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# Labour Behind the Purdah: Servitude, Fosterage, and Female Labour in the Mughal and Rajput Zenana

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**ABSTRACT**

The zenana in early modern South Asia has conventionally been framed as a space of seclusion and elite domesticity, obscuring the labour systems that sustained it. This paper examines how dominant historiography has produced an epistemic erasure of labour within Mughal and Rajput (Amber) zenanas. Focusing on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it reconstructs labour hierarchies and foregrounds fosterage and milk-kinship as practices linking domestic labour to political influence. Drawing on Indo-Persian chronicles, vernacular texts, visual sources, and European travel accounts, the paper argues that zenanas functioned as structured labour institutions and sites of competing knowledge production.

## Introduction

The earliest and most prevalent image of the zenana was that presented by early European travellers and late colonial writers who often presented it as an enclosed world of sensuality and idleness. This space appears in chronicles as an interior space, in travel accounts as a site of curiosity, and in much of the historiography as a domain defined by restriction and privilege. Yet this familiar historical imagination has come at a cost. Scholarship has frequently neglected to pay attention to the circumstances that enabled such a space to exist. The zenana, as it emerges from the archive, is seldom explored as a site of labour.

To read the zenana only as a space of seclusion is to mistake its effect for its foundation. This paper starts from a different premise: that the zenana was not merely a space to be defined, but a structure to be sustained. Its operation rested on a vast variety of activities and their discharge by individuals whose presence is intermittently visible but analytically underdeveloped. These forms of labour were neither incidental nor peripheral. They were systematised, controlled, and incorporated in wider frameworks of authority. To foreground labour, then, is not to add another layer to the study of the zenana, but to reconsider its very constitution.

A careful involvement in the archive becomes necessary in such a shift. Indo-Persian texts such as the *Ain-i Akbari* and *Akbarnama* provide much more detailed descriptions of the imperial household, yet they render labour primarily as function, subordinated to the administration. In Rajput contexts, vernacular materials such as *Nainsi ri Khyat* and *Vir Vinod* present a different problem. In this case, labour is not methodically defined, but is expressed in bits, fragmented in references to provisioning, service, and everyday routine. European observers, writing from the outside with their own cultural biases, focus on scale and spectacle, noting the presence of numerous attendants and the strict regulation of access, but they seldom enquire about the organisation of work itself.

That imbalance is the point of departure of this paper. By placing Mughal and Amber (Rajput) materials in conversation, it seeks to reconstruct the labour regimes that sustained the zenana and to examine how different modes of recording shape what can be known about them. The comparison is not aimed at reducing difference to similarity, but to illuminate how different political formations produce different forms of visibility. What emerges, across both, is not a contrast between presence and absence, but between different ways of making labour legible.

The key note of this enquiry is plain but consequential, that labour organised the zenana on all levels. It arranged its hierarchies, maintained its material economy and fashioned its relations to political power. In order to present this argument, the paper will take a comparative and multi-archival approach based on court chronicles, vernacular histories, travel accounts, and visual material. It does not give preference to one source over the other, but reads across them, and listens to what they disclose and to what they hide. Such a method allows one to leave the descriptive explanations of the zenana and proceed to examine the mechanisms that supported it.

By so doing, the paper aims to rebrand the zenana into the early modern south Asian history not as a fringe, or closed space, but as a labour-intensive institutional space. This point of view does not push the

questions of gender or power to the side; it restructures them. It attracts the work in terms of how spaces are created, hierarchies are sustained and relationships are established.

**The Archive and Its Silences**

If labour structured the zenana, its recovery depends not on a single archive but on reading across multiple, unevenly constituted textual traditions. Each of these sources, the Indo-Persian chronicles, the Rajput vernacular histories, and European travel accounts make labour visible in distinct ways, while simultaneously obscuring it through its own narrative imperatives. The job, then, is not to remove the information, but to comprehend how these archives generate and constrain knowledge.

The *Ain-i-Akbari* gives one of the most elaborate descriptions of the imperial household in the Mughal case. It is administrative, classificatory and entrusted in order. It states in the text that at the imperial court, all things are conducted in a systematic and routine manner (Abul Fazl, 1873, p. 50), which is a formulation that anticipates system, rather than experience. Labour here, is represented as functional, as it is distributed, organised into departments, and subsumed in a more comprehensive logic of governance. There is an indication of a very fragmented organization with officials being appointed over each department (Abul Fazl, 1873, p. 51) but the names of the people doing the work are mostly undocumented. This mode of representation carries a lot of implications. As Irfan Habib has argued, Mughal administrative texts privilege "the regulation of functions rather than the description of persons" (Habib, 1963, p. 12). Labour is thus rendered legible only insofar as it contributes to order.

