

CHAPTER-2

Historical Legacies of Domestic Work and Its Contextualisation in Assam (Guwahati) Context

2.1 Introduction

Domestic work, in common parlance, can be defined as tasks related with housework i.e. cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, and taking care of dependent persons such as elderly, children, the sick and person with disabilities. The term was introduced by the feminist movement in the 1970s, and, since then, 'domestic work' has formed a significant part of feminist scholarly debates, more particularly in the West. These debates were mainly reflection of the drudgery associated with confining women to domestic work.

However, unlike the western societies, in India similar debates did not emerge, as men and women of lower-castes provided cheap labour to rich and aristocratic families since pre-colonial days (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Ghotoskar, 2013). It is significant, however that, the nature of the work has witnessed notable changes since then. While in pre-colonial times, the work encompassed a range of activities from cattle rearing to vegetable cultivation, food processing and other activities involving household production, for which the workers were paid remuneration in kind (Neetha, 2004), under colonial influence there was the growth of a 'middle-class' which proliferated the recruitment of domestic workers, thus, limiting the performance of the work inside the household. Employing a domestic worker, during this period was primarily considered as a symbolic capital of the middle-class homes (Fernandes, 2006; Mattila, 2011). Moreover, the changes in social milieu of the colonial state, also contributed towards a drastic growth of domestic workers from the lower classes, wherein even the Brahmin widows sought work as paid domestics, particularly for the task of a cook (Banerjee, 1985).

Further, in the post-liberalisation period, the social value of labour of domestic workers has taken a different orientation, with the notable growth of a 'new middle-class'. Employing of domestic workers is no longer considered exclusively as a marker of status, rather it has become a middle-class and upper-class phenomenon (Neetha, 2004). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the changes in the nature of domestic work practices over the past centuries in India should not be viewed as separate phases of history. But, rather as a continuum signifying a transformation in domestic work relations.

This chapter highlights the historical evolution of paid domestic work in India by tracing the transition of middle-class Indian domesticity from colonial to contemporary times. Drawing on the historical evolution of the work in India, the second part of chapter contextualizes the study in Guwahati by developing an understanding of the city as a “city of migrants”. In the third section, the chapter locates the ideologies of domesticity in Assam by tracing the growth of Assamese middle-class under the colonial legacy in Assam. The last section of the chapter marks the heterogeneity amongst the domestic workers in the city by tracing their historical and social standing in Assam.

2.2 Paid Domestic Work and Middle-class Domesticity: Mapping the Historical Evolution in India

2.2.1 Colonial India

During the early colonial period, domestic work partly overlapped with the system of slavery, wherein the identity of a domestic servant¹ existed in a continuum from ‘free’ waged coolie to an ‘unfree’ slave (Sinha, 2020). It is significant that, although, the institution of slavery was abolished in 1843, and clear distinctions between a slave and a servant were upheld by law, the social conditions of both were permeable, as they largely performed menial work (ibid). The slaves were primarily divided into two categories, those who worked in the fields and those who worked indoors (Matilla, 2011). While, the field slaves typically belonging to the untouchable castes were restricted to outdoor work, those working in the inner quarters of the house were mostly from the lower castes like shudras, and they served as the master’s personal help (ibid).

Nitin Sinha (2020) in his analysis on history of domestic servants observes that, in the eighteenth century colonial India, everyone serving the European and native elite households were classified under the broad term ‘servant’. He notes that during this period the term servant was defined as ‘a relational social identity structured through the

¹Here, the researcher uses the term ‘servant’ in describing the historical evolution, as the people serving the European and elite houses in colonial India were in general referred to as such. However, in the present study, the researcher has used the term “domestic” or “domestic worker” interchangeably, in order to be methodologically consistent. Unlike, previous studies (Ray, 2000; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Froystad, 2003) the present study do not prefer using the term ‘servant’, as it gives an impression of undermining ‘domestic work’ as a form of employment (Mattila, 2011), and discredit the performers of the work as a category of ‘workers’ integral in sustaining the economy. But, scholars like Menon (2022) maintains that, although, in present times the term ‘domestic help’ has replaced the word ‘servant’, the public usage of the term is nonetheless, misleading, as this continue to be a category of workers who are treated less than humans, even lesser than pet animals.

