected under law, however, there is still a gender gap between men and women.[8] This is largely due to systemic and legal frameworks such as teenage marriage and lack of repercussions for violence against women within households that plays a part in the power they have over their finances.[9] The fairness of domestic work is highly contested considering the low pay and their standards of work/rights.[10] This is an undervalued position and, when compared to Western cultures, domestic work is much more common, including services provided in more middle class homes vs. solely in upper-class, wealthier homes.[11]

Indian domestic servitude is dependent on the social ordinance of the caste system because it plays a large part in who is employed and in which households. This system assigns 'levels' to people and this level can determine who you can marry, what jobs you can have, and what opportunities and resources people have access to. It can be a factor in how households hire their 'help' as well[12]. This hierarchy is very affluent throughout South Asian history and as Nicole Boivin, an Archaeologist and Professor at the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland states, "caste today is an important feature of social and political life in India, and that it has undergone substantive changes during the course of the

[5] Maya John, "The Persistent Precarity of Domestic Workers in South Asia," Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung (Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung, June 8, 2021), https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/44474/the-persistent-precarity-of-domestic-workers-in-south-asia..
[6] Maya John, "The Persistent Precarity of Domestic Workers in South Asia," Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung (Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung, June 8, 2021), https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/44474/the-persistent-precarity-of-domestic-workers-in-south-asia..
[7] Indrani Chakraborty and Archana Meena, "Closing India's Gender Gap in Financial Inclusion," The India Forum (TheIndiaForum, October 17, 2025), https://www.theindiaforum.in/gender/closing-indias-gender-gap-financial-inclusion.
[8] Chakraborty, Indrani and Meena, Archana. 2025
[9] Chakraborty, Indrani and Meena, Archana. 2025
[10] John, "Persistent Precarity of Workers"
[11] John, "Persistent Precarity of Workers"
[12] PEW RESEARCH CENTER, "Attitudes about Caste," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, June 29, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/attitudes-about-caste/.

past century or more…".[13] According to data collected from a survey sent out within India by the Pew Research Center, many who subscribe to the caste system would not describe it as being discriminatory when asked if they experience caste discrimination.[14] The power the caste system is indirect and is technically illegal due to legislation such as the Indian Constitution of 1949, which explicitly prohibits untouchability under Article 17. Dalits, previously known as 'Untouchables' occupy the bottom of the caste totem pole and are usually seen within the domestic worker's sphere.[15] Within the caste system, a lot of households will hire their 'help' based on whether they share the same caste as the family.[16] Caste within India goes back at least 3,000 years, so this is not just a social order impacting domestic workers, but also an ingrained system that has pre-shaped who has access to certain opportunities.[17] Caste is mentioned in Ancient Aryan-Vedic script dating back to 1750-500 BCE written in Sanskrit establishing social distinction in the form of the caste system[18]. The four different levels within caste established in this script as "Brahmin, consisting of priests, scholars, and teachers; Kshatriyas, the kings, governors, and warriors; Vaishyas, comprising agriculturists, artisans, and merchants; and Sudras, the service providers and artisans who were originally non-Aryans but were admitted to Vedic society"[19]. Dalits would be considered as complete outcasts of this system.

Although the effects of colonization are being compared in current arguments in terms of how this has affected domestic servitude, this system pre-dates British colonialism in South Asia as Shireen Moosvi, a History Professor at Aligarh Muslim University, discusses.[20] The lack of attention to pre-colonial social systems in play contributes to the misunderstanding of current day domestic servitude in South Asia. According to Moosvi, "The history of domestic servants in pre-colonial India has not received much attention so far…" in comparison to how contemporary, post-colonial India deals with caste as a result of colonialism.[21] Historical research predominantly examines the proliferation of domestic servitude under colonialism across South Asian countries. Moosvi further explains within *Domestic Service in Precolonial India: Bondage, Caste and Market* that the caste system influenced who worked within the domestic servitude sphere: "those who perform personal service are not only held in scorn,

