

The Household Workers of the East India Company Ports of Pre-Colonial Bengal*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the various experiences of slavery and freedom of female household workers in the Dutch and English East India Company (VOC and EIC, respectively) ports in Bengal in the early eighteenth century. Enslaved household workers in Bengal came from various Asian societies dotting the Indian Ocean littoral. Once manumitted, they entered the fold of the free Christian or Portuguese communities of the settlements. The most common, if not the only, occupation of the women of these communities was household or caregiving labour. The patriarchy of the settlements was defined by the labour and subjection of these women. Yet, domestic service to VOC/EIC officials only partially explains their subjectivity. This article identifies the agency of enslaved and women of free Christian or Portuguese communities in their efforts to resist or bypass the institution of the European household in the settlements. These efforts ranged from murdering their slave masters to creating independent businesses to the formation of sexual liaisons and parental/fraternal/sororal relationships disregarding the approval or needs of their settlement masters.

The East India Company settlements in early eighteenth-century Bengal were primarily trading settlements. The largest ones, Hugli and Calcutta – the respective headquarters of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the English East India Company (EIC) – were ports. Much like other port cities across the globe, these settlements were crucibles of new social relationships. This article explores the origins and labours, oppressions, and aspirations of the enslaved, free Christian and Portuguese women, who formed the majority of the household workers – caregivers who worked in private homes, taverns, mess-houses, and brothels – in the East India Company ports in pre-colonial Bengal. Living in close proximity to their employers,

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primarily officials of all ranks of the East India companies, these women proved to be a defining element in the social composition of the early company settlements.

This paper shows that the origins of the Anglo-Indian family¹ lie not in the sexual encounter between local women and European men, but in the complex interaction amongst enslaved women coming from all over the Indian Ocean world, free Christian and Portuguese women, and European men. Demographic information on enslaved women workers in European households in early eighteenth-century Bengal shows that they came from all over the Indian Ocean littoral – from Mando, Makassar, Banda, and Batavia in the present-day Indonesian archipelago, from Ceylon, Patna, and Bengal – where they were captured and sold into slavery.² Once manumitted they entered the fold of the free Christian or Portuguese communities of the settlements. Because of their ambivalent identities, the enslaved, free Christian, and Portuguese women have escaped the attention of the historians of the informal Portuguese Empire as well as historians of women in European settlements. The Bay of Bengal region was a frontier zone of the Portuguese Empire in Asia.³ The Portuguese presence in this region has been studied as that of independent merchants, renegades, imperial aspirants, soldiers, and subordinate agents of the EIC Empire.⁴ The women of the Portuguese community, who worked as caregivers in various capacities in all European settlements, are hardly ever discussed in this literature. Even though women in the European settlements of the Indian Ocean world are now a long-discussed topic, the literature focuses on relationships between native/local women and Europeans.⁵ Non-European, but non-indigenous women

1. Durba Ghosh, *Sex and Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge, 2006).

2. For the demographics of the slave trade in eighteenth-century Bengal, see Titas Chakraborty, “Work and Society in the East India Company Settlements in Bengal, 1650–1757” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2016); manumission documents, too, give us similar demographic information. Tamil Nadu State Archives [digitized by the National Archive, The Hague, available at: <http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/archief/ead/index/zoekterm/tamil%20nadu/aantal/20/eaidid/1.11.06.11>; last accessed 6 December 2018, hereafter 1.11.06.11], 1677B, fos 5, 120–132, 254, 284; 1.11.06.1/1694, fos 747, 1031.

3. George Winius, “The ‘Shadow-Empire’ of Goa in the Bay of Bengal”, *Itinerario*, 7:2 (1983), pp. 83–101.

4. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History* (Malden, MA, 2012), pp. 261–283; Maria Augusta Lima Cruz, “Exiles and Renegades in Early Sixteenth Century Portuguese India”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 23:3 (1986), pp. 249–262; Jorge Manuel Flores, “Relic or Springboard: A Note on the ‘Rebirth’ of Portuguese Hughli, c.1632–1820”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39:4 (2002), pp. 381–395; Stefan Halikowski Smith, “Languages of Subalternity and Collaboration: Portuguese in English Settlements across the Bay of Bengal, 1620–1800”, *The International Journal of Maritime History*, 28:2 (2016), pp. 237–267.

5. Some representative works are Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: Europeans and Eurasians in Colonial Indonesia* (Madison, WI, 1983); Leonard Blussé, *Bitter Bonds: A Colonial*

find no place in this scholarship. Yet, as this paper shows, the majority of the household workers in the early eighteenth-century European settlements were non-indigenous female enslaved and “free” workers, and their labour and subjection as slaves, housekeepers, domestic help, and sexual partners within the families of European company servants, and as proprietors, slaves, and workers of the taverns and brothels, shaped the patriarchy of the settlements.

As once-uprooted people, these women figured out ways of surviving in Bengal while also subverting the class and gendered order of the settlements. The agency of enslaved female domestics, especially concubines, is a much-discussed subject. The literature can be divided into two broad groups. One group asserts the agency of women especially as cultural intermediaries and creators of Eurasian cultures and families.⁶ The other group emphasizes the lack of agency of these women in making choices in their work, sexuality, and family.⁷ Both groups, however, have only examined the lives and actions of these women strictly ordained in relation to, and in the presence of, European men. This paper investigates and locates the agency of women in their efforts at self-creation, autonomous of the control of their European masters/employers. The self-activity of household workers shaped their manifold trajectories within and outside the bounds of company settlements in Bengal – from slavery to freedom, from foreigner to native, from worker to employer. Most importantly, these women – both enslaved and free – formed familial structures separate from the households of the men they served that were based not just on labour, but also on creative kin relations. Their ability to form friendships or affective ties with various people within the settlements proved not just their resilience, but also their drive to break free from the subject position created through labour and bondage.

Divorce Drama of the Seventeenth Century (Princeton, NJ, 2009); Ann Stoler, “Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusions in Colonial Southeast Asia”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34:3 (1992), pp. 514–551; Erica Wald, “From *Begums* to *Bibis* to Abandoned Females and Idle Women: Sexual Relationships, Venereal Disease and the Redefinition of Prostitution in Early Nineteenth-Century India”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 46:1 (2009), pp. 5–25; Ratnabali Chatterjee, *The Queen’s Daughters: Prostitutes as an Outcast Group in Colonial India* (Bergen, 1992); Ghosh, *Sex and Family in Colonial India*; Indrani Chatterjee, “Colouring Subalternity: Slaves, Concubines and Social Orphans in Early Colonial India”, in Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, and Susie Tharu (eds), *Subaltern Studies*, No. 10 (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 49–97; Margaret Strobel, “Women’s History, Gender History, and European Colonialism”, in Gregory Blue, Martin Bunton, and Ralph Croizier (eds), *Colonialism and the Modern World* (Armonk, NY, 2002), pp. 51–70.

6. Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia*; Strobel, “Women’s History, Gender History, and European Colonialism”; Ghosh, *Sex and Family in Colonial India*.