relationships of domination and hierarchy' (Sinha, 2020, p. 155). It is significant, however, that the people defined as servants were bound by a distinct hierarchy, and they were categorised into two groups, *naukar* (upper-class servants) and *chakar* (lower-class menial servants) (ibid). The *naukar* was a more generic term encompassing everyone ranging from the banians to moneylenders, clerks, butlers who enjoyed a greater degree of permissibility in their masters' households, unlike the *chakars* who performed menial tasks (ibid). Moreover, it is noteworthy that the *naukar* groups like the European and elite households of the period, too, had their own set of domestic servants (*chakar*) in their respective households (ibid).

It was from the mid nineteenth century colonial India when major transformations were witnessed in domestic service, with the emergence of a newly educated middle-class called *Bhadralok*², in the urban social milieu of colonial Bengal³. This period was marked by an enduring presence of a 'woman's question', directly linked to their domesticity, thereby, making significant changes in the domestic work relationships. Notably, the position of woman and the consequent domestic changes thereon can be best located within the broader framework of colonial influences overwhelming the Indian society of the period.

The British colonisers classified the newly emergent *Bhadralok* group during this period, as 'educated natives' in order to mark them distinct from the old nobility and masses (Bhattacharya, 2005 cited in Ray & Qayum, 2010). Being the first recipients of colonial education, these middle-class intellectual men were the first to be incorporated in the clerical ranks of the British administration (Ray & Qayum, 2010). As by-products of colonial projects, and influenced by modernity, this class held a strong desire to reform Indian society (ibid). However, this reformation was to be achieved without jeopardizing the age-old Indian traditions. It was in this context, Indian society came to be defined by a powerful dichotomy between 'outer' (*bahir*) and 'inner' (*ghar*), in line with a

²In Bengal, *bhadralok* means gentleman, and is defined as a social group which is heterogeneous in origin, marked by an ideology of respectability (Ray & Qayum, 2010). They are distinct from the poor or uneducated called *chotolok* or *gariblok* (Roy, 2002). The membership of the group was not ascribed and therefore, had to be achieved (Mukherjee, 1977 cited in Ray & Qayum, 2010).

³As Calcutta was the imperial capital of colonial India until 1911; most of the accounts of colonial history are centered in West Bengal. Moreover, it was in Calcutta where the 'woman question' first emerged in nineteenth century India. A process that started in Bengal soon spread out to the rest of the sub-continent the changing condition of women and the attendant ideas and practices of domesticity was an all India phenomenon across caste, class and religious groups (Banerjee, 2010).

nationalist fervour, and dialectic between tradition and modernity (Chatterjee, 1989). This also marked the gendered division of society, in which, the ‘inner’ representing the ‘home’ was typically demarcated as an arena associated with woman (ibid). And, the ‘outer’ representing the external world came to be associated with men (ibid). Thus, while men, as subjects of colonial rule had to abide by the Western norms in the outer world, it was the ‘home’ which served as the primary arena for maintaining the Indian identity (Sarkar, 1992).

By late nineteenth century, ‘home’ was accorded the status of a private space, thereby, marking it as an intrinsic part for maintaining public identity of the middle-class (Fernandes, 2006; Matilla, 2011). In this, the middle-class woman i.e. the *bhadramahila* (counterparts of *bhadralok*) was assigned crucial roles for conserving integral essence of the ‘home’ from any Western influences (Chatterjee, 1989). This led to the creation of an ideal middle-class domesticity, in which woman was central in communicating an image of middle-class ‘respectability’. ‘Home’, therefore, served as a space where the colonised men retired after day long negotiations with their colonial rulers (Sen, 1999) and, thus, reclaimed their masculinity:

The karta [head of the household] therefore, becomes within the home what he can never aspire to be outside of it- a ruler, an administrator, a legislator or a chief judge, a general marshalling his troops (Sarkar, 1992, p. 224).

