

Monday, 20.03.2023; 4:15 - 6:00 pm CET

Nitin Varma, (Humboldt University, Berlin), Germany:

Biographies of Servitude: Life histories of Domestic Servants from the Colonial archive

Abstract:

Drawing upon a range of legal and ego documents from nineteenth-century northern India, this presentation employs a “microhistorical” methodological approach to reconstruct life trajectories of individuals who worked as domestic servants in Anglo-Indian households. I contend that a “life trajectory” approach is more amenable to the nature of historical material and the possibilities of historical reconstruction from colonial archives. The paper, therefore, directly engages with the question and potential of a life course approach for subaltern groups in an early nineteenth-century colonial setting. Notwithstanding the methodological challenges that are inherent in the reconstruction of life trajectories of individuals who worked as domestics, I contend that such an attempt also has the potential to move beyond the normative and formulaic portrayal of domestics that is prevalent in the contemporary literature and specific established approaches in the existing scholarly literature. I employ the notion of life in a double sense. In a more familiar understanding, lives refer to the life trajectories of the individual servants that I will reconstruct. At the same time, I use the notion to probe the trajectory of the category itself (i.e. domestic servant) and shifts across space and time.

Bio:

Nitin Varma is a social historian with degrees from the University of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi). He holds a PhD from Humboldt University, Berlin, on the history of coolie labour in the colonial tea plantations of India, which was published as a monograph titled *Coolies of Capitalism* (Berlin, 2016). He is currently based at the International Centre for Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History (Re:Work), Humboldt University, Berlin. He has recently published a two-volume co-edited book (with Nitin Sinha) titled *Servants' Past* (Delhi, 2019) which includes contributions on the history of domestic labour in South Asia from the sixteenth century to the present.