[13] Nicole Boivin, "Orientalism, Ideology and Identity," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 5, no. 2 (June 2005): 225–52, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605305053368.
[14] PEW RESEARCH CENTER, "Attitudes about Caste,".
[15] Gregory Kozlowki, "Indian Government Bans Discrimination against Untouchables | EBSCO," EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | www.ebsco.com (EBSCO, 2023), https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/politics-and-government/indian-government-bans-discrimination-against.
[16] PEW RESEARCH CENTER, "Attitudes about Caste,".
[17] PEW RESEARCH CENTER, "Attitudes about Caste,"
[18] Lumen Learning, "The Caste System | World Civilization," Lumenlearning.com, 2019, https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldcivilization/chapter/the-caste-system/.
[19] Lumen Learning, "The Caste System | World Civilization,"
[20] Shireen Moosvi, "DOMESTIC SERVICE in PRECOLONIAL INDIA: BONDAGE, CASTE and MARKET," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 64 (2003): 560–82, https://doi.org/10.2307/44145491.
[21] Moosvi, "DOMESTIC SERVICE PRECOLONIAL INDIA".

but are also excluded from the three 'twice-born' Aryan varnas or caste, and put among the Sudras the lowliest of the castes".[22] There is a global emphasis in South Asia on how colonialism has affected the region but not very much interest in the longstanding social structures created well before the idea of 'European invasion'. This ideology does not consider the tracing of people and what kinds of customs and culture belongs to who. Without considering the social systems in place before colonialization, we are simplifying human interaction, migration, and the presence of multi-cultural origin, including domestic service work, within South Asia. In premodern India, domestic work was done by slaves and servants, and this is a reflection of the social systems set in place at the time.[23] Now, domestic servitude is an occupation dependent on both social class and caste.

The presence of unfair work practices inflicted upon lower caste Indian workers was not exclusive to India though. After the abolishment of slavery within many parts of the world, South Asians migrated in pursuit of work and economic growth after British colonial occupation led to poverty and famine.[24] Chattel slavery entailed the brutal abduction of Africans, passage, and work of mostly sugar cane within the Caribbean islands. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade to the Caribbean began in the early 16th century and persisted until the early 19th century. Abolishment and emancipation staggered in the Caribbean due to the many different colonial forces at hand. After the abolishment of slavery, colonial forces looked to other places for cheap labor. The installment of indentured servitude transported Indian workers to places such as the Caribbean, South Africa, Fiji, parts of East Africa, and South America in pursuit of job opportunities. Indians were misled into thinking that traveling to these new places would allow them to acquire some wealth in comparison to their conditions within India and return home in a better state. This was far from the truth of the brutal overseas passage to their destinations and the labor and living conditions they were subjected to once they reached their destination. Indians were legally bound to indentured servitude contracts through signing with a thumbprint, becoming indentured workers for a certain number of years.[25] This system differs from that of slavery because enslaved people were considered legal property, and even though indentured workers were not well informed in their decision, they did legally agree to work as indentured workers. Despite the legal implications between slavery and indentured servitude being different, the enslavement system outlined the brutal treatment of indentured workers. Indentured workers were subjected to severe work and production expectations, inadequate health assistance and nutrition, and lack of access to clean water.[26] This mass migration

[22] Moosvi, "DOMESTIC SERVICE PRECOLONIAL INDIA".
[23] Moosvi, "DOMESTIC SERVICE PRECOLONIAL INDIA".
[24] Striking Women, "Indentured Labour from South Asia (1834-1917) | Striking Women," Striking-women.org, 2019, https://www.striking-women.org/module/map-major-south-asian-migration-flows/indentured-labour-south-asia-1834-1917.
[25] Girmitunitedorg, "Coolies: How British Reinvented Slavery," *YouTube*, November 11, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxl4q_jfDPI.
[26] Melissa Ramnauth, ed., "Indian Indentured Labourers in Trinidad, Guyana, and the Caribbean," West Indian Diplomacy ®, January 3, 2024, https://westindiandiplomacy.com/indian-indentured-labourers-in-trinidad/#life-on-the-plantations-hardship-and-resistance.