*Akbarnama* works in a different manner but has a similar effect. The influence and proximity to power described by Abul Fazl in his description of figures such as Maham Anga is anticipated, but there are working networks which created such proximity unspoken. Her political importance is documented in the text, but the daily routine by which care, service, and mediation made such power is not described (Abul Fazl, 1877, pp. 534–536). As Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam note, Mughal chronicles are "concerned with the articulation of sovereignty, not with the social processes that underpinned it" (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 1998, p. 45).

In Rajput materials, on the contrary, labour is not represented by classification but by dispersion. Texts like *Nainsi ri Khyat* and *Vir Vinod* do not provide systematic descriptions of the zenana, but do contain repeated mentions of provisioning, retinues and household structure. Records of distributions of grain and ghee to particular groups indicate organized systems of assistance, despite the lack of official categories (Nainsi, 1968, pp. 112–115). In this case, labour is inherent in narrative fragments, where one can see its

impact but not a description of it. This is a variant of recording that indicates another epistemological system.

Another dimension is brought about by European accounts of travels. Francois Bernier, describes the zenana as containing “a prodigious number of women, each attended by several servants” (Bernier, 1891, p. 272). Tavernier also highlights the size and structure of palace families, pointing to the extravagance of the arrangements that surrounded elite domestic environments (Tavernier, 1925, p. 114). These narratives are not usually read without purpose, but they should be treated with caution. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam cautions, European observers “translated unfamiliar institutions into familiar categories, often exaggerating scale while misunderstanding structure” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 186).

Modern historiography has challenged and reproduced the patterns outlined above. Ruby Lal’s work marked a critical turning point by showing that the zenana was not simply a location of passive confinement but a space of negotiation and political activity (Lal, 2005, pp. 77–83). Similarly, the work of Findly on Nur Jahan and Afshan Bokhari's study of courtly culture has broadened the analytical lens to include the intellectual and cultural contributions of women in the Mughal court (Findly, 1993, pp. 45–52; Bokhari, 2013, pp. 89–94). These contributions have been critical to both dismantling previous assumptions regarding women's passivity and highlighting a different hierarchy of visibility. By placing elite women and exceptional individuals at the forefront of the historical record and largely ignoring the economic and labour structures that supported them, the issue of how that agency was materially created has been insufficiently addressed.

This same issue is present in the economic and administrative histories of the Mughal state. While Shireen Moosvi's work has analysed revenue, taxation and trade in-depth, much work has been dedicated to understanding the economic contributions of the family or household to the overall economy. In Moosvi's work, the zenana is viewed as an adjunct to the imperial structure of the Mughal Empire rather than a space of economic activity (Moosvi, 2008, pp. 112–115). The zenana, in these accounts, appears as an adjunct to imperial structure rather than as a site of economic activity in its own right.

Rajput historiography encounters a slightly different but intertwined issue. Historians such as Norman Ziegler, Ramya Sreenivasan, and Cynthia Talbot have developed fairly large bodies of work regarding kinship, lineage, and political culture and have made clear that relational networks were integral to the operation of Rajput polities (Ziegler, 1976; Sreenivasan, 2007; Talbot, 1995). Although the contributions of these authors have provided significant insight into the relationship between the household and the

polity, few of them analyse labour as an analytical category in its own right. Service as an activity is mentioned in these studies in the context of other forms of loyalty and obligation, yet the labour process as an activity supporting the systems of loyalty and obligation has not been theorised in a manner specific to it.

Such a pattern reflects a more general epistemological problem. Bernard Cohn has argued that the ways in which we know about the past are based on the categories of knowledge used for its production, and that these categories determine what is recorded at all, as well as what is made significant about the records (Cohn, 1996). The zenana is a case in which the constructed categories of historical knowledge give special significance to space, hierarchy and the activities of elites and reduce the significance of labour as an object of analysis. In the same way, feminist historians who study labour have emphasised that domestic and reproductive labour are not unrecorded or absent, but rather, domestic and reproductive labour do not fit within the frameworks of historical significance (van der Linden, 2008). In order to rebuild labour, then, it is necessary to read across these traditions without giving more weight to the former than to the latter but rather to put them into dialogue.