7. Chatterjee, “Colouring Subalternity”; idem, *The Queen’s Daughters*.

SLAVES, “FREE CHRISTIAN” AND “PORTUGUESE WOMEN”, AND THE SETTLEMENT HOUSEHOLD

By the mid-eighteenth century, both Calcutta and Chinsura, the headquarters of the EIC and the VOC respectively, had grown into prominent settlements. Chinsura was the Dutch sector within the larger port city of Hugli. Even though Hugli had its origins as a Portuguese settlement in the late sixteenth century, it grew as a port city only after the Mughal emperor Shahjahan’s conquest of the place in 1633. He then allowed all Europeans to build their settlements in the region for trading purposes. In the early eighteenth century, the city was one long stretch along the river Bhagirathi, with the Portuguese, Dutch, and French sectors laid out from north to south. Even though the English maintained a factory in Hugli, they had acquired zamindari rights over three villages further south along the river in 1698, which became their most prominent settlement and headquarters, Calcutta. Chinsura was a conglomeration of the “village” Chinsura and the adjacent Bazar Mirzapore. It was fortified in the late 1690s, when the EIC fortified Calcutta too. By the mid-eighteenth century, the settlement around the fort in Calcutta had taken the form of a commercial, administrative, and military centre. Residential complexes with sprawling gardens belonging to Europeans had also grown within this area. In Chinsura, the VOC officials lived alongside the Portuguese, Armenians, Greeks, Banians, and Muslim merchants of various Asian origins who owned individual houses. But in Calcutta, the Armenians and Greeks shared the European quarters, while the native merchants were pushed to the north of the city, and the Portuguese were primarily sandwiched between the native and European quarters. Just north of Chinsura was the Church of the Holy Rosary, the largest Roman Catholic Church in the region, with influence over the Catholic population in most of Western Bengal, including Calcutta. The numerous Portuguese inhabitants of Chinsura, and Calcutta – many of them independent women proprietors – came under the spiritual jurisdiction of this church. These Portuguese women ran taverns, mess-houses, and brothels in both Hugli and Calcutta, places that Europeans frequently visited. The mainly female proprietors of such places, as well as English, Dutch, Armenian, Greek, and Portuguese householders owned slaves.

The enslaved population in the settlements, both male and female, primarily performed the work of social reproduction, as nurses, cooks, housekeepers, and sex workers, in houses and taverns. For instance, in August 1678 an ailing Padre Manuel Gonsalves sought passage on an EIC ship. He was to be nursed by two of his slaves. Captain Stafford, relieved that the crew would not be responsible for his care, allowed the padre passage.⁸

8. Factory Records [British Library, London; hereafter G] 20/5, fo. 6.

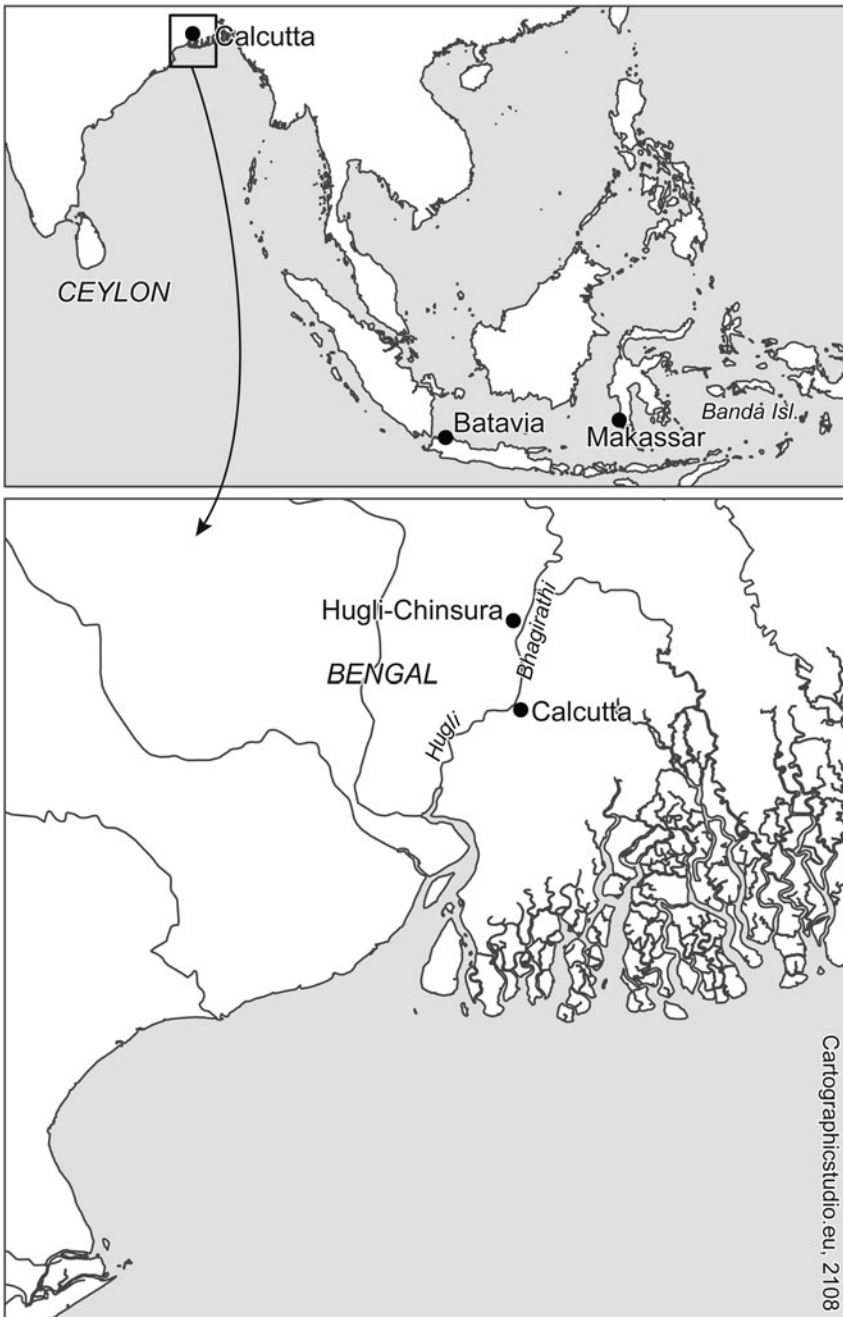


Figure 1. Calcutta and Chinsura in eighteenth-century Bengal.

When junior merchant Harmanus von Blom sold Febrauraj van Bengale and Valentijn van Bengale to the VOC director Jan Sichterman in November 1740, it was mentioned in the sale document that they were both “good cooks”.⁹ Enslaved women and men were critical to childcare. In the wills of their masters, enslaved men and women were often enjoined to look after little children and accompany them back to Europe, after which they were promised freedom.¹⁰ As Rozina Visram and Michael Fisher have pointed out, this was common practice amongst Europeans moving between India and England. The “freedom” promised on reaching the shores of England, however, was nothing more than the masters’ euphemism for relinquishing all responsibility for supporting their slaves.¹¹

Manumission of enslaved workers was common in the settlements. In cases where the enslaved women provided sexual services to their masters, they could expect manumission and additional monetary gains, especially if they bore children of their masters. Marcella, a slave woman who bore the child of her master, George Petty, was emancipated and given fifty pagodas.¹² Maria, a female slave of John Rennald, was promised her freedom in his will and a sum of 300 rupees. She was the mother of Rennald’s only son.¹³ Some enslaved women could expect to inherit the houses of their masters. Nathalia Peres, a slave of a pilot, was emancipated in 1740 and she received the house of her master in the Stroobazar near Chinsura. Nathalia was the mother of the pilot’s only son, Dirk.¹⁴ Paternal guilt and a sense of obligation allowed these women to make small but significant gains.

