

Spaces of Labor in the Social Clubs of British India: Obsolescence in Denial

Nisha Shanghavi

Obsolescence offers a paradigm to think about temporal change by following a logic of expendability and supersession to break away from the past.¹ How can obsolescence enable re-thinking colonial spaces of labor in postcolonial India? I turn to a colonial practice of club members being waited on by lady attendants, spatially embedded in the ladies' dressing room adjoining the swimming pools – one of the least visible spaces – in the Tollygunge Club (est. 1895) in Calcutta, India.² In my analysis of the club's dressing rooms, a gender-specific facility, I examine two interconnected rooms, entered from doorways on opposite ends as a space, which even today, provides a historically colonial service of attending to female swimmers of the club: these services have no defined specifications and range from providing clean

¹ Daniel M. Abramson, "Obsolescence and Its Futures," in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches in Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 231-243.

² Calcutta was the capital of the British Empire in India until 1911. It was renamed Kolkata in 2001 as per its precolonial pronunciation, and a result of decolonization efforts. For the purpose of this article, I shall address present-day Kolkata as Calcutta since the discussion here addresses certain spatial and social continuities from the colonial period.

towels to watching valuables or everyday possessions that members do not want to lug around while they socialize or enjoy other activities in the club.

Ordinary spaces like doors, passages, service spaces, and served spaces often conceal the physical presence of labor. The study of these spaces, though, reveals



Figure 1: The official entrance to the dressing rooms are through the blue swinging doors. There is a notice board to post timed news bulletins, circulars, and a list of members who serve on the swim committee. On the left of the door is a five-foot-tall list of rules and regulations for the pool. The first two rules specify proper attire for swimmers, including swim caps to be worn by male and female swimmers with longer than shoulder-length hair. Photo by author, 2024.

transactions and the socio-economic hierarchies embedded within them.³ Recent scholarship has explored how servants working in the homes of British colonizers in India were made invisible as they traversed service and living spaces.⁴ Unlike colonial residences where Indian servants were a ubiquitous presence in all spaces, the dressing room staff remain within the confines of two rooms.⁵ To what extent is such obsolescent colonial labor sustained due to its spatial presence outside the margins of the visual field? How are the architectural spaces constructed to enable invisibility of labor practices and the people who perform them?

³ See Robin Evans, "Figures, Doors, and Passages," in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association, 1997), 55-91.

⁴ See Swati Chattopadhyay, "Locating the Bottlekhana," in *Small Spaces: Recasting the Architecture of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 38-61. For detailed discussion on labor and laboring bodies in colonial India, see Chattopadhyay, "Making Invisible," in *Small Spaces*, 124-146. For further reading, see Nitin Sinha, "Who Is (Not) a Servant, Anyway? Domestic Servants and Service in Early Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 1 (2021): 152-206; "Domestic Servants and Master-Servant Regulations in Colonial Calcutta, 1750s-1810s," *Past & Present* 255, no. 1 (2022): 141-88; Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵ Although this article discusses swimming pool dressing rooms, there are even more confined spaces of labor in Calcutta's clubs. The Bengal Club's ladies' room has an all-day lady attendant who is provided with a plastic chair inside the bathroom and works 8-hour shifts. Similarly, women's bathrooms in Tolly have a female attendant during club hours.

In summer 2022, I visited the Tollygunge Club for the first time in four years. I “inherited” my membership to Tolly, as the club is colloquially called, as a child of a “full” member.⁶ My father’s undergraduate engineering degree from a U.K. university in the 1960s fetched him a decent job with an American company in Calcutta. Deemed “clubbable,” my father was welcomed into Calcutta’s British clubland – as England-returned, “civilized,” and deserving of access to what had been white-only spaces until the 1960s.⁷ Clubs were notoriously governed by strict rules and regulations of social propriety and etiquette within their premises. Today, a five-foot-tall wooden board listing pool rules is placed on the wall outside of the women’s dressing room (fig. 1).

One such club rule is that swimmers with shoulder-length hair, and longer, must wear a swim cap – a ubiquitous regulation in the colonial clubs with swimming pools in Calcutta. I purchased a silicone swim cap from the club’s sports shop – lest anyone object to my entry into the pool without it. After a short swim, I walked through a pair of blue wooden swinging doors, to the changing room with private showers and dressing stations,



Figure 2: View of the inner room/lounge area where the attendants, or *ayahs*, are provided with two plastic chairs. Note the yoga mat, water bottle, and a duffel bag are placed on the sofa by a member who is likely using the pool, or is in the club premises elsewhere – lest their things become wet, or dirty if placed on the floor. Several pool users have left their bags and personal belongings on the shelves to be under the supervision of the attendants, or *ayahs*. Photo by author, 2024.

⁶ There are various types of memberships – limited-time memberships for corporate employees, or dormant membership for outstation members, and reciprocal memberships for members from affiliated clubs. A full member undergoes a selective process for admission and enjoys a lifetime membership.

⁷ “Clubland” has been in use since the 1880s to designate London clubs within a spatial grid encompassing Piccadilly, Pall Mall, St. James’s Street, and Haymarket. My use of “Clubland” refers to the British clubs in India as a cultural phenomenon, a product and a remnant of the British empire. See Seth Alexander Thévoz, *Club Government: How the Early Victorian World was Ruled from London Clubs* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2019), 6. The term, “clubbable,” was used as early as 1763, however, “clubbable” is specifically a nineteenth-century concept used to describe “Britishness.” See Mrinalini Sinha, “Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India,” *The Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 489–521.



