

# CHAPTER-1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

The present study is contextualised in the space of middle-class homes, which serves as the main meeting ground between middle-class employer and their domestic worker. Much like other spaces, these spaces are also socially constituted, and are not neutral. It reflects the inequalities and hierarchies that are central in understanding power equations, just like any other social spaces. At the familial level, the inequalities and hierarchical relations in these spaces are reflected through the unequal use of resources by each family member, based on their social location of gender and age.

And, with the incorporation of paid domestic workers within these spaces, the inequality is further transformed by keeping the family members on one side and, the domestic worker on the opposite side of the spectrum. Significantly, it is certain that, while hierarchical relations are inevitable in any employer-employee relationship, in case of paid domestic work, this hierarchy appears to be problematic, particularly due to spatiality of the workplace. Here, interactions between employer and domestic worker provide the scope for development of an interpersonal relationship, which is in stark contrast to other workplaces. The domestic worker, a lower-class outsider not only gets accessibility to the embodied living spaces of the middle-class employer, but, also serves the employer and their families, by undertaking the domestic tasks, which has traditionally been performed through familial ties. While, this on the one hand liberates the middle-class women from the drudgery of domestic work, on the other hand, this, concomitantly, increases the feelings of their vulnerability. However, it is noteworthy that, such feelings are not one-dimensional, as domestic workers are equally vulnerable in these spaces, as relations with their employers develop in close proximity behind closed doors. This essentially increases the embeddedness of inequality and vulnerability – material and symbolic – in such workplaces. Consequently, both employers and domestic workers devise their own mechanisms which transform the spaces of middle-class homes as sites of class struggle and class reproduction.

Moreover, the lack of recognition of ‘paid domestic work’ and its performers as a category of occupational workforce by the state, in addition to the work being outside of public eye, further intensifies the class struggle within these spaces. This subsequently

increases power of the employers to manifest work conditions based on their own preferences and prejudices, as the workplace is outside the ambit of any regulation, unlike other workplaces. On one hand, this necessitates the risk of precarity of the performers of the work. And, on the other hand, this contributes towards domestic reproduction of intersectional inequality, as the paid domestics are not only of lower-class, but, also of lower caste or of marginalised ethnic or minority religious groups. Paid domestic work, therefore transforms ‘the socially accepted meaning of the home’ (Mc Dowell, 1999, p. 83), by constructing it as sites wherein, structural inequalities based on gender, class, ethnic, caste and religion are reproduced in a close physical proximity, in the realm of everyday lives. And, these inequalities are in a way reminiscent of what we see in the larger society, which significantly positions the employers and their domestic workers in oppositional ways, in terms of power relations.

In this light, it is noteworthy that, while this thesis does not directly inquire about the precarious working conditions of the domestic workers, it nevertheless, significantly, focuses on the power practices of ‘distinction’ – gender, class, ethnic, religious - which contribute towards precarity and subordination of domestic workers, thereby, shaping everyday domestic work relations. Moreover, the thesis at the same time, inquires about the capacities of domestic workers power of resistance, as subjects, who are entangled with unequal power equation with their employers.

## **1.2 Research Problem**

The study aims to explore the work relations that unfold between employer and domestic workers in the realm of everyday domestic space. The approach towards understanding the work relations is multi-layered, where the present research combined gender studies with class, intersectionality and resistance studies. The study explores the transformation in domestic work sector, in the context of Guwahati, and, examines the everyday interactions between employers and domestic workers that take place in a close physical proximity. As the work and subsequent interactions takes place in the private spaces of employer’s homes, the employer’s home essentially transforms into sites of constant struggle, like other workplaces. However, unlike other workplaces, these spaces of contact are segregated, whereby; the employer and worker meet as ‘isolated pairs’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). This necessarily limits the collective bargaining power of the domestic workers, rendering them, as well as, their contributions to the economy as invisible.

Notably, in India, domestic labour dates back to ancient times when the work was largely performed by the serfs of the landlords (Ghoshkar, 2013). These serfs were mainly from lower castes i.e. the Shudras, deprived of their means of production, and whose positions were governed by the Varna system that ensured they served those higher in caste stratum (ibid). This was at par with the system of domestic slavery, where the royal rulers bought slaves for domestic work from the lower castes (Mehta, 1960 cited in Rollins, 1985).

Despite the long history of domestic labour in India, there exists little documentation on the subject during this ancient period (Neetha, 2009). It was only in the post-colonial India, domestic labour as a special category of workers received attention contributing towards a burgeoning body of literature. Existing scholarship has shown that, historically, paid domestic work has been associated with male servants, largely due to single male rural-urban migration (Neetha, 2004). But, from 1960 onwards, as family migration took momentum, domestic work primarily gained prominence in terms of female employment, thus, making it feminised (ibid). And, from early 1990s, with the recognition of the sector in terms of female employment, the work was marked as a special category of labour in India (Neetha, 2004; 2009).

In contemporary India, with gender as the central determining factor in paid domestic work sector, much of the debates are in relation to whether caste or class should be considered as the decisive hierarchical factor in determining the labour relations (see also Dickey, 2000b; Tolen, 2000; Froystad, 2003; Waldrop, 2004). While scholars like Dickey (2000b) and Tolen (2000) put forth an argument highlighting ‘class’ as the fundamental identity in contemporary urban India, Froystad (2003) and others without discarding the essentiality of class argues that, the complex manifestations of ‘caste’ identity of the worker plays a central role in organising the sector.

Significantly, the burgeoning scholarship on paid domestic work in India has provided a rich analysis on class, gender and caste dimensions in understanding nature of the work and work relations (Dickey, 2000a; 2000b; Tolen, 2000; Ray, 2000; Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Sharma, 2016; 2019; Barua, et. al. 2017). Taking the middle-class homes as ‘contact spaces’ (Nare, 2014), the present study contributes to the existing body of scholarship, by analysing the additional social dimensions and hierarchies of ethnic and religious identity (which has not found much scholarly attention), and how it intersects with gender, class and caste in influencing the

relationship between employer and the domestic. This essentially helps in understanding the multi-layered dynamics of employer's spatialised power practices and distinction that manifest in close proximity with their domestic workers, in the spaces of the middle-class homes.

Furthermore, in India, much of the scholarship on paid domestic work has primarily provided a one-dimensional perspective on power relations in understanding the work. These literatures essentially project the employers as the ultimate repository of power, thereby, sidelining the power of resistance by workers towards employer's practices of distinction (barring a few like Dickey, 2000a; Barua, et. al. 2016; Sharma, 2016). The present study therefore, addresses this issue by approaching the work relationship in totality, and, thereby, turns the gaze around by unraveling the agency exercised by the domestic workers.

Significantly, in the light of these claims, the present study essentially aims to contribute to the extending scholarship on paid domestic work in India, more particularly in the context of Assam, which, incidentally has escaped the scholarly attention in South Asian research. This study also contributes to the theoretical discussions by focusing on the intersectional analysis of work relations in context of paid domestic work sector. Indeed, this appears to be one of the strengths of this study, as it helps in understanding the complexity of labour relations in the private spaces of employers, which in a way reproduces the inequality that sustains the larger aspects of the political economy of Assam. However, to be noted is the fact that, the 'homes' are also constitutive part of the larger society. In this sense, the 'private domestic space' i.e. the 'home' serves as an essential foreground for learning the practices of 'distinction' and 'inequality', which are thereby, practiced in larger society.

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. Additionally, the study intends to highlight the significance of 'domestic work' as an essential life skill for the daily survival of human beings. As Mattila observes, 'domestic activities and relations have great political and economic significance, and are inseparable from the relationships and processes that make up the public domain' (Mattila, 2011, p. 4).

Besides, the existing scholarship has widely focussed on how the domestic workers are accorded the positions of ‘invisible being’ in the public spaces i.e. in their workplaces, by employers, and, also by the state through ignorance in legislative policies for this particular category of workers. Notably, there is ample literature focussing on occupational lives of the domestic workers, but, their lives within their private spaces i.e. their own homes has not received much scholarly attention (except Mattila, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016; Wadhawan, 2019). The present study intended to address this, in order to have a nuanced understanding of the everyday lived experiences and personal struggles that the domestics 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.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The present study is built on the following research 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.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

The guiding structural component of the present study is formed on the basis of the following research questions:

1. How is part-time domestic work organised in Guwahati?
2. How are gender relations and domestic work structured in middle-class households?
3. What is the relevance of part-time domestic workers in reproducing everyday middle-class domesticities and class distinction?
4. How do the employer and part-time domestic workers negotiate the labour relations in the realm of everyday domestic space?
5. How are social dimensions of class, caste, gender, ethnicity religion, and their interplay manifested in domestic work relations?

6. How do employers and domestic workers perceive the everyday interactions that take place between them?
7. What is the perception of part-time domestic workers towards domestic work as an occupation?
8. What is the role of paid domestic work in shaping the daily lives of domestic workers and vice-versa?
9. How are beliefs surrounding gender shaped in the homes of part-time domestic workers?
10. How do part-time domestic workers negotiate the structures of inequality at home and workplace?

## **1.5 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

### **1.5.1 Class Relations**

The study examines paid domestic work as a part of class relation, in which Bourdieu's theory of class provides helpful insights, to understand the inequality that shapes the employer- domestic relationship. In Bourdieu's analysis of class, the concept of 'capital' appears to be one of the central concepts, wherein, he defined capital as 'the set of actually usable resources and power' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 114). Unlike, other social theorists, he discussed about varied forms of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic – in the production of class. Precisely, he defined 'class' as a group of individuals who shares a common nature and similar external living conditions, wherein, economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital are used to analyse the individual's external living conditions in the social space (Hong & Zhao, 2015).