However, the institution of the home and family was threatened when the middle-class women started imitating the European women (Chatterjee, 1989; Sen, 1999). The very essence of domesticity of the middle-class family trembled under such colonial influences. It was around the same period when issues related to women’s education were highly emphasized under the colonial rule. This generated further fear that Indian women’s formal education would turn them into *bibis*⁴, just like the Westernised women of their colonial rulers (Ray & Qayum, 2010). Moral degeneracy seemed inevitable to the Indian reformers, who held that women’s education would corrupt the ‘pure tradition’ and ‘true womanhood’ of Indian woman, debarring them from their primary roles as wives and mothers (Sen, 1999). However, prolonged debate and discussion led to a general consensus on the attainment of cultural refinements by Indian woman through modern education, without jeopardizing her position at home (Chatterjee, 1989).

⁴*Bibis* meant westernized women with no sense of duty (Ray & Qayum, 2010).

Yet, soon the educated housewives came under criticism when it became almost certain that all middle-class homes hired servants (Ray & Qayum, 2010). As Banerjee in her analysis on domestic manuals of the 19th century writes:

While the steady stream of reference to domestics and the prescription of maternalistic behaviour towards them imply the acceptability of hiring domestic help in colonial Bengal, the employment of servants in new middle-class homes were viewed with suspicion by the same authors, describing having servants as a negative development brought about by modern Western education (Banerjee, 1996, p. 8).

Consequently, this led to the emergence of domestic manuals in late nineteenth century colonial India, that continued up to first quarter of twentieth century (Banerjee, 2010). Largely fashioned after British and American domestic economy tests, these manuals were particularly addressed to the young and educated brides of the middle-class families in order to teach them the basic essence of domesticity (ibid). Through the manuals these 'new women' (Chatterjee, 1989) were advocated to give devotion to tasks that upheld their colonized counterpart's status (Sen, 1999; Banerjee, 2010). Simultaneously, they were given necessary advice on proper management of servants (Ray & Qayum, 2010). Thus, emulating the British families in India, the employment, control and management of servants came to define the middle-class Indian domesticity. Nevertheless, though this model was inspired by the ideal of the British family, the Indian reformers adapted a principle of *selection*⁵ in their acceptance of liberal ideals (Chatterjee, 1989).

It is significant, however that the employment of servants did not free the housewives from the drudgery of domestic work, as even with an army of servants, 'the amount of work was so great that she [mistress of the house] worked ceaselessly from dawn until late at night' (Borthwick, 1984 cited in Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 50). Moreover, with the mobilization for India's independence gaining momentum in early twentieth century, the position of the respectable middle-class woman was further refined. She was entrusted with cultural responsibility for building the inner life of the home, and embody the virtues of a chaste, self-sacrificing traditional Hindu woman, thereby, distinguishing herself from both European women, and, women of the lower socio-economic class like maidservants, washerwomen and prostitutes, who were exposed to the public gaze

⁵Italics from the original text.

(Chaterjee, 1989; Banerjee, 2010). She was therefore, accorded a status of cultural superiority, over both the European women, as well as the “common” woman, considered as coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, and subjected to brutal physical oppression by the male (ibid). Concomitantly, this period was marked with a steady increase in the employment of servants from lower classes (who were also lower in caste), as the presence of servants emerged as a crucial marker of status for the new middle-class families (Banerjee, 2004).

The increasing availability of the number of servants during this period can be directly linked to the advent of modernisation. With the establishment of the British political hegemony in the region, the colonial powers were inclined towards investing in the vast bulk of traditional economic activities, which catered to the needs of ordinary people (Banerjee, 1985). This paved the way for modern activities to make inroads into the sphere of traditional economy, thereby, either destroying or altering these indigenous patterns of living, in order to meet the purpose of modern economy (ibid). The outcome was the emergence of a group of lower caste and class people, including women, limited by their means of production or survival (Ghotoskar, 2013). These women mainly involved in making traditional crafts for daily use, could not sustain to the competition meted by the mechanized products, which contributed to their worsening economic position (Banerjee, 1985; Sen, 1997). Moreover, the commercialization of land further curtailed their access to forests, which provided them with food and fuel (Sen, 1999). The exhaustion of rural resources, therefore, triggered a city ward migration for most women, in search of work. This group primarily consisted of single women migrants, forced to migrate either because of widowhood or barrenness and unchastity (ibid). They were mostly incorporated into domestic service, as in this period, it was the only occupation amongst the available modern services, which had a fast expansion, encompassing both men and women (Banerjee, 1985). Moreover, it also served as one such occupation where even the Brahmin widows found employment as cooks in the elite and middle-class families (ibid).