generated a large Indian presence outside of South Asia that continued a system like domestic servitude in terms of rank in society of the workers. When looking for how colonial powers have exploited cheap labor, this presence is not just evident in the living communities of the descendants who originally traveled in search of opportunity, but also through the archeological presence of Indian domestic workers sharing the same living quarters as people who were once enslaved. Even though indentured servitude implies a payment, the relationship between employer and the employed was not fair. In this mass migration of workers, conditions were harsh. The journeys to where they would end up working, the conditions in which they worked in, and the wages they received were all inhumane considering this was right after slavery ended and their treatment was very similar[27]. South Asian mistreatment in terms of working in other places can be traced starting from the ships they had to make the journey on. The South Asian immigrants' form of transportation to other countries were slave ships which were cramped and promoted disease.[28] Their living quarters in these foreign places were often repurposed slave quarters. Julia Haines notes in *Mauritian Indentured Labour and Plantation Household Archaeology* that slave quarters are often made of stone or wood, are very small (accommodating many people), run down, and are distinctly "built separate from, but away from the owner's house", which is usually also very grand in size and decor[29]. Barbara Mooney, a Professor of Art and Art History focusing on North American Architecture and African American Art and Architecture, argues that "Limiting slave sites to discreet Black architectural space set apart from what is defined as distinct white architectural space too easily erases the presence of enslaved human beings from the sites altogether".[30] Archaeological evidence of overlap between indentured workers and previously enslaved people can be seen through examples such as the Bras d'Eau plantation. The Bras d'Eau cane plantation, a sugar plantation in Mauritius, gives insight to how indentured servants built upon slave plantation spaces including the material items they brought with them that can be found within their living quarters[31]. Within formerly enslaved living spaces, objects related to the caste system such as glass and ceramic bottles used to carry water were found. Specifically, the number of bottles found in the quarters indicated a person's place within the caste system. Haines states "They used proportionally more of these bottles, and individual ceramic dishes to materially assert distance between themselves and other immigrants who they may not have known, and whose caste identities they may not have known".[32] Indian workers

[27] Striking Women, "Indentured Labour South Asia".
[28] Striking Women, "Indentured Labour South Asia".
[29] Julia Jong Haines, "Mauritian Indentured Labour and Plantation Household Archaeology," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 55, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 509–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/0067270x.2020.1841966.
[30] Barbara Burlison Mooney, "Understanding History's Huts," Scribd, 2004, https://www.scribd.com/document/184755123/looking-for-history-s-hut.
[31] Haines, "Mauritian Indentured Labour Archaeology,".
[32] Julia Long Haines, "Diasporic Kinship: Indentured Laborers and the Archaeology of Relations in Mauritius," ScienceDirect, June 2025, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027841652500011X.

had to adjust to the new social order of the Colonial Caribbean while also maintaining their own forms of social stratification and they did so by upholding the caste system. Archaeology studying the presence of enslaved people, or colonial archaeology, (in terms of the period of the Atlantic slave trade and after) is important to acknowledge in reference to South Asian domestic worker's space and place because it explains why future domestic worker's occupied the same spaces in either separate or overlapping time periods. Arguably, "the materiality and culture of enslavement laid the groundwork for the indentured labour system."[33] After their period of indentured servitude, "the descendents of those who stayed back became significant parts of the population of a number of countries including like Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad, Jamaica, Malaysia and South Africa, and, to a lesser extent, in the East African countries of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania."[34] During the initial migrations of Indians to places such as the Caribbean, field and agricultural work was mostly done, but the presence of Indians within the Caribbean and other places of the world post-servitude is still present and we can see this in the domestic servitude systems that present today, similar to the domestic servitude field within India.

Colonial spatial practices are reflective all over the world. The evolution of the living quarters of enslaved people inhabited by Indian indentured workers can be studied in correlation to socially structured power. Globally, archaeological evidence of where servants, enslaved people, indentured servants, domestic workers, etc. occupied within the household is evident through the material evidence that they have left behind, whether that is within the employer's home or the designated spaces they live in outside of their employer's home. In some spaces within the U.S, outside of evidence of slavery on plantations, servitude within the household is evident through the location of the servant's bedrooms and living areas which are secluded and away from the areas of living for the family, similar to the examples discussed within India. They are built so the servants are seldom seen and can carry out their work without much acknowledgment from the family. Something that is a global pattern that almost every region has seen and is still experiencing is class differences. The issue of class difference often entails "massive homes that demanded an entire staff to keep them running."[35]

Domestic servitude, like other forms of work that is historically seen to be done by people who are in lower socioeconomic status or social class can be studied through the places these workers have occupied in the past. The people who are employed in this role, whether willingly or out of necessity, often do not get a voice to share their experiences and the hardships they endure. To locate this

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[33] Julia Jong Haines, "Mauritian Indentured Labour and Plantation Household Archaeology," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 55, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 509–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/0067270x.2020.1841966.
[34] Striking Women, "Indentured Labour South Asia".

[35] Lily Theders, "Driehaus Museum," Driehausmuseum.org, 2025, https://driehausmuseum.org/blog/view/below-americas-stairs-domestic-servants-in-the-gilded-age..

knowledge, we can consult the material evidence that they have left behind and interpret what this said about their lives. Advocacy within the modern day is seen through sociopolitical movements and protests that are held to better the conditions of domestic workers. Vandana Bhujan, writing for a blog to empower South Asian women, claims that the solution to the inequalities faced within the domestic servitude sphere lies in financial education which, historically, South Asian women have not had access to.[36] The Global Fund for Women claims that "domestic worker activism is present at the national and state levels" in India by raising awareness and creating solidarity within the domestic worker's field.[37] This unification between workers would hopefully encourage private households to legally be recognized as workplaces and domestic work as a field to qualify as work under labor laws.[38] Social progress, seen through the work of Sr. Christin Mary, coordinator for the National Domestic Workers' Movement, aims to create equality for domestic workers within their treatment and advocate for their rights.[39] Through the examination of the archaeological place of domestic workers, we have learned that these jobs are the backbone of how society functions within India and other parts of the world, maintaining the households for families who contribute in their own ways to society, while also providing people in need with some form of employment. Mary states that the NDWM was started "to empower the Indian domestic workers who had no recognition, no identity, no visibility, and who were treated by the employers like slaves."[40] Domestic workers' spaces are reflective of this inequality between their position and their employer's while also implying mistreatment such as unfair wages and lack of governmental regulation on this industry. Social systems that contribute to hierarchical power dynamics in India are shaped by systems such as class and caste that have been implemented into everyday life, creating distinct positions in society.

[36] Vandana Bhujang, "Advertising Services," Girl Power Talk, September 22, 2024, https://girlpowertalk.com/financial-literacy-of-women-in-india/.
[37] Global Fund For Women, "Female Domestic Workers Rights Movement in India," Global Fund for Women, January 6, 2021, https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/movements/domestic-workers-rights-movement/.
[38] Global Fund For Women, "Female Domestic Workers Rights Movement in India,"
[39] Philip Mathew, "Q & a with Sr. Christin Mary, Advocate for India's Domestic Workers," Global Sisters Report, January 12, 2021,
[40] Mathew, "Q & a with Sr. Christin Mary, Advocate for India's Domestic Workers," Global https://www.globalsistersreport.org/ministry/q-sr-christin-mary-advocate-indias-domestic-workers.

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