Economic capital, for Bourdieu 'is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights' (Bourdeiu, 1986). It includes any material possessions which has a monetary value attached to it. Cultural capital comprises cultural knowledge, competencies or dispositions as markers of class distinctions (Johnson, 1993). It exists in three forms viz, the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), and the *institutionalised* state, in the form of educational qualifications (Bourdeiu, 1986; emphasis in original). Social capital comprises of the social connections and networks that an individual or group accumulates over the period of their life-cycle (Dickey, 2016). And, symbolic capital refers 'to degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity,

consecration or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*)' (Johnson, 1993, p. 7).

In Bourdieu's view, much like economic capital, other forms of capital are unequally distributed amongst the class fractions, wherein the volume and composition of capital possessed by an individual determines their class position (Bourdieu, 1984). Consequently, he emphasizes that, while different forms of capital can be obtained from economic capital, they are however not reducible to each other (Bourdieu, 1986). As the labour time required for acquiring the varied forms of capital is different for each individual or group, this subsequently, brings variation in their reproducibility (Hong & Zhao, 2015). Of the different forms of capital, the transfer or reproduction of cultural capital is most time-consuming, which cannot be instantly passed from one person to another. Nevertheless, once cultural capital is acquired, it plays the most significant role as a class barrier. Cultural capital, indeed, provides one of the most pervasive and consistent means that people use to classify themselves and others (Dickey, 2016). It therefore forms the fundamental prerequisite which contribute towards the formation of 'class habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus are the mental structure which is defined by Bourdieu as dispositions which are 'durable' and 'transposable', and are 'structured structures' in which they inevitably incorporate the objective social conditions of their inculcation (Johnson, 1993, p. 5). Moreover, the dispositions of the habitus are 'structuring structures' through their ability to generate practices adjusted to specific situations (*ibid*). This accounts that individuals occupying similar class positions have similar habitus, thus, forming the essence of their 'class habitus'. For instance, habitus manifested through consumption practices act as a symbolic boundary between individuals occupying different class positions, thereby, legitimating the class structure (Hong & Zhao, 2015). In other words, while it is certain that members of same class do not encounter identical experience, but, they nevertheless, are more likely, than members of other classes to perceive and classify similar situations (Bourdieu, 1984).

Boundaries between social classes are therefore constructed with a combination of habitus and varied forms of capital, more specifically economic and cultural capital (Hong & Zhao, 2015). Thus, while, 'capital' is involved in constructing social boundaries between classes, 'habitus' is more closely associated with the construction of symbolic boundaries (Fan, 2012 cited in Hong & Zhao, 2015).

Drawing from Bourdieu's conceptualisation of class, the present study examines how class is reproduced and experienced through paid domestic work in the realm of everyday life. The study therefore, analyses through empirical data on how 'class' operates in the everyday practices between the employer and domestic worker. In this, the study refers to 'class' as a set of cultural practices, symbolic and cultural capital and consumption patterns combined with a certain level of wealth and income (Bourdieu, 1984; Mattila, 2011), echoing with the recent contributions to class analysis in India (Dickey, 2000a, 2016; Fernandes, 2006; Donner & Neve, 2011). Moreover, as the study focuses on the labour relations, wherein the middle-class homes of employers serves as the everyday meeting ground for employer and her domestic worker, the middle-class homes are examined as the locus of both class – economic and symbolic - struggles and class reproduction. The following section briefly conceptualises the middle-class as a distinct category in India.

### **1.5.1.1 Conceptualising Middle-class in India**

Middle-class as a conceptual category has received wide scholarly attention in the post-liberalization period from 1991 onwards. Prior to that, research surrounding middle-class in India was focused primarily on the colonial period (Fernandes, 2006), wherein the group was recognized more or less as homogeneous through their engagement in reform movements and institutions like school, legal system, state-run offices and urban infrastructure (Donner & Neve, 2011). Fernandes enumerates three central characteristics that distinguished the middle-class during the colonial period: firstly, the group was marked by its accessibility to specific socio-economic resources like English education and modern forms of professional employment, which marked them separate from traditional elites; secondly, the group was marked by its political assertiveness, which rested on the claim to represent the general interest of the public, often against the colonial state power, and, thirdly, the claims of representation by this group was accompanied by a project of self-identification that marked them distinct from both colonial state and the marginalized social groups<sup>1</sup> (Fernandes, 2006, p. 2).

However, with economic liberalization, competing claims were made with regard to the categorization of the 'middle-class' in India. This period marked the growth of a 'new middle-class' which caught the public imagination, and has since been portrayed as the

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<sup>1</sup>Middle-class during this period overwhelmingly represented the Hindu middle-class culture comprising mainly of the upper-caste norms (Chaterjee, 1989).



powerful social and political actor in India (Dickey, 2016). Fernandes argues that, this post-liberalization middle-class is not “new” in terms of its structural or social composition, but rather their newness refers to a process, in which they assert a middle-class identity by laying claims to benefits of liberalization (Fernandes, 2006, p. xviii).

In the last few decades, analysts have used a wide variety of characteristics to identify the Indian middle-class, which ranges from assessing their income to durable property and assets, occupation, structural position, consumption practices, cultural and social capital and attitudes (Dickey, 2016). Yet, they have failed to achieve a consensus regarding the exact size and composition of the middle-class, with varying estimates from 50 million to 350 million (ibid). This accounts that the construction of this social group is not a homogeneous category, as other segments of middle-class or upwardly mobile working class too, has the capacity to be a part of it, thereby, making the boundaries of this social group fluid in nature (Fernandes, 2006). As noted by Liechty, middle-class ‘is a concept notoriously difficult to “pin down” in objective terms’ (Liechty, 2003, p. 64). Furthermore, adding to the complexities of the parameters in defining middle-class is also shaped by internal differences and classificatory practices based on caste, region, religion, ethnic background and language (Fernandes, 2006; Donner & Neve, 2011). For instance, while Fernandes (2006) noted speaking English constituted a distinct criterion for being classified as middle-class in Mumbai, for Dickey (2016) attaining education in private English medium schools in Madurai constituted one of the practice of new middle-class, while Saavala (2010) relates to the classificatory practice of belonging to a residential location in the right neighbourhood.

Significantly, unlike pre-liberalizing days, in contemporary India considering the diversity of the group formation, ‘middle-class’ as a conceptual category cannot be reduced to a single-entity or ascertained numerically (Fernandes, 2006; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Donner & Neve, 2011). Nevertheless, scholars like Kapur (2021) argues that in present India, as per objective measure, anyone employed in the formal sector is middle-class because of the particular safety nets, whether employment guarantees, pensions or healthcare, which ensure the stability of lifestyles that we associate with the class. And, subjectively it could be measured on the grounds of how people self-identify themselves as middle-class on the basis of their consciousness in procurement of non-material consumption viz media (Kapur, 2021).

Notably, while the new middle-class or the new entrants to the social group may be in stark contrast with the old middle-class stratum, but, they nevertheless, are seen striking a balance between changing material and social context with that of the traditional values and practices of morality (Liechty, 2003; Donner & Neve, 2011). This therefore, explains that middle-classness is a ‘shared life-world and a way of being, that is produced through gendered, ethnic, community and religious differences and histories on the one hand, and a distinct way of engaging with the state and its institutions, the market and a range of hegemonic ideologies, values and moralities on the other hand’ (Donner & Neve, 2011, p. 17).

In line with the recent studies on contemporary articulations of middle-classness in India, the present study contextualises this social group by identifying certain classificatory values and practices that are representative to middle-class in India (Dickey, 2000a; 2016; Fernandes, 2006; Donner & Neve, 2011). The defining parameters through which the study locates middle-class in Guwahati are: educational and occupational aspects, symbolic aspects like their practices of consumption and lifestyle, embodied cultural practices of traditional values of domesticity and morality. While, these parameters have been drawn from the existing scholarship of Dickey (2000a; 2000b; 2016), Fernandes (2006), Donner (2008) and Donner & Neve (2011), the study examines middle-class home, as a central institution in (re)producing and consuming these hegemonic ideologies. Furthermore, existing scholarship on domestic work has highlighted that hiring of paid domestic workers also serves as an essential parameter for classifying the ‘middle-class’, whether it is lower, upper or wealthiest section (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011), which contribute towards reproduction of their class and lifestyle (Anderson, 2000).

### **1.5.2 Intersectionality**

The term ‘intersectionality’ first coined by Crenshaw (1989) has its roots in black feminist thought with a focus on multiple oppressions- race, gender, class- faced by black women in USA. Since then, the definition of the term has been expanding and is not limited to the holy trinity of ‘race, gender, class’ (Romero, 2018; Page & Yip, 2021). Indeed, in recent years the term has become more of a ‘buzzword’ with it being taken up by scholars, policy advocates and practitioners, activists, social workers and the like in diverse fields, to a more common usage of the term (Nash, 2008; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Moreover, the wide popularity of the term can also be grasped from its wide applicability as an analytical tool, as a methodology, as a theoretical or a conceptual framework.

Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) key contribution to intersectionality theory is in demonstrating how multi-layered and intricate power dynamics are overlooked when legal cases involving multiple discriminations are considered (Page & Yip, 2021). She particularly introduced the concept to examine discrimination from the perspective of those who experience multiple inequalities. However, it is worth noting that, although, Crenshaw is credited with introducing the term 'intersectionality', scholars have argued that the concept can be traced back to as early as 1851, with the famous speech '*Ain't I a woman*' delivered by Sojourner Truth highlighting the invisibility of Black women in discussions of women's oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Romero, 2018). Significantly, it is noteworthy here that, while intersectionality has been instrumental in tracing the experiences of multiple oppressions by black women, in contemporary times, an intersectional analysis has enabled one to examine a range of social problems encompassing multiple identities of discrimination (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

In this regard, 'intersectionality' as a theory essentially provides the framework for understanding how multiple social divisions like race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, citizenship status, among others, exist in relation to one another and influence each other, thereby, determining differential positions of people in the society (Collins, 2013; Mirza, 2013; Romero, 2018). Intersectionality framework, therefore, recognises the fundamental link between ideology and power that allows dominants to control subordinates by creating a politics in which 'difference' is used as a conceptual tool for justifying arrangements of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

However, it is to be noted that, considering the wide applicability of the term of intersectionality in diverse disciplines and fields, there has been no consensus about the basic characterisation of the term. In this sense, Collins & Bilge (2016) have provided a general description of the term, which is more or less acceptable amongst all:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social

division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2).

According to Collins & Bilge, there are six core ideas – inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity and social justice – of intersectional frameworks, which (re)appear when one uses intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 25-30). Of these, in the present study, five ideas – inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity – have been fundamental in conceptualising domestic work relations between employer and the domestic worker. Collins & Bilge (2016) emphasises that inequality is central in understanding intersectional framework, which recognises the potential of interactions amongst various categories in understanding inequality. This links to the second facet of intersectionality viz, relationality, which moves beyond the binary thinking of *either/or*, and embraces a *both/and* frame in analysing any issue or social problem at hand. Embedded in this is the central concept of power, which cannot be pre-determined in a one-dimensional and unilateral fashion (Page & Yip, 2021). Indeed, power is better conceptualized as a relationship (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Following a post-structuralist understanding, such as proposed by Foucault (1989), power has multiple dimensions and directions, which is not fixed, but at the same time, within broader societal patterns, works continually to reaffirm existing advantages (cited in Page & Yip, 2021). This relates to the fourth facet of intersectionality, i.e. social context, which entails in understanding the particular historical, political and geographical context in analyzing intersecting power relations in context. The intersecting power relations in a context shapes the identities, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural representations and ideologies, thereby, introducing complexity into everything that are being examined or analysed (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 202).

Drawing on this understanding, the present study examines the multiple dimensions of social division, and, their interrelationship which manifest the everyday employer-domestic worker relations and employment practices. In the space and context of a middle-class home, while the class privileges of employers are pronounced visibly in relation to their domestics, the study, in significant ways, examines further how the ‘interlocking dynamics’ (Collins & Bilge, 2016) of social dimensions like gender, caste, ethnicity and religion, operate in relation to class and analyse their impact and role in

employer-domestic relations. The spatial approach enables the contours of a particular context to be mapped in detail, to explore the nuances and complexity, together with exposing the operations of power (Page & Yip, 2021). Nevertheless, spaces, here are not static (Massey, 1994; 2005). In addition, the study further examines the intersectional dynamics in understanding how the lives of the domestic workers and their participation in paid work shape one another.

### **1.5.3 Key Concepts of the Study:**

This section discusses the key concepts that are used in the study.

#### **1.5.3.1 Space**

Discourses on the division between production/reproduction and private/public have been central in highlighting the unequal spatial relationship of man and woman, as part of patriarchal capitalism, in the West (Geetha, 2007). Feminist scholars in the West have widely associated such division with industrialisation, which led to spatial segregation between home and work:

Prior to industrialisation...both production and reproduction were organised almost exclusively at the household level. Women were mostly responsible for most of what might be designated as reproduction, but they were simultaneously engaged in the production of food stuffs, clothing, shoes, candles, soap and other goods consumed by the household. With industrialisation, production of these basic goods gradually was taken over by the capitalist industry. Reproduction, however, remained largely the responsibility of individual households. The ideological separation between men's "productive" labor and women's non-market based activity....arose in which men's work was to follow production outside the home, while women's work was to remain centred in the household (Glenn, 1992, p. 4).

Feminist debates on domestic work are often based on such categorical spatial division of labour, as it failed to acknowledge women's reproductive labour as part of production. The key argument of these debates is that reproduction of labour at home in the form of domestic work is inextricably linked to production, for it is the women of the households who cater to the domestic needs of their labouring men on a daily basis, thereby, indirectly contributing in creating profits for the capitalist industry (Glenn, 1992; Geetha, 2007). Despite this, the work at home remains undervalued, wherein domestic work is perceived as a 'woman's natural skill', thus, detaching the economic value of such labour

leading to subsequent subordination of women (Heirofani, 2016). In the Indian context, these debates made a shift from the ideological to more concrete, by focussing on the household as a definite spatial location, where unequal transaction take place between different members of the family depending on their gender, and age differences (Geetha, 2007). Moreover, in India, such practices within the household are informed by distinctive categories of kinship, caste, religion, geographical location and sexual culture (ibid).

According to Massey, the distinctive spatial characteristics across culture, attach symbolic meaning to physical spaces, in which the gendered messages transmitted through such spaces entails in construction of gendered spaces (Massey, 1994). This in turn informs the construction of gender relations in fundamental ways by regulating the male and female use of spaces and resources (Massey, 1994; Geetha, 2007). This therefore, separates man and woman by confining woman to spaces which is inside/private i.e. the home, and man to spaces which are outside/public (Geetha, 2007). Indeed, this inextricably links the identities of woman and of home, and constructs the home as a woman's space or place implicating it as a source of 'stability, reliability and authenticity' (Massey, 1994, p. 180). This in cultural terms coexists with and masks the patriarchal devaluation of both woman's lived spaces and their reproductive labour at home (Geetha, 2007).

However, it is worth noting that, while the spatial divisions of private/public and inside/outside in general highlight the unequal gender equation, such divisions also keep man and woman of particular groups together, which reinforces the class, caste, community and national divisions (Geetha, 2007). In the context of paid domestic work, this further brings light to the fact that, women's relationship to domestic labour and subsequent subordination cannot be assumed to be a universal experience (Glenn, 1992), as women of lower class and caste groups are seen taking on the reproductive labour of rich and affluent women for wages (Dickey, 2000a; Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Neetha, 2004). Notably, this also adds to the spatial complexities of everyday life, as the conventional meanings and neat categorizations of spaces like public/private, inside/outside gets disrupted with the induction of paid domestics in the private and inside spaces of employers. The private space of employers, therefore, becomes the public workspace for the domestics. As Massey contends about space, that it is 'the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous

plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; of the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity' (Massey, 2005, p. 9).

Moreover, space is socially constructed (Spain, 1993). Likewise, 'home' as a spatial location is socially constructed, which entails to re-drawing of the spatial boundaries - material and symbolic - of 'home' and 'outside', as two distant social classes –employers and domestics- inhabiting distinct social and physical spaces comes in close proximity in the realm of everyday life (Sharma, 2016a). Bourdieu (1989) underlines the close proximity between social and physical spaces as:

It is true that one can observe almost everywhere a tendency toward spatial segregation, people who are close together in social space tending to find themselves, by choice or by necessity, close to one another in geographic space; nevertheless, people who are very distant from each other in social space can encounter one another and interact, if only briefly and intermittently, in physical space (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 16).

In paid domestic work, although, domestic workers interact with employers in their protected and intimate physical space, but these interactions are in conflict with their respective positions in social space (Sharma, 2016a). Their presence in the space of the middle-class homes are indeed fraught with anxiety and discomfort prompting the employers to engage into certain everyday boundaries of distinction through which hierarchies are (re)established between the parties involved.

Notably, the tensions of public/private, inside/outside, as materialised in the home raise the concept of home as a 'contact space' (Nare, 2014). Nare proposes the notion of 'contact space' to refer 'to particular spaces where people from different backgrounds come into contact...[and] engage in various forms of boundary work to define distance and closeness' (Nare, 2014, p. 364). She analyses households as private contact spaces due to the high symbolic and cultural values attached to 'home'. Moreover, for domestic workers such spaces could also imply 'risky spaces' as they work in isolation which enhance their vulnerability in such spaces (Nare, 2014).

Drawing insights from Nare (2014), the present study approaches middle-class homes as 'contact spaces', and unfold the everyday interactions and negotiations between two unequal groups- employers and domestics- thereby, examining the spatial dynamics which inform the labour relations, in distinct ways.

### **1.5.3.2 Purity and Pollution**

The Hindu civilisation is sometimes called a civilisation of purity and pollution, and the Hindu psyche is believed to be pathologically obsessed with them (Shah 2007, p. 357).

In Hindu religious thought, the conceptual ideals of pure and impure or pollution has been integral in governing every aspect of a Hindu man and woman's life for centuries (Dumont, 1980; Shah, 2007). They are permeated with ideas of purity and impurity or pollution right from their birth to death (Shah, 2007). In India, these ideas are specifically important because they determined the structure of Hindu society, in the public as well as the domestic domain. In the public domain, this found expression through ritual ranking of various castes. According to Dumont's (1980) influential model, each caste in Indian society was placed in a hierarchy around the dimension of pure and impure, which in turn, is determined by their association with either pure or impure tasks. Based on this, those caste groups which are specialised in impure tasks related to polluting elements like biological or organic waste are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, and are therefore, accorded the status of 'permanent impurity' (Dumont, 1980). On the other hand, in the domestic domain of every Hindu home, the polluted status of an individual is independent of their caste. Everything, from a woman after child birth to a dead body, relatives of a dead person, defecation, or a menstruating woman etc. are considered polluted (Dumont, 1980; Apte, 1988; Shah, 2007). And, this creates a consensus for a status of 'temporary impurity', wherein the person is considered to become pure only after observing the rules of purification (Dumont, 1980).