Figure 3: View towards the upstairs private massage room and a basement for service staff's personal belongings, changing into uniforms, and eating meals. The second shift attendants work from 1:00 pm – 9:00 pm, with lunch at 3:00 pm. A plastic chair is provided for the attendants only. Photo by author, 2024.

and rows of small lockers. Further inside is an air-conditioned lounge equipped with bathrooms, mirrors above a vanity, a pair of semi-circular green leather sofas with a small, glass coffee table between them, and freshly-cleaned bath towels stacked on a side table (figs. 2, 3). A small basement is reserved for the personal use by the service staff, where they sit on the floor, and an upstairs room for massages. The *didis* generally gather in the interior air-conditioned chamber of the ladies' dressing room, hoping to remain cool during the sweltering hot summer months of Calcutta. This interior room has a service entrance, leading directly to the main circular driveway, so as to minimize traversing through club property. With only two plastic chairs provided for the *didis*, a few of them oftentimes squat cross-legged against the wall in a corner on the floor, waiting to be called to serve – they are not allowed on the sofas.

As I was about to enter a private dressing room, a much older *ayah*, or lady attendant as they are now referred to, approached me with a warm smile, and a faint recognition. Not expecting to be recognized, let alone acknowledged, I nodded at her with surprise. She extended her arm, gesturing at my swim cap, and softly said, "let me dry it for you," probably as a kind gesture to make contact with me. Taken aback, I looked at my silicone cap, the water droplets already trickling off. I showed her how dry it already was, implying I did not need her assistance. In all honesty, I was embarrassed at the thought of giving her a meaningless chore. The encounter left me in great discomfort – why was her labor even available to an able-bodied person like me? I wondered why she considered it part of her job to dry my swim cap?

During my childhood days in the 1980s, the presence of *ayahs* in club dressing rooms had never bothered me. Children often went swimming unaccompanied by their



Figure 4: Interior view from the poolside door, looking through the outer room with changing stations on the right, rows of lockers on the left bottom, a thick floor mat to absorb water – rolled back every time the floor is mopped, and aligned perfectly by contractual cleaning staff. The service door at the far end exits to the driveway through a covered passageway. Photo by author, 2024.

their gym bags, folding wet clothes, and safeguarding personal items like wallets, electronics, etc. Throughout the day, a contracted group of women cleaners attend to the showers, especially to mop the frequently wet floors between the pool, showers, and dressing rooms (fig. 4).⁸

parents, who were comforted by the knowledge that the *ayahs* would care for the children and assist them with zippers, buttons, put on swim caps, or unknot and comb hair etc. This time, however, it felt different. I had never asked for their assistance as an adult. Referred to as (*ayah*) *didi*, or “maid-sister,” a combination of the Anglo-Indian term, *ayah*, and *didi* in Bengali for older sister, the female attendant, whose name I did not ask, proudly declared how she remembered most members because of her 30-year service at the club. For 16 hours each day, *didis* are tasked to lie in wait and assist when called. Three to four male attendants in the men’s changing rooms adjoining the pool also provide an equivalent service including packing and unpacking



Figure 5: View of the inside lounge, showing two bathrooms on the left, a two-sink vanity, and the second exit through the large door on the right. Photo by author, 2024.

⁸ In a private conversation in December 2024, the cleaning staff confided that their work was checked by a supervisor every time they mopped the floors.



Figure 6: View of the passageway connecting the doorway from the dressing room lounge to the circular pathway/driveway to exit the club. The passageway is without any openings besides the singular, shuttered window, offering privacy between the inner dressing room and the outer path. Photo by author, 2024.

With the first shift beginning at 5:00 am, and the second shift ending at 9:00 pm, a little past the pool closure time, *didis* spend most of their work time providing an endless supply of clean towels, picking up carelessly strewn used towels, hair dryers, and messy talcum powder from plastic bottles mixed with pool water lying on the floor left by female members and children, safekeeping swimmers' bags, valuables, and assisting in mundane chores. During my December 2024 visit, I had forgotten my hair tie at home, without which I could not have tucked my long hair in the swim cap. I asked the attending *didi* if she had a spare one I could use – and, of course, she did. It was a used hair tie, probably abandoned in the dressing room, which she had picked up and caringly saved in an ordinary white plastic bag, full of other little forgotten objects. I was able to swim in the pool that day because of her ability to see value in such discarded, deserted

things. The mundane labor is sustained by the members' continual dependence on the *didis*. I, much like other club members, am complicit in denying obsolescence to the labor practices embedded within these spaces.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abramson, Daniel M. "Obsolescence and Its Futures." In *The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches in Contemporary Architecture*, edited by Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White, 231-243. New York, NY: Routledge, 2020.
- Chattopadhyay, Swati. *Small Spaces: Recasting the Architecture of Empire*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023.
- Cohen, Benjamin B. *In the Club: Associational Life in Colonial South Asia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015.
- Evans, Robin. *Translations from Drawing to Building*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.
- Kumar, Dharma. *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Sinha, Mrinalini. "Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India." *The Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 489–521.
- Sinha, Nitin. "Who Is (Not) a Servant, Anyway? Domestic Servants and Service in Early Colonial India." *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 1 (2021): 152–206.
- Sinha, Nitin. "Domestic Servants and Master–Servant Regulations in Colonial Calcutta, 1750s–1810s." *Past & Present* 255, no. 1 (2022): 141–88.
- Thévoz, Seth Alexander. *Club Government: How the Early Victorian World Was Ruled from London Clubs*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2019.