2.2.2 Post-colonial India

Following independence in 1947, increased modernization brought about considerable changes in the society. On one hand, the entrenchment of the market forces into the rural economy further alienated the poorer sections of the rural society leading to their absorption in the informal economy, including domestic work (Banerjee, 1985). On the

other hand, there was a notable growth of a new middle-class⁶ in the society (Neetha, 2004; Neetha, 2009). Unlike the colonial era, this class in the post-colonial India built itself as agents of modernity, primarily deriving its power from the market forces, rather than the state (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Barua, et al, 2017). The woman of this class increasingly attained higher levels of education, which contributed in their steady rise into paid employment outside the home (Neetha, 2004; Ghotoskar, 2013). This resulted in the growth of dual careers as a new family norm in urban area (Neetha, 2004). However, interestingly, not much has radically altered in terms of power paradigms amongst these new middle-class families where the position of ‘woman’ is concerned (Chaudhuri, 2014). The traditional ideal of domesticity and associated femininity continued to influence contemporary relationships in these families (Donner, 2011). A natural outcome to this was a sudden increase in demand of paid domestic workers, as Neetha observes, ‘employing domestics is no longer a symbol of wealth and aristocracy, and it is now largely a middle-class and upper middle-class phenomenon’ (Neetha, 2004, p. 1682). The paid domestic workers, thus, enabled the middle-class women to fulfil their varied domestic roles, without interrupting the traditional patriarchal set-up of these families. Furthermore, the increasing recruitment of domestic workers in urban areas is also attributed to the decline of extended and joint family system, which earlier served as a source of helping hand in smooth functioning of middle-class households (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Barua, et.al, 2017). Consequently, the growth of nuclear families, along with, overall changes in emergence of the new middle-class, has contributed to the alteration of paid domestic work arrangements in contemporary period (Neetha, 2004).

Recent scholarship has shown part-time domestic work being the most common form of contemporary domestic arrangement in India, which is largely shouldered by the female workforce (Dickey, 2000b; Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2009; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). Historically, paid domestic work has been associated with male servants, largely due to single male rural-urban migration (Neetha, 2004). But, since

⁶The term ‘new middle-class’ is mostly used to refer to the upwardly mobile class segment that has been ‘able to take advantage of the economic structural adjustment policies, and is counted as middle-class either in terms of consumption of what have been labelled ‘middle-class products’; or in terms of the occupation of one of the increasing number of white-collar (i.e. middle-class) jobs’ (Waldrop, 2011, p. 166-167). Furthermore, Fernandes and Heller (2006) argue, that the ‘new middle-class’ is not new in terms of its social composition, but, rather in the way in which it seeks to assert a middle-class identity through the language of economic liberalization (cited in Barua et. all, 2016).

1960 onwards, as family migration took momentum, domestic work primarily gained prominence in terms of female employment, thus, making it feminised (ibid). This can further be linked to the neo-liberal policies, wherein with the shut-down of textile mills contributing to loss of male wages, the women of the households were forced to seek paid work in the informal sector of urban areas (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). And, in the urban areas, the sheer lack of alternative opportunities makes domestic work as a viable option for these growing numbers of poor illiterate women, for it is perceived as an extension of the work that they perform in their own homes (ibid). Furthermore, Sinha (2020) notes that, domestic service has become feminised primarily because of two factors, firstly, on the basis of numerical count, where women outnumbered men in the performance of domestic service; and secondly, because of its relation to the social value of work, where the work performed by women are disregarded and deemed unproductive. He however, argues that, while the first factor is of a comparatively recent origin, the disregard towards the labour of women domestic servants has been traditionally established in India, and, in this context, paid domestic work has historically been feminised. In colonial times, the labour of women servants was largely subsumed within their male counterparts, where their contribution either as independent servants or as wives of the male servants, remained hidden under the male category servants (Sinha, 2020).