Although, traditionally, the contexts related to the idea of pollution have been myriad, in contemporary urban India, individuals are seen making compromises, wherein concerns related to it are loosening (Apte, 1988; Shah, 2007; Mattila, 2011). Yet, it is significant that, the polluted status of members of a caste group or an individual continue to persist strongly in relation to the task of cleaning streets and toilet, and in the field of religion (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Shah, 2007; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). While, in the field of religion, rules like worshipping of deities at home or in temple only after a bath, prohibiting woman from performing *puja* or fixing of marriage dates during her menstrual period are strictly observed; in relation to the task of cleaning streets and toilet, overt practices of distinction are directed towards sweeper caste (Shah, 2007).



Moving beyond this, Mary Douglas's analysis of 'pollution' or 'dirt' covers a wide range of societal contexts, wherein she essentially defines 'dirt' as a 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1984, p. 36). According to her, varying ideas of 'dirt' or 'pollution' and its related behaviour exists universally in all societies, driving its people to conform to certain ritual practices of purity. She opines that, dirt or categories of pure and impure are not absolute, rather it is relationally constituted and is therefore, relative. What is clean or pure in relation to one thing may be unclean or impure in relation to another and vice-versa (Douglas, 1984, p. 8-9). In order to suffice her point, she illustrates a few examples, in which a context of pollution is created with the presence of certain objects, substances, behaviour and the like, if they happened to be in places where they are not supposed to be.

Significantly, in the context of domestic work performed within intimate spaces of one's home, the idea of 'pollution' or 'dirt' is dynamic. According to Chakrabarty, on the one hand, everyday cleaning and removal of 'dirt' from one's home is a way of marking symbolic boundaries of the home, thereby, delineating it as a space devoid of 'pollution' (Chakrabarty, 1992). On the other hand, it serves as a crucial marker for middle-class women to reproduce their ideal gendered identities in the realm of everyday lives (ibid). Interestingly, in this light, middle-class women have traditionally been considered instrumental in upholding the dichotomy between *ghar* and *bahir* i.e., home and all that represents the outside world (Chatterjee, 1989). They are entrusted with crucial roles in conserving the purity of their home, which includes the spiritual, cultural and physical elements (Dickey, 2000b). In the light of these claims, middle-class women, as protectors of their home are actively engaged in practices which separate the 'polluted' from the 'pure'. In the context of paid domestic work, it is such practices of separation of pure and impure or polluted by middle-class employers, which have been central in defining their relationship with domestic workers.

More recently, there is a growing micro-level scholarship on domestic work in India, which extensively highlights on employer's practices of exclusion, as embedded in caste and class induced beliefs of 'pollution' (Dickey, 2000a; Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Barua et al. 2017). Notably, while the contours of caste and class in domestic work are integral in highlighting the exclusionary practices of employers, there is little discussion on how the religion of a domestic worker shape everyday labour relations. However, interestingly in context of the present study,

this very aspect happens to be an underlining theme, as Hindu employers overtly discuss their beliefs of ‘pollution’, emanating particularly from the cultural practice of beef consumption by the Muslim domestic workers.

Cattle or cows have been traditionally considered as sacred by the Hindus. As per Hindu culture, it is seen as a representative of God, and worshipped across India. Moreover, being extolled in Vedism as a cosmic symbol, the universal mother and source of food, even the involuntary killing of a cow is perceived as a serious offence amongst the Hindus (Dumont, 1980). In Assam, this can further be associated with the political turn of events in the recent times. With the passing of ‘The Assam Cattle Preservation (Amendment) Bill’ by the Assam Assembly in August, 2021, the state adopted a stricter measure by replacing the ‘Cattle Preservation Act’ of 1950. According to the provisions of the new Bill, regulations are mandated in the slaughter, transportation and consumption of cattle in the state<sup>2</sup>. In this light, the consumption of cows by Muslims, makes them inherently polluted, thereby, creating a context which indicate the ‘unhygienic and ritually impure state’ (Sharma, 2016a, p. 54) of these beings. As noted by Mary Douglas, ‘our polluted behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea, likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications’ (Douglas, 1984, p. 37).

In the light of these perceptions, this study draws insights from Douglas’s (1984) idea of ‘pollution’, and examines how middle-class women, as protectors of their ‘home’ are actively engaged in routine domestic practices which separate the ‘polluted’ from the ‘pure’. The practices of pure and polluted, therefore, serve as a key boundary in defining their relationship with domestic workers.

### **1.5.3.3 Maternalism**

Although, domestic work in contemporary times has been increasingly commodified with the market-oriented features of wage labour, existing scholarship reminds us that domestic work relation is far from being straightforwardly contractual (Romero, 1992; Mendez, 1998; Neetha, 2009; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Barua, Haukanes & Waldrop, 2017). Scholars have inferred this in context of the space where the work

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<sup>2</sup><https://prcindia.org/theprsblog/assam%E2%80%99s-new-cattle-preservation-law> Retrieved on 15.01.2022. Moreover, with the amendment of the Act in the state, any violation of the cited provisions would invite imprisonment of the perpetrator for at least 3 years, and a fine varying from 3 to 5 lakhs <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-assembly-passes-cow-protection-bill/article35905184.ece>. Retrieved on 15.01.2022

performed is the employer's home, in which employer and domestic meet as 'isolated pairs', entailing to an interpersonal relation (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Dickey, 2000a; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). Moreover, given the moral economy of contemporary domestic work being primarily a gendered sphere, interpersonal ties in the relationship has been analysed in the light of maternalism, where women employers engage in varied practices of benevolence with their women domestic workers, which perpetuate a relation of patronage and dependency (Rollins, 1985; Mattila, 2011; Barua et al. 2017). Markedly, in doing so, while the employers affirmed their own superiority, they simultaneously maintained everyday boundary of distinction with their domestic workers by constructing them as inferior beings.

In domestic work, maternalism originates from the historical tradition of paternalism, based on the ideology of feudal patron-client model, in which employer's obligations of protection and guidance towards his servant was in return for the servant's work, loyalty and obedience towards the master (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992). The contemporary discourse on domestic work, has replaced the term paternalism with maternalism<sup>3</sup>, given the domestic labour relations largely being between women (Rollins, 1985). In this sense, maternalism as a conceptual category is distinguished from paternalism, where 'women's supportive intra-familial roles of nurturing, loving and attending to affective needs, serves as a key element in moulding the labour relationship between a woman employer and her domestic' (Rollins, 1985, p. 187). However, Rollins emphasises that such gendered manifestation of the relationship does not serve as a unifying element between woman employer and the woman domestic worker; rather much like paternalism it contributes towards disregarding the human worth of the worker:

The maternalism dynamic is based on the assumption of a superordinate-subordinate relationship. While, maternalism may protect and nurture, it also degrades and insults...The female employer with her motherliness and protection and generosity, is expressing in a distinctly feminine way, her lack of respect for the domestic as an autonomous, adult employee. (Rollins, 1985, p. 186)

Notably, the role of maternalism in domestic work relations is dynamic in shaping the social identities of the actors involved. According to Romero (1992), the varied acts of employer's maternalism projects the domestic workers as needy, immature and

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Rollins was the first to use the concept of 'maternalism' in 1985, in her study in Boston. She used the term in a context where class and race served as the primary power relations that shape maternalism in domestic work.

inadequate, while buttressing the employer's perceptions of themselves as benevolent, thoughtful and superior moral guardians. Building on this, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) has defined maternalism as a one-way relationship which underlines the deep class inequalities between employers and their domestic workers. Additionally, studies have attributed maternalism as an instrumental component which contributes towards racial/ethnic superiority of employers (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992, Glenn, 1992; Lan, 2003), and in Indian context, it shows caste superiority (Barua et al. 2017).

Existing studies have shown how employers exhibit maternalism towards their domestic workers through varied practices like transferring of gifts and personal favours, expressing gestures of maternal protection and altruism, by incorporating them as 'part of the family', by treating them as a child incapable of taking independent decisions, extending financial help and so forth (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Shah, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Lan, 2003; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Barua et al. 2017). Such practices existing within the market-oriented features of waged domestic labour, in significant ways, serves as a key element for employers to solicit unpaid services from their domestic workers. It significantly ties the domestic workers in a relationship of obligation by blurring the distinctions between paid and unpaid housework, thereby, weakening the worker's ability to maintain contractual agreements (Romero, 1992, p. 130). The unpaid housework in this regard is not simply limited to physical labour of the domestic workers, but it encompasses also their emotional labour, wherein they are required to manipulate their feelings in order to fulfill psychological needs of employers (Romero, 1992). In this light, scholars have agreed that a maternalistic relationship in domestic work aids to both physical and psychological exploitation of the domestic workers. This has been marked powerfully by Rollins as:

What makes domestic service as an occupation more profoundly exploitative than other comparable occupations grows out of the precise element that makes it unique: the personal relationship between employer and employee (Rollins, 1985, p. 156).

It is significant, however that, while, scholars have emphasised maternalism as a discretionary power of employers in drawing boundaries and reproducing structures of inequality - class, race/ethnic, caste - in domestic work relations; this does not entail one to dismiss the perspectives of domestic workers in embracing a maternalistic relationship. As Lan observed, neither employers nor domestic workers are monolithic groups, rather both the groups develop different preferences and strategies based on their

social positions, job descriptions and employment conditions (Lan, 2003). This brings light to the fact that, a maternalistic relationship is sometimes purposefully maintained by one or both the groups involved, in India (Dickey, 2000a; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011), as well as elsewhere across the globe (Romero, 1992; Mendez, 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo's, 2007; Lan's, 2003).

