

Conceptualizing Work/Employment in India:

A Study of *Chakri* in Colonial Bengal (19th–20th centuries)¹

Abstract: Conceptualizing Work/Employment in India: A Study of Chakri in Colonial Bengal (19th–20th centuries). This paper examines *chakri* as a distinct category of work in colonial Bengal. It traces the emergence of *chakri* in Bengal's encounters with colonialism, and the subsequent association of the category with "English education" and the *bhadralok* (literally, "respectable ones"). *Chakri* was and continues to be a referent of white-collar jobs in Bengal. In addition, it was crucial to consolidating respectability, as the *bhadralok* distinguished themselves from those who engaged in manual or menial labour (e.g., peasants, domestic workers etc.). However, a closer look at the terms *chakure* (employee) and *chakor* (servant) reveals differing connotations. Characteristics embedded in the notion of *chakor* – service, servitude and loyalty – noticeably blurred the lines that divided respectable work from manual-menial labour. Yet divisions between these two were maintained, even as the undertones of *servant* varied morally within the socio-economic categories of *chakure* and *chakor*. At the same time, this study extends beyond immediate concerns of livelihood in order to encompass broader yet interrelated realms of citizenship and nation building.

Key Words: bhadralok, chakri, colonial Bengal, kaaj, servitude

"Many considered Kamalakanta mad [...] It's not as if he wasn't educated. He knew a smattering of English, a smattering of Sanskrit. But knowledge which couldn't lead to earning a livelihood, is such knowledge knowledge at all? Fact of the matter is one should be able to approach *sahibs*. Many big fools who can merely sign their names – they acquired much property – in my opinion they are indeed scholars. And erudite men like Kamalakanta who have read a few books; they are in my opinion absolute fools.

Kamalakanta had once obtained *chakri*. One *sahib*, hearing him speak in English had appointed him as a clerk. But Kamalakanta could not sustain the job [...] He

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would write poetry in official documents – on official letters, he would write verses of a poet, god knows who, by the name of Shakespeare.”²

I.

Chakri is such an inalienable aspect of Bengali middle-class life and lifestyle that as a category of work it seems almost ahistorical. It is as if it had always been there and as if the Bengali middle-class man (more than the woman) has always been distinguished as *chakure* – one who earns his/her livelihood from *chakri*. And yet *chakri* is an important feature of Bengali history, representative and symptomatic of the complex relations between the colonizer and the colonized. It is also significant in its socio-economic effects on the historico-sociological formations of the Bengali middle classes, locally known as the *bhadralok*, which literally translates as ‘respectable people’. It is perhaps for these reasons that social historians are beginning to look at *chakri* in greater detail than before, as a socio-economic category for understanding not only the economic structure of colonial (and post-colonial) Bengal but also of wider social relations encompassing conflict, competition and cooperation with British rule. Sumit Sarkar³ and Dalia Chakrabarti⁴ are significant in their contribution to the study of *chakri*. In this paper, I try to take forward some of their arguments as well as suggest some of my own in conceptualizing the specific case of *chakri* in colonial Bengal.

Chakri was one of the legitimate references of labour markets in Bengal and continues to be so. It represented a category of paid employment that emerged through the engagement with colonialism. All those means of livelihood that are paid for – i.e. those which involve the relation of employer-employee, in other words, salaried jobs⁵ – are called *chakri*. It may also be termed *kaaj* that literally means activity/work. But *kaaj* – unlike *chakri* – extends to unpaid work like housework as well as the work of domestic workers, daily wage labour, etc. *Chakri*, for its part, *always* involves the notion of working for someone else and most importantly, knowledge and skills.⁶ It precludes the sense of intimacy and the familial nature of work that often characterizes *kaaj* such as unpaid housework and the labour of domestic helpers. The word *kaaj* is also used to refer to Bengali Hindu funeral rites. *Kaaj* thus extends to notions of intimacy, informality and the private space. *Chakri*, by contrast, is based on the *contractual*, formal nature of the office and connotes secular, public space.⁷ Yet, interestingly, the word *chakure* (i.e. employee) and *chakor* (i.e. servant) are derivatives of each other. *Chakri* was and continues to be the referent of white-collar jobs in Bengal.

It is impossible to say with certainty exactly when *chakri* was introduced to Bengal. But definitely by the 19th century, *chakri* had become much sought after. Multiple references to it can be found in the literature of the time. In this essay paper, I specifically look at the Bengali clerks (*kerani*) as one of the earliest forms of *chakri* in Bengal. In addition, it is more feasible to study the *keranis* than any other category of *chakure* because they are amply mentioned in the literature of 19th- and 20th-century Bengal. They are singularly important to a study of Bengali socio-economic relations in this epoch inasmuch as they represented the emergence of the middle classes in Bengal – the *bhadralok*. British government and mercantile offices thrived in Bengal, particularly Calcutta. Until about the 19th century, no Indian was appointed to these offices. However, around that time, it was felt by the East India Company officials that Indians should be recruited to the ranks of clerks in these offices. They were paid lower salaries than their British counterparts, which made economic sense, and they knew Bengali, which made day-to-day administration that much easier. Hence, *chakri* emerged as a tool of effective governance.

The remainder of this paper has been divided into five sections. Sections II, III and IV seek to understand the nature of *chakri* by tracing its emergence and establishment in colonial Bengal. Western education, clock time and formal institutionalization of *chakri* were central to establishing it as a crucial aspect of the new modern disciplinary structure of governance. And, as I try to show in section V, precisely because it was a crucial adjunct of governance, *chakri* could stake *legitimate claims to governance* otherwise denied to those earning their livelihood from *kaaj*. Taken together, these sections – by looking at the various aspects of *chakri* – attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of *chakri*. At the same time, the central aim of this paper is to demonstrate that *chakri* is more than an economic category of work: it is integral to the socio-cultural politics in Bengal. The socio-cultural aspects of *chakri* become clear when one considers the strong association between *chakri* and respectability as manifest in the nomenclature *bhadralok*. *Chakri* is opposed to *kaaj*, associated as it is with ‘non-respectable’ people. Yet, as one studies the bases of such distinctions, it becomes amply clear that boundaries between *chakri* and *kaaj*, and consequently between the ‘respectable’ and ‘non-respectable’ people, are highly inexact. In studying *chakri*, therefore, one necessarily moves beyond immediate questions of livelihood into realms of identity formation. In the case of colonial and post-colonial Bengal, issues of identity formation become particularly complex, for they are closely associated with those of citizenship and nation-building as well. The concluding section briefly looks at *chakri* and *kaaj* in present-day Bengal to bring to the fore questions needing to be addressed at a future point by those studying *chakri* in Bengal.

II.

The office of the clerk in Bengal predates British colonialism and British mercantile offices. Clerks were important to the smooth functioning of the administration in the Mughal era, lasting in Bengal roughly until the latter half of the 18th century.

