



Research Paper

## ‘An Anthology of the Domestic Workers of Kolkata’

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### Abstract

Women of humble backgrounds in contemporary times are often maids in homes in Kolkata. Previously there were men who served in households. But after 1980s there has been a shift in gender play in this regard. Women have outnumbered men often lead to a vanished men's role in caring and serving families of the middle and upper classes in the city. These women either travel from their villages daily to their workplaces at Kolkata or are residents permanent or temporary at the slums in the city. Their lives are striven with struggles against poverty, violence and they fight back to keep them afloat in the midst of a chaotic city life. This paper will unravel their stories often untold and unknown. The stories are real, lived and first level experiences of these women who have a voice but almost unheard. It will be an analytical and descriptive piece weaving together their biographies, a social situation in which they live and a history they had never inhabited.

**Keywords:** Domestic maids in Kolkata, Women as maids, Kolkata Domestic workers, Domesticity, Women Domestic Workers, Women and Labour

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### I. Introduction

Domesticity is integral part of any household. The household, the private world is dominated by women. They have the authority of completing and coordinating different kinds of works if not always decisions. Domestic workers are helps or assistants who have no power over the domesticity of the households they serve but are sometimes essential in upper and middle class homes in the city. They are at contemporary times mainly women who leave their own domesticity to earn money in exchange of their services at different homes in the city. The homes had domestic workers from the colonial times to serve the *Babus* (owner or the householder). The man-servant (*Chakar*) of the *Babu* confined himself to decisions of the *Bahirmahal* (the outdoor parchment of the home) the inner part *Andarmahal* being in sole authority of the woman patriarch of the family assisted by younger daughters and daughters-in-law and sometimes by maids called *jhi*. With time the colonial homes of the rich landlords simplified into a single (nuclear) household banishing the difference between the outdoor and indoor separations settled in big to moderate homes or apartments rented or of their own. After independence middle-class household formed an integral part of the city homes where maids and man-servants both were recruited as per requirement, no special division of labour between the sexes of these assistants were maintained in terms of the works to be done. It was after the Land Reforms in Bengal in 1977 that perhaps slowly the man-servants vanished from the city-space leaving behind a large void of labour requirement in households for the woman to fill.

By 1990s homes of middle class and upper classes in Kolkata were filled in with requisite women assistants in housework. The structural transformation and automation of agriculture have led to the mechanization of work, which has pushed women to exit from farm activities, especially from the middle and higher large size of landholding and to engage in unpaid activities (Schultz, 1990; Mehrotra et al., 2012). Thus, it shows that the unpaid domestic activities are more prevalent in the two extreme strata of the economy (the poorest and highest wealth quartiles, smallest and largest size of the land holdings of the household). Further, according to the household employment status, the percentage of women engaged in unpaid activities is higher in the self-employed household (62.1 percent) and household of casual laborers (58.1 percent), respectively, in 2011-12. The eastern region (73.4 percent) has higher women domestic workers for household work followed by the central region (64.8 percent) in 2011-12. Domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses with respect to their working conditions. They often work for excessively long hours, with little to no pay, and with almost no access to social protections. Globally, on average, 30% are excluded from labour

legislation, but a much greater number do not enjoy de facto minimum protection at work (Augustine and Singh 2016).

The house-maids travel from the nearby slums within the city or take long journeys to and from the city every-day or stay at the owners' home for a period of time. It has been observed that the participation of women in unpaid domestic work is quite high in the urban areas compared to the rural areas and the burden of domestic duties is increasing with the passage of time in both the sectors. The reason is probably the limited and poorly remunerated employment opportunities for women, which have reduced the opportunity cost of unpaid work mostly in the urban areas. The low participation of women in unpaid domestic work in rural areas may be because most of the women in the rural area are engaged in agriculture, which is generally informal (Singh and Pattanaik 2020). The women who come for work in exchange of pay at homes in Kolkata have the same story to share of poverty, violence and longings for better life. A general statement on their lives is not the focus of this piece. It will present stories of different women inhabiting the same space at the same time. The stories are of women but not of domestic maids (helps/assistants). The work they do might signify them as domestic maids but the stories are of poor women who desire to live a happy life.