Building on this, the present study uses the concept of 'maternalism' to analyse the perspectives of both employers and the domestics. While, maternalism serves as a useful tool for employers to influence the labour relations, the study concomitantly, unveils an entirely different aspect of embeddedness of the work relations in maternalism, by underscoring the subsequent negotiations of the domestics towards employers' acts of maternalism.

#### **1.5.3.4 Resistance**

Where there is power, there is resistance (Foucault, 1978, p. 95 – 96).

Although, domestic workers are embedded in an unequal power relationship with their employers, they nevertheless, exercise the power to resist. This implies that power and resistance co-exist and reassert themselves (Constable, 2007). The present study shows domestic workers, as subjects of power, capitalising on informal strategies which reflects that they are 'as manipulative as they are manipulated' (Nyamnjoh, 2005). These strategies are approached as part of the workers resistance, by drawing insights from James Scott's concepts of 'everyday forms of resistance' and 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1985; 1990).

According to Scott, resistance includes 'any act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are *intended*<sup>4</sup> either to mitigate or deny claims made on that class by superordinate classes or to advance its own claims vis-a-vis those superordinate classes' (Scott, 1985, p. 290). However, considering the risk of open confrontation with their superordinates being too high, the intentions of the subordinates find reflection through everyday forms of resistance like gestures, feigned ignorance, gossip, and other such small acts which are typically informal, thereby, requiring no organised group effort (Scott, 1985, p. xvi). Key to Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance' is the concept of 'public transcript' and 'hidden transcript' (Scott, 1990). While, public transcript refers to

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<sup>4</sup>Emphasis as in the original text.

‘the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate; hidden transcript is the discourse that takes place “offstage”, beyond direct observation by power holders’ (Scott, 1990, p. 2-4). As public transcript takes place in a power-laden context, it bears the mark of fear, impelling subordinate groups to enact rules of deference and compliance. However, it is through hidden transcript, the subordinate groups express their ‘everyday forms of resistance’ that contradict to what appears in the public transcript (Scott, 1990). In this sense, resistance can be defined as a subtle art of dissimulation, wherein subordinate groups challenge their superior without any direct confrontation, thus, allowing for ‘a veiled discourse of dignity and self-assertion within the public transcript...in which ideological resistance is disguised, muted and veiled for safety and sake’ (Scott, 1990, p. 137).

The use of Scott’s idea of resistance to analyse the capacity of domestic workers’ agency has been best articulated by Parrenas (2015) in her study with domestic workers in Los Angeles and Rome. She shows how ‘domestic workers take advantage of opportune moments within the daily rituals of domestic work by creatively interjecting subversive acts into everyday routines so as to resist the tedium and disciplinary measures that normalize inequalities between employers and employee’ (Parrenas, 2015, p. 151-152). In the Indian context, Barua, Haukanes & Waldrop (2016) mobilized the concept of Scott in order to understand how domestic workers contest boundary work of employers as embedded in class and caste practices. Their study reveals the oppositional cultural repertoires developed by domestic workers in their contestation with employers, without publicly challenging their authority (Barua, Haukanes & Waldrop, 2016, p. 7).

Taking cues from these earlier studies, the present study draws from Scott’s idea of everyday resistance (1985; 1990) to examine the various dynamics of subordination in the work relationship, and, the subsequent negotiation strategies adopted by the domestic workers, both as part of ‘public and hidden transcript’. In this, the study does not intend to romanticize workers power of resistance, considering the nature of paid domestic work, and the social location of domestic workers in relation to their employers. Nevertheless, the study situates the domestic workers within the field of power, by highlighting them not as passive victims of subordination. Rather, they are acting subjects, whereby, they unsettle the dominant constructions of their inferiority, in significant ways.

## **1.6 Review of Literature**

### **1.6.1 Understanding (paid) Domestic Work**

Domestic work has long been portrayed as a woman's work across the world (Hazarika & Das, 2021). To understand domestic work and its intricacies, it would be incomplete if we do not consider theorists like Engels (1884), who provided early traces to the questions of relating domestic work to the women sex, in his classic *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. According to Engels, the seeds of historical relegation of women to households and domestic work started with the development of the institution of patriarchal family under capitalist mode of production. With the disintegration of primitive communism, which was governed by a matrilineal descent, and accorded women a higher degree of respect and social authority; the transition towards a capitalist economy dictated the development of a monogamian family with a patrilineal descent. This necessitated the emergence of private property leading to elimination of female authority, as noted by Engels, 'the overthrow of mother right was the *world historical defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of his children' (Engels, 1884, p. 87). The establishment of a patriarchal family was accompanied with notable changes in the household management. The old communist household which had a public character, transitioned into a system where household management no longer concerned society, and the women were limited to private domestic sphere of the household, thus, relegating them as 'head servant' of the husband. As Engels observed: 'The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife...In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy without any need for special legal titles and privileges' (Engels, 1884, p. 105). This gendered division of labour and emergence of private property, together with a patriarchal family, therefore, contributed towards an overarching perception, whereby, housework or domestic work came to be associated as a woman's task, breeding innate femininity.

Uma Chakravarti (1993) in the Indian context emphasized that, women's labour came to be restricted within the households with the increasing dependence on agriculture as a major source of food production. She explains that this shift to an agricultural economy

was accompanied with a simultaneous development of a distinct caste division in the society, wherein, the women from upper caste were ceased from participating in ‘production’, thereby subjecting them within the domestic sphere. This brought in significant changes within the familial structure, which witnessed the emergence of a patrilineal succession distinct from that of the earlier structures of the society, as Chakravarti observed, ‘...the emergence of a fairly stratified society and the collapse of tribal economy and polity in post-Vedic period, especially with the establishment of private control over land, held and transmitted within a patrilineal system, accompanied by the beginning also of patrilineal succession to kinship...meant that the sexual behaviour of certain categories of women needed to be closely guarded’ (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 581). This therefore, subjected the wives to complete male control, which was mechanised through the ideology of stridharma or pativratadharma, internalized and reproduced by the women as the highest expression of their selfhood. The early India depiction of patriarchy (Brahminical patriarchy) therefore, reveals ‘that the structure of social relations which shaped gender was reproduced by achieving the compliance of women’ (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 585). This, therefore, continues to be a dominant belief about woman’s place even in contemporary times, which is primarily achieved through socialization within the familial space from a young age. Consequently, the conceptualization of ‘naturalization of domestic sphere’ (Wadhawan, 2019), has continued to persist with positioning the women as forerunners of household or domestic work.

According to Anderson (2001), it is very difficult to describe in clear terms what domestic work comprises of on the basis of the tasks performed, as it often involves performing a range of tasks simultaneously. Rather than a series of tasks; domestic work is better perceived as a series of processes, of tasks inextricably linked, often operating at the same time (Schwartz & Cowan, 1983, cited in Anderson 2001, p. 26). Moreover, domestic work performed within one’s own household is not just about physical labour; it involves mental or emotional labour which situates the performer within a certain set of social relationship (Anderson 2001). For McDowell (2009) the kinds of work that fall within domestic work, and which are essential for smooth running of the households can be categorized into two:

The first type of work includes basic, unskilled, low-level and repetitive tasks involved in keeping the home clean: mopping, sweeping, dusting, cleaning, washing



up, providing meals every single day. The second type of work is different as it encompasses the sort of affective embodied work involved in caring for others: looking after children, partners and other dependents, providing the sort of intimate services and a loving environment in which they will flourish...care, whether of children or other types of dependents, consists not only of guarding the cared-for, in the sense of making sure that no harm comes to them, but also nurturing them—loving and caring for them and ensuring that as far as possible their well-being is enhanced (McDowell, 2009, p. 82).

Both the types of work are in general undertaken within the family as a labour of love, and are devoid of any monetary exchanges amongst the family members. But, the moment any of these tasks are undertaken for wages, the work essentially forms a part of paid domestic work, thereby, commodifying the labour performed within the home (McDowell, 2009). The value of domestic work therefore significantly changes when it is exchanged in the market for wages.

Existing scholarship on paid domestic work has highlighted that the performers of the work typically comprises of women, who are drawn into the work considering the notions of innate femininity attached to the work (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Ray 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2004; McDowell, 2009; Mattila, 2011; Parrenas, 2015; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). However, it is noteworthy that, the perception of the work as a part of natural attributes of femininity typically makes it one of the most poorly paid occupations (McDowell, 2009). Additionally, the work is marked as a distinctive category from other low-status service/manual occupation because it takes place in the homes of individual employers (*ibid*). This implies that unlike other workplaces, paid domestic work do not provide a neutral territory, as it is also ‘the living space of the employer, a space imbued with social meaning, embodying the aspirations of its inhabitants and the ways in which they live, as well as material manifestations of relations of love and affection rather than market based cash exchange’ (McDowell, 2002, cited in McDowell, 2009, p. 83). Consequently, this intensifies the problems with regard to regulating the work conditions of paid domestic workers and organizing them under trade unions (McDowell, 2009). Taken all these factors together, render paid domestic work as an invisible occupation, widely recognized as part of the informal “shadow” or “under the table” economy (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007), wherein, the devaluation and subordination related to the performers of the work particularly intensifies in light of its association as a ‘feminine work’. Notably, the feminine aspect

of the work is so strong that even the man who enter such spaces of work are largely stereotyped as feminine in the process (Sengupta & Sen, 2013).

