

Abstract

This study is contextualized in the space of middle-class homes in Guwahati, wherein it explores the spatial dynamics in paid domestic work sector, and examines the everyday interactions between employers and domestic workers that, take place in a close physical proximity. While the middle-class homes primarily serve as the intimate private spaces for the employers, with the incorporation of domestic workers in these spaces, it is transformed into work spaces for the workers. Much like other work spaces, these spaces are socially constituted and are not neutral spaces. But, unlike other work spaces, these spaces of everyday contact are segregated from one another, which necessarily limit the collective bargaining power of the domestic workers, thereby, rendering them, as well as, their work as invisible. With this backdrop, the study focuses on the perspectives of both middle-class employers and part-time domestic workers in analyzing the everyday interactions and work relations, in the context of paid domestic work in Guwahati.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualization of class, the study examines the middle-class homes and subsequent work relations between employers and domestic workers, both as part of class reproduction and as an arena of class struggle. Although, the domestic workers entail the middle-class employers in reproducing their daily class positions in society; in contemporary times, it also contributes towards employer anxieties with blurring class distinction. This necessarily entails the employers in constructing boundaries of spatial distinction with their domestic workers, which significantly pronounces the unequal power entangled in the relationship. Furthermore, taking an empirical approach, the study examines how paid domestic work is organized through the intersecting hierarchies of class, gender, ethnicity and religion, in Guwahati. In this, while the study reiterates significance of class, along with gender dimensions in understanding the nature of the work and work relations; the study additionally emphasizes the relevance of social dimensions of ethnic and religious identity, which has not found much scholarly attention, in comprehending the work relationship. Taken together, this essentially helps in understanding the intersectional dynamics of employer's spatialised power practices that manifest in close proximity with their domestic workers, in the spaces of the middle-class homes.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, the present study does not restrict the understanding of domestic work relationship by underlining the employers as ultimate repository of

power. Rather, the study simultaneously addresses the power of resistance of domestic workers, by drawing from Scott's (1985; 1990) idea of 'everyday resistance', and, explores the resistance strategies adopted by domestic workers in negotiating the employer's spatial practices of subordination. By considering the resistance practices of domestic workers as entangled with their daily struggles of subordination, this study essentially contributes to the theoretical discussions on spatial dimensions of power, by throwing light to the voices of domestic workers.

Besides, moving beyond the occupational lives of domestic workers, the study examines the personal lives of domestic workers within their private spaces i.e. their own homes, which has not received much scholarly attention. The present study intended to address this, in order to have a nuanced understanding of the everyday lived experiences and personal struggles that the domestic workers encounter. In this, a close observation reveals that their personal lives are peculiarly shaped by a complex inter-linkage with their work lives and vice-versa.

The present research has been studied with the following objectives:

1. To trace the historical evolution of domestic work and contextualise it in Guwahati.
2. To examine the pattern of paid domestic work in Guwahati.
3. To understand domestic labour relations (class, ethnicity, religion, gender) between employer and the domestic worker.
4. To know the different means through which the domestic workers negotiate challenges in their household and workplace.

Literature Review

The literatures on (paid) domestic work and its associated meaning as a part of class relation, and intersectional hierarchy has been reviewed for the present study, to comprehend the spatialised work relations between employer and domestic worker, in the realm of everyday lives. While these literatures entail towards an understanding of the dominating power of employers in the relation, the present study further reviews the power of resistance on the part of domestic workers, which enriches the understanding of the overall work process unfolding in an intimate private space of employers 'home'. These literatures, therefore, in totality have helped the researcher in structuring the

thesis, and formulating the major arguments, thereby, contributing to the extending body of scholarship on domestic work relations in India.

Methodology

The present study is a qualitative research, wherein the primary tools used for collecting the data include semi-structured interview, focused group discussion (FGD) and case study method. While, the semi-structured interviews have been used for both the employer and domestic worker group, the FGDs are solely conducted with domestic workers. And, case study is done on selected cases for both employer and domestic workers, which become essential as narratives to supplement the arguments in the study. The above tools have been further supplemented by informal conversation and non-participant observation in the households of both domestic workers and employers. To sort out the informants, random sampling technique has been used, while snowball sampling has been used in few cases with the employers. Furthermore, the primary tools used for the study is enriched through secondary sources like academic books and scholarly articles, and, newspaper articles and reports on (paid) domestic work in India, as well as elsewhere, besides e-resources.