Scholars have argued that, in India, today, the nature of domestic work relations has undergone significant transformation. With the sudden demand of domestic workers and their increasing availability, domestic tasks are categorically divided into sweeping and mopping, cooking, washing dishes, washing clothes, child care, elderly care, toilet cleaning and waste removal. The workers largely sell their labour power to employers through part-time arrangements (Matilla, 2011). This in return have empowered employers to choose specialised workers based on their respective needs. Furthermore, it is pertinent to note that, this arrangement of domestic work continues to prevail with traditional full-time domestic work, specifically recruited by families which have both the means and space to accommodate full-timers (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Barua, et.al, 2017).

Based on the contemporary classification of domestic workers (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Sen & Sengupta, 2016), in Guwahati they are broadly divided in to three groups-

1. Full-time live-in domestic worker – These are workers who live in the employer’s residence with their labour being exclusively extracted by a single employer.
2. Part-time domestic worker –These are workers who work in multiple houses with their labour being divided amongst several employers. This group of workers lives in their own homes, and, is thus, referred to as part-time live-out domestics.
3. Full-time live-out domestic worker – These are workers who work in a single house from morning to evening, their labour, therefore, being extracted by a single employer. But, unlike full-time live-in workers, they enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy, as they return to their own houses at sunset.

The present study particularly focuses on the second group of workers, and it explores the domestic work relations in general. The study reveals that while, class can be perceived as the major divide between employers and workers, the attributes of gender, caste, religion, and ethnicity marks the heterogeneity and hierarchies amongst the workers, which are selectively orchestrated by the employers. These are some of the issues which have guided the present research, and, have therefore, informed the chapter lay out of the thesis.

2.3 Understanding the Field: Guwahati

Guwahati, the capital of North-Eastern state of Assam is a major riverine port city in North-East India, which is located along the southern banks of the river Brahmaputra and foothills of Shillong plateau, with the Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport to the west and town of Narengi to the east. The city spreads over an area of 216 square kilometres, and is divided into 60 municipal wards. With a population of over one million as per the census of 2011, the city exhibits a heterogeneous population, where Assamese, Bengali and Hindi are the dominant linguistic groups. Religiously, Hinduism is the dominant religion accounting for 84.74 percent of the total population of the city, followed by Islam accounting for 12.45 percent, and other religions accounting for less than 1 percent (Census 2011). Of the total population of the city, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes accounts for 8.1 percent and 6.0 percent respectively (Census 2011).

Guwahati derives its name from two Assamese words ‘guwa’ meaning ‘areca nut’ and ‘haat’ meaning ‘a weekly marketplace’, tracing its origin to a time when it served as trading port on the River Brahmaputra (Census 2011). In the colonial period, the city was known by the name of Gauhati (Desai et al, 2014, p. 4). The city expanded and came to prominence since 1972 with the reorganisation of the state capital from Shillong to Guwahati. Before 1972, the city served as state headquarters for a brief period, though, in ancient times the area was a site of various pre-historic urban settlements (Giri, 2001, p. 17).

In modern times, the city started experiencing changes following the years of independence with establishment of the High Court in 1947, the Railway head quarters in 1958, the University campus in 1947-48, the Engineering College, the Medical College, the Oil Refinery in 1962, and the construction of rail cum road Saraighat Bridge over River Brahmaputra in 1964. However, it was only from 1972 onwards, after attaining the status of state capital, urban development started taking place in the city, which had an impact on the social, economic and political life of the inhabitants. As a capital city, it became well connected in terms of transport and communication, thereby, making connections with the hinterlands, and becoming a ‘Gateway to North-East India’. All other states in the region are dependent on the city for connectivity within the region and rest of India. The city is one of the fastest growing urban centres of India. And in North- East India, it is the largest metropolis and a major regional hub for commercial and educational activities.

2.3.1 The City of Migrants

Being a central city in the region, Guwahati witnessed an exponential growth of population post 1971 onwards. The 1971 census estimated that 59 percent of Guwahati’s total population had migrated to the city (Desai et al, 2014). This may be attributed in great part to in-migration from nearby rural areas of Assam, followed by migration from outside Assam and a massive arrival of cross-border migrants from East Pakistan, the present day Bangladesh (ibid). Amongst all the eight North Eastern states of India⁷, Guwahati situated in the state of Assam has the largest share of migrants with strong sub-national ethnic identities (Abbas, 2016 cited in Das, 2016). According to the 2011

⁷ The North-Eastern states of India includes: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

census, in Guwahati the migrants comprised of 42 percent of the total percentage of population (Das, 2016).