Women working as domestic worker are perhaps the oldest jobs women do. People migrate from villages to cities for various reasons like drought, lack of agriculture, lack of employment option, land acquisition in the name of development, displacement, harassment etc. these migrants are mostly poor and disadvantaged, they get work in the unorganized sector of the city. Due to lack of education and skill, domestic work is the easiest way of livelihood. Domestic work is also an important source of livelihood for women. A report of the International Labor Organization show that 14% of female employment in Latin America and 11% in Asia comprise of domestic work. Despite their contributions to households and national economies, domestic work is situated at the low end of the care economy, working for long hours and at low wages. These again result in exclusion of domestic workers from labours and social rights which effectively legitimize discrimination of a female dominated class of workers. The toll on their health and well-being is clear but often unrecognized in law and policy. The Domestic Workers' Welfare and Social Security Act 2010 Bill was drafted by National Commission for Women to bring them to mainstream and address complains about unpaid wages, starvation, inhumane work hours, verbal, physical and sexual abuse. The Census of India reports show that 1931 there were 2.7 million people as servants, 1971 there were 67000 people engaged in same work and in 1991 and 2001 there was a 120% increase in the number of domestic help. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of workers aged between 15 and 59 went up to 17%.

### **Narratives**

The first story is of Subhadra, middle-aged woman married to a labourer. She is his second wife. She was married to this man because he did not demand dowry but had to look after his five children from his first deceased wife. Moreover she had to promise that she would never want her own child. The family was settled at the hinterland in the districts near to the city. The first two older children an boy and a girl did not accept their new mother. The younger three a girl and two boys were very young to understand the difference of a mother and a step-mother. She tried her best to meet all ends and demands. She also succumbed to the sexual demands of the husband with justification that it was natural for a man to make demands on his wife. Being the second woman in his life she was considered a care-taker and not an equal, or a partner. Time passed the eldest son grew disobedient and deviant. He frequently engaged in conflicts with Subhadra and sometimes also struck her. No one protested. The eldest daughter was married off but blamed her step-mom for her worries because she had a lazy but suspicious husband. The couple lost the younger son to a fatal disease and later as jobs were scarce moved to the city for a desire to live a happy life leaving behind the children to the care of the extended family members. Later the eldest daughter arrived with her kid as she had left her home and family and could not go to her natal family in her village. She desired anonymous identity in the city and started to live with the couple. Subhadra started to work in different households in the vicinity accumulating some money for vital expenses of the family. Soon her sons and daughters started demands on her money to which she had to succumb as any denial would result in accusations of her not being a 'good' mother and questioning her attachment as a mother to her 'own' children. She gave away all she earned to her husband and children as they were her own who would look after her when she would be sick and old. She was a housewife in the village but in the city she had to work both at home and outside. She became tired but had to meet all demands of a husband who was in and out of work and started to drink everyday to unburden him from all tensions of running a household and being jobless at times. Subhadra worked, took up more part-time jobs to make ends meet. One day she fell ill. There was no one beside her. Her brother was summoned from the village to take her to a doctor. He had to give all expenses of the cure. Subhadra paid a part of it but her husband or her earning sons never came up to inquire if she was doing well. She had given gold ornaments from her savings to her daughters, daughter-in-law, grand sons and daughters. But no one seemed interested in her well-being. She survived but learnt a lesson. She returned to her rented home in the city, carried on with her work within and outside home

and started to save more than before. She did not let her husband know of the savings and hurled them to a bank account in her natal village with her brother. She is determined that she will not stay with this family which she thought was hers but never was.

Subhadra has the agency to change her situation. Her parents or any member of her natal family did not think of her wishes. A marriage deal where they did not have to give away any thing was important. She had to sacrifice her desire to be a biological mother when she heard that her husband's demands were appropriately set against hers. At a younger age she did not have the courage to go against the will of her parents. Nor did she have the education and awareness of what she wanted. It was only later in life with experiences and understanding that she learned it was her life and she had to make ways to fulfill her requirements.

Ajanta exercised her agency much earlier in life when she realized it was useless to carry on with her husband. He was lazy in earning for his family but expeditious in bed. She bore children but could not feed them properly. She tried to persuade him in many ways but failed in each. He did not allow her to work outside home. It was a suffocating situation. She had to give in to him whenever he wanted her on bed. Any form of denial resulted in violent attacks. One day after her husband was away for some business, she decided to pack her bags, take her children and return home. Here she started to earn and pledged never to return. Nonetheless her husband started to visit her and made alibis to stay. The story started to repeat. Meanwhile Ajanta fell in love with a man and left home with him and moved to the city. They both live in a shanty, work together and earn money. She sends money regularly to her mother who takes care of her children. She has not married but is in a live-in relationship. This is a secret she keeps very dear to her heart. She introduces this new man in her life as her husband but never visits her home with him. Ajanta's husband does not visit her children. He fears that people in the vicinity might beat him if he makes any demand on his children as the mother is earning money to sustain them.

Ajanta's story is different in the way she had found a way to live life in her terms. But she could not deny the role of a husband or the importance of a husband in a woman's life. She could not deny the social pressure on her either. She had to take recourse to untruth to save her life and of her children. But she fears the day when things might come to light and the questions she has to face. She is struggling hard to make her desires from life come true one day.

Gayatri is young. She married the man of her choice. She escaped from home to deny marriage with a groom selected by her family. With the man of her heart she went to Hyderabad from a village in the Sunderbans. This boy was the son of the village *Pradhan*. He did not have a job but had contacts. Soon he secured a job at a factory and found a shelter for both. The factory workers came to know one day that both had eloped and made all arrangements for them to register their marriage. They stayed there for two years but they feared being caught by police. Soon they made arrangements to flee from Hyderabad and stay in a different city. They came to Kolkata and started their journey together in the new city; the boy as a daily wage labourer and she as a house-maid. But they could never make ends meet: to arrange for food, shelter and clothing became so difficult for them. Meanwhile she got pregnant but decided to abort the fetus as she perceived a doomed future for the family. The boy consented to it. With the help of an elderly woman Gayatri was 'freed'. The problems started after this. Gayatri was often the target of her husband's misgivings. She is tortured every now and then on any pretext: not being able to give choosy platter, being late from work, being known to women of the neighborhood, taking up work of her own choice, making any kind of decision. She now regrets her decision to elope with him. She is seeking all ways to reconnect with her family though she assumes that the boy will never be accepted in his family even might face death, nor will she be recognized as the bride. Still, she continues to ring her brother expecting him to pick up the call, at least she wants to be with her own family soon as the violence and the suspiciousness is unbearable for her.

Pushpa a middle-aged woman accompanied with her son and daughter migrated perhaps illegally to India from Bangladesh after her husband and a son died in clashes in post 1970s. She came for work and survival to this new land for work relying heavily on her relatives who had migrated earlier. She started to work as part-time maid in two houses but living with her family and connections. Soon the relatives refused to feed her son and daughter. Therefore she initiated some important people in the vicinity to employ her son which she ultimately succeeded and started to give a portion of the wage to her relatives who accepted their stay in their home. After some time she started to look for a place to stay (which she could call her own) and soon found a 'home' where the owners offered an abandoned house that they were ready to give her for stay. She took her son and eight year old daughter to this place. She was relieved that at last she had found a roof on top and a space she could stay on her own. But her economic means was scarce and it was hard for her to meet all ends. She gave her daughter for stay at a home nearby for eight hours. The daughter would return to the space, their new home only at nights and her son joined work with a car mechanic. One day as Pushpa was asleep she heard knocks on the door. She saw one of the sons from the homes she worked for. She opened the door as she knew the person. He was also one of the owners of the space she lived. She called him in and he asked for a cup of tea. She was astonished to see him at this hour but continued to make tea as asked. She did not have a porcelain

cup so offered him tea in a glass made of steal. It was warm so she covered it with the end of her saree and offered him the glass. He wanted to sip the tea with the glass covered with her saree as he was also not able to handle it with his bare hands. Fearing many things together she sat at some distance with the end of her saree wrapped around the glass from which the man sipped his tea. Her children were asleep. She wished they were awake. But she feared her daughter's future and security. The man asked for something else, now her body, and his new-found love. She could not believe her ears. She wanted to shout and show him the way but her condition and dependence prevented her. Where would she go? She stated crying, sobbing and requesting the man to let her go. He did not persuade her but sat on the chair sipping his hot tea. He told her he will return at day-time when her children will not be around and that she makes time for him in the afternoon. He went away that night. But she started to have him regularly to save her family from starvation and being homeless. She knew no one, had no one to support her, she was alone. He offered her money which she took and this continued. In a few months her relatives, friends started to ask questions. She answered no one and stopped visiting them because she needed the money. She got pregnant one day and told the man. He promptly gave her money and contact to abort the child. She did. After this the man accompanied his friend, his brother to the place and she gave in each time but for money. This continued for three to four years after which the man got married followed by his brother who was also a regular visitor. She was soon asked to leave the place as the owners had other plans and did not want a woman like her to inhabit the space. She left the area to rent a place and stay there. She lives in her own home now, has married off her daughter and her son is settled with his wife. She is relieved that she could tide over a tough time!

All the stories are narratives of conscious decision-making by the women. Though set in a poor economic condition these women are making choices and trying best to overcome the hurdles set not only by poverty but by social context in which they live. Except Gayatri all others are making choices to make changes in their settings and plunging in the dark of an unknown future. Gayatri on the other hand wants to return to her roots to unleash herself from her now bound state. The irony is that their choices to forego with the present may put their own domesticity at stake, but they take care of others' domesticity in terms of money. This earning helps them to fight their own battle to seek change in their lives. Unfortunately all husbands are patriarchs, demanding, commanding and authoritarian in their own ways. They (the men in their lives) do not have any emotion towards their wives but are particular about what is expected of them. In such a situation the wives either comply or run away. Their choices are also limited by the economic situation they are in. The choices they make might help them to live life in their terms but cannot wade off the hurdles put forth by poverty. Pushpa's story is that has a different value is embedded in the story of struggle against poverty. She might have been able to do something but took the path because she feared the struggle she might have been subjected to if not agreeing to the man she did not love or wanted. He was only a means to an end for her.

## **II. Conclusion**

There is a vast literature on domestic workers and their struggles. Sen et al (2016) focus on double domesticity— domestic work for living and reproductive work for their families. Sengupta and Sen (2012) show how parents from urban working-class neighbourhoods are not obsessed with sexual chastity of their daughters they accept courtship and elopements sometimes hailing the latter with some relief. Perhaps it also helps the women from this background to make decisions for their own benefit! Kundu (2008) states that young married women coming from distant places with higher number of children with low and uncertain income of other family member prefers part-time domestic work to supplement her family income. Higher number of adult equivalent family members, high regular monthly spending on medical and education, low contribution of other family members in the family and higher hourly wage motivates a part-time domestic worker to work more than one house simultaneously, most of them working as full-time domestic workers more than eight hours in a day deprived from overtime pay, public holiday, and timely payment of salaries. Ignoring employment convention, they are also fired without giving a reasonable period of notice as well as informing any valid ground of dismissal. Only positive side is that all part-time workers and regular full-time workers are enjoying three-paid holidays per month. This background is significant to understand the agency they initiate to change their lives. But it is important to remember that the transformation of autonomy to agency is influenced by some social structural characteristics. Social structures define the extent and quality of women's agency and outcome (Charrad 2010). Women exercise their autonomy within structures that may constraint, shape or enhance their abilities. In turn, social structures embody power inequalities that influence agency. The process of exercising autonomy leads to decision-making. Once agency is achieved women are ready to make decisions. The importance of background factors is important to consider women's agency and decision-making capacity (Rodrigues, Pillai, Ferreira, 2016). The study has found that in spite of existing socio-cultural environment that limits women's autonomy and agency. The study found significant effects of these factors on women's decision-making roles. Programmes for improving autonomy and agency may provide an assistive environment for

altering a socio-cultural environment that situates women in low status positions. Altering the environment in which they live may bring change in the way they think and want to change their lives.

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