This entails towards an understanding that, gender serves as a significant dimension and a central organizing principle in paid domestic work, which has significantly found wide reflection in the existing literature. In Los Angeles and Rome, Parrenas (2015) showed how gender stratification is deeply ingrained in the work by taking the case of migrant Filipina women domestic workers. She highlights that the Filipina domestics migrate from their home countries in Philippines only to depart from one system of gender stratification, and enter into another one in the advanced countries of the United States and Italy.

### **1.6.2 Domestic Work and Class Relations**

The significance of domestic work for people's lives and well-being varies according to who is doing the work and under what conditions (Anderson, 2001, p. 26). This entails toward an understanding that with outsourcing of domestic workers, the aspects of class operates as a significant determinant in influencing everyday domestic work relations (Romero, 1992). Significantly, while gender is a central element in domestic work occupation, elements of class further enables to understand the employer-domestic relationship, in totality. As Ozyegin specifies, 'domestic service is a critical arena of intimate social and cultural interaction between two different types of women inhabiting otherwise discreet worlds...domestic service allows us to observe the ways women of different classes participate in one another's lives and to examine the effects of class inequalities on the lived experiences of class and gender identities of women' (Ozyegin, 2001, p. 127).

Moreover, scholarship across the globe has interestingly highlighted domestic work as a class-based occupation, which brings women of different class backgrounds together in the spaces of middle-class home (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Gill, 1994; Dickey, 2000a; 2000b; Tolen, 2000; Lan, 2003; Muttarak, 2004; Waldrop, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Parrenas, 2015; Barua. et.al. 2017). As Dickey contends, domestic service 'is an arena in which class is reproduced and challenged on a daily and intimate basis...Domestic service interactions constitute the most intense, sustained contact with members of other classes that most of its

participants encounter' (Dickey, 2000a,p. 32). Significantly, in this, the participants perceive themselves to be on different sides of class lines (Dickey, 2000b).

In the global North, South, and transnational context, numerous strands of scholarship emerged highlighting the class phenomenon ingrained in paid domestic work. Although, in the West, the modernization theories of the 1970s predicted the obsolescence of domestic work as an occupation (Cosser, 1973), the late twentieth century, instead, witnessed a tremendous rise in recruitment of poor women working as paid domestics in middle-class households for a living (Romero, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). This consequently led to much scholarly attention on the subject, resulting in numerous strands of scholarship in global literature. One of the notable strands of scholarship emphasises on increased international migration and subsequent class vulnerabilities of non-citizen immigrant domestic workers working in private homes (Romero, 1992; Constable, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Parrenas, 2015). A second influential strand of literature highlights how domestic work is constituted as an institution of inequality, wherein employers indulge into various micro-politics of 'distinction', which reproduces the hierarchical class boundaries in the realm of everyday domestic sphere (Cock, 1980; Rollins, 1985; Hansen, 1989; Romero, 1992; Gill, 1994; Lan, 2003; Muttarak, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Parrenas, 2015). Notably, in all these literature, the manifestation of class relations and struggle has been a connecting link, wherein, 'conflict and accommodation, incorporation and distancing, and imitation and innovation form an integral part' (Gill, 1994, p. 10).

As in other parts of the world, contemporary research in paid domestic work in India has also analysed the labour relations as class relations. For instance, in Madurai, Dickey (2000a; 2000b) has provided an insightful analysis emphasising on the oppositional nature of labour relation, which according to her was first and foremost a matter of class. Based on fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, in a railway colony with families of officers of the Indian Railways and the families of servants serving them, Tolen (2000), reflected on the transfers of knowledge and practices between the classes. While, the servants are essential in maintaining the everyday lifestyle of employers, Tolen highlights that this is achieved by the employers by transferring knowledge of appropriate class practices to their servants. However, she argues that this transfer of knowledge is not a neutral process, and is inflected with power dynamics, wherein employers seek to control their servants' use of knowledge which threatens or blurs the social differences between the

classes. In New Delhi, Waldrop (2004) shows that employer-servant relationship is flavoured by class by highlighting the system of gating- material and solid- in the form of building fences around upper middle-class residential areas situated in Golf Links. Through the system of gating, the employers establish a sense of order which marked the everyday boundaries between inside and outside i.e. between the residents and the lower-class domestic workers who regularly commuted to and fro in these residential areas. In Kolkata, Ray & Qayum (2010) studied the cultures of servitude imbibed with the idioms of class identity by reflecting on the subjectivities of both employer and servant class. According to them, much like Dickey (2000a; 2000b) and Tolen (2000) domestic labour relations is essentially a class relation. In Jaipur, Mattila (2011) reflected that class practices of employers legitimize the 'othering' of domestic workers. Drawing on fieldwork in Mumbai and Chennai, Barua, et.al (2017) analyses the material and symbolic hierarchies that shape the everyday class relations between employers and domestic-workers.

### **1.6.3 Intersectional Hierarchies in Domestic Work Relations**

While, gender and class are significant determinants in shaping everyday relations between employer and their domestic workers; there are also other related social dimensions which characterizes the paid domestic work sector. In the West and transnational context, the literature has particularly highlighted the racial and ethnic stereotypes that intersects with gender and class in shaping everyday domestic work relations, while, in India the essentiality of caste has been widely discussed. Notably, the scholarship on domestic work relations across the countries appear to be more or less similar, which, in a way signifies something essential about human nature and behaviour.

In the United States of America, Rollins (1985) and Romero (1992) has observed the racial subordination of African American and Chicanca women domestic workers respectively. Both of them emphasised that the transformation in the domestic service occupation takes place, particularly with the dominance of the women of colour as paid domestic workers. Romero significantly explains: 'as domestic service becomes increasingly dominated by women of color, particularly immigrant women, the occupation that brought women of different class backgrounds together in the women's sphere is now bringing race relations into middle-class homemaker's home. The struggle between women that was once based on different class interests now has added dimension of race and ethnic conflict' (Romero, 1992, p. 69).

Rollins's (1985) study is one of the pioneering works examining domestic labour relations between white female employers and their black female domestics. Conducting in-depth interviews with twenty employers and twenty domestics, in addition to her personal experience of working as a domestic in ten households, she explicitly reflects on how the presence of African-American workers validates the self-esteem, class and racial superiority of white middle-class employers. Romero (1992), in her study, on the other hand, focuses on both paid and unpaid domestic work to examine the intersection of class, race and gender in the dynamics of housework. Using oral life-histories of twenty-five Chicana women domestics, combined with her personal experiences of being from a family of domestic workers and herself working as a domestic, she challenges the feminist notion of 'sisterhood'. Reflecting on 'home' of white middle-class employers, as a site of class struggle, she highlights on the subsequent racial, and, gender prejudices being reinforced with the recruitment of Chicana domestic workers. Significantly, according to Glenn the racial construction of domestic service in United States is based on historical association of African American, Mexican American and Japanese American women with domestic labour. Such association with the past has continued justifying the ideologies that woman of color are inherently suited for degraded labour like domestic service (Glenn, 1992, p. 14).

Gill (1994), analyses domestic service work in La Paz, Bolivia, over a span of sixty years from 1930 to late 1980s, a period when Bolivians experienced dramatic social and economic changes in the society. It is in the backdrop of these upheavals, Gill analyses the intersection of class, gender, and ethnic inequalities in the mistress-servant relationship i.e. between the white employers and rural Aymara women. She argues that, 'class, gender and ethnicity are inseparable and that consciousness of class is always articulated in gender and ethnic-specific ways' (Gill, 1994, p. 8).

Bakan and Stasiulis (1995) has shown in the context of Canada, how stereotypes are created and recreated about particular categories of domestic workers, not just by employers but, also, by placement agencies of domestic workers. They argued that, in developed states, the placement agencies serving as one of the key 'gatekeepers' in domestic service actively determined the source countries of domestic workers, and in what number they are to be hired. This perpetuated a 'racial ranking within domestic employment hierarchies', in which the positions of domestic workers were determined based on certain pre-conceived perceptions, (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995, p. 306). However,

these positions were not static, as Bakan and Stasiulis observed that, they are subjected to shifts based on domestic workers' collective resistance strategies against exploitative work conditions in Canadian employment practices. For example, the Caribbean domestics from being passive and loving mammy were stereotyped as aggressive, incompetent and cunningly criminal; the Filipina domestics once seen as soft, frugal and ambitious were widely stereotyped as 'greedy'. Similar shifts in stereotyping of domestics were also observed in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republic of Yemen in the studies of Constable (2007), Lan (2006) and de Regt's (2009) respectively. In all three nations, Filipina domestics were being increasingly replaced by Indonesian domestics, who were perceived to be less problematic by employers. The perception of employers changed towards Filipina maids, when they started organising resistance strategies against government policies related to their stay in host countries. Thus, once considered as 'cheap, docile and ideal to labour shortage', the Filipinas were popularly held as 'problematic' by the employers (Constable 2007). Lan (2003), further argues that, employers prefer hiring certain ethnic categories of domestic workers because of their 'migrant' status in the host countries over the 'local' domestic workers. This entails to the redefinition of spatial and symbolic boundaries where employers and workers negotiate class, ethnic and gender identities through everyday interactions, which thereby, sheds light on the identity politics inherent in the work.

This reflects that employers' racial/ethnic stereotypes of domestic workers are influenced by the ways in which workers' negotiate inherent inequalities in paid domestic labour (de Regt, 2009). Moreover, in large account these are also shaped by employers' previous bad experiences with domestic workers of particular ethnic background. All this together contributes in influencing employers' to avoid recruiting domestic worker of which the earlier worker was an ethnic member (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995). This illustrates the human tendency to homogenise social categories, such as ethnicity, thus, considering all members of the particular social category as having identical natural attributes (Yural-Davis 2006, cited in Mattila, 2011).