Oftentimes, the passage from slavery to freedom was punctuated with conditions that chained the freed slaves to their old status. Henry Dallibar handed over his slave, Bastian, to his friend, Capt. Marmaduke, on the stipulation that Bastian was to serve his new master for five years before gaining his freedom.¹⁵ Similarly, Luzia, one-time slave of Sarah Shadow, was

9. I.11.06.11/1715, fo. 85.

10. Will of Elizabeth Harding, Mayor’s Court Records [British Library, London]. Most files for the Mayor’s Court records are unfoliated. Those that are foliated have two types of foliation – first, the entire file is foliated consistently, irrespective of bundles; second, the foliation starts anew with each bundle in a file. In the case of the latter, I have specified the bundle in parentheses and folio numbers. For unfoliated files, I have given the date of proceedings. [Hereafter, P/154 or P/155.] P/155/9 (1736 bundle), fos 1–2; will of Daniel Willeboorts P/155/9 (1736 bundle), fos 2–4; will of Sarah Guion, 1742, P/154/42, fos 2, 6–7.

11. Rozina Visram, *Ayabs, Lascars and Princes: The Story of Indians in Britain 1700–1947* (New York, 1986), pp. 11–34; Michael Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 53–65.

12. Will of George Petty, P/154/40 (1728 bundle), fos 14–15.

13. Will of John Rennald, 1741, P/154/55, fo. 7; similar gains were made by Sophia, slave of Thomas Hawkes, and Magdalena, slave of John Gulielmis. P/154/50, fos 19–20, Bengal Public Proceedings [British Library, London; hereafter P/1] 4, fos 414v–415r.

14. I.11.06.11/1694, fo. 124.

15. P/15, fo. 255r.

bequeathed to Sarah Peris, whom she was required to serve for seven years before gaining her freedom.¹⁶ As these examples show, freedom, though promised, could be deferred in various ways. George Downing stated in his will that Nicholas, his eight-year-old slave, was to serve his friend Richard Dean “not as a slave but as a servant” for five years, after which time he was “to be set entirely at liberty”.¹⁷ Though juridically no longer a slave, Nicholas was to continue to function as one until he gained complete freedom. Sometimes, the conditions of emancipation blurred all difference between slaves and servants. In 1736, ship captain George Penuse freed all of his slaves – Giddah, Flora, Bavenah, and Pauncheecok – but added that they were to “serve as before”.¹⁸ William Coverly gave his slave boy Caesar his freedom, but “he is to serve my well beloved wife Maria Coverly as long as it shall require him to do so”.¹⁹ It was thus not a mere slip of the tongue when the terms “servant” and “slave” were used interchangeably.²⁰

For those slaves who successfully moved out of their slave status once manumitted, the social trajectory from slavery to freedom often meant entrance into the “free Christian” and/or the extremely heterogeneous Portuguese community, whose existence was primarily dependent upon various forms of services it provided to the VOC and the EIC trade and settlements in Bengal. The Portuguese had been in Bengal since the sixteenth century, both as rebels and merchants working under the legal framework of the *Estado da Índia*. Three factors – the licence to marry locally, the presence of a large number of renegades, and the proselytizing practices of the Augustinian church – led to the formation of an internally variegated community, especially in the second half of the seventeenth century, when the influence of the *Estado* waned. The community was fractured along race, religious, and linguistic lines. Various estimates indicate that the “black” or “brown” Portuguese, as opposed to the pure-bred Portuguese, were the overwhelming majority in eighteenth-century Bengal.²¹ The Augustinian mission held only nominal sway over the Portuguese community. Especially the “black” and “brown” segments of the community often questioned the Augustinian church’s moral authority.²² Even though historians

16. Will of Sarah Shadow, 1755, P/154/46 (4th bundle), fos 40–42.

17. Will of George Downing, P/154/46 (6th bundle), fos 40–42.

18. Will of George Penuse, 1736, P/154/40 (1736 bundle), fos 4–5.

19. Will of William Coverly, 1751, P/154/46 (3rd bundle), fos 36–37.

20. Will of George Petty, 1728. Petty mentions his “servants” Marcella and Maria, to whom he promised “freedom” and fifty pagoda and twenty pagoda respectively, P/154/40 (1728 bundle), fos 14–15.

21. In the early eighteenth century, an Augustinian friar noted that there were 25,000 Christian Portuguese in Bengal, most of them being “brown” Portuguese. Arnulf Hartmann, “História dos Missões dos Padres Augustinianos na Índia nos princípios do 18 século escripta pelo P. Fr. Jorge da Apresentação missionário”, *Analecta Augustiniana*, 57 (1994), pp. 193–341.

22. *Ibid.*

have emphasized language as a cement for the highly variegated Portuguese community,²³ it is unlikely that all members of the Portuguese community spoke Portuguese. From the baptismal records of the Church of the Holy Rosary for 1698, it is clear that none of the 487 converts were of Portuguese origin.²⁴ Of these converts, some were twenty-five years old. It is unlikely that such mature age converts would have spoken Portuguese, though they took Lusophone names. It is evident also from various wills left by self-declared Portuguese people that only some spoke the language. Despite their internal differences, almost all Portuguese served the European companies, including the EIC or the VOC, in some capacity.²⁵ While some worked as merchants, the majority worked in subaltern positions, such as soldiers, pilots, and household workers. Manumitted slaves joined the ranks of these subaltern Portuguese.

The practice of conversion to Christianity upon manumission, and the prevalence of Lusophone names amongst the slaves, eased the transition of freed slaves into the free Christian and Portuguese communities. Masters such as Roger Kinsey wished that his slaves, Scipio and Pompey, be christened in the Roman Catholic Church as a condition for their emancipation.²⁶ In Chinsura, several emancipated slaves had Lusophone names. When Nathalia Peres, Theodara de Rosario, Rosa de Rosario, Sabina, or Domingo gained their freedom, absorption into the Portuguese community presumably was a small step (see [Table 1](#)). Portuguese women were often referred to as “free” Portuguese women, signifying their passage from slavery to freedom in a society marked by household slavery. When Anna Cordosa appeared in the Mayor’s Court as a witness, she was specifically asked “to whom she belonged”, to which she answered “she was her own mistress”.²⁷ As noted in various manumission documents, wills, and inventories, slaves in the European households were able to create and maintain their own families. Such families included not only man, woman, and children, but also multigenerational members, such as grandparents and grandchildren ([Table 1](#)). In several instances, they were both listed and manumitted as families. On the eve of his departure in 1755, Jan Kerseboom, Director of the VOC in Bengal, manumitted fifteen such families ([Table 1](#)).²⁸ Some even received a house or part of a house as a condition of emancipation ([Table 1](#)). Since kinlessness is possibly the greatest bane that separated

23. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya, *The Portuguese in the East: A History of a Maritime Trading Empire* (New York, 2008), pp. 71–124; Halikowski Smith, “Languages of Subalternity and Collaboration”, pp. 240–241.