The rising number of migrant population in Guwahati since 1971 should be located within the broad framework of the history of migration in Assam, which dates back to the colonial period. Assam witnessed the first wave of migration in the 19th and 20th century, with the advent of East India Company, and the initial encounters of the Company with Assamese people. Under the Company's rule, there was the discovery of tea, coal, oil and natural gas in undivided Assam, which led to a huge demand of manpower, the labour for which was not fulfilled due to unavailability of local labourers. In order to compensate the shortage of manpower in various sectors of the economy, the colonial policies encouraged migration from surrounding areas of Bihar, Odisha, Rajasthan, Nepal and East Bengal, thereby, leading to ethnic division of labour in Assam (Das, 2016). The migrant communities viz the Santhal, Oraon and Munda tribes (later came to be known as Tea Tribes in Assam) from the Chotanagpur region of Bihar and parts of Odisha were brought in to fulfil the demands of tea plantation sector (Guha, 1977). Marwaris from Rajasthan were brought in for trade and commerce purpose, the group later came to dominate the sector (ibid). The East Bengali migrants comprising of both Hindus and Muslims mainly came from the East Bengal districts of Sylhet and Mymensingh respectively, and were settled in undivided Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam, though eventually they dispersed in other parts of the state (ibid). The Bengali Hindus gradually settled in erstwhile Cachar district of Assam, taking up administrative and teaching jobs in Assam (Das, 2016). The Bengali Muslims -mostly comprising of the poor peasants- on the other hand, who were mainly settled in the wastelands of Assam by the colonial state in order to generate revenue, predominantly settled in Western parts of Assam (ibid).

The region witnessed a second wave of migration comprising of this East Bengali population, following the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, after independence from the colonial rule, and a substantial extent after the 1971 Liberation War, which led to the creation of Bangladesh (Desai, et.al. 2014). This population movement since the colonial period, and which continued on, due to porous Indo-Bangladesh border has always been seen with animosity, as impinging into the resources of Assam by the local communities (ibid). The issue of immigration from Bangladesh during this period also culminated in the form of ethnic and separatist movement in

various parts of Assam, resulting in violent clashes. This rendered people of different ethnic groups' homeless, thus, forcing them to migrate to Guwahati at different point of times (ibid).

Owing to this historical background, Guwahati experienced a migration of different communities in different points of time, which contributed to its massive population growth within a short span of two decades i.e. from 1971 to 1991 (ibid). The city saw a phenomenal growth in the urban population from 9.60 percent in 1971 to 23.22 percent in 1991 (Giri, 2001, p. 18). Although, migration continued in some form in the post 1991 period, a decreasing trend was experienced in its rates, and the city by then already had a large section of pre-existing migrant population and their successive generations (Desai et al, 2014). The reasons for migration were primarily social and economic. While, the poor migrated to Guwahati to escape the shackles of poverty and hardship in rural areas, the middle class migrated for better employment opportunities and standards of living, and the affluent classes migrated to reap the benefits of living in the city (ibid). Additionally, people from other states of India migrated in search of better economic opportunities, Guwahati being the largest economic hub in the North-Eastern region of India. The enormous population pressure on land subsequently led to infringement of open spaces, hills, wetlands and so forth, thereby, marking significant changes to land use pattern of the city. In this, people with lower income who fail to afford high rental houses largely inhabit in overcrowded and dilapidated condition, which has consequently contributed to the growth of informal settlement and slums in various parts of the city (ibid). As per the census of 2011, the total number of population in the slums stands to be 25,739 i.e. around 2.69 percent of the total population of the city.

It would be wrong to infer, that with the increase in working population there was a change in nature of economic activity in the city. On the contrary, the population growth in the city was not corresponded by a parallel expansion of the economy (Giri, 2001). It was the tertiary sector in the form of self and regular employment type of work, which developed as the main sector of employment in Guwahati's economy (Desai et al, 2014). According to the 2004-2005 NSSO round data, a major proportion of Guwahati's workforce engaged in the tertiary sector, of which the male comprises 63.4 per cent, and, the female workers comprise 82.8 per cent (ibid). While the female workers are predominantly engaged in regular wage employment as domestic workers, the male is engaged in self-employment as petty traders (ibid).