**Hierarchies, Roles, and the Organisation of Labour**

The labour in the zenana when it appears to have been unevenly distributed across the archive is made more accurate in its structure when explored with the assistance of specific instances, names and recorded practices. What comes to view is not just an undifferentiated system of service but a stratified hierarchy filled with recognisable roles and historically proven actors, whose labour kept the zenana an institutional space. The zenana was not a solitary service of an anonymous individual, but it was organised into known systems of working people.

Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* provides the structural outline of this organisation, noting that "officers are appointed over every department" (Abul Fazl, 1873, p. 51). The most labourers at the bottom are not named, but there are some statistics in the primary sources showing how the labour was conducted in the upper levels. One such incident is the khwajasara Itimad Khan, a trusted peripheral employee of the imperial court with the responsibility of managing entry and controlling the flow of information between the zenana and the court. His position is a good example of supervision, surveillance and mediation being institutionalised as specialised labour. Similarly, the subsequent Mughal documents of Khwajasara Hilal, demonstrate that eunuch personnel remained significant to ensure the order with the zenana. Their responsibilities of controlling access, controlling attendants and delivery of information demonstrate that

labour at this degree cannot be dissociated with control. As Findly notes, such figures were "entrusted with authority precisely because of their position within the enclosed household" (Findly, 1993, p. 69).

Being under this layer of supervision the archive becomes more fragmented, though not utterly quiet. Abul Fazl refers to numerous attendants that were hired to serve the individual, however, he does not name them, though other sources provide some insight into their presence (1873, p. 52). The *Akbarnama* records the instances of attendants that accompanied the royal women during their undertakings and travels and one can perhaps conclude that their duties could not be confined to the sitting housework (Abul Fazl, 1877, p. 540–542). European observers provide additional detail. Bernier describes attendants who "wait upon the ladies, dress them, and are constantly at hand" (Bernier, 1891, p. 273), suggesting continuous and specialised service. These servants, bandis and kaneez, were the basis of the zenana operation, and performed not only in cleaning and repair, but also in personal care. Their work is not set explicitly, although it is hinted at many times. More concrete evidence of labour differentiation appears in provisioning records. The *Ain-i Akbari* details the functioning of the imperial kitchen (matbakh), where food was prepared in large quantities for the household. According to Abul Fazl, food was distributed in an orderly fashion meaning that certain groups were tasked with the responsibility of preparing, delivering, and servicing food (1873, p. 49-50). According to the analysis by Moosvi, these roles were associated with regular allocations and the labour was directly correlated with material sustenance (Moosvi, 2008, p. 113). In places where names are lost, functions are clear-cut.

The pattern of evidence, which is more visible in Amber, does not permit any less concrete reconstruction. *Nainsi ri Khyat* gives several records as to how much grain and ghee was assigned to certain domestic unit groups, indicating structure in service communities. As an example, records of how provisions were distributed to palace servants demonstrate that labour was organized in units as opposed to appointing individuals (Nainsi, 1968, pp.). 112–114).

The Amber zenana's use of women instead of eunuchs underscores the Rajput emphasis on ritual purity and gendered interiority. The gatekeeping attendants, identified as strī-sevākar, formed the zenana's first tier of internal administration, regulating movement and maintaining the sanctity of lineage space. The organisation of internal labour is evident in Nainsi's description of ritual and musical specialists. The named performer, Bhairavi, demonstrates the presence of trained musicians within the zenana (Nainsi ri Khyat, Vol. I, p. 249). European travellers offer parallel descriptions: Bernier notes that Rajput women "keep female musicians and dancers for their recreation and ceremony" (Bernier, 1934, p. 221). These accounts collectively show that cultural labour was an integral component of the zenana's social life,

sustained by specialists whose roles blended entertainment with ritual function. Figures named are less common, but some provide insights into the system. In Rajput sources we find mention of specialised functions of Charans and Bhats in the cultural and ritual life of the zenana. These individuals, tasked with genealogical recitation and ritual roles, were in a role that embodied service coupled with symbolic power (Talbot, 1995, p. 72). The existence of them implies that labour did not limit itself to the maintenance of the house but extended to the creation of the courtly identity. These traces of text are supported by visual evidence. Miniatures of palaces always display more than one servant standing close to the elite figures, some of them are holding fans, some are carrying various objects, and other servants are standing at doorways. These visual clues point to division of roles even in cases where textual sources are implied. Labour, in Rajput contexts, has to be rebuilt not through lists, but through patterns.

