

Article

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**‘Tumhari Haisiyat Kya Hai?’:  
Classism Abound but Shy of Class Conflict, Bollywood  
And the Dynamics of Masters and Servants Across Ages**



*Bawarchi* (1972)

Ramu kaka, Raheem chacha, Dharam da, Kanta ben, Kamla maushi, Dai jaan, Ramlal, Bahadur and the endless brigade of characters without a family name who occupy different types of labouring bodies with forgettable, interchangeable or disposable roles, crowd the periphery of Bombay cinema. They provide a sustained impression of effect between the master and working class, where the former, through his kindness and the latter, through his unwavering loyalty, placates the audience with a promise of camaraderie across unbreachable wealth gaps or through the souring of the same dynamics, make us painfully aware that the difference between *us* and *them* is just a simple coin toss of fate. Aware of their decided place in the larger scheme of things, Ramu Kaka happily accepts that his kind does not have the strength or agency to drive the plot unless they are required to have children who dare to punch above their weight, fall into prohibited love affairs and prompt the question “tumhari haisiyat hi kya hai?”. The ensuing conflict, however, goes around and comes around to abide the average Bollywood film buff by the worn-out shackles of recycled feudal class logic. This paper attempts to bring out the problematic use of this logic by exploring films across different eras— from a time when Sikander has to be the martyr on Kamna *mamsaab*’s altar to resolve their class difference (*Muqaddar ka Sikandar*) to the ex-maid and aspiring designer Ratna, standing on the rooftop of her so in-love, multi-millionaire Sir’s apartment and slowly but surely addressing him by his name- Ashwin (*Is Love Enough? Sir*). The primary focus of this essay is to examine the public sphere with respect to its integral relationship with domestic issues and conceive of the relations within the household as a microcosm of the

rules and comportment of societies, with the institution of domestic servitude providing a powerful lens to view social constitution and reconstitution over time. Standard historical sources are not enormously helpful when talking about lived experience. Therefore, I look at Bollywood cinema as an archive of urban middle-class masters and servants representing each other. Although cinema is a medium primarily controlled by the master class, there exist gaps in these master narratives that give us a segway for digging into unconfessed anxieties of class, caste and gender when they are forced to cohabit in the same space.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, class, domestic service, women, space, Bombay.

India has a long and unbroken history of domestic servitude. The relations of paid domestic work, an institution central to understanding self and society, are intimately tied to the evolution of the modern Indian elite. Feudal *Zamindaris* had a platoon of paid and bonded servants working in the family home and lands. Sharing a degree of physical closeness with the masters was inevitable, however undesirable it was to either or both. The threat of mixing inside and outside, the touch of the ‘impure’ on ‘pure’ and the dissolution of the self and the other looms large (Tanika Sarker).

Servants transgress household boundaries, both physically and symbolically. They bring the outside in and take back to the outside what belongs inside. They can be vectors of dirt, disorder, and disease and infect children with lower-class habits and language; they may steal valuable belongings and trade inside gossip. All of these dangers are raised repeatedly by employers. In *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, Ramnath justifies his scepticism about the young Sinkander chumming with his daughter Kamna based on a previous experience with a similar orphaned boy he had housed, who ended up killing his wife for petty theft. Sikandar, throughout the plot, keeps proving his loyalty by becoming a watchful protector of the family through distress, proving otherwise until his final martyrdom alleviates him from the class of bastard orphans who murder their masters. For *Sikandar*, the logic of exceptional moral character and the aphorism we all have in us make it big if given the right circumstances. The ethos of the feudal household continues to resonate in the relationships and expectations of employers and servants in the urban middle-class house.