The study has been conducted in multiple phases in Uzanbazar locality of Guwahati city from the period 2019 to 2021, for approximately over 12 months. Uzanbazar is selected as the field site because it is one of the oldest residential areas of Guwahati, and has a fairly representative heterogeneous population. The heterogeneity, therefore, makes it an interesting area of investigation in the context of paid domestic work, as it entails a nuanced understanding of the personalized interactions amongst people from different backgrounds such as class, ethnic, religious, and caste in the realm of everyday lives.

For ethical concerns, the study ruled out interviewing employer-domestic worker pairs (see also Dickey, 2000b). Rather, same geographical location of the employer and domestic worker is taken. This entailed to avoid potential suspicion in the minds of informants - employers and domestic workers - regarding breaching of confidentiality. Furthermore, notably, for the purpose of the study, only women employers have been interviewed. The interviewed women belong to the Assamese community and significantly represented a wide spectrum of common middle-class attributes. Moreover, while it is a deliberate decision to interview only women, as they are mostly entrusted with the task of managing the domestic workers, the women too, suggested that their

husbands seldom interacted with the domestic workers, and vice-versa. Domestic workers, on the other hand, are approached in their settlement located in Uzanbazar, which is a slum pocket in the locality. As the women of the Bihari Paswan and East Bengal-origin Muslim residing in the selected slum settlement predominantly work as part-time domestic workers in the neighbourhood of larger Uzanbazar locality, hence, the study comprises of these two groups of domestic workers.

Organization of the thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters, in which, the first chapter introduces the research topic by highlighting the research problem, objectives and questions pertaining to the study. In addition to this, the chapter also discusses the theoretical and conceptual framework used in the study, along with the methodological approach used in collecting the data, which is followed with a brief summary of chapterization. The second chapter provides the historical overview of domestic work, by contextualising it in Guwahati. This chapter highlights the historical evolution of paid domestic work in India by tracing the transition of middle-class Indian domesticity from colonial to contemporary times. Drawing on the historical evolution of the work in India, the chapter contextualizes the study in Guwahati by developing an understanding of the city as a ‘city of migrants’. The chapter further locates the ideologies of domesticity in Assam by tracing the growth of Assamese middle-class under the colonial legacy in Assam. Moreover, this chapter marks the composition of the contemporary middle-class employers hiring paid domestic workers in the present study. And, also establishes the heterogeneity amongst the domestic workers by throwing light on the aspects of their caste, ethnic and religious affiliations, thus, linking it with their historical and social standing in Assam. Notably, while class can be perceived as the major divide in determining the work relations between employer and the domestic worker; the attributes of caste, gender, ethnicity, and religion marks the hierarchies amongst workers, which are skillfully used by the employers for their own advantage. All this together determine the domestic labour relations, and, thereby, shape the negotiations between employer and domestic worker in Guwahati. The third, fourth and fifth chapters are the main core chapters of the study, which analyses the findings of the study under various themes and sub-themes. The third chapter focuses on the middle-class homes as ‘contact spaces’, where it serves as the main meeting ground between employers and workers. By addressing the question as to how part-time domestic work is organised in Guwahati, this chapter looks at part-time

domestic workers as essential class-markers and gendered subjects in middle-class homes, entailing the middle-class women in reproducing their class and gendered positions, in the realm of everyday lives. The fourth chapter focuses further on the social dimensions of class, along with ethnicity, religion and gender, and their intersectional reality in shaping the spatialised employer - domestic worker relationship. While this has primarily been comprehended from employers' perspectives; the chapter in part also underscores the perspectives of domestic workers towards employer constructions and practices of spatial distinction. The fifth chapter analyses the social world of domestic workers- Bihari Paswan and East Bengal-origin Muslim women- in order to underscore the context under which they sustain their everyday lives. By addressing certain pertinent questions related to their work and life choices, this chapter underlines the precarious positions of these women domestic workers in society, which transcends beyond their workplaces, into their own homes. Furthermore, this chapter views the domestic workers as resisting subordinates, and examines the varied subtle practices of resistances adopted by them, in order to negotiate the quotidian practices of spatial subordination (as highlighted in the previous chapters) encountered in their workplaces. Although, the domestics are entangled in unequal power equation with their employers, they are active subjects who consciously manipulate the power equations with employers as part of their everyday resistance. The last chapter summarises the major findings and observations that are encountered in the field, which broadens the sociological discourse on paid domestic work in India, particularly in the context of Assam (Guwahati) where the research topic has found limited focus by the researchers. To conclude, it can be ascertained that, the study significantly contributes to the extending body of scholarship, as well as, adds region-specific, new dimensions in understanding the intersecting intricacies and spatial dynamics of employer - domestic worker relations, in the realm of everyday lives.