Comparison of Mughal and Amber materials thereby also shows convergence and divergence. Mughal documents provide the names of the officials and the offices identified, whereas the lower-level workers are mostly anonymous. Rajput sources on the other hand maintain episodic number and ritual experts, but not administrative hierarchy. But labour, in both instances, is organised, differentiated and necessary. This is especially clear when it comes to the regulation of space. At Mughal levels, the access to zenana was restricted by khwajasaras like Itimad Khan and the access was supervised and controlled. In Amber, the same functions were carried out by retainers who had a ruling household where their authority was based on kinship and loyalty, as opposed to office (Sreenivasan, 2007, p. 146). Seclusion, therefore, was not a condition, it was an achievement of labour. The zenana, in this sense, is not an interior, silent, but a space that is animated by constant movement, the order of which is preserved by the harmonious co-ordination of the work of those whose labours, though they are on the periphery of the archive, were at the heart of it.

**Economy, Provisioning, and the Material Life of Labour**

If the organisation of labour shows the internal structure of the zenana, its economy shows the conditions in which that labour was maintained. Labor in such places was neither abstract nor accidental; it was materialized: nourished, dressed, and serviced by mechanisms of distribution, compensation, and clients. What we need to do to know about labour, then, is also to know the economies which allowed it to happen as well.

The *Ain-i-Akbari* mentions that provisions were “assigned according to rank and requirement” (Abul Fazl, 1873, p. 49), indicating a system in which economic support was calibrated to hierarchical position.

This was not a uniform system of wages, but a differentiating system that was the combination of cash wages, in-kind wages, and imperial patronization. The senior officials of the zanana, including khwajasaras and supervisors, might also be well paid. It is recorded that leading khwajasaras attached to the imperial shrine received stipends as much as the lower mansabdars, gifts and at times land grants. Moosvi notes that "elite household officials were integrated into the wider fiscal system of the empire, receiving both cash and jagir-based rewards" (Moosvi, 2008, p. 114). This integration underscores the extent to which labour within the zenana was connected to broader imperial economic structures.

At lower levels, however, compensation worked in a different way. The service staff (bandis, kaneez, and others) were regularly fed because they were not paid in salaries. The *Ain* documents the wide scale organization of food distribution with the help of the imperial kitchen (matbakh) where every day large amounts of grain, meat and other products were cooked (Abul Fazl, 1873, pp. 49–50). Such allocations were not accidental; they made the main process of maintaining labour possible. This system can be explained with the help of the analysis of labour relations in South Asia presented by Indrani Chatterjee. She argues that such arrangements reflect "a continuum between servitude and service, in which subsistence and patronage replaced contractual wages" (Chatterjee, 1999, p. 46). This was the case within the zenana because it established economic dependency within the labour construct. The Mughal zenana was thus a redistributive economic unit, where labour was sustained by moderated flows of resources.

In Amber, the labour economic structure was filled with yet another organised rationale. In this case, the focus was more on the monetised salaries rather than on the provisioning, shares, and patronage based on service. *Nainsi ri Khyat* gives vital details which records how grain, ghee and other necessities were given out to household groups who were attached to the court (Nainsi, 1968, pp. 112–115). Though short, these entries refer to a system where labour was maintained by the periodic allocation of subsistence resources.

The Amber zenana, in which a few types of labour were monetised, seems to have operated on a non-monetary maintenance economy. Service groups were facilitated by the availability of food, clothing, and shelter and were often related to their place in the household hierarchy. As Sreenivasan notes, "service in Rajput courts was compensated through patronage and subsistence rather than through fixed wages" (Sreenivasan, 2007, p. 147).

It was a system that brought about an economic dependence hierarchy. Increasingly senior retainers and supervisory individuals might be granted land or incomes, and less senior workers were sustainably

sustained by daily or intermittent allocations. The delineation between labour and dependency was therefore blurred as in the Mughal context but in this case in different forms of the economy. Allusions in Vir Vinod to the expenditure in the palace suggest the presence of structured systems of maintenance of attendants and service staff (Das, 1886).