When Lalloo receives a letter calling him back to his native village on account of his sister-in-law’s sickness in *Hum Aape Hai Koun*, the comical vamp of an aunt raises suspicion about its authenticity, insulting Lalloo’s integrity and suggesting that it all might be his fat scheme to fleece a lump sum and never return, since he is a “naukar”- a designation she throws at him almost as if it were a slur. Given the tested loyalty of Laxmikant Verde’s servant figure across two Rajshri films now, as a friend and confidante of the main couple in love, Mami’s accusation rings hollow. It is only a premise for Lalloo to claim his innocence unabashedly and for the matronly *bhauji* to shower him with affection, which she does without dissenting with *mami* since such trifles are beneath her. Filial love becomes the one precondition that dismisses class anxiety. Lalloo’s unrelenting loyalty towards his tender-hearted mistress does away with issues of disparity that put these two kinds of people at odds with each other. The film, however, despite its benign display of charity, can't contain Lalloo. Even though he is a part of the house's panoramic interiors (Ranjini Mazumder), Lalloo’s quarter is the kitchen- his bags are packed in a kitchen, and his romance with another servant, Chameli, blossoms. Rajshri’s filmic interior cannot conceive of a servant quarter where Lalloo can be located in his less-than-satisfactory status in life amidst clutter, hand-me-down clothes and discarded furniture. Lalloo is only subject to Prem’s good-natured quipping and Bhauji’s niceness. Prem, Nisha, and Bhauji all appeal to a nationalised identity of the master class, and Lalloo’s relationship with them exists merely through their association.

There is an overwhelming display of “niceness” for the domestic worker when he’s not left

to merge with the background. The Oscar-winning *Parasite* sums up this “niceness” quite succinctly. “The madam... is rich but still nice,” says Kim-taek, the chauffeur to the madam and her family. “Nice because she’s rich”, retorts his wife, who plays housekeeper to the same family. “Hell, if I had all this money, I’d be nice too”. The niceness on display results from a power dynamic- where one is placed in a position of privilege and can make her “niceness” seen. (Sohini Chattopadhyay). *Parasite* remains one such foreign language film that intersects this conversation about class relations, with a decided effect on Bollywood cinema because of how wisely it was received and how it sparked all this conversation about the master-servant dynamic, making conning and deceit more permissible than it is in Indian middle-class imagination.

Capitalism, as we know it, is the determining force in all interpersonal relationships in today's master-servant dynamic.

Shojit Sircar's *Piku* makes its domestic servants victims of the eccentric old Bhaskar's bullying and paranoia. He walks behind the maid in his dirty shoes, inconsiderate of her wiping the floor, to check on her apparent stealing habits; he makes her clean the toilet thrice a day or until he's satisfied and suspects her stealing toilet cleaner. It's the fifth maid in two months, complaints his daughter, ashamed of what society might have to say, and probably more worried about where a boycott on account of harassment will put her as a working woman who would now have to deal with household chores too. “What relationships, Piku? Taking a cleaning lady to dinner?”- argues Bhashkar, poking fun at the insinuation of calling domestic helps a “society” they would need approval from. Budhan has come into the household in dowry with the late mother and is here to stay. He laments the dream of a respectable job. “Fine then, you start going to my office tomorrow”, retorts Piku, taking his expectations to be disingenuous. At the beck and call of a constipated, senile old man and his makeshift commode, on top of his temperamental daughter, Budhan has much to do and little to say. Does *Piku*'s “bhadrak” culture endorse a classist India? Of course, it does. In a drive to extract a humane story out of the throes of a

comedy on constipation, its servants sit neglected in the back seat where there's hardly any space to accommodate them, only enough to punch down. Surrounded by naysayers, Budhan cannot sit beside Rana Chowdhury in the passenger seat of his taxi, one because it's rightfully the heroine's place beside the hero and two because he's Budhan, the servant. Relegating him to the front seat will put Rana at one with the dull domestic worker he cannot relate to as an engineer and as the owner of the cab company. Yet Budhan is there as a character devoid of a past and future, just a fleeting presence in time making hissing noises outside the public lavatory to help *Dadu* pee.