24. Historical Archives of Goa, Goa, India, Book No. 2760, fos 3–19.

25. Halikowski Smith, “Languages of Subalternity and Collaboration”, pp. 241–252.

26. Will of Roger Kinsey, undated, P/154/45 (unfoliated).

27. P/154/46, Proceedings of 27 February, 1746/47 (unfoliated).

28. I.11.06.11/1693, fo. 376.

Table 1. *List of selected manumissions in VOC records.*

Year	Name of slave	Master	Terms
1732	Rosa de Rosario	Joannes Anzelmus Thielen, fiscal and merchant	
1734	Sabina	Leonara van Mandhar and Jan van Boekholt	Retained right to recall manumission
1734	Theodora de Rosario	Nicolaas Buinincx, sergeant	
1740	Aron, his wife, Aurora, and their children Domingo and Sabina	Ditto	Aron's family received 100 rupees and a part of the house and garden bought by Blom outside of Chinsura
1740	Nathalia Peres	Trent Wenneber, pilot	Received a house in Stroobazar. She got patta but could not sell the house
1755	Tjelie and Rebecca	Jan Kerseboom, director, who was leaving	
	October and Dina and their children Sictie and Isabel	Ditto	
	Kamis with his grandsons Jonas, Adonis, and Joseph	Ditto	
	Elis and Patra and their children Domingo and Bouang	Ditto	
	Kloris and Lijsje with their child Saptoe	Ditto	
	Anthonij and Calista	Ditto	
	Coridon and Diana	Ditto	

(Continued)

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Year	Name of slave	Master	Terms
	Sultan and Sabina	Ditto	
	David and Juliana with their children Ontong, Dominga, Leander, Lizarda, and Lena	Ditto	
	Damon and Limanada and their children Meij, Manies, and Andries	Ditto	
	Titus and Regina	Ditto	
	Florentiana with her daughter Floriana	Ditto	
	Rebecca with her son Arees	Ditto	
	Alexander with his wife Magdalena and son Albert and daughter Fenisa	Ditto	
	Snel and Malatie with their children Sisilia, Octavio, and Harlequin	Ditto	

Source: Bengal Directorate at Chinsura and the successors (*Kantoor Bengalen te Chinsura en rechtsopvolgers*) collection at Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai. Boxes consulted: 1677A, 1677B, 1679A, 1679B, 1694, 1696, and 1715.

a slave from a free person, the presence of family at the moment of emancipation no doubt made the task of blending into society of freed men and women far easier.

Women of the Portuguese and the free Christian communities were extremely visible in the company records as various forms of caregivers – tavern owner, landladies or mess owners, brothel keepers, and housekeepers. In the 1670s, an English traveller, Thomas Bowrey, noted that in Hugli provisioning trades were run by the Portuguese, a significant number of whom were women. In the early eighteenth century, Portuguese women continued to be important in the provisioning and caregiving trade at both Chinsura and Hugli. In Calcutta, Domingo Ash is a unique example of an enterprising Portuguese woman. Domingo Ash was the most important supplier of arak to the EIC ships for at least forty years.²⁹ An arak distiller herself, Domingo Ash also maintained her own punch-house. To add to her profits, she was a moneylender and a landlady on the side.³⁰ Apart from Domingo Ash, Portuguese or free Christian landladies and tavern keepers abounded in both Chinsura and Calcutta.³¹ Beginning in the late 1680s, Portuguese women worked as tavern keepers.³² As a traveller in 1727 observed, the taverns doubled as lodgings in the early settlements, for tavern keepers let out rooms to lodgers.³³ Often, poor European soldiers and sailors were the lodgers, and they shared rooms, each occupying one bed. Room sharing was an old practice amongst European sailors and soldiers in Bengal.³⁴ For Portuguese and free Christian women proprietors who accumulated wealth, this reproductive labour remained the primary or foundational source of their income.

Several of the Portuguese and free Christian women worked as housekeepers. Durba Ghosh has noted that “housekeeper” was a term signifying “conjugal

29. Starting from 1704, Domingo Ash's licence for distilling arak was renewed until 1743/4, P/1/5-P/1/16.

30. In 1727/28, she lent a considerable sum of 200 rupees to a ship merchant, Sheikh Benaik, proceedings of 1 February 1727/28, P/155/10 (unfoliated). In the same year, she was renting out a house for ten rupees a month. Proceedings of 16 March 1727/28, P/155/10 (unfoliated). Another example of Portuguese women in the moneylending business is Dominga Araujo, who listed her creditors in her will, 1760, P/154/50 (unfoliated).

31. On 18 June 1734, a bookkeeper, Nicolaas Wendel as a tenant, and Nathalia Raposa, a free Portuguese woman as the landlady, signed a lease for a whole year, renewable on the willingness of both parties involved. 1.11.06.11/1677B, fo. 278. Examples of tavern keepers from Chinsura include Anthonica da Silva (1733) 1.11.06.11/ 1677A, fos 255–282; a woman named Lucia (1743) 1.11.06.11/1693, fo. 347; in Calcutta, Alsida de Rosario, P/155/73, fo. 58.

32. In 1686, in Chinsura, [National Archive, The Hague, Archive of the Dutch East India Company, hereafter, VOC] 1422, fos 1450r–1451v; in 1733 in Chinsura, 1.11.06.11/1677A, fos 255–282; in 1743 in Chinsura, 1.11.06.11/1693, fo. 347.

33. MssEur B 162 [British Library, London], account by Judith Weston of a voyage to Madras in East Indiamen, fo. 6r.

34. Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir* (Calcutta, 1953), pp. 241–242.

domestic arrangements” of the European men.³⁵ “Conjugality” often translated into domestic labour – looking after men in sickness and health was the task of these housekeepers. For example, Leonara van Mandhar took care of Roger Bereneert, Director of the VOC in Bengal, in his illness. Pleased with her service, Bereneert made a handsome provision of 10,000 rupees for her in his will.³⁶ Before his death in 1715, Captain Herbert left “nurse money” for a woman.³⁷ Lodewick Demurry’s housekeeper, Rosa de Rosario, who was also his sexual partner, “made the punch and dressed the victuals” for him. When he fell sick at Culpy, Rosa de Rosario went from Calcutta to look after him.³⁸

During his travels in Bengal in the early eighteenth century, Alexander Hamilton summed up his impression of the oldest Portuguese quarter, Bandel, in Hugli: “The Bandel, at present, deals in no sort of commodities, but what are in request at the Court of Venus”.³⁹ Providing sexual services formed the foremost work of the Portuguese or free Christian women of the settlements. The practice of taking native women as concubines by European men was rare in this period, in contrast to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Since deep intrusion into the Indian heartland was not possible in this period, Europeans had to rely on the women originating from their Indian Ocean outposts for such services. Native women were thus present in the European settlements as construction workers and domestic servants. Except for three instances, native women never figured as domestic partners of the European men.⁴⁰

As “free” women, the Portuguese or free Christian women performed the same work as their enslaved sisters. In this sense, the free Christian and Portuguese communities must be understood as being on the same continuum as slavery. Since freed slaves joined the ranks of the Portuguese and free Christian communities and then continued to do domestic labour, the community was an outgrowth of the practices of slavery in early company settlements. However, there were two major differences in being a free Christian or Portuguese female caregiver. First, through the creation and maintenance of taverns, lodging houses, and brothels, these women were able to commercialize household labour and thereby amass wealth. Secondly, for those who became housekeepers, reproductive labour was premised on fairly contractual relationships. Contractual relationships,

35. Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*, p. 110.

36. I.11.06.11/ 1677A, fo. 456.

37. P/1/3, fo. 112v.

38. Proceedings of 17 February 1746/7 P/154/46 (unfoliated).

39. Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies* (Edinburgh, 1727), p. 21.

40. Nicholas Rowe in his will, 1731, left for the maintenance of “a Moor woman” Meddo and her son an allowance of five Madras rupees, P/154/40 (1731 bundle), fos 9–11; will of John Vass, 1752, mentioned a native servant Meapa, who bore him a son, P/154/50 (1752 bundle), fos 19–20; will of Samuel Spencer, gunner, 1741, mentioned a woman Chicka with whom he had a child, P/154/42, fos 9–10.

furthermore, reveal that households in the company settlements were cemented through labour over and above any affective ties.

THE LIMITS OF PATERNALISM

There were limits to the paternalism of European masters towards their female enslaved and free household workers. Within the context of indigenous noble families, concubinage or wet-nursing were avenues for considerable social mobility for enslaved and free women. Within Rajput, Mughal, and Bengal Nawabi households these women were important political actors with considerable land grants.⁴¹ Moreover, in the case of the Bengal Nawabs, all children within a household shared similar agnate kinship, i.e. the patriarch extended equal paternity to all.⁴² Since the concept of an “illegitimate child” did not exist within these noble families, the possibility of social mobility for concubines (enslaved or otherwise) and the children borne by them increased significantly. In contrast, within hyper-monogamous European households, domestic labour of concubinage or wet-nursing was fairly transactional. It did not create any avenue for the enslaved or free concubines or their children to be part of the master’s family. European men provided for their children born of the bodies of their (enslaved) concubines as an obligation outside the realm of the family. Even then, in many cases, they made sure that the mothers of such children formally had no access to such provisions. Though the unnamed Portuguese woman from Chinsura might have secured some financial support since Jan Cornelisz had left his entire estate to their child, who lived with her, she personally did not inherit a single penny.⁴³ While a provision of 200 pounds was made by Charles English for his “illegitimate” son, John English, he made no provision for the mother of the child.⁴⁴ In certain cases, childbearing brought no change in the conditions of work. Jan van Latum freed his child Turkenij de Rosario, born to a slave woman. Though Turkenij got her freedom “by dint of her birth”, no provision was made to free the mother or to leave her with any money.⁴⁵

Promises of gain were always dependent upon conditions beyond the control of the enslaved women. While many slave women remained slaves

41. Ramya Sreenivasan, “Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines: Female Slaves in Rajput Polity, 1500–1850”, in Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton (eds), *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington, IN, 2006), pp. 136–161; Shadab Bano, “Women Slaves in Medieval India”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 65 (2004), pp. 314–323.

42. Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Law and Slavery in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 36–77.

43. I.II.06.II/1677A, fo. 570.

44. Will of Charles English, 1756, P/154/40 (6th bundle), fo. 7.

45. I.II.06.II/1696, fo. 217.

regardless of their maternity, most enslaved women bearing their masters' children were promised their freedom after the death of their masters. Such a waiting period was a major predicament in their path to emancipation, as some of them died before their masters. Flora, who bore a child for Adam Dawson, boatswain of the EIC living in Calcutta, never lived to see any gains from her childbearing.⁴⁶ In his will, John Rennald promised his slave Maria 300 rupees and her freedom as she was the natural mother of his son. Later, he made amendments to his will as Maria had passed away.⁴⁷ Any hope of gain was made even more fragile by the master's potential dissatisfaction. Mary Dottison could inherit her part of her master's property only if "she behaves herself in a proper manner till the time of my decease and not otherwise".⁴⁸ Mary's freedom depended upon her master's arbitrary definition of "good behaviour".

For free Christian and Portuguese women, contracts sometimes guaranteed no protection against the whims of their masters and even their friends. In England, from the mid-eighteenth century there was a marked move towards contractual relationships between household employers and their domestic servants. Such contracts, or "poor settlements", were often contested in courts.⁴⁹ Examples for similar contractual relations between household workers and domestic (especially female) servants are rare in Bengal. From the few examples available, it is clear that contracts were flimsy verbal arrangements. Rosa de Rosario's appeal to the Mayor's Court demanding her share of the inheritance of her client/master Lodewick Demurry's belongings reveals the vulnerability of the housekeeper in these contractual arrangements. Six years before his death, Lodewick Demurry moved in with Rosa de Rosario. Her expenses were borne by him, and he was heard saying multiple times, "If I go to Europe or marry or dye I will provide for my girl". Catherine de Rosario, Anna Cordosa, and Maria de Rosario, who were all close to Rosa and who also worked as housekeepers, confirmed the verbal promise made by Lodewick Demurry.⁵⁰ In hopes of Demurry's legacy, Rosa continued to work for him, even though she felt burdened by her work. Anna Cordosa, Rosa's friend, observed that Rosa and Lodewick had differences and that Rosa often "came and lived with deponent (Anna Cordosa) for seven or eight days and then she went back and lived with Lodewick Demurry". After Lodewick's death, four of his friends, Harman Hendrikson, John van der Hayden, Jan Carl, and Samuel Bailey, testified that they heard Lodewick say on his deathbed that he would not leave

46. P/154/40 (1733 bundle), fos 1r–2r.

47. P/154/45, fo. 7.

48. P/154/50 (2nd bundle), fos 12–13.

49. Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 66–86, 131–145.

50. Proceedings of 17 February and 27 February 1746/47, P/154/46 (unfoliated).

anything to his girl “who hath poisoned me”. The counter evidence provided by Rosa de Rosario and her three housekeeper friends was ignored by the Mayor’s Court of Calcutta. The court decided to hand over Demurry’s entire property to the aforementioned Harman Hendrikson, to be divided amongst himself, Jan Carl, and John van der Hayden.⁵¹ We do not know whether cutting Rosa from the inheritance was Demurry’s deathbed wish. But it is clear from the judicial proceedings that the evidence and interests of company men were given undue importance over the voices of the housekeepers.

The main possibility for social mobility amongst the women of the free Christian population of Bengal was marriage with European men. In 1688, the EIC allowed their men in India to marry Roman Catholic women in the settlements. Such marriages were also allowed in the Dutch settlements.⁵² In 1734, Leonara van Mandhar thus married a VOC sailmaker from Rijswijk, Jan van Boekholt. Had she not married, she could not have made good use of the fortune left to her by her erstwhile master, Roger Bereneert. Bereneert added a clause to his will stipulating that Leonara, his “free Christian girl”, could gain access to her money only if she were married, thus limiting her chances of enjoying her new-found wealth. However, her prospects for marriage were not difficult, for with her inheritance of 10,000 rupees Leonara was presumably a sought-after maiden in Chinsura.⁵³ Leonara in all probability was an exception.

Marriages, though allowed, were extremely difficult to come by, especially in Calcutta, and the few existing examples show that marriage did not improve the status of the “free” women. One James Kennie was married to a Maria Texeira. Abusively describing her as “a common whore” in his will, Kennie left her three Arcot rupees.⁵⁴ Hamilton’s description of the “mustice wife” of a seaman had similar overtones. In the absence of the seaman, Hamilton alleged she was “a little inclined to lewdness”.⁵⁵ The sexuality of the free Christian and Portuguese women was feared and abused even in marriage.

Physical abuse, perhaps, most blatantly revealed the limits of paternalism. Tavern keepers such as Anthonica da Silva were often perceived by their neighbors as “whores”.⁵⁶ Taverns were also sites of extreme violence. In 1686, Abraham, a VOC gunner, and a mate he had known from his previous ship, enjoyed drinks at a tavern not far from the EIC factory in Hugli. For some unknown reason, in the course of the first drink Abraham’s friend struck the barmaid, a Portuguese woman, in her face.⁵⁷ The ugliest form

51. *Ibid.*

52. Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben, *Being “Dutch” in the Indies: A History of Creolisation and Empire, 1500–1920* (trans. Wendie Shaffer) (Athens, OH, 2008).

53. I.11.06.11/1677B, fo. 63.

54. Will of James Kennie, 1757, P/154/50 (3rd bundle), fos 3–4.

55. Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, p. 10.

56. I.11.06.11/1677A, fo. 143.

57. VOC 1422, fos 1450r–1451v.

of assault was obviously rape. On 10 October 1719, Michael Cameron and John Massey, sailors on two EIC ships, broke into the house of two Portuguese women, Joanna Averiss and Maria Rodriguez, presumably tavern keepers, and gagged and tied two minor girls of that house and then raped them. The older girl, Sabina, was a nine-year-old slave, and the younger one, Biviana, daughter of Joanna Averiss, was only five. Biviana, bleeding profusely, was seriously injured. Cameron and Massey were punished with thirty-nine lashes by rattan on their bare backs.⁵⁸ This shows that in EIC settlements rape was considered a minor offense compared to petty theft, which was often punished by death.⁵⁹ As victims of the same crime, Joanna and Biviana's fate bridged the social difference between slavery and freedom. The difference between their social status in the settlement was one of degree and not of kind. As workers who could be easily denied any monetary gains or who could be physically abused at the whim of the master, they equally felt the limits of paternalism of the settlement men.

SELF-MAKING OF THE HOUSEHOLD WORKERS

It was through resistance and not just through the masters' manumission documents or provisions in wills that enslaved workers achieved their freedom. The only work that mentions South Asia within the context of slave resistance in the Indian Ocean world argues that there is very little evidence of resistance amongst slaves.⁶⁰ Since the focus has been on African slaves, other enslaved people have fallen out of the discussion. The experiences of the enslaved population in Bengal shows that they were no passive sufferers in the household. Strategies of resistance were many. Even murdering one's master was not off the charts. In 1712, a slave woman owned by Jacques Leloeu, a free burgher of Chinsura, was caught conspiring to poison her master and his wife. After she confessed, the Hugli council of the VOC hanged her.⁶¹ On 19 November 1739, September van Mandhar, a slave of a junior merchant, killed his master and injured one of his master's palanquin bearers. He was apprehended and sentenced to the rack. Upon his death, his body was to be thrown into the Ganga.⁶² The severity of punishments reveals how households were fraught with worker-employer contradictions; not all slaves were eligible for manumission. Moreover, as the two preceding sections of this article show, manumission was not in itself emancipation for the

58. P/1/4, fos 140r-v.

59. P/155/72, fo. 51.

60. Edward Alpers, "Flight to Freedom: Escape from Slavery among Bonded Africans in the Indian Ocean World, c.1750-1962", *Slavery and Abolition*, 24:2 (2003), pp. 51-68.

61. VOC 8742, fo. 527.

62. VOC 8787, fos 1132-1133.

enslaved, as freedom from slavery did not mean freedom from reproductive labour. Manumission was very much an external process – a process from above – where the household workers had very little leeway in shaping their lives.

Family formation amongst slaves sometimes could become a transgressive act, if the masters disapproved. As manumission documents show, masters allowed their slaves to maintain families under conditions of slavery. However, the master's consent was necessary for such family formation. Wherever slave masters did not approve of a match, family making became an audacious task. The tragic story of Hanna and Hackema demonstrates the high stakes of aspirations to conjugal life independent of the will of masters. In May 1728, a slave woman, Hanna, stole gold and silver ornaments worth one hundred rupees from her master, Khwaja Gregor, an Armenian merchant residing in Calcutta, and fled with her lover, a freedman, Hackema. For Hanna and Hackema theft was a crucial means to their freedom and a life not ordained by Hanna's master. Hanna and Hackema had unsuccessfully tried to steal from Khwaja Gregor six months before. Hanna was pardoned that time on her promise "never to be guilty of such actions again nor any more to keep company with Hackema".

Yet, Hanna took the risk a second time, with fateful consequences. Running away was the only avenue open for Hanna and Hackema to keep each other's company. They crossed over to the other side of the river Hooghly, where the old Mughal *thana* or toll station stood. There they went to a lodging house maintained by two merchants, Bunny Khan and Bauden, and found food and lodging for a night in exchange for some stolen jewellery. To assuage the merchants' suspicions, Hanna told them that her master had freed her and gave her the jewellery as gifts to start anew her life with Hackema, whom she would marry. Unfortunately, before Hanna and Hackema could safely pass into their free life in Bengal, they were caught by her master's search army the very next day. With the stolen goods on them, they had no safeguards against the brutal justice of the Mayor's Court and were both sentenced to death. Hanna pleaded that she was pregnant. Despite being in the early stages of pregnancy – as attested to by a jury of matrons – she was judged unworthy of life.⁶³

Hanna and Hackema's journey displayed their knowledge of the politics and law of both Bengal and the EIC. The Mughal police station signified the boundary of the EIC's zamindari, beyond which point they had no legal jurisdiction. They went over to a place that came under the legal jurisdiction of the Bengal Nawab or the Mughal emperor. Apart from her knowledge of the legal boundaries of the EIC zamindari, Hanna had the necessary knowledge of English common law to defend herself in the Calcutta court.

63. P/155/72, fo. 31.

When the death penalty was passed against Hanna and Hackema, they were asked if “they had anything to urge why sentence of death should not pass against them”. Hanna promptly mentioned her pregnancy – she was aware that English common law provided immunity to pregnant women on death row. Like many poor pregnant women facing the death penalty in England, her plea proved futile as the jury of matrons judged that Hanna was “not quick with child”, or not in the later phases of her pregnancy.⁶⁴ Hanna and Hackema’s labours of robbery and flight to carve out a life together and then Hanna’s self-defence in the courtroom bore testimony to the immense efforts enslaved people put into creating an autonomous zone of interpersonal relationships.

Even though Hanna’s aspirations to a family life came to a violent end, some female household workers could successfully create and maintain their own affective ties. The wills of sixteen Portuguese and free Christian women provide a rare window into what these women called “family” and how they dealt with the patriarchy of the settlement even when it impinged on their affective ties.⁶⁵ While toiling for the upkeep of the company servants, these workers, especially women, innovated different kinds of affective ties, which developed an alternative form of family life, separate from households with male company servants at their centre. The Anglo-Indian family, especially in North Indian Mughal cities in the early colonial period, has received a fair amount of historians’ attention. Studies on Begum Samru and Khair un-Nissa, for example, have emphasized the agency of indigenous women in creating innovative family ties at the moment of transition from pre-colonial rule to company rule.⁶⁶ As the first women who served the domestic needs of the European men of the companies in Bengal, Portuguese/free Christian women in and around Calcutta and Chinsura in many ways pioneered the innovative family ties in the long transition to colonialism. At the crossroads of class and gender, these women defined the various possibilities of emotional ties for the household workers.

64. Gregory Durston, *Wicked Ladies: Provincial Women, Crime and the Eighteenth-Century English Justice System* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013), p. 75.

65. Wills of Susanna de Rosario, Catharina Disius, Anthonia de Rosario, 1.11.06.11/1694, fos 112, 222, 1026; will of Lucia de Piedade, Simoa de Mello, Anna de Rozario, Magdalena de Rosario, 1.11.06.11/ 1693, fos 181, 239, 247, 480; will of Roza de Costa, 1.11.06.11/1693, fo. 258 and her revised will in 1.11.06.11/1715, fo. 552; will of Elizabeth Pain, 1757, will of Dominga Araujo, 1760, P/154/50 (unfoliated); will of Adriana Mendis, will of Clara van Bengale, 1.11.06.11/ 1693, fos 39,84; will of Josepha Jesus, 1.11.06.11/1715, fos 159–160; will of Petronella Henrietta, 1.11.06.11/ 1696, fos 628–629; will of Nathalia Raposa, 1.11.06.11/ 1694, fo. 108.

66. Michael Fisher, “Becoming and Making ‘Family’ in Hindustan”, in Indrani Chatterjee (ed.), *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2004), pp. 95–121; William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love & Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (New York, 2004); Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*.

In analysing the experience of motherhood amongst black women in the United States, Patricia Hill Collins has noted that the disjuncture between the public and the private sphere, or the domestic sphere and the labour market, was blurred for most women of color.⁶⁷ Similarly, unlike the European woman, familial ties experienced by the propertied free Christian or Portuguese women of the settlements went beyond the experience of womanhood confined to the hearth and home. For most female European women who left wills, their widowhood was their primary identity.⁶⁸ There are very few instances of VOC or EIC officials recording Portuguese or free Christian women as dependents. None of the sixteen women in their wills express any inkling of present or former marital ties. Reproductive work mainly for male company servants was the source of these women's wealth, yet in the absence of the patriarch in these units these women created affective ties in their workplace with their subservient male workers and slaves, according to a logic that went beyond the singular factor of heteronormative caregiving.

There is significant evidence to show that free Portuguese women contributed towards the making of the fortunes of quite a few European men. Alexander Hamilton described Baranagore, a place known for the brothels run by the Portuguese women, thus: "The town is famously infamous for a seminary of female lewdness, where numbers of girls are trained up for the destruction of unwary youths".⁶⁹ Though in Hamilton's representation, these women were infamous for the "destruction of unwary" men, their wills on the contrary reveal that they were generous benefactors to European men. Magdalena de Rosario from Chinsura left the bulk of her property to Simon George.⁷⁰ Petronella Henrietta also nominated a Dutch man as her sole heir. Nathalia Raposa left 868 rupees and 5.5 annas to VOC bookkeeper Joan Francois van Schie. Simao de Mello chose a VOC sergeant, Lodewijk de Giets, as her universal heir. The wealthiest of all these women, Roza de Costa, who had multiple acquaintances in Batavia, left a substantial amount of money for each of them. Particularly, a sergeant, Grimius, and a bookkeeper, Grabo, were the primary inheritors of Roza de Costa's wealth. She revised her will twelve years later in 1755 following Grimius's death and left his son, Lambertus Grimius, 1,000 Arcot rupees.⁷¹ As has been discussed earlier, the relationship between these women and European men was normally maintained outside of wedlock. True to this practice, none of the

67. Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing About Motherhood", in Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (eds), *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York, 1994), pp. 45–66.

68. Married women made their wills jointly with their husbands in the Dutch settlement.

69. Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, p. 19.

70. I.111.06.11/ 1693, fo. 48o.

71. This Roza de Costa wrote her will in 1743 and she is not the same Roza de Costa who wrote a will in 1755.

wills define these women's relationship with the men, evading any effort to formally establish bonds centring these men legitimately in the eyes of settlement patriarchy. Moreover, they were not motivated by the need to compensate for caregiving work or paternal guilt for leaving behind illegitimate children. Thus, benefaction was never a one-way channel, with Portuguese/free Christian women at the receiving end.

In these houses of "female lewdness" women formed familial relationships with native men. Of the sixteen women, only Catharina Disius referred to male relatives. The first was Ram Chandra, whom Disius called her brother, and the second, Betchoe, her nephew and Ram Chandra's son. She left the former a large garden and the latter a smaller garden she owned. The non-Christian names of her brother and nephew suggest that most probably they were not her blood relations. However, not only were they included within the ambit of her family, they were also generously endowed with her wealth, in her will.

The most important innovation in kinship ties amongst these women lay in their practices of motherhood. Except for Lucia de Piedade, who had a grandson, no other woman had any consanguineous kin. In fact, four of them clearly stated that they had "no blood relations in the world". Yet, as in most wills, the possessions of these women were left for the young. "Motherwork" is a term used by Patricia Hill Collins to signify racially marginalized women's experience of raising children. According to Collins, "I use the term 'motherwork' to soften the existing dichotomies in feminist theorizing about motherhood that posit rigid distinctions between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective".⁷² These women engaged in the trade of reproductive work were performing motherwork, through bridging the divides between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective as an expression of a collective survival strategy. Motherhood was broadly defined; biological mothers were not the only ones responsible for the upkeep of the children. Filial relationships thus had various names. Most of the women from the VOC settlements left money for their "wards" (*opvoedeling*). Susanna de Rosario chose her "ward", Sabina de Rosade, as her universal heir. Similarly, Anthonia de Rosario chose her "ward", Johanna de Rosario. Lucia de Piedade left her "ward" half of the straw house. Magdalena de Rosario left for her "foster child", Margaretha de Rosario, ten rupees. Domingo Araujo from Calcutta referred to the three children to whom she left most of her property, as "house-bred child". These "wards", "house-bred child", or "foster children" were usually not the natural children of these women. Even when Lucia de Piedade nominated her grandson, Nicolaas de Silva, as her universal heir, she mentioned no clear relationship with his natural mother, Roza de Rozario. That all three – Lucia, Nicolaas, and Roza – had different surnames

72. Collins, "Shifting the Center", pp. 47–48.

suggest that irrespective of blood relations, a process of kin formation, going beyond consanguineous relationship, was at play in defining maternal lineage. Similarly, Anna de Rozario left all her property to her “adopted children”, Catharina and Francisco de Rozario, whose biological parents were her slave, Sara and her husband, Tam. Motherwork for these women was a process of maintaining children in the taverns and brothels, irrespective of who the biological mother was and whether their birth was planned or not. While most of these children were born as a result of the women’s sexual work for the company men, the patriarchy of the settlements found no incentive to maintain these children. Moreover, as has been discussed earlier, European fathers generally considered these children as “illegitimate”, and none of the children born to Portuguese/free Christian/enslaved women lived with their fathers or entered the ambit of his family, even when they inherited part of the father’s property. The families of these Portuguese and free Christian women thus found novel ways of incorporating these otherwise unwanted “illegitimate” children.

These matri-focal families sustained the institution of slavery in the settlement, even though their relationship with their slaves differed considerably from the European men’s relationship to their slaves. For these women, as was the case with all slave owners of the settlement, slaves were capital investments. Portuguese and free Christian women were prominent in the slave trade. For example, in 1753 a Portuguese woman from Calcutta sold her slave in Chinsura for seventy Arcot rupees – the money “saved her from poverty”.⁷³ Anna de Rosario earned thirty-five Arcot rupees by selling her slave Sabina van Falta to the assistant merchant, Jan van Hoorn in 1743.⁷⁴ Some even “lent out” their slaves in order to make money.⁷⁵ Some women, like Leonara van Mandhar along with her Dutch husband, used the language of any other cautious European slave owner – “retained rights to recall manumission” – while freeing slaves.⁷⁶ However, except for Simao de Mello, none of these women, unlike the European slave masters, gifted slaves to acquaintances in their wills. Promising all the house slaves freedom after their death was the norm. Some, like Leonara van Mandhar, went to the length of using 1,550 of her 10,000-rupee inheritance to emancipate seven of her slaves.⁷⁷ As mistresses of taverns, lodging houses, and brothels, it is highly likely that they had exploitative control over their slaves, even though, as is clear from the tavern keeper Lucia’s testimony, slaves were working alongside the mistress at her workplace.⁷⁸

73. I.II.06.II/1715, fo. 560.

74. I.II.06.II/1694, fo.132.

75. I.II.06.II/1715, fo. 117.

76. I.II.06.II/1677B, fos 120–132.

77. I.II.06.II/1677A, fo. 545.

78. I.II.06.II/1693, fo. 347.

As slave mistresses, what set these free Christian and Portuguese women apart from their European male counterparts was the familial ties they created with their slaves. The wills present an insight into the interpersonal relationships between the female members of such establishments, and even between the slave-owning mistress and her female slaves. Roza de Costa left her “house-bred” children, Rafael, Domingo, and September, and two female slaves Rosetta van Bengale and Anthonia 300 rupees and her house. Roza also provided for burial money for Rosetta and Anthonia in her will. In this case, motherwork performed by the propertied woman opened up a zone of cooperation between the enslaved women and their mistresses. In the “absence of blood relations”, these women often depended upon their slaves to fulfill the filial duties of caregiving. Magdalena de Rozario freed her slave Susanna van Calcutta and left her 1,000 rupees. Magdalena depended on Susanna to bury her. Though Roza de Costa had several acquaintances in Batavia, her closest people in Chinsura were her eight slaves. She promised freedom to all and left them each between ten and 200 rupees in cash. One slave family of Rafael de Couto, Andre and Sophia Theodora, inherited a large amount of gold. Sophia Theodora also inherited the house in which her mistress lived, and others were to eventually inherit three other houses that Rosa owned in Chinsura. Josepha Jesus was unique amongst these women. In her will made in 1755, she left her two slaves, Allvina Jesus and Rietha de Chorea, her entire property. Both of these slaves were first entered in her will as “daughters”. The word was later struck out and the word “slaves” was entered. Slaves in some of these households were subservient female members of the family. Though these relationships were unequal – the mistress exploiting the labour of the enslaved women to generate profits – such establishments provided spaces where female bonding based on trust and care could develop.

CONCLUSION

During the Battle of Buxar in 1764, some members of Mr Morgan’s Battalion abducted Komaree from her village adjoining Buxar. Following her abduction, she served as a concubine to various members of the EIC army and her work took her all over Northern India. Years of service yielded a modest fortune, with which Komaree started her own business in Farukhabad in the Upper Gangetic plain, in the province of Awadh in the 1790s. Here, adjacent to the army regiment, she set up her own shop, retailing in grains, mats, carts, etc. Most importantly, a steady source of her income remained “conveying” her sister and two other slave girls to men in the army.⁷⁹ Komaree’s story was very similar to many female household workers discussed in this paper.

79. Chatterjee, “Colouring Subalternity”, pp. 60–61.

As predecessors to Komaree, the enslaved, free Christian, and Portuguese women of the EIC and VOC settlements of the early eighteenth century set the stage for sexual and familial relationships between European men and non-European women. Despite the similarities, the process of colonial expansion by the EIC after 1757 separates Komaree's story from the stories of the enslaved and freed women of early eighteenth-century settlements. With colonization, the class and gendered relationship that had emerged centring the European household in the company settlements penetrated deep into the South Asian hinterland. Unlike the household workers in the early eighteenth century, Komaree was born in the North Indian mainland. After the Battle of Buxar, EIC officers no longer had to rely on their Indian Ocean networks to supply their domestic labour force. In other words, as nodes of Indian Ocean networks of trade, the company settlements/ports in the early eighteenth century were incubators of relationships of reproductive/sexual labour that later became the foundations of the Anglo-Indian family in colonial India.

With their lives and labour, these women bridged the dualities of slavery/freedom, domesticity/market relations, and slavery/kinship. As this article shows, manumission of enslaved women in European households was common. Upon manumission, they became part of the free Christian or Portuguese communities of the settlements. However, manumission did not translate into freedom from domestic labour. Domestic service for European men was the only form of economic opportunity open to them. Even the most fortunate amongst these women, who amassed considerable wealth, made their money from running taverns or brothels providing care to European men. Caregiving work thus bridged the fates of freed and enslaved female domestic workers of the settlements. Moreover, the nature of their work, and in some cases bondage, blurred the distinction between the domestic sphere and the marketplace/workplace.

Domestic service to EIC officials only partially explains the subjectivity of these women and their agency in forming social relationships in the company settlements of pre-colonial Bengal. Some of these women formed families extraneous to the institution of the European household. For enslaved women such tasks were difficult and entailed "conspiracies" of escape and/or murder of the slave masters. Freed women created sexual liaisons and parental/fraternal/sororal relationships bypassing the needs of their male European clients. In more ways than one, these women pioneered the strategies of independent existence, albeit highly circumscribed, that Komaree adopted towards the end of the eighteenth century.