Visual sources reinforce this interpretation. Amber and Jaipur miniature paintings often portray food preparation and distribution, with several people in the background cooking, carrying vessels and serving. These pictures indicate that the process of provisioning was not a marginal part but a core of the zenana operation.

A comparison of the two systems reveals both divergence and convergence. The Mughal zenana incorporated elements of monetisation, integrating certain forms of labour into the imperial fiscal structure. Amber, by contrast, relied more heavily on redistributive provisioning tied to kinship and service. Yet in both contexts, labour was sustained through structured economic arrangements that reinforced hierarchy and dependency.

**Labour as the Production of Proximity**

Care was not an incidental and affective practice but rather a systematic labor, carried out in hierarchies, and able to generate lasting modes of proximity. In the contexts of Mughal and Amber, caregiving labour demonstrates that the lines between domestic service and political power were not determined, but negotiated on a constant basis.

Within the zenana, it was not intimacy that was given to one, but labour. The system of fosterage practised in the Mughal court is the best means of expressing this relationship. Children of the imperial family were not only raised by their birth mothers but were placed in webs of wet nurses, servants and overseers. Such arrangements formed relationships that went beyond the domestic realm to the political arena. The most common example of this is the figure of Maham Anga, the wet nurse of Akbar. The *Akbarnama* explains her position in the early years of the reign of Akbar, how she was close to the emperor and how she was involved in courtly affairs (Abul Fazl, 1877, pp. 534–536). But to hold her as a lone case is to overlook the framework which enabled such power to exist. Her status was based on some more extensive system of caregiving labour-nurses, attendants, intermediaries-who together generated the conditions of intimacy in the zenana. As Ruby Lal argues, “the authority of such figures cannot be understood outside the structures of care that defined the early Mughal household” (Lal, 2005, p. 85). Caregiving could not be merely the proximity of emotions but was an organised labour that put some

people at a long-term contact with the imperial body. This nearness, in its turn, may be translated into influence.

This trend is supported by additional examples. Another well-known wet nurse in the court of Akbar is the character of Jiji Anga, who is mentioned in Mughal sources as a well-known person whose association with the emperor went beyond the political realm. Her position, as that of Maham Anga, demonstrates how caregiving labour might produce a different kind of authority that was informally written yet nonetheless effective. In this regard, care served as a process in which labour was introduced into the realm of power.

The archive reflects another structure of care giving labour, though it brings out similar dynamics in Amber and broader Rajput contexts. In this case, fosterage is not so formulated in written sources, yet caregiving is the key to organizing relationships at home. Families of princes had attendants and caregivers whose duties went beyond nurture to socialisation and affiliation.Among the most influential figures in the social hierarchy were wet nurses and foster-mothers, whose positions held both domestic and political significance. Nainsi provides a detailed account of the wet nurse Parvati Doodhiyān, stating that "*Kunwar ne doodhiyā sambhāle, rānī-sā ro nirikshan hai*"- "the prince is tended by the wet nurse, under the queen's supervision" (Nainsi ri Khyat, Vol. I, p. 236). The phrase "under the queen's supervision" is critical: it establishes a chain of maternal authority, with foster-mothers operating as extensions of the queen's domestic and political responsibilities. The wet nurse Parvati Doodhiyān, who tended Kunwar Jagan Singh, participated in shaping the future leadership of Amber. Fosterage was a mode of political integration: Parvati's kin became aligned with the royal family, forming bonds of loyalty.

The statuette of Panna Dai, who was a protector of the infant Udai Singh is a very impressive example. The fact that she sacrificed her own child to protect the future ruler is documented in Rajput stories as the demonstration of loyalty and devotion. But they also are referring to the political value of care giving roles. As Sreenivasan notes, such figures "occupied positions of intimacy that enabled them to shape the trajectories of power" (Sreenivasan, 2007, p. 148).

Caregiving in Rajput households was done by the groups of attendants whose work formed ties of loyalty that may be transferred into political life. Such relationships are less formalised in imperial records as in the Mughal case, but they are nonetheless embedded more in the narrative and memory, and are therefore no less important. This difference presents differences in modes of representation and not differences in

realities. Rajput historical traditions, as Cynthia Talbot states, tend to encode the political relationships through the tales of service and devotion (Talbot, 1995, p. 71). The labour of caregiving, and this aspect, is no longer visible as a category but as a story, its meaning expressed via exemplary characters instead of administrative explanation.