The presence of servants is a necessary marker of class. Employers, as Bhaskar does, attempt to contain the threat of their presence spilling over by buttressing the symbolic boundaries of the household, controlling domestic workers' movements through space, and manipulating workers' closeness to and distance from themselves them to the trunk of cars, into the kitchen, away from the bedroom.

There are three precursors which continue to shape the culture of servitude. First, servants are essential to a well-run household; second, they are 'part of the family' and bound to it by ties of affection, loyalty, and dependence; and third, servants comprise a category with distinctive lifestyles, desires and habits. Yet, at the close of the 20th century, this culture of servitude is no longer hegemonic. The first premise sits uncomfortably with contemporary notions of privacy and ideologies of the nuclear family, especially in the more confined space of the apartment. The second is complicated by the entrance of capitalist and corporate discourses about employers and employees. The third is challenged daily in a political culture where democratising discourses circulate in state and civil society (Sara Dickey). In the cosmopolitan reality of modern in South Asia, class, caste, and gender form a glutinous mix with no distinctly separable category. Coming away from Bollywood to Mrinal Sen's Bengali film *Kharij*, we are made to address the young Palan who is only Palan, an underage domestic helper boy whose last name or address is made deliberately obscure to underscore the lack of anyone who would fight the case of criminal levels of neglect which leads to his

eventual death in the locked kitchen of his employer-cum-foster family. The absence of a last name in the twenty-first century isn't merely obliteration. Deleting servants' last names and replacing them with an effective term like *kaka*, *chacha*, or *bai*—a frequently discussed factor cannot be simply aligned to the invisibilisation of their lower caste status. It is one of the factors, yes. Still, in the cosmopolitan metro cities teeming with migrants and commuters



from all walks of life, a *Kantaben* could very well be a Rajput woman playing masquerade in Karan Johar's *Kal Ho Na Ho* as the homophobic maidservant providing comic relief. *Budhan* could very well be a displaced Brahmin refugee from present-day Bangladesh who entered domestic service as a child labourer in the pangs of hunger. Invisibilising caste works both ways, to hide a lower caste identity in a Mandal middle castes' apartment complex as well as an upper caste identity stripped of its class status and forced into labour for the sake of sustenance.

Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Bawarchi* insists on this masquerade. Taking away Rajesh Khanna's totemic star power and mystique, he is cast into the eponymous role as *Raghu*, a philosopher-guide-cook all wrapped into one. Adapted from the Bengali film *Golpo Holeo Shatti*, where a meek-looking but magically energetic Rabi Ghosh plays the solution to all domestic problems at whichever house he hails with his presence, Khanna's *Raghu* gets upcycled as an Urdu-speaking professor-philosopher who has taken to housework as a means to tackle the moral crisis in the nation with the family being the functional unit in a Nehruvian India. It is a comical charade, happy pretence and role-play, drawing the paid labourer out of the servant body and using it as an empty signifier who heralds the vehicle of social change in a *khaki* uniform and Gandhi cap. Decades

later, it would influence David Dhawan's *Hero No. 1* with the quintessential middle-class hero Govinda in a similar game of charades, playing servant to win over the lady's hand.

The role of gender is another important factor in the economy of domestic service, a form of labour in which poor women leave their homes to work in the households of wealthier women. Because household work is labour intensive, largely manual, and poorly paid, and because domestic labour is highly gendered, with cooking, cleaning, laundry and childcare seen as women's work, most middle- and upper-class households hire lower-class women servants. Women are deemed to be less unsafe and more controllable in urban upper-class apartments, more available for lesser pay. However, women labourers also pose a greater menace—seen on the flipside as notorious sexual energy unleashed in the close confines of Mumbai's flats, a parallel challenge to the absent wife and mother, threatening to take over the family and upend rules of social etiquette. The home interior becomes a supple, permeable space under the ministrations of the woman servant once the women members are away. Hence, it is only fitting that the Netflix anthology *Lust Stories* opens with Zoya Akhtar's short film about the sexual freedom of a maidservant in the master's household.

Akhtar interrogates the various levels of power and their interactions, which affect our desires and our inability to do anything about them. Love is a privileged position that can only be fancied by the majority. Akhtar takes a bottom-up look at this power struggle, closely examining the unit holding much of that power—the liberal, upper-caste affluent families—that see love less like a bond and more like a business transaction, materialized over snacks and meetings, culminating in marriage. (Thakur)

The story and the camera's gaze revolve around *Sudha*, annoyingly addressed as "beta" by her employers, who look at her with careless affection and portion out their "love" for her in terms of the number of packets of snacks she gets in the gift but fail to notice her. She is involved in a sexual relationship with their son. The potentially life-changing relationship for *Sudha* is merely a distraction for the handsome, employed bachelor

Ajay. However, Ajay hardly notices Sudha when she's not wrapped around his legs. Sudha, on the other hand, only hoped that he would notice. The vignettes of her life consist of small scenes, opening her shoes beside the family's, taking care of their belongings as her own but not quite; extended scenes of her scrubbing tables, floors, and tiles of the bathroom, expertly brooming under everyone's feet, smoothly transitioning in that claustrophobic one Bhk that her employers are ready to get rid off at the first sign of wedding being materialised.

The colour drained from her space, lips chapped, and sun-dried; Sudha looked at Ajay if only he'd noticed. She surreptitiously glances at the bride-to-be, trying to determine if she can match up. While the uptown fiance is clad in a pastel pink Lucknowi chikankari kurta that hides her silhouette, making us focus on her untanned face gently caressed by Ajay, the first of what we notice of Sudha is her unpolished legs hanging out of her skimpy pyjama, as she's on bed with Ajay and soon after when she's wiping the floor, roughly moving on all fours. They only talk once, in playful expletives that let on more than they want to. "Gandi saali," says Ajay when Sudha forgoes the shower after sex; "Nanga Saala," says Sudha when she hands him a towel. In the heteronormative logic of the world- both are transgressors; one has been tainted with desire, one stripped naked of pretences. Discomfort weighs down the air in the room for Ajay only when everyone, including Sudha, has left. But it's not something he cannot get over.

Society constrains this poignant look at desire and attempts to critique it because if it's to remain credible and not just cinema, this desire has to be stifled (Thakur). Sudha is left in the sisterhood of the worker next door, in front of the lift, where she shares a pack of sweets with this other woman who happily flaunts a torn kurta received as a handed-down gift from her employer, just like the pink kurta on the fiance which once torn might be bequeathed on Sudha in the future. Life is a vicious cycle of indignity and misery for these women, who helm through these vicissitudes with untenable strength. Tensions appear prominently because of the unmatching combination of intimacy based on their

closeness to these families and a distance based on the polarity of class and other hierarchies.

Rohena Ghera looks at the same dynamic with rose-tinted glasses in her *Is Love Enough? Sir*.



Handled with an observational style and cinematic elements of realism, much unlike the staple Bollywood melodrama, *Sir* opens itself to the possibility of love conquering the chasm between wealth and poverty. For a city that squashes time and space and disregards silence, Mumbai is too sanitised, attentive, and generous towards Ratna if we overlook the one or two hiccups along the way. Mumbai is mythicised as a city of overnight fairytale transformations. Ratna takes the bus, looking at the transit system as a liminal passage between the orthodox village society where she's a widow and the questionable men of that village, who are nothing like the "city boys" who Ratna is initially passive towards but progressively attracted to. Inconvenient truths, workplace safety and unequal power dynamics ignored, Ashwin and Ratna begin to share a "connection", both being victims of prematurely terminated marriages and hostage to their families. Ratna is a well-spoken, intelligent, and talented woman who needs the right opportunity to transcend her circumstances. Ashwin, the family's black sheep, is also a misfit in the upper-class echelons that lack his sensitivity and compassion. Ratna and Ghera are relatively simplistic in their way of looking- the blue glass bangles as a sign of emancipation, the sewing machine, the shirt she gifts instantly worn by Ashwin on his birthday at the expense of all other gifts, her discomfort with other women in the apartment prompting him to sanitise the space for her comfort, all can be dismissed as a fantasy if one is to be slightest bit cynical. In the fantasy land of *Sir*, genuine passion blooms between the woman paid to

cook and clean and the man who is paying her to do so.

Shobha Dangle's short film *Lata* balances Ghera and Akhtar's stories by unpacking the mutual passivity and inertness of the household and the house help. Lata is merely a girl, taking care of an art deco apartment with gleaming rich interiors- scrubbing, brooming, washing, ironing and repeating. She eats in the toilet. Unlike Ratna's tiny home within Sir's apartment, her quarters are the white tile of the bathroom floor. She is awkward and fidgety whenever the homeowner's disciplining presence is anywhere near. She cannot even sit on the bed she so efficiently makes every day or use the toilets she scrubs clean after the owners finish their messy business. She cannot spend too much time on the job hearing her lover over the phone talk about an accident that took the lives of her fellow villagers; she cannot stop catching the news telecast on the TV because time is contracted inside the house during the day. The green and white latrine floor is crucial to the narrative- where Lata gets to eat and dress up for Ganpati Visarjan in peace. Every other place in the house resists her presence when she has overstayed the welcome. Not one word is spoken about it, but the rules of movement are practised as if engraved in stone. Mumbai gets a little more accessible and a little more young at night when Lata gets to dance on the street.

The gate is the most stable marker of inside-outside and family-non-family space. However, these categories are relative and shifting, operating on a continuum rather than acting as an apparent dichotomy. At the lift, Lata and the audience hear a woman from the highrise applaud an elderly domestic servant about her fitness. They are awed that the woman walks twenty-five minutes every day to reach this building that came to be in her lifetime and surprised that she doesn't "enjoy" riding buses. The irony is hard to miss.

Domestic workers are imperative to run households of the Bombay urban cinema well and, at the same time, misfits occupying polar opposites of class and other hierarchies. At once, inside and outside, familial and unfamiliar in the permeable space of the house, the trajectory of the domestic labourer touts

the ancient class logic of deserved and undeserved wealth- the fantasy of overnight mobility, the promise that they are shortchanged for.

"Your father is a driver. A servant's son becomes a servant." The front seat- back seat dynamic of employer and employee (Sohini Chattopadhyay), in this case, Murad and the people



he chauffeurs around in Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy*, a critical darling for venturing into the tension of class politics, eschews a sympathetic look or employer that *Parasite* knowingly avoids. Murad looks into the car's rearview mirror to notice the crying woman he is chauffeuring for the night. He wants to reach out and comfort her. The sequence is embellished with a song that attempts to bind the isolation and grief of these two vastly different figures. *Gully Boy* portrays the nuanced lives of young Dharavi rappers whose lyrics are triggered by class violence. Yet, their complaints are dangerously partial to their drunken fathers instead of the poverty trap caused, technically, by the same employers Murad wanted to reach out to in the car. It continues to romanticise the servant-master dynamic. Akhtar's empathetic gaze is a fresh change, but it is not good enough because it shies away from grabbing the problem by the neck. Despite the hint of realisation, the dominant class is lulled into the comfort of their medieval class logic, for which they have been given a long pass.

Much more is left to be said about production dynamics and the fact of casting for servant figures in Bollywood, for who gets to be the comic saviour Lalloo or who fits the role of Kattappa, who receives

a rounded story for themselves and, more importantly, who doesn't. This is merely a scratch of Marxist-Amedkerite analysis on the surface of the mammoth-like world of Bollywood cinema.

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