“In retrospect the year 1765, when the East India Company became the Emperor’s *Diwan*, has come to be seen as the dividing line between Mughal and British Bengal. The establishment of British predominance in Eastern India was, however, a gradual and a protracted process [...] taking a considerable time to become fully effective throughout Bengal and Bihar.”⁸

“In [the] Mughal regime, in the district, as in the provincial head-quarters, particularly in the gigantic bureaucracy of revenue and finance (*dewani*), there existed a considerable class of subordinate officers and clerks, variously known as *mutsaddis* and *muharrirs* (accountants), *khazanchis* (treasurers), *munshis* (writers) and *poddars*, who were generally Hindus.”⁹

Dalia Chakrabarti argues that “[t]he office of clerk in Bengal was a colonial transplant. But throughout the history of the state in India, office-bearers, though with different nomenclatures, would do what has been clerk’s work since colonial times”.¹⁰ This argument, I believe, conflates the nature of the clerk’s office in colonial times with that of pre-colonial times. If indeed the colonial clerk’s office had already been presumed in the Mughal era, then clerkship – and *chakri* as such – ceases to be a viable topic of enquiry into the changing historical and economic situation in Bengal. But there are crucial differences between the clerk’s office in colonial and pre-colonial (Mughal) times that are instrumental to understanding the specific nature of *chakri* in colonial Bengal. The office of the clerk in the Mughal regime, encompassing the *dewans*, the *muharrirs*, the *munshis*, etc., was based on the patron-client relationship known as the *jajmani* system. While it is impossible here to dwell at length on the system of land grants and tributes in the Mughal era, it suffices to say that the *dewans* and revenue administrators called *mutaseddis* could obtain rights from the emperor to collect revenues from the peasants in addition to their remuneration. Of course, not all clerks and petty administrative officials had access to opportunities of upward mobility. However, “many petty officials are known to have lived lives of great ostentation. Some went in for spectacular charities and one established a *pura* (a small township) in the name of his son.”¹¹ The office of the clerk was greatly dependent on the *Nawab*’s patronage. The social origins of the clerks point to the fact that traditional caste occupation roles dictated the choice of appointees to the posts of clerks.

“[T]he clerks were almost exclusively Kayastha, Baniyas (both Jain and Hindu) or Khatris by caste. The trading communities’ traditional familiarity with ‘all Money-business’ as Fryer put it, apparently gave them a virtual monopoly over jobs which involved accounting procedure.”¹²

Certain nomenclatures pertaining to divisions within clerkship were carried forward from the Mughal times into the early British period.

“From a statement of salary scales of those working in ministerial establishments in the Collector’s office in 1772, we gather that there were serishtadars, record-keepers, head *muharrirs*, *muharrirs*, *khazanchis* and *nazir* – all doing something similar or analogous. Some of these offices were actually from Mughal administration continuing within the colonial fold.”¹³

Broadly, until the last decade of the 18th century, the transition from the Mughal to the British era remained fluid with administrative and political overlapping. However, from around the beginning of the 19th century, British rule had been firmly consolidated in Bengal in particular. Consequently, the office of the clerk also underwent changes. The office of the colonial clerk in the 19th and 20th centuries was based on the modern contract that is terminable and ideally not determined by caste and religious considerations. In theory, *chakri* offered opportunities of upward mobility to lower-caste men. In practice, though, caste continued to play an important role in recruiting candidates to the office of the clerk. *Chakri* hardly afforded upward mobility to lower castes since upper-caste Hindu men particularly the Kayasthas who had traditionally been employed as clerks in pre-British times, continued to be appointed to clerk posts. Out of 33,283 Kayasthas recorded in the 1901 Census of Caste Wise Distribution of Occupation among the Hindus of Calcutta, 10,125 were occupied as clerks.¹⁴ The three higher castes of Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas continued to predominate amongst the clerks while the lower castes continued mostly in their traditional occupations of menial/manual work. The lower castes, particularly the untouchables, were basically kept out of the ambit of clerkship since they were not allowed entry to schools. Parents of upper-caste students wouldn’t allow their children to study with lower-caste children for fear of caste ‘pollution’. Yet such study was crucial to acquiring the skills for clerkship or *chakri* of other kinds. Not until 1937 is there mention of ‘scheduled caste’ (lower-caste)¹⁵ appointees to the post of clerks being recommended.¹⁶ Although traditional caste norms and patronage continued to retain their importance in gaining access to the post of clerks, it was only in British India that the office of the clerk was institutionalized in the economic structure of a modern state.

After 1857, when the Crown officially took over the reins of India’s administration from the British East India Company, “the essential principles of bureaucratic

organization namely rational organization of work, hierarchical arrangement based on predetermined formal impersonal rules, continuous staff, increasing specialization, recruitment on the basis of technical qualification, separation of office from private spheres and rational calculative ethos [were] progressively introduced".¹⁷ Regular examinations were held to select suitable employees for *chakri* in government administrative jobs using clearly outlined qualifying criteria. Although the Public Services Commission, the official body responsible for conducting competitive examinations for the recruitment of clerks, came into being in 1937, "the procedure of recruitment through examination began much earlier".¹⁸ Tasks to be performed by clerks were formally codified for the first time in the 20th century in "The Report of the Committee appointed to draw up a Comprehensive Scheme for improving the Pay and Position of Ministerial Officers 1905-06".¹⁹

The other significant point of departure is the introduction of clock time by the British. The Mughal clerk's office did not operate on the notion of fixed working/office hours. In contrast, specific work hours characterized *chakri* in 19th- and 20th-century Bengal. Sumit Sarkar argues:

"Clocks and disciplinary time came more or less together here, whereas in Western Europe the transition from medieval clocks showing hours alone, through watches ticking off minutes and seconds, to bureaucratic-industrial structures of time, took some five hundred years – a history moreover marked by a great deal of pain, resentment and resistance. Colonial India had to undergo a similar process, and that under conditions of alien rule, within a couple of generations [...] *For the educated middle-class bhadralok of nineteenth-century Bengal, disciplinary time manifested itself primarily in the form of clerical jobs in British-controlled government or mercantile offices.*"²⁰

Classification and regularization of time into stipulated work and leisure hours was a new phenomenon in Bengal introduced by the colonial powers. The Report (cited above) also referred to the time that ought to be taken in performing the codified tasks.²¹ The clerks were supposed to work from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. out of which "six hours to nine and one quarter of an hour [...] were to be spent on drafting letters and making and comparing fair copies".²² While seasonal time based on agricultural practices of sowing, reaping and harvesting crops might have affected work in the Mughal epoch, a linear concept of time was ushered into Indian society, most poignantly in the modern office, in the colonial era. 'Disciplinary time', in fact, was one of the most hated features of *chakri*. Many Bengali satires of the time revolve around the plight of clerks bound to their desks from morning to dusk. Punctuality was institutionalized in the clerk's life as reaching the office late for three consecutive days could lead to demotion.²³ One of the earliest recorded protests by Bengali clerks was

in response to disciplinary time. In 1905, 247 clerks of the Burn Iron Works in Howrah went on strike protesting against a new system of recording attendance, which they found humiliating.²⁴ Although the strike itself failed to extract any benefits for the clerks – those dissenting were dismissed and new recruits appointed to their posts – the protesting clerks were widely hailed as heroes.

Thus, the impersonal contractual nature of the job along with disciplinary time characterized *chakri* generally and the clerk's office specifically in 19th- and 20th-century Bengal.

III.

The office of the modern bureaucratic clerk in Bengal was an outcome of the administrative exigencies of the British East India Company (henceforth referred to as 'the Company'). The Company came to India in the first half of the 18th century with the express intent of conducting trade. As the Company's might grew, of course, it felt the need of recruiting clerks and other petty officials for the smooth functioning of its administrative affairs. "Initially the clerks were called *writers* and *factors* in East India Company administration. They were Europeans and Eurasians."²⁵ More specifically,

"factors and writers [...] were part of a four tier covenanted civil servants. The other two were Senior Merchant and Junior Merchant. The *factor* was originally a commercial agent or an executive head of a factory. But over the years the term lost any relation to occupation of the *factor*, and even ceased to have any application at all except in the nominal list of service. The *writer*, really a copying clerk, held the rank and style of junior grade of covenanted civil servant. They were part of a hierarchy in existence from an early date in Company's history up to 1833, in which each civilian in Company employment was classified in the first five years as *writer*, then in the eighth year as *factor*, in ninth and eleventh as junior merchant and thence-forward as senior merchant."²⁶