In the Indian context, aspects of 'caste' have been an overarching determinant in analysing contemporary discourse on domestic labour relations, which, in turn, intersects with gender and class. However, the relation of caste with gender and class is not limited to highlighting the fact that, it is primarily the poor women from lower castes who essentially work as paid domestic workers. But, it also includes the intricate details about

the practices which are informed by caste-based segregation – division of domestic tasks, conditions of work, wage determination, use of domestic space, rules regarding bodily comportment – in the private domestic spaces of the employer’s home (Srinivas, 1994; Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Waldrop, 2004; Chigateri, 2007; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Sharma, 2016).

For instance, Raghuram (2001) discusses how domestic work is organised along caste and gender lines in Noida, taking the context of the newly emerging urban structure in the region. She particularly emphasised on the alteration of the nature of domestic work with urbanisation, wherein not only gender roles, but, also caste roles were being re-negotiated amongst the *jamadarnis* belonging to Balmiki caste. In Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Froystad (2003) emphasised the persistence of caste in the reproduction of unequal master-servant relationship within private homes. She noted the practice of the upper-caste employers in segregating domestic tasks based on the caste of domestic workers, which in turn, perpetuated untouchability and upper-caste superiority in everyday interactions. In Kolkata, Ray and Qayum marks the subtle practices through which caste structures the labour relationship between employer and domestic worker (Ray & Qayum, 2010). Matilla (2011) in her study in Jaipur, with Rajasthani and Bengali Hindu part-time workers and child live-in domestic workers, highlights how the social dimension of caste is skillfully orchestrated by employers, in order to draw distinct boundaries with workers, thereby, affirming their superiority and stereotyping the workers in the process.

#### **1.6.4 Domestic Work and Worker’s Resistance**

There is a growing body of literature in paid domestic work, which turns the table around by highlighting the strategies of resistance adopted by domestic workers in order to claim a sense of dignity for themselves (Cock, 1980; Dill, 1988; Ozyegin, 2001; Lan, 2003; Constable, 2007; Parrenas, 2015; Barua, et.al. 2016). While the existing scholarship largely focuses on the employers as the holders of power, whereby, domestic workers are portrayed as passive agents of power; the literatures on worker resistance significantly depicts the workers as ‘resisting subordinate’ (Ozyegin, 2001, p. 126). As Ozyegin argue ‘only by examining the alternative contexts and bases of identity can we fully understand the dynamics of power and the role of resistance as part of the work interaction in the domestic worker-employer relationship’ (Ozyegin, 2001, p. 129).

For instance, in South Africa Cock (1980) observed the resistance strategies of the black domestic workers by staying within the system of oppression. Rather than expressing any overt signs of dissatisfaction towards the exploitation meted by their white employers, they wear a protective mask of disguise. Additionally, they most successfully indulge in acts like mockery and ridicule under their mask of deference, which Cock calls as ‘muted rituals of rebellion’ (Cock, 1980, p. 84). Such acts of adaptation and resistance enable the domestics to maintain her personality and integrity intact. For Dill, ‘resistance is the act of constituting and defending one’s self worth’ (Dill, 1988, p. 37). She observes ‘confrontation, chicanery or cajolery’ as the prime resistance acts by the domestic workers ‘through which they establish their own limits within a particular household’ (ibid, p. 37-43). In this, she powerfully argues that resistance are ‘assertions of self-respect’ (ibid, p. 43).

Ozyegin (2001) in her work with Turkish domestic workers and doorkeepers emphasises the resistance strategies adopted by these workers, wherein, they emotionally manipulate their employers by inflicting beliefs of ‘class guilt’ in them. In this, the workers not only embrace the class hierarchies ingrained in the work, but, also successfully attain raises and extra benefits from their employers.

In Taiwan, Lan (2003) emphasises that the live-in Filipina domestic workers negotiate the unequal power dynamics with their employers by living a dual life, which segregates their public and private spaces. For the live-in Filipina domestic workers who share their living space with employers, the sense of their being is often breached upon by the employers. Lan uses Goffman’s metaphors of front and backstage, and throws light on the reorganization of public and private spaces by the workers. The Filipina domestics enact the play of a ‘perfect maid’ in front of their audience- the employers- six days a week which serves as their front stage. And, on Sundays, when they gather with their fellow Filipina domestics on the public spaces of Taiwan, they re-live their lives and feel at home, thereby, turning the public spaces into their backstage by taking off their masks. Similarly, in Hong Kong, Constable (2007) observes that power and control is not one-dimensional, where the Filipina live-in migrant domestic workers are not simply passive subjects to the institutionalised power. But, ‘rather they are implicated in a field of discursive power in which they both [employer and domestic worker] contest and contribute to alternative versions of reality’ (Constable, 2007, p. 203). Her study focuses more directly on the resistance strategies, wherein the foreign domestic workers are seen



participating both in overt acts like the protest rallies, as well as, subtle everyday forms of resistance in the form of evoking laughter, jokes, pranks and humor about their employers. Furthermore, she emphasizes on the ‘discursive resistance’ practices of docility, self-discipline and accommodation, wherein, the domestic workers accept rules of employment, in order to overcome stressful conditions at work in a foreign land. In this light, Constable warns about the practice of ‘romanticizing resistance’ in domestic work occupation, and at the same time, emphasizes that Filipina domestic workers should not be perceived as ‘passive, oppressed victims’ of power (ibid, p. 181).

In the Indian context, Barua, et.al, (2016) mobilized the concept of Scott’s resistance and highlighted the domestic workers contestation towards employer’s practices of boundary work, as embedded in class and caste prejudices.

### **1.7 Research Methodology**

The present study is a qualitative research. 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 on the themes like: employer’s practices of segregation and everyday inferiority, negotiating wage and leave, employer’s act of benevolence. 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. Additionally, the study has referred to 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 ruled out a survey method in gathering the data because it essentially focuses on work relations between employers and domestic workers. In this, the interview method used in the study proved to be beneficial in situating and contextualizing a detailed analysis of the relationship. Moreover, the domestic workers in the study are illiterate, which further strengthens the purpose of the study to use interview method, consisting of open-ended questions. Even for the employer group, although, they are

literate, face-to-face interviews essentially helped in enriching the intricate details of their emotions while they narrated accounts of their personal lives, as well as of their experiences with domestic workers.

In order to protect the privacy of informants, anonymity has been maintained by using pseudonyms throughout the thesis. Interviews and conversation with domestic workers were in Assamese, while with the employers it was a mix of Assamese and English. All the interviews were recorded with permission from the informants, and were accordingly transcribed by the researcher.

For ethical concerns, the study ruled out interviewing employer-domestic worker pairs (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. However, the initial decision was to interview employer-domestic worker in pairs in order to get a detailed account of how work relations unfold in a particular household. But, such a practice was dropped after a pilot study conducted by the researcher in 2018 with a few employer-domestic worker pair. During this brief pilot study, the researcher first located the employers, and, through them, their domestic workers were approached. But, such a practice appeared to be futile, as the researcher encountered uneasiness on the part of domestic workers. They were unwilling to share their experiences in an open manner, by mostly giving sanitized responses to the questions that were asked. In other words, the researcher was always viewed as 'the employer's friend or relative'. Moreover, the inquisitiveness on the part of employers to know what information their domestic workers shared also seemed like an extra burden. All this together, entailed in coming to the decision of ruling out interviewing employer-domestic worker pairs. It is noteworthy that, such an approach does not limit the study, as it significantly led both the groups to share their experiences without any inhibition by doing away with pre-conceived ideas about the researcher's whereabouts.

Further, it is noteworthy to mention that, at the beginning of the research study, there was difficulty in conducting interviews with the domestic workers. Considering their busy schedule of work, they had very little time to spare and sit through long hours of interviews. Consequently, the researcher combined interviews with a more relaxed and informal conversation method when they were back at home for a brief afternoon break between their morning and evening shift. Additionally, this was supplemented with

FGDs with the availability of the workers, while they relaxed and spent time by chatting amongst themselves.

The individual conversations were mostly carried on while the women performed their own domestic chores. In some occasions, the conversations were continued throughout their way to their workplaces for an evening shift. The strategic incorporation of conversation with interviews entailed towards an establishment of rapport with them, which enhanced the researcher's understanding of their social world. Subsequently, in the long-run, it also entailed towards the researcher's acceptance amongst the informants, as she was invited for birthday parties of their young school-going children, and for other social gatherings. This enriched the quality of the research because it enabled the researcher to closely observe the social relations amongst the family members, and also with their fellow domestic workers and neighbors. Although, it is notable that, during the initial phases of our meetings, there was a feeling of insecurity amongst the workers, as the researcher's class position was reminiscent with their employers, and this, consequently made them view the researcher in a powerful position than theirs. Additionally, the interviews and conversations were not one-sided, as the informants frequently quizzed the researcher about her marital status, religious identity, family members and the like. However, the researcher's position as a woman gradually acted as a beneficial factor in finding acceptance amongst the workers, as we (researcher & domestic workers) gradually started sharing stories about our respective experiences of being a woman, and the expectations surrounding it. It is noteworthy that, the researcher's gender location as a woman also, at the same time, limited the study, as the perspectives of the husbands and father-in-laws towards their working wives and daughter-in-laws could not be collected. In other words, the men distanced themselves from being interviewed.

In contrast, the interviews with employer class were more easy-going. Given the educational background of the researcher, in addition to other related symbolic and cultural capital with that of the employer group, made the researcher's acceptance amongst them easy. Unlike, the domestic workers, they were more than willing to share their domestic work experiences, as they most commonly retorted: 'I can speak non-stop about my experiences with maids'. Their willingness to talk openly about their domestic practices may be inferred in the sense that, these matters appeared to them as self-evident which had little scientific value in studying (Mattila, 2011). Nevertheless, their

willingness to speak, in a way, acted as an advantage for the study, as long hours of interviews and conversation could be held with them. Consequently, this led to shorter field visits with the employers.

### **Locating the Employers and Domestic Workers**

The study is conducted in multiple phases in Uzanbazar locality of Guwahati 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.

### ***Employers***

All the employers in the study are interviewed in their respective homes, with each interview lasting about one and half to two hours. The interviews are mostly conducted in the drawing room over a cup of tea and snacks. In each of the interviews, the researcher took prior appointment schedules from the employers. And, based on their time schedule the researcher visited them. In some occasions, the meetings were scheduled in times when the part-time domestic worker was present in the house. This, therefore, added to an advantage, as the researcher got the opportunity to closely observe the interactions between the employer and worker. In houses which had full-time live-in domestic workers, these workers were always around doing domestic chores, and occasionally made brief visits to the interview room when they were called upon to perform a particular task.

For the purpose of the study, only women employers were interviewed. It was a deliberate decision to interview only women, as they are mostly entrusted the task of managing the domestic chores and domestic workers (see also Dickey, 2000b; Mattila, 2011). Moreover, even the women themselves suggested that their husbands seldom interacted with the domestic workers, and vice-versa. The women are all married, with five being widowed, two being separated from their husbands, and one living separately owing to work-related reasons. Initial contact with a few of the interviewed women employers was established through a network of the researcher's known families. Gradually, these women further helped in establishing contact within their circle of

friends. Additionally, information has also been gathered through observation of domestic practices in several other households located in Guwahati city.

While Uzanbazar is a heterogeneous residential area, the informants in the present study belonged to the upper-caste Assamese community. They practice Hinduism and are between the age group of thirty-four to seventy-five.

### *Domestic Workers*

Domestic workers in the study are approached in their settlement located in Uzanbazar. It is a slum pocket, officially called as Uzanbazar Railway Colony. The particular slum is selected for locating the domestic workers, as it is one of the oldest slums which featured in the list of the Director of Municipal Administration Department in 1997. The entry to these women was through a local NGO working in the settlement since 2014. Interestingly, the researcher's association with the NGO aided to the acceptability amongst these women, which consequently contributed to several rounds of informal discussions with them. Here, it is also noteworthy that, although the interviewed women are associated with the activities of the local NGO (which has served as our entry point), this is primarily in context of their larger rights as workers in relation to the state, and it did not cater to their daily challenges at workplace. Moreover, the women are also not members of any trade union. It is therefore, from this vantage point, the experiences of the interviewed domestic workers have been analysed.

The selected slum predominantly houses the Bihari Bansphor, Bihari Paswan and East Bengal-origin Muslim. The women of the Bihari Paswan and East Bengal-origin Muslim predominantly work as part-time domestic workers in the neighborhood of larger Uzanbazar locality, hence the study comprises of these two groups of domestic workers. The Bihari domestic workers in the sample are between the age group of 25-57 years, while, the East Bengal-origin Muslim domestic workers are between the age group of 20-40 years.

The interviews with the domestic workers are mostly conducted in their single room homes, which they shared with other family members. This consequently, curtailed the privacy in the conversations, in most occasions, as their family members (particularly young children and elderly women) were mostly around. Moreover, as it was during the afternoon when the researcher conducted fieldwork with the workers, visitors from neighboring rooms mostly dropped by to see what was happening, thus, adding to

frequent disruptions in the conversations. Consequently, this led to many consecutive rounds of visits in each worker's home in order to gather the data, unlike the case with the employer group.

Moreover, as the research has started during the peak time of NRC (National Registry of Citizenship)<sup>5</sup> verification process and CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act)<sup>6</sup> in Assam, this appeared as a hindrance in gaining confidence amongst the East Bengal-origin Muslim women, during the initial days of fieldwork. The researcher was misinterpreted as government official, acting as an agent to falsely implicate them as Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam. During the initial days of fieldwork, this acted as a major drawback, as the researcher was turned away by the women in most instances. Further, the researcher's religious identity as a Hindu contributed in turning the researcher away during this peak time of state-led NRC verification process and the politics surrounding CAA. It was only after repeatedly seeing the researcher in several meetings and collective processions conducted by the local NGO (which served as the entry point), they gradually gained confidence, and, their feelings of 'threat' gradually subsided. In the whole process, getting access to the workers of the particular community appeared to be time-consuming, which stretched the duration of fieldwork time. While this acted as a limitation in the initial days of fieldwork, it nevertheless, helped the researcher to understand the complexity of social relations that the East Bengal-origin Muslims share, as residents of Guwahati and of a multi-ethnic slum settlement, as well as, with their employers.

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<sup>5</sup> NRC is an official record maintained by Government of India for the state of Assam, to identify people who are legal citizens of the country [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Register\\_of\\_Citizens\\_for\\_Assam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Register_of_Citizens_for_Assam) Retrieved on 27.06.2022. It includes the demographic information about all those individuals who qualify as Indian citizens, as per the Citizenship Act of 1955 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/what-is-nrc-all-you-need-to-know-about-national-register-of-citizens-1629195-2019-12-18> Retrieved on 27.06.2022. While the registry was first prepared after the 1951 census, it has not been updated since then, leading to serious anomalies in the entire process of updating exercise undertaken from 2013-2019.

<sup>6</sup> Citizenship Amendment Act seeks to amend the definition of illegal immigrants by granting Indian citizenship to the religious minorities belonging to Hindu Bengalis, Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists and Christians, who migrated to India from the countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan before December 31, 2014. [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/72436995.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst&from=mdr](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/72436995.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst&from=mdr) Retrieved on 27.06.2022.

## **1.8 Outline of Chapter Schematisation**

The thesis is divided into six chapters, in which, Chapter 1 introduces the research topic and Chapter 2 provides the historical overview of domestic work, by contextualising it in Guwahati context. Chapter 3, 4 and 5 are the main core chapters of the study, which analyses the findings of the study into various themes and sub-themes. And, Chapter 6 provides the conclusion of the study, whereby, the main arguments are highlighted.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study by highlighting the research problem, research objectives and research questions. This chapter also discusses the theoretical and conceptual framework used in the study. It also discusses the literatures reviewed for the study in various themes, which have fruitfully guided the analysis of the present study. Further, the chapter discusses the methodological approach used in collecting the data, along with the various limitations which the researcher encountered during the fieldwork.

Chapter 2 addresses the first research objective of the study. The 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. It was during the nineteenth century colonial period which marked the employment of domestic workers as a crucial marker of middle-class status in Indian society. This perception was further followed in the post-colonial period. 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. The chapter then marks the composition of the contemporary middle-class employers hiring paid domestics in the present study. It further reflects on the social space of the slum settlement of the domestics and their migration histories in the settlement. It marks the heterogeneity amongst the domestic workers by throwing light on 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 between employers and workers, the attributes of caste, religion, ethnicity 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, which has been examined in the following core chapters.

Chapter 3 addresses the second research objective of the study. This chapter focuses on the middle-class homes as ‘contact spaces’, where it serves the main meeting grounds between employers and workers. The chapter delves into the question as to: how part-time domestic work is organised in Guwahati, and, explores the various domestic tasks divided into occupational categories by highlighting the middle-class values and beliefs associated with each category of task. The chapter also highlights the labour regimes of the part-time domestic workers which structures the domestic work sector in Guwahati. Moreover, the chapter looks at domestic workers as essential class-markers, and examines the various reasons which necessitate their recruitment in middle-class households of the present study.

Chapter 4 addresses the third research objective of the study. This chapter focuses on the social dimensions of class, ethnicity, religion and gender, and their interplay in shaping the employer - domestic worker relationship. This has primarily been comprehended from employers’ perspectives; nevertheless, the chapter in part also underscores the perspectives of domestic workers towards employer perceptions and practices. The first part of the chapter discusses anxieties of employers in the light of blurring ‘class distinction’ with their domestics, as well as, the fears associated with the entry of lower-class domestics in the spaces of their middle-class homes. The chapter further discusses the concerns of employers in relation to ethnic, religious and gender dimensions, which particularly gets reflected through their recruitment practices. The last part of the chapter focuses on the discourse of ‘difference’ in the domestic work relationship, and highlights the everyday practices of segregation in relation to the domestic workers. This section highlights that, the discourse of ‘difference’, in the relationship is a complex interplay of multitude social dimensions of class, caste and religious identity of each domestic worker.

Chapter 5 addresses the fourth research objective of the study. The chapter analyses the social world of domestic workers- Bihari and East Bengal-origin Muslim women- and underscores the context under which they sustain their everyday lives. It addresses certain pertinent questions like: why do they take up paid domestic work? How do taking up paid work shapes their lives? How do they negotiate the constraints of taking up paid work both at their familial level and at workplace? Significantly, to understand domestic labour relationship in totality, it is essential to take into account the overall context- domestic worker’s own home and workplace- of their precarious positions in society.



Furthermore, this chapter explores in detail the resistance strategies resorted by domestic workers in order to negotiate the quotidian practices of subordination (as highlighted in the previous chapters) they encounter in their workplaces. Interestingly, this chapter also notes the practices of domestic workers in recognizing their rights as domestic workers, with the support of local non-governmental organizations.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarising the major findings and observations that were encountered in the field. It reflects that the study 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 intricacies and spatial dynamics of everyday domestic work relations.

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