Where caregiving is formalised by Mughal sources as structure, it is retold by Rajput sources as memory. In spite of these differences, the dynamic in both contexts is the same. These relations make traditional divisions between domestic and political spheres difficult. It shows that power was exercised not only in the formal arenas but also generated in the household close quarters. Meanwhile, the way that the caregiving labour is treated at the archive itself demonstrates its weaknesses. Influence is remembered in the archive, yet the labour which made this possible is forgotten. To rebuild the work of caring as labour, one must, then, read more than just separate characters and take note of the trends that they are an expression of. Maham Anga, Jiji Anga and Panna Dai are not exceptions; they are spots of light in greater work systems. Their visibility in the sources is not due to the scarcity of caregiving labour, but to instances when it came into the most noticeable contact with power.

**The Problem of Visibility**

Labour appears in bits and pieces, in functional descriptions, and in narrative traces, but seldom as a main focus. This is not just a lack of evidence; it's a problem rooted in how various archives organize knowledge. The comparison reveals not just incomplete records but a pattern of selective visibility. Mughal texts show labour as structure while hiding its agents; Rajput sources keep traces of practice while leaving structure unstated; European accounts emphasize scale while reducing complexity. Each archive creates its own version of labour, influenced by its priorities and limitations.

This leads to a methodological question: how can we reconstruct labour from such uneven evidence? The solution is not to favor one archive over another but to read them together. By placing these sources in conversation, we can identify patterns that go beyond individual forms of representation, such as hierarchies of service, systems of provisioning, and networks of care. Rosalind O'Hanlon's idea of the household as a site where "social relations and political authority were mutually constituted" offers a useful framework (O'Hanlon, 2007, p. 897). It suggests that we cannot understand labour just through administrative categories or narrative fragments, but must see it as a set of practices that cross these forms. To recover labour is to read across what the archive separates.

This method also requires looking at visual sources. Miniature paintings from both Mughal and Amber contexts show attendants in structured arrangements, standing behind elite figures, placed at thresholds, engaged in acts of service. These images do not name their subjects, but they reveal patterns: repeated roles, differentiated tasks, and spatial hierarchies. In this way, visual materials offer evidence that complements textual sources, making clear what is otherwise implied. Even here, visibility is limited. Paintings, like texts, follow conventions of representation, patronage, and aesthetic focus. They highlight certain figures while pushing others into the background. Labour appears, but often as part of the scene rather than the main focus. The invisibility of labour is not a gap in the archive; it is a result of how the archive is constructed. Recognizing this has significant implications. It shifts the task from filling in missing information to questioning the conditions under which information is produced. Labour is not simply hidden; it is systematically pushed aside within forms of knowledge that favor authority, hierarchy, and spectacle.

Labour becomes visible not when it is directly mentioned, but when its traces are read together. In this sense, studying labour in the zenana also involves studying historiography. It challenges how the zenana itself has been understood and emphasizes that what has been treated as background is, in fact, foundational.

**Conclusion**

Labor existed in numerous ways in both Mughal and Amber settings, establishing hierarchy through a network of supervision and service. In addition to establishing hierarchy through supervising others and supporting day-to-day life by both providing and maintaining resources, labor also controlled the physical space through its oversight and facilitated closeness between people by allowing the connection between the roles people fulfill in their homes (i.e., through caregiving) to have a political impact. These interactions were not distinct functions but rather connected activities that together created the zenana as an institutional space. The proposed comparative framework creates a more nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences between the two sites. It illustrates that what appear to be oppositional Mughal and Rajput systems are in fact two different modes of representation rather than fundamentally different representations of reality; they both have a presence of labor that has been recorded based on the values inherent in each archive: as a process in one and as partial records in the other.

Labour as a focal point reintroduces movement, structure and agency to a site which is often conceptualized as being static in nature. At the same time, the varying levels of visibility of labour

relative to different sources demonstrate the need to carefully examine the archive itself. The marginalization of labour is not incidental and is indicative of how historical narratives are created. Administrative texts emphasize order, narrative traditions emphasize exemplariness and outsiders emphasize spectacle. In each case, labour exists in full representation, yet none of those representations substantially convey the presence of labour. Recognizing this displacement is not just about filling gaps. The study of labor in the zenana thus becomes an exploration of historiography, how certain forms of work are pushed to the edges and how they can be brought back into focus.

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