Englishmen, Portuguese, Armenians, and Anglo-Indians (i.e. those born of mixed Indian-European parentage) were recruited to these posts. Bengalis did not have access to these posts until well into the 19th century. In a parliamentary speech of 1831/32, Holt Mackenzie argued that employing native Bengalis would be much cheaper than their British or European counterparts. In 1860 James Long "remarked that the Bengali kerani could be employed at one-third the cost of Eurasians [...]" In 1833, the office of deputy collector was created for Indians, in 1837 that of principal sudder, and in 1843, the deputy magistrate."²⁷ Although Europeans and Eurasi-

ans were still recruited to these posts, they were simultaneously thrown open to the Bengalis as well. As a result, over the years Bengalis were increasingly appointed to the lower rungs of administration. The 1891 census recorded that out of 58,614 persons occupied in clerical jobs, only 79 were British-born Europeans.²⁸

“A direct reference to clerks occurs in 1921 Census with reference to employees in irrigation, telegraph and postal departments. In the three departments there were 49 European and Anglo Indian clerks while Bengali clerks numbered 3877. Measured with reference to all persons directly employed in the three departments, clerks constituted 16.56%, while among clerks Bengali clerks constituted 98.75% (“Subsidiary Table ix, Number of Persons employed on 18th March, 1921 on Railways and in the Irrigation, Telegraph, and Postal Departments in Bengal”, Census of Bengal [1921], 56A). This indicates Indianisation of clerks.”²⁹

However, while these data do suggest that more and more Indians were being appointed to lower-rank administrative jobs, it also points to an increasingly exclusivist approach to the more important higher posts. For those were filled almost exclusively by the British. While in the early 18th century, officials of the East India Company acquired an ostentatious lifestyle similar to that of the Mughal *Nawabs*, by the end of the century the Company began to frown upon such practices. As a result, by the early 19th century,

“the British had emerged from the role of traders and were now firmly entrenched in that of administrators. This required a new breed of Englishmen. The old habits of the Company ‘nabobs’ of the previous era – their adoption of native customs like smoking the hubble-bubble, keeping an Indian mistress, and offering puja to the Goddess Kali at the ancient temple of Kalighat in the south of Calcutta – had to be discarded so that the new rulers could maintain their separate identity and thereby the prestige of the imperial culture.”³⁰

The democratization of *chakri* – in the sense of legally being accessible to application by all Indians irrespective of caste, class, religion, and gender – was part of a highly stratified and bureaucratized administration characteristic of the modern state. Nevertheless, by the 20th century, *keranigiri* (i.e. clerkship) had become a much sought after *chakri* for the Bengali middle classes – mostly for men but also (later on) a few women.³¹ In fact, *chakri* came to be established as a signifier of respectability and was therefore significant to the very consolidation of the *bhadralok*, that social category of Bengali middle classes. Further, new educational institutions imparting English education became instrumental to obtaining *chakri*. Concurrently, *chakri* came to be seen as a hallmark of respectability, a critical way to distinguish the

Bengali *bhadralok* from those engaged in manual-menial labour such as peasants, domestic workers, daily wage labourers, etc.

IV.

“The terms *middle class*, *literati*, and *intelligentsia* all have been used to describe it. Marxists have called it a petty bourgeoisie [...] A favorite target of the colonizer’s ridicule, it was once famously described as ‘an oligarchy of caste tempered by matriculation.’ More recently, historians inspired by the well-meaning dogmas of American cultural anthropology called it by the name the class had given to itself – the *bhadralok*, ‘respectable folk’ [...] Whichever the name, the object of description has, however, rarely been misunderstood: in the curious case of colonial Bengal, all of these terms meant more or less the same thing.”³²

In Sanskrit, the word *bhadra* originally meant ‘privileged’ or ‘fortunate’.³³ Subsequently in Bengali, it came to mean ‘polite’ and/or ‘decent’ while *lok* designates ‘person.’ Hence, *bhadralok* effectively signifies ‘polite or decent people.’ In this sense, the present Bengali understanding of *bhadra* is slightly removed from its Sanskrit counterpart but “the association of both with the condition of being civilized” is unquestionable.³⁴ Some scholars like Subrata Dasgupta³⁵ refer to the *bhadralok* as *bhadralok class*. I, however, do not find it apt to think of the *bhadralok* as a class if one understands class as “a specific and rigorous relationship to property in the narrow sense”.³⁶ The *bhadralok* itself is differentiated into different strata that could more rightly be conceived of as class in the previous sense. For

“[t]he British in India needed brokers, agents, revenue collectors, contractors, lawyers, and managers to help them in their transactions with Indian producers. They needed Indians as middlemen, in other words. These middlemen in Bengal became the core of the Bengali *bhadralok* [...] The Deb family of Shobhabazar, the Tagores (or Thakurs) of Pathurighata, the Tagores of Jara-sanko, the Mallicks of Barabazar [...] and others formed the uppermost echelons (*abhijat*) of the *bhadralok*.”³⁷

A rung lower than the *abhijat* in matters of wealth were the *maddhyabitta*. They worked mostly as teachers, lawyers, small merchants, clerks, and so forth. Some scholars favour a third stratum within the *bhadralok* – the ‘genteel poor’³⁸ or lower middle class. Clerks at the lowest administrative levels may be classified as the genteel poor. But if one understands class in the broader and rather loose sense of a discernible and relatively coherent stratum as regards the breeding and wealth of

its members, then the *bhadralok* might qualify as a class. The *bhadralok* are predominantly formed of the middle classes. I contend, however, that it is appropriate to think of the *bhadralok* neither in terms of class nor occupation alone. It is best thought of as a status group. Class and the nature of occupation contribute to the consolidation of the *bhadralok's* status. Significant to the appellation *bhadralok* is a *certain life style* that in practice (as much as is feasible) and ideology (most definitely): precludes menial and manual labour, greatly emphasizes intellectual pursuits and occupations, and subscribes to a value system that has a love-hate relationship with Anglicization. So, the *bhadralok* includes both class and caste relations in its ambit, and as such does not serve as a counter-model to caste. Class and caste, in India, are interrelated and serve to fortify each other at most times. Since those belonging to the lower castes had very little access to education, particularly to English medium schools or vernacular schools modeled on Western education ideals – *the precursors to obtaining chakri* – they had fewer opportunities for economic upward mobility. They continued to perform menial and manual labour and since these were tasks that were looked down upon, they were (for the most part) excluded from the category of *bhadralok*. Thus, not only did the *bhadralok* as a category not function as a counter-model to caste, it reaffirmed the caste-class nexus that, in practice, precluded the lower castes from its domain.

Are income and property not better indicators of the middle classes' status, or factors in its consolidation, than culture? Joya Chatterji puts forward a similar argument in her discussion of the *bhadralok*. Arguing that the *bhadralok* was in effect a rentier class, she posits, that "this was a class that did not work its land but lived off the rental income it generated. The *bhadralok* gentleman was the antithesis of the horny-handed son-of-the-soil"³⁹ While this may be true for many, given the practices of sub-infeudation and various requirements of the East India Company, and the opportunities thus generated, such a blanket statement cannot apply to everyone. As mentioned already, the *bhadralok* included in its fold different economic strata ranging from the aristocrats with landed property (on the one hand) to the genteel poor (on the other). The latter did not own land or their land holdings were so meager as to not generate enough income to push the genteel poor upward into the ranks of a 'rentier class'. Thus, class cannot sufficiently explain the different economic ranges encapsulated within the folds of the *bhadralok*. Further the boundaries between *bhadralok* and non-*bhadralok* worlds are fuzzy and ill-explained by ideas of class-based hegemony. As I shall attempt to show later, the economic differences between the genteel poor and the menial servants of aristocrat *bhadralok* families may not have been vast. Despite considerable anxieties generated amongst the former regarding maintenance of their respectability, they were nevertheless not considered *chotolok/non-bhadralok*.⁴⁰

The very notion 'respectable' is constituted of various cultural elements such as an emphasis on intellect and intellectual pursuits, certain styles of dress, reliance on Hindu Brahmanism, etc. – all of which present many problems to those interested in studying them since any generalization is bound to be faced with individual vagaries. Yet and despite these problems, *bhadralok* has become a generalized sociological category. As such it is recognized to have emerged in colonial Bengal. It stood in a relation of subalternity to the British and of political and cultural dominance to the uneducated masses of Bengal.⁴¹ I am not suggesting that the *bhadralok* emerged as a result of British colonialism alone or that the *bhadralok* might not have existed prior to the natives' engagement with the British. I propose, however, that it can be argued without hesitation that the colonial experience definitively shaped the *bhadralok* as an identifiable category, thereby consolidating its identity in more than one way.

Here, I shall restrict myself to the interrelations between *chakri*, English education and the *bhadralok*.⁴² *Chakri* and English education are inextricably interlinked since a minimal knowledge of English and training in the wider pedagogical system covered under the blanket term 'English education' were the foremost qualifications necessary to aspire to *chakri*. Together, the two consolidated and reflected the *bhadralok's* gentility – and continue to do so. After all, access to English education and consequently white-collar jobs maintained the required social distance – or at least sustained the rhetoric of social distance – from the non-*bhadralok* or the *chotolok* (literally, the 'little people') who engage in menial and manual labour. *Chasha Bhusha Kooli Majur*, i.e. peasants and labourers,⁴³ fall outside the purview of the *bhadralok* world. The three strata of the *bhadralok* were united in their encounter with the British. I am of course not making a case for a singularly uniform experience but a generalization can be made concerning the *bhadralok's* aspirations to Anglicization that in many ways informs its culture until the present. In fact, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' is instructive here, as demonstrated by Tanja Paulitz.⁴⁴ Cultural capital is pivotal to power relations in society as it "provides the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy, as classes distinguish themselves through taste".⁴⁵ Bourdieu's work explains how cultural products and processes – such as education systems, language, norms and values – inscribe the social order in people's minds, leading in turn to a "sense of one's place"⁴⁶. Education systems and pedagogy generally are crucial to the consolidation of cultural capital, and English education firmly established the cultural superiority of the *bhadralok* over the non-*bhadralok*.

English education, i.e. "formal education along Western lines", served as "a fundamental agent in the creative encounter between West and East, between Anglo-Europe and India".⁴⁷ It referred not only to the institutions (schools, colleges) and instruments (English language, certain kinds of school curricula) of its promulga-

tion but more importantly signified one of the modes of introducing the Western model of modernity – and concurrent values and aesthetics – in colonial Bengal. This was recognized, indeed aspired to, by the British themselves. Macaulay’s infamous minutes on the project of introducing English education to the natives is proof of this: “We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern [...] a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”⁴⁸ However, it is not as if English education was imposed on the Bengalis from above. The latter became enthusiastic patrons of English education although English as the medium of instruction received flak from many Bengali *bhadralok* as nationalist sentiments began to rise in 19th- and (especially) 20th-century Bengal.

Some of the earliest English language schools in Bengal were set up by Christian missionaries and wealthy Bengali *bhadralok*. It seems the first English school was “established by public subscription as early as 1727 (or possibly 1734).”⁴⁹ In 1800, Jagomohan Basu founded an English School in Calcutta. Individual efforts notwithstanding, the systematization of Western education in Bengal can roughly be said to have its origins in the first half of the 19th century when the Company started setting aside funds for the promotion of Western sciences in India as well as for the development of oriental studies. A budget of one hundred thousand rupees was set aside for these purposes by the 43rd clause of the 1813 Charter Act.⁵⁰ In the Bengal Presidency, specifically,

“the period from the year 1817 when Hindu College was established until 1835 when Bentinck announced the education policy based on Macaulay’s Minutes, may be called the era of establishment and progress of Western education through the medium of English language. In fact, higher education and education of the higher classes was the major topic of discussions and debates pertaining to educational norms, in government and non-government circles at the time.”⁵¹

At this prestigious College (later Presidency College), the students were taught courses in European science and literature – “the history of England and Greece and Rome, the European classics and the plays of Shakespeare”⁵² – even before these began to be taught in England itself!

Apart from signifying the ‘civilizing’ mission of the British government, English education was also meant to serve the highly important function of creating a repository of eligible candidates for appointment to government jobs. In a March 1825 dispatch, the East India Company Directors asked the government of Bengal to give “a very efficient stimulus to the cultivation of the English language and *useful knowledge* in general among the natives – by a marked preference to successful candida-

tes at College in the selection of persons to fill those situations in service which can be advantageously conferred upon Natives”.⁵³ A few years later, in 1832, Mackenzie, then Secretary to the Government of India, held that the natives trained in English were not much inferior to the Europeans in intellect and the Company would profit from employing them in administrative jobs.⁵⁴ The Western schools introduced by the Company at the time were mostly at the secondary and tertiary levels, whereas primary schools received little attention, with only “less than 40% of public expenditures”⁵⁵ being spent on primary schools. However, after 1854 the Company began concerted efforts to create a mass primary school system imparting education in the vernacular. The gradual increase in attention to primary schools was symptomatic of greater efforts by the British government to regularize or systematize vernacular indigenous schools, *pathshalas*, (especially the primary schools) in line with their model of education. As a consequence,

“[i]n 1853, the Council of Education proposed to follow Adam’s recommendations by establishing experimentally in four districts or zillahs, model vernacular schools and to organize the necessary staff to visit and inspect the existing vernacular schools of those districts. The plan was to provide instruction to the teachers, rewards to the best pupils, supply books to the schools [...] This experiment was carried further in 1855, with the plan of sanctioning government grants for the village schools and completely overhauling their syllabus in favor of more ‘moral’ and educational training. The schools were arranged into circles according to their districts and money rewards were offered by the state to the gurus for improving the education of their pupils.”⁵⁶

English education, therefore, refers not only to English as the medium of instruction but more significantly to a whole new pedagogical and disciplinary system. English education encompassed three critical elements: introduction of new disciplines of study, disciplining the students’ and teachers’ code of conduct, and the phenomenon of disciplinary time. Indian history and geography, which had hitherto not existed as systematic subjects of study in Bengali schools, were made a part of the school curricula.⁵⁷ Yet these disciplines were not direct transpositions or mere replications of courses taught in universities of Britain. Rather,

“[m]uch thought and effort was spent in the nineteenth century in determining suitable content of Western education under colonial conditions. The emphasis clearly was on providing a general humanistic education [...] an entire academic discipline was invented for the teaching of English literature as the formative spiritual influence on a colonized elite. The consequences were far-reaching for the emergence of the new literary and aesthetic disciplines in the modern Indian languages.”⁵⁸

The new education system also sought to discipline the bodies and minds of students and teachers alike. It was felt that the indigenous teachers, *gurus*, should undergo special training themselves.

“Henry Woodrow, the Inspector of Schools for East Bengal [...] initiated another project of transferring a certain number of gurus from their native village schools to a Normal School, where they were to remain for a year and ‘receive instructions in their proper duties as teachers.’ In the meanwhile, the Normal School pupils were to act as their replacements in the village schools.”⁵⁹

These changes rendered the earlier class of *gurus* redundant, making way for a new breed of teachers who would, quite in keeping with the current educational ethos, be henceforth addressed as *master-mashai* instead of *guru-mashai*. The image of the *guru-mashai* was transformed from that of an able teacher to that of an idle, barely educated man. While it is true that most *pathshala* teachers were themselves educated only in the rudiments of elementary education, it is also true that the new rhetoric – circulating in the *bhadralok* society as a response to official policies of a centralized education system – reviles the *guru* vis-à-vis highly romanticized figure of the master. The new type of teacher was an embodiment of erudition, purity of the soul, and self-sacrifice for the benefit of his students. A master had not entered his profession to make money: “Only those who strive to be like the selfless, guileless Brahmin scholar of the past, satisfied only by a meal of tamarind leaves, should accept the mantle of a teacher.”⁶⁰ The Brahmin scholar or the *master-mashai* was, in other words, the virtuous Bengali *bhadralok* – or at least the aspirational ideal image for which the *bhadralok* stood. As more and more indigenous *pathshalas* fell under the rubric of a centralized government system of education, the erstwhile *gurus* had to make way for *bhadralok* in the teacher’s position. Many *bhadralok* such as Dinesh-chandra Sen “took up the selfless job of teaching students in remote areas”⁶¹

Interestingly, the self-sacrificing ideal *bhadralok* teacher touched upon the Christian notion of ‘calling’ which is absent in any other form of *chakri*. *Chakri* did not signify the *chakure*’s response to the divine. On the contrary, it represented servitude to foreign lords. 19th- and 20th-century Bengali literature is replete with the drudgery of the *chakure*’s life, which allegedly stood in stark contrast to one’s personal life-world. The anxieties created by the public domain of *chakri* – the domain of drudgery and servitude – were anything but divine or a symbol of one’s commitment to God. Moreover, any attempts at drawing a parallel between the ideas of the ideal teacher and having a calling must be tempered with the fact that it is the mythical⁶² Brahmin who is considered by the *bhadralok* to be the perfect master.

The third component, disciplinary time, altered the nature of indigenous schools absolutely. Earlier the schools allowed for a long mid-day break. This “was changed

to a continuous session from ten to four”.⁶³ While earlier the system of annual or terminal examinations did not exist,⁶⁴ these were now introduced and students regularly examined. Clock time in schools, as in modern offices, was completely different from traditional Hindu notions of cyclical time, which are dependent on seasonal agricultural practices.

Thus, the new education system and *chakri* were both partakers of modernity as it emerged in and through the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. An article in the 1876 *Calcutta Review* noted that, “the *pathshala* had changed its character and become a unit in the Government scheme of *Kerani* manufacturing education”.⁶⁵ At the same time, the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed phenomenal increase in the numbers of Anglo-vernacular schools, particularly at the middle or secondary level. Lessons were taught partly in English and partly in Bengali; at the college level, education was imparted almost solely in English. It is extremely significant that in Bengal,

“[l]iteracy in English increased by 100 percent between 1891 and 1901, by 50 percent in the next decade, and by 50 percent again in the next. In 1921, while the figure for literacy stood at 18 percent in Bengal, 3.4 percent of the population was literate in English. By 1918, Calcutta University, with twenty-seven thousand students, was the largest university in the world, and the proportion of literate people taking full-time university courses was the same as in the United Kingdom [...] Not surprisingly, the bulk of the university graduates were employed in government service, education, and law.”⁶⁶

In this way, English education was established as the primary requirement for *chakri*. Concurrently, *chakri* as a category of work secured and validated ‘useful knowledge’ so much that English was considered by many *bhadralok* to be *kaajer bhasha* (language of work and/or useful language) as opposed to *bhaaber bhasha* (language of emotions).⁶⁷ Tithi Bhattacharya⁶⁸ argues that, given the high fees of colleges in Calcutta, it is extremely unlikely that sons of the *maddhyabitta bhadralok* could afford such education. Yet most Bengali clerks belonged to this very section of the *bhadralok*. Although the office of the clerk required only a rudimentary knowledge of English language, it necessitated a long and intensive training or apprenticeship in the wider model of a pedagogical and disciplinary system – the ubiquitous English education – that stood for much more than simply the knowledge of English language.

Chakri and English education reaffirmed each other not only in their direct mutual assistance but in their contribution to the wider socio-economic and political conditions of colonialism that fostered a new disciplinary structure. Kamalakanta, even in his quiet rebellion to *keranigiri*, stands testimony to this.

V.

Chakri and *chakure* (employee) are closely associated with the word *chakor*, designating ‘servant/slave/enslavement’. The aspect of enslavement in *chakri* has been succinctly brought out in the works of Sarkar and Chakrabarti.⁶⁹ A closer look, however, at the various implications embedded in the notion of *chakor* – service, servitude and loyalty – considerably blurs the seemingly sharp dividing lines between *chakri* and *kaaj*. Simultaneously, divisions between the two are maintained as the undertones of ‘servant’ acquire different moral dynamics within the socio-economic categories of *chakri* and *kaaj* or *chakure* and *chakor*. Such an examination also takes one beyond the immediate concerns of livelihood to broader but interrelated realms of citizenship and nation-building.

Chakri including the office of the clerk was much coveted by the *bhadralok*. Richard Temple, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, observed around the 1870s that due to surplus availability of cheap clerical labour, the Government could no longer “afford reasonable remuneration to those engaged in it”.⁷⁰ Underpayment and, more importantly, wage differentials based on racism represent the underside of *chakri*, particularly *keranigiri*. In the 18th century,

“[t]he pay differential was evident in a salary structure where the European *writers* were placed at the scale of Rs. [i.e. rupees] 300 per month and the Indian *Sarishtadar* at Rs. 250 pm, the Head *Muhurrir* (translator) at Rs. 100 pm, the *Munshi* (clerk) at Rs. 75 pm, the Persian *Muhurrir* at Rs. 50 pm and the Bengali *Muhurrir* at Rs. 40 pm [...] In 1856 the European or Eurasian ‘assistants’ in Secretariat, Government of India (Finance) received payment of Rs. 200/150/120/100/90/80/70 while the Bengali Hindu assistants [...] received a much lower payment of Rs. 60/50/45/40/35/30/25/22/20.”⁷¹

However, a salary of Rs. 20 was not really so inconsequential at the time, and unemployment among the educated was not yet the volatile issue it would later be. Instead, “[w]hat made *chakri* intolerable at this specific conjuncture was rather its connotation of impersonal cash nexus and authority, embodied above all in the new rigorous discipline of work regulated by clock time [...] Time bound office work, again, had to be performed in the unfamiliar enclosed space of the modern city building”.⁷² *Chakri*, then, despite its appeal to the *bhadralok*, typified servitude and implied servitude to a foreign imperial power. The office, in turn, was the site of continuous racial discrimination toward Bengali employees. *Chakri* came to symbolize enslavement and subservience. Much of 19th to 20th centuries literature revolves around the theme of the slavish and enslaved *kerani*. This body of literature, mostly satires and farces, offers a subtle critique of *chakri* and foregrounds the drudgery of

lower middle-class life. Criticisms directed at enslavement to the British became more vehement post 1905 – chiefly after Lord Curzon’s proposal of dividing Bengal elicited widespread protests by the Bengalis who were engulfed by the spirit of nationalism.

Yet for all the connotations of enslavement in *chakri*, the word *chakor* was most often used to refer to domestic helpers. And the term *kaaj*, not *chakri*, referred to their work. Domestic workers have been an integral part of the Bengali *bhadralok* households in colonial times as much as today. The changing socio-economic conditions resulting from an increase in administrative jobs and the consequent growth of the urban wage economy were major factors leading to the increase in employment of domestic workers in middle-class households in colonial Bengal. Calcutta, the hub of commercial and administrative activities in colonial Bengal, also attracted migrants from the countryside, many of whom had traditionally been artisans and craftsmen. Nonetheless, these skilled individuals,

“who had flocked to the city with gleaming prospect of success in the eighteenth century, received a hard blow by the middle of the nineteenth, being unable to compete with the European tradesmen who poured into the metropolis to satisfy the rich clientele. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century the majority of the once-prosperous artisans and craftsmen were reduced to the ranks of lowliest labourers – the barbers and washermen, the servants and scavengers.”⁷³

Domestic workers, known variously as *chakor* or *britta*, encapsulated a wide range of workers: servants for the household and servants for the outdoors. They ranged from *khansama* (head chef) and cooks to the head waiter and peons; from the palanquin bearers and the coachman to the gardener, etc. There could be ten to 28 servants for a small family, about 42 for a larger one, and 50 to 60 for really wealthy ones.⁷⁴ Those servants⁷⁵ who had a more intimate interaction with their masters’ families are particularly emblematic of the ambiguous, complex relations between those deemed respectable and non-respectable. The servants in colonial Bengal embodied a patron-client relationship with their *bhadralok* masters. The *chakors* were seen as both cunning and guileless, indispensable but incorrigible. The memoirs of some prominent *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila* (genteel women) record the presence of the *chakors* in their lives, foregrounding the various tensions manifest in the relations between them. Rabindranath Tagore’s poem “Puratan Britya” (The Old Servant) “immortalized in the minds of the Bengali literate population the image of the loyal, faithful, long-suffering servant from the perspective of a remorse-stricken employer.”⁷⁶ Most domestic workers at the time were live-in servants and thus a part of the familial structure, privy to intimate details of the household even though they remained

outside the bounds of 'blood relations'. They were generous "in bestowing on their wealthy and *maddhyabitta bhadralok* masters the necessary tools for leading a luxurious lifestyle that was greatly dependent on the servants, fostered through generations; and all the social 'Paraphernalia of Gentility'".⁷⁷ The wealthy and *maddhyabitta bhadralok* undoubtedly depended on their *chakors* to perform tasks that they themselves considered below their dignity. Due to paucity of adequate data, it is impossible to say with certainty if the lower-middle-class households such as those of the poor clerks earning about Rs. 20 per month could afford even a single domestic worker. Nonetheless, the data gathered in Indian censuses (of 1911, 1921, and 1931) indicate that "domestic service constituted one of the principal occupations of colonial Bengal. From the 1880s on, there was an increasing demand in the hiring of servants in Bengal and by the first decade of the twentieth century domestic service accounted for 12 percent of all occupations in Calcutta, as opposed to 7.3 percent in Bombay, 6.68 percent in Madras, and 6.1 percent in Delhi".⁷⁸ However, whether or not the genteel poor could afford domestic workers is immaterial to the conceptual and ideological – as well as rhetorical – distance between the *chakure* and the *chakors*. While *chakri* was the preserve of the respectable, *kaaj* was the domain of the non-*bhadralok*, derogatorily known as the *chotolok*. The actual difference in remuneration between the lowest paid clerk and a trusted *chakor* in a wealthy *bhadralok* family may very well not have been much. But the fact that the *chakure* was English-educated and the *chakor* was not ensured one the status of *bhadralok* and relegated the other to that of *chotolok*.

At one end of the spectrum, the *chakor* signified merely a *menial servant* while at the other, the *chakure*, despite enslavement to the office and a foreign government, was referred to an *honourable servant* of the Government of India. "In a letter from the Calcutta Civil Financial Committee to the Vice President in Council at Bengal, dated 16.12.1830"⁷⁹ mention was made of writers, including them in the category of civil servants. In the Censuses of Bengal, clerks were variously included in the categories of 'Government Servant', 'Servant to the State', and so on.⁸⁰ The socio-economic categories of *chakri* and *kaaj* thus capture significantly different moral economies: one legitimized and privileged, the other delegitimized and degraded. *Chakor* and *chakure*, then, in a play of semantics, can be opposed to each other in their derived sense of menial servant vis-à-vis honourable government servant. The dynamics of the connotations of 'servant' are significantly different in the life worlds of the *chakor* and the *chakure*.

The *chakor* was supposed to be the very embodiment of unquestioning loyalty to his/her master/mistress. In his/her unshakeable faithfulness, the menial servant was the paragon of humility and self-sacrifice. This is poignantly captured in Tagore's "The Return of the Khokababu"⁸¹ Raicharan, the trusted servant, enters his master's

home when he is barely twelve years old. He is entrusted the task of looking after his master's one-year-old son, Anukul. In time, Anukul's newborn son is also handed over to Raicharan's loving care. Raicharan happily submits himself to all the whims and fancies of his little master, Khokababu. But one evening, tragically, the little master disappears on the banks of a river while in the servant's care. The distraught Raicharan is summarily dismissed from his master's household. Shortly, thereafter, Raicharan himself begets a son and gradually convinces himself that this child is a reincarnation of his Khokababu. In fact, Raicharan brings up his own son as if he were the former's master, showering him with affection and servitude. "Raicharan loved him like a father but cared for him like a servant."⁸² Raicharan remains true to his master even after years of being 'out of service'. His act of deceiving himself in treating his own son as his master is a supreme act of sacrifice where ties of blood are rendered secondary, even superficial, to ties of allegiance to the erstwhile master.

This story is important in highlighting the ideal type of the *chakor* constructed by the *bhadralok*. Most children of wealthy families including the Tagores were brought up in the care of servants. Many were weaned off their mothers in infancy and entrusted in the care of suckling midwives. Abanindranath Tagore recounts an incident concerning 'his' maid:

"Leaving her own home in some village came my Padmadasi who was as black as darkness [...] She went back angry; she told stories, quarreled, worked and left us a long time back. As a reward for bringing me up she received a thick golden chain and a blood spot on her head. Perhaps nobody in the whole world except me has any impression left of her? Perhaps that is why while narrating my own story, I could see that distant woman who had no blood connection with me – sitting on the other side of fifty-five years she was pouring milk in and out of the tumbler for me."⁸³

Blood or blood connection is a symbol of strong, invincible familial ties, expressing "the idea of a certain kind of relatedness in conjunction with the idea of the person, the idea of relative, the idea of marriage, the ideas of issuance and lineality – all of which together define 'kinship' in Bengal."⁸⁴ Yet, many *chakors* without any 'blood connection' became an integral part of *bhadralok* families through providing care and milk, symbolic of maternal concern. When suckling midwives performed this job entrusted to them, they entered this symbolic world of kinship at the same time as their significance became all the more threatening to the relatives who connected 'purely' by blood. Their status and existence within the paternalistic, patronizing *bhadralok* households was precarious even as it was demanding. Assimilated into the father-son model of patronage, gagged by strong emotional ties, the *chakors* were never accorded the status of independent social agents in their own right.

The *chakor*, though not invisible, are definitely inaudible in the discourses of colonial Bengal. The social agency of the *chakor* articulates itself in everyday tactical acts of manipulation – what James Scott so aptly calls “the weapons of the weak”.⁸⁵ The nationalist discourse, however, has no place for the *chakor* as national social agents. Partha Chatterjee argues that the history of nationalist politics in India must recognize the discontinuity and continuity between ‘elite’ and ‘subaltern’ politics, both of which, “in their mutually conditioned historicities [...] have appeared, on the one hand, in the domain defined by the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity, and on the other, in the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing project”.⁸⁶ His work goes on to account for the complex interrelations between the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* men (at one end) and the marginalized *bhadramahila*, the Muslims, the peasants, and the lower castes (at the other). I suggest extending this to *bhadralok chakure/chotolok chakor* to reflect on how legitimized referents of the labour market are much more than just categories of livelihood. Imbricated in the status of legitimized and delegitimized work are issues of citizenship and nation-building.

As a loyal and honourable servant engaged in the service of the nation, the *chakure* is also a *stakeholder* in the country’s governance. The notion of loyalty to the state/employer is brought out succinctly by Therese Garstenauer.⁸⁷ Despite the fact that the civil servant places himself at the state’s disposal – and must therefore honour the state by unquestioning and unwavering loyalty – his occupation denotes prestige and social distinction. This is similar, in some ways, to the *chakure* in his role of the loyal government servant. However, the crucial difference between civil servants as discussed by Garstenauer and the *chakure* in this case is the nature of the state. While the former functioned in a monarchy and later in a free republic, the latter were subjects of a colonial state. In the colonial context, the *chakure*’s anxiety was heightened as he (or she) was a legitimate servant of a colonial government, a government that was increasingly seen as illegitimate by the people of India. It is significant that in the colonial context, the *chakor*’s subservience and loyalty to the master is never bereft of legitimacy whereas the colonial servant’s loyalty to the foreign government borders on delegitimacy. But this has no effects on the hierarchy between the *chakure* and the *chakor*. The former is a legitimate citizen with claims in the new nation-building process – in contrast to the latter whose identity as a legitimate citizen is never absolute. To maintain a legitimate stakehold in governance, it seemed all the more necessary for the *chakures* to want an indigenous government in place of an imperial one. In 1905, when the clerks of the Burn Company went on strike, the three hundred who protested were exalted as heroes in the nationalist discourse, and their strike was projected as a patriotic act of defiance against colonial rule. The subsequent strike by clerks of the Howrah Division of the Railways was glorified in

much the same way. But it remains unclear to what extent these protests were in fact nationalist and not simply a response to the immediate conditions of work, irrespective of the nature of the state (colonial or indigenous).⁸⁸ However, many *chakures* such as teachers, lawyers, doctors, and others were leading figures in the Bengali nationalist struggle. From roughly the last decades of the 19th century – and definitely from the first of the 20th century – Bengal (and India as such) witnessed an upsurge in nationalist sentiments. On 12th June 1905, in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra, a college teacher and ardent nationalist, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, founded the Servants of India Society. It was established with the aim of creating “a band of selfless and intelligent workers who would dedicate their lives to the service of the nation.”⁸⁹ It was no longer enough to be a servant of India, the state. Instead, one had to be a servant of India, the motherland. While there was dignity and honour in serving the state, *glory* could be attained only in service of the motherland. Where the primary allegiance of the *chakor* lay with the individual master, that of the *bhadralok chakure* lay with the nation or motherland (as the case may be). The petty status of the *chakor* is consolidated in his/her sole service to the individual and that without claims on the latter. The government servant, however, in his/her service to the nation also stakes a claim to nationhood. The transfer of power from the colonial to the sovereign government did not challenge the nature of the categories of work since such a change did not mean a change in the rationale for a modern, bureaucratic state. *Chakri* and the *chakure* remain legitimate referents of the labour market while the *chakor*, though not an illegitimate worker, remains delegitimized. An elderly conservative woman in a *bhadralok* household in Calcutta of the 1990s, when asked how she felt “about male servants touching her clothes [responded:] ‘Doesn’t bother me, I am perfectly happy. A servant isn’t really a man; a servant is a servant.’”⁹⁰

VI.

Although live-in domestic workers are still extremely important to *bhadralok* households in present-day Bengal, a common phenomenon is that of an individual domestic worker employed in several households. To the extent that such a scenario has divested the ‘master-servant’ relationship of its patron-client characteristic and conferred a relatively more impersonal, contractual nature on it, it has come to resemble the nature of *chakri*. The intimate nature of *kaaj* has also been diluted by the growing importance of clock time to domestic workers’ work within the private sphere. The notion of working hours now also applies to a certain extent to those domestic workers working in several houses. While the live-in worker must remain

at the beck and call of the master/mistress throughout the day, there is some notion of private time or leisure time for non-live-in workers. Time is also one of the pet grouses that middle-class employers direct at the domestic workers. The latter are often reproached for coming late to work. “You are late today”, “You are late again”, “Is this the time to come?”, are common refrains.⁹¹

Yet the domestic worker’s labor never falls under the ambit of *chakri*, it remains *kaaj*. And domestic workers, in contemporary parlance, are often referred to as *kaaj-er lok*, the person who works. However, this term of address acknowledges to a certain extent the changing nature of the domestic workers’ *kaaj*. They are no longer expected to be inextricably bound to their middle-class employers by ties of extreme fidelity. The workers’ ‘weak’ loyalty is a common lament in middle-class households. This is posited against the highly romanticized image of the servant in ‘old times’ when he/she was considered to be like a ‘family member.’⁹² A common rhetoric in middle-class households in Bengal is that the domestic workers have become highly ‘professional’, apparently demonstrated by the ‘common knowledge’ that domestic workers in Kolkata have formed unions. During my fieldwork in Kolkata, however, I did not come across any union formed by domestic workers although their interests are represented by some NGOs and local political parties in certain neighborhoods.

Citizenship, governed as it is to quite an extent by the nature of work, continues to be a salient issue when one considers *chakri* and *kaaj*. A substantial proportion of the domestic workers’ population in Bengal (and India) is formed of interstate and international immigrants. There is a common discourse around the ‘illegal Bangladeshi immigrant’ entering Bengal to find work as domestic helpers. This is not to say that there are no illegal Bangladeshi immigrants employed as domestic workers in Bengal. But the paranoia centered around concerns of legitimate and legal citizenship compounds the delegitimacy of the domestic workers’ *kaaj*. Frequently, government notices in the newspapers advise readers to get the antecedents of domestic workers verified by the police before employing them.

While considerable research needs to be done in this area to enable any conclusive comparison between *chakri* and *kaaj* in present-day Bengal, I suggest that *chakri* and education continue to be inextricably linked.⁹³ The domestic workers’ limited access to education defines the nature of their work. Though the domestic workers’ work becomes more impersonal and resembles *chakri*, it lacks the social premium that education and the educated *bhadralok* command in Bengal even today. Claims to legitimate citizenship were denied to the *chakors*/domestic workers in the nationalist project of nation-building, which is evident when one considers and compares the various connotations of the word ‘servant’ embedded in *chakor* and *chakure*.

Hence, in conceptualizing *chakri* as an emerging category of work in colonial Bengal, I have attempted to hold it as a mirror to the changing socio-economic con-

ditions in the Bengal of that time. The indubitable links between English education and *chakri* have been central to this conceptualization. Further, English education and *chakri* continue to consolidate and privilege the *bhadralok's* gentility. English education, *chakri* and the category of *bhadralok* trace their origins to the encounter with British colonialism and the modern disciplinary system. *Chakri* institutionalized Western education as a prerequisite to 'legitimate' forms of work. In doing so, it formally pushed the segment of domestic workers, *chakors*, outside the domain of legitimate work. Such delegitimization continued. *Chakri* was established as a legitimate reference of labour markets. At the same time it produced new hierarchies of work and socio-economic conditions. The new notions of 'valuable' time (time invested in *chakri*, a determinant of the amount of salary) and Western education as a marker of respectability defined certain kinds of work and people as being outside the coveted rubric of *chakri*. However, a comparative analysis of *chakri* and *kaaj*, refracted through the semantics of the word *chakor* complicates any attempt to posit the two as absolute binary opposites. At the same time, it points to the ways in which, despite the points of continuity between *chakri* and *kaaj*, the two are kept on different planes of legitimacy. Legitimacy in the realm of work extends to questions of legitimate citizenship as well. *Chakri* and *kaaj*, then, become more than simply categories of livelihood: they are also categories of being.

Notes

- 1 I want to thank the participants of the workshop "Work – Employment – Vocation" (University of Vienna, 10th–11th February 2012) for their questions and comments which have enriched my paper. I am immensely grateful to Dr. Rabindra Ray (Department of Sociology, University of Delhi) for his invaluable comments and suggestions. I have also greatly benefited from Ashawari's comments on my paper. At last, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for the *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* for their incisive critiques of the paper and helpful suggestions for improving it.
- 2 Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Kamalakanter Daptar, in: idem, Bankim Rachnabali. Sahitya Samagra, Kolkata 2004, 49-90, 49, translation and emphasis are mine.
- 3 See Sumit Sarkar, Writing Social History, New Delhi 1997.
- 4 See Dalia Chakrabarti, Colonial Clerks. A Social History of Deprivation and Domination, Kolkata 2005.
- 5 See Tithi Bhattacharya, The Sentinels of Culture. Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal, New Delhi 2005.
- 6 Wage was also included in *kaaj* like the remuneration paid to domestic workers. But it did not function as a significant differentiator between *chakri* and *kaaj*: The difference in the remuneration of servants of the aristocratic *bhadralok*, on the one hand, and the genteel poor, on the other, was not considerable.
- 7 Here my focus is primarily on the question what differentiates *chakri* from *kaaj*. Therefore, I do not particularly refer to similarities between *chakri* and European employment. In such terms *chakri* would come close to European public service, closest probably to the office of the British clerk. Even the Bengali *keranis'* attire – long coat, socks, and umbrella – was modeled on that of the British clerk.

- 8 P. J. Marshall, *The New Cambridge History of India. Vol. 2, Bengal: The British Bridgehead. Eastern India 1740–1828*, London 2008, 93, emphasis in original.
- 9 Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, 4, emphasis in original.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Mughal India*, in: idem and Irfan Habib, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India. Vol. I: c. 1200–c. 1750*, Cambridge and New York 1987, 261–307, 300, emphasis in original.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, 5–6, emphasis in original.
- 14 See *ibid.*, 26, table 10.
- 15 Lower castes are sometimes called ‘scheduled castes’ because the government listed some of them in a ‘schedule’, i.e. a list to determine who officially belonged to the lower castes. In 1937 the government recommended recruitment of ‘scheduled castes’ to the post of clerks, thereby recognizing lower castes as a group that required certain privileges; as such the group came to denote an official and political category.
- 16 See *ibid.*, 44.
- 17 Ibid., 29.
- 18 Ibid., 27.
- 19 See *The Report of the Committee appointed to draw up a Comprehensive Scheme for improving the Pay and Position of Ministerial Officers 1905–06*: i, xxxii, cited in: *ibid.*, 6–7.
- 20 Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 190, emphasis added.
- 21 See Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, 6–7.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 See *ibid.*, 113.
- 24 See Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903–1908*, New Delhi 1973, 199–206.
- 25 Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, xii, emphasis in original.
- 26 Ibid., 4–5, emphasis in original.
- 27 Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture*, 59–60.
- 28 See Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, 24.
- 29 Ibid., 26.
- 30 Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets. Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*, Calcutta 1998, 34.
- 31 The 1901 census records that female employees constituted a meager 0.13% of the total number of clerks and inspectors serving in government administration. See Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, 45. I am aware that women are conspicuously absent from this paper. While I do not underestimate their importance for the history of *chakri*, the scope of this paper would not be able to do justice to an elaborate and nuanced discussion of women in Bengal in 19th–20th centuries.
- 32 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Delhi 1997, 35, emphasis in original.
- 33 See Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology*, New Delhi 1988, 53.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 See Subrata Dasgupta, *Awakening. The Story of the Bengal Renaissance*, Noida 2010.
- 36 Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology*, 55.
- 37 Dasgupta, *Awakening*, 48.
- 38 See Sarkar, *Writing Social History*.
- 39 Chatterji, *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*, Cambridge 1994, 5.
- 40 The genteel poor, although steeped in poverty, were nevertheless considered *bhadralok* or respectable.
- 41 See Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 35–36.
- 42 Of course, not all *bhadralok* were engaged in *chakri*. Many were small-scale businessmen, shopkeepers, etc.
- 43 Comprising mostly lower castes.
- 44 See Tanja Paulitz, *Verhandlungen der mechanischen Maschine. Geschlecht in den Grenzziehungen zwischen Natur und Technik*, in: *ÖZG 21/1* (2010), 65–92.

- 45 J. Gaventa, *Power after Lukes: A Review of the Literature*, Brighton 2003, 6.
- 46 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London 1984, 141; also idem, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford 1980.
- 47 Dasgupta, *Awakening*, 50.
- 48 Cited from Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, 15.
- 49 Poromesh Acharya, *Education in Old Calcutta* in: Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed., *Calcutta The Living City. Volume I: The Past*, New York and Toronto 1990, 85-94, 89.
- 50 See <http://economics.ucr.edu/seminars/spring07/ped/LatikaChaudhary5-6-07.pdf> (October 22, 2011).
- 51 Poromesh Acharya, *Bangalir Shikhachinta*, Kolkata 2011, 20. Translation mine.
- 52 Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, 42.
- 53 Cited from Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, 43. Emphasis added.
- 54 See *ibid.*
- 55 <http://economics.ucr.edu/seminars/spring07/ped/LatikaChaudhary5-6-07.pdf> (October 22, 2011).
- 56 Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture*, 169.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 58 Partha Chatterjee, *The Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, in: idem, ed., *Texts of Power. Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, Minneapolis and London 1995, 1-29, 11.
- 59 Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture*, 170.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 62 'Mythical' because in practice there are many castes and sub-castes within the *varna* of Brahmins. Yet the Brahmin is always imagined in its purest and original, homogenized idea as a man created from 'Brahma'. Brahma is a Hindu God and also refers to the universal Creator in Hindu scriptures. Brahmins occupy the highest position in the caste hierarchy and are traditionally supposed to be priests and scholars since the myth is that they were created from Brahma's mouth. In contrast, the lower castes or *shudras* are supposed to have been created from Brahma's feet and therefore occupy the lowest position in the caste hierarchy.
- 63 Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture*, 170.
- 64 See Poromesh Acharya, *Indigenous Vernacular Education in Pre-British Era: Traditions and Problems*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 13, No. 48 (December 2, 1978), 1981-1988.
- 65 Cited from Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture*, 173, emphasis in original.
- 66 Chatterjee, *The Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, 10.
- 67 See Acharya, *Bangalir Shikhachinta*. Translation mine.
- 68 See Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture*.
- 69 See Sarkar, *Writing Social History*; Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*.
- 70 Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture*, 59.
- 71 Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, 52-53, emphasis in original.
- 72 Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, 309.
- 73 Swapna M. Banerjee, *Down Memory Lane: Representations of Domestic Workers in Middle Class Personal Narratives of Colonial Bengal*, in: *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring 2004), 681-708, 686.
- 74 See Benoy Ghose, *Kolkata Shaharer Itibratta*. Vol. 2, Kolkata 1975, 155.
- 75 For the rest of this section I shall refer to domestic workers as servants or *chakor* and their employers as masters to emphasize the idea of servitude and patron-client relationship embossed in the notion of *chakor*.
- 76 Banerjee, *Down Memory Lane*, 691.
- 77 Ghose, *Kolkata Shaharer Itibratta*, 144. Translation mine, emphasis added.
- 78 Banerjee, *Down Memory Lane*, 681.
- 79 Chakrabarti, *Colonial Clerks*, 19.
- 80 See *ibid.*, 20-25, tables 2, 3, 6, and 9.
- 81 Rabindranath Tagore, *The Return of the Khokababu*, in: idem, *The Return of Khokababu. The Best of Tagore*, translated by Sipra Bhattacharya, New York, London 2009, 22-31. *Khokababu* can be translated as little master. *Khoka* is often used as a term of endearment for little boys in Bengal. *Babu* was/ is commonly used as a means of addressing the *bhadralok*.

- 82 Ibid., 28.
- 83 Cited from Banerjee, *Down Memory Lane*, 691.
- 84 Cited from Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology*, 67.
- 85 James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, Conn. 1985.
- 86 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 13.
- 87 See Therese Garstenauer, *Beamte im Un/Ruhestand. Überlegungen zu österreichischen Staatsbediensteten*, in: *ÖZG* 22/3 (2011), 81-111.
- 88 See Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 199-206.
- 89 <http://www.indiatogether.org/stories/2002/rd1002.htm> (January 9, 2012).
- 90 Raka Ray, *Masculinity, Femininity and Servitude: Domestic Workers in Calcutta in the Late Twentieth Century*, in: *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2000), 691-718, 699.
- 91 See the exchange between two middle-class women in Kolkata in Manpreet K. Jeneja, *Transactions in Taste. The Collaborative Lives of Everyday Bengali Food*, London/New York et al. 2010, 52-53.
- 92 See Ray, *Masculinity, Femininity and Servitude*.
- 93 At the present time, of course, English education – especially knowledge of English language – is imperative to *chakri* also because of the challenges of globalization.