Furthermore, the city exhibiting a heterogeneous population, contributes towards a segregation of occupational groups on the basis of their work, language, religion and ethnic lines. For example, the Rajasthani (Marwari community) people and Bengali Hindu community largely predominates the trade and commerce sector; the hard manual labour in the informal economy is usually opted by the East Bengal-origin Muslims; and the non-commercial activities are mostly performed by the Assamese people.

2.4 Paid Domestic Work in Guwahati: Employing and Working Class

2.4.1 Employers: Locating the Middle-Class

Over the years there has been much scholarly debates on the definition of the term ‘middle-class’ (Lietchy, 2003; Fernandes, 2006; Donner, 2008; Savaala, 2010; Donner & Neve, 2011). The intention of the present study is not to focus around these debates, but, rather to understand the relations of the middle-class to notions of domesticity.

The emergence of a powerful middle-class in Assam is directly linked to the colonial legacy in India, but, in every Indian state the social roots of this class is distinct (Saikia, 2000). In Assam, the Assamese middle-class primarily gained popularity in the late nineteenth century colonial India, and have come to dominate the social world ever since (Gohain, 1973). However, unlike other colonial regions, in Assam the growth of middle-class took several years⁸, and the connotation of the term frequently kept changing (Kalita, 2011). It is nevertheless, significant that, by the end of nineteenth century, this middle-class clearly emerged as a social group embracing various government job positions in civil and judicial branches, revenue officials, school teachers, tea planters, tea garden clerks, advocates, traders, shopkeepers, moneylenders, big landholders and rich peasants receiving rents and produce from share croppers (ibid). But, in the post-independence years, the composition of middle-class experienced a significant change. With the burgeoning of schools and colleges in the region, this class have noticeably become more affluent and ambitious, bagging well-paid posts in the newly expanded

⁸ The growth of Assamese middle-class was not a result of single historical event, but had passed through four stages of development: first, the period of gestation from late 18th century to about 1820; second, the rise and growth from 1820 to 1850; third, further growth and development from 1850 to 1880; and fourth, growth and expansion from 1880 to 1947 (Kalita, 2011).

bureaucracy, and, thus, having a greater control over financial resources of the state (Gohain, 1973).

The historical evolution of middle-class in Assam started with the British annexation of Assam in 1826, which brought an end to the six hundred years of Ahom rule, and subsequently, laid seed for the modern age in Assam (ibid). Prior to the British annexation, the region primarily sustained on an agricultural economy, where land was the main source of living, and social relations were upheld by a feudal fervour (Kalita, 2011). But, with the colonial rule, the feudal aristocracy was dismantled, and the region experienced the growth of a new social class i.e. the middle-class (ibid). According to Gohain 'the new middle-class was not formed from the ranks of the former nobility. The advantages of the British education and the new avenues of employment and trade were cornered by caste Hindus who had served the former rulers as their clerks and bureaucrats...what seems to have struck the Ahom feudal nobles a deadly blow was the abolition of chattel slavery and the widespread system of forced labour that supported them' (Gohain, 1973, p. 14). Kalita notes that the failure of Ahom nobility to march towards the ranks of middle-class like their caste Hindu compatriots was firstly, because of their distaste for clerical works widely prevalent under the colonial government, and secondly, because of their resentment at British opposition to feudal privileges⁹ (Kalita, 2011, p. 12-13). The Ahom nobility, therefore, in the initial years of colonial rule distanced themselves from the western education popularised by the colonial state (ibid). Hence, the Assamese caste- Hindu men were among the first to partake of this colonial educational project. Armed with western education the members of the caste-Hindus like Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kalitas were quick to take up government jobs that subsequently played a major role in their emergence as middle-class (Gohain, 1973). As active participants in the colonial projects, this class worked closely with the British administration (Gohain, 1973; Saikia, 2000; Kalita, 2011).

The growth of the Assamese middle-class can therefore, be attributed to an amalgamation of colonial bureaucracy, western education and the subsequent newer forms of employment administered by the colonial powers (Gohain, 1973; Saikia, 2000). Through the development of western education in colonial India, the main intention of

⁹The Ahom nobility who ruled Assam for six hundred years were deprived of their royal authority in the wake of the British annexation of Assam in 1826, and, this resulted in a mutual disharmony in the relations between the Ahoms and British administration (Kalita, 2011).

the rulers was to create a middle-class in India, which would act as mediators between the government and the governed (Saikia, 2000).

In Assam, with the institution of the Ryotwari¹⁰ system in Upper Assam and the continuance of the Zamindari¹¹ system in Lower Assam, the British appointed mauzadars to particular village circles as revenue officials, who emerged as an affluent middle-class (Gohain, 1973; Bhattacharya, 2009). They were educated, wealthy and powerful, and, were thus, the logical outcome of colonial bureaucracy (Gohain, 1973). Furthermore, with the educational projects at its nascent stage in the early nineteenth century Assam, the colonial rule gave rise to a new Calcutta¹²-educated Assamese middle-class who derived their inspirations from Bengal, and, thus, brought home the ideas (Saikia, 2000). They were a small group of first generation western educated gentry produced by the colonial state. Consequently, they were immersed in various colonial projects as salaried employees, in an around the district and sub-divisional headquarters of Assam (Bhattacharya, 2009). With time this section of the middle-class kept growing, and arguably education came to be regarded as a significant asset by this class (ibid). Additionally, as trade and commerce in Assam was still in its nascent stage at the time of British invasion, there was absence of any native capitalist in the region (Gohain, 1973). This resulted in the commercial monopoly of Marwaris¹³ in Assam, and the Assamese middle-class armed with western education were thus, squeezed into only two sources of income – service in a government department or tea garden¹⁴ and mauzadari or agency for collection of land revenue (ibid). Further, around this time, the region also saw the growth of the Assamese tea planting class, largely influenced by the success of European tea planters. This class formed the most affluent class in colonial Assam from amongst the Assamese middle-class of the region (Gohain, 1973; Kalita, 2011).

¹⁰ This was a land revenue system in British India, where revenue was paid by the farmers directly to the state.

¹¹ Under this system, the zamindars who acted as intermediaries between the state and farmers collected the land revenue from the farmers.

¹² Calcutta, hosting as the colonial capital from 1858-1912 served as a central area for the British, and thus, experienced development earlier than the other parts of colonial India.

¹³ A business community originally from the state of Rajasthan, who settled in Assam under the aegis of colonial powers.

¹⁴ The tea industry was first discovered by the colonial government in a wild state in 1826, it was experimentally cultivated by the colonial government in 1830s, which began to flourish by 1859 and thereby, generated employment and became a source of development for Assam (Gohain, 1973). The commercial tea plantation industry incorporated a sizeable number of Assamese youths in various clerical posts, and they were called as *babus*, who later lend their support in the fight against British in huge number (Kalita, 2011).

The Assamese middle-class, a by-product of the colonial rule worked in close collaboration with the alien powers until, the mass awakening against the colonial policies gained momentum at the national level. Gradually, in the early twentieth century they abandoned their collaborative roles with the colonial government, and got associated with the nationalist movement, thereby, merging their history with the history of Indian nationalism (Gohain, 1973).

2.4.1.1 Patriarchal Traditions and Domesticity

In Assam, the impact of reformist movements considering the ‘woman’s question’ was felt only during the twentieth century, unlike Bengal and other parts of India (Nath, 2011). It was around this time, the idea of an Assamese middle-class woman¹⁵ began to evolve. The ideal Assamese middle-class woman was imagined ‘out of the intertwined impulses of colonialism, social reform and nationalism’ (Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 48-49). This imagination is often believed to echo the Bengal example, as most of the Assamese intelligentsia during this time were educated in Calcutta, and brought these ideas home (Chaudhari, 2014). Moreover, this was the time when Bengal renaissance was continually changing the notion of Indian woman, amidst the discourses on nationalism and tradition/modernity (ibid). In Assam, Aparna Mahanta and others have highlighted on the aspect of ‘woman question’, which was governed by the consciousness of tradition and modernity dialectic. This, thereby, created a new ideal of domesticity by limiting women to the domestic space.

As already stated earlier in the context of colonial Bengal, the escalating colonial domination during the time became a source of fear in the mind of middle-class Indian men, which entailed them to create a distinct *inner domain* (home), represented by woman (Chatterjee, 1989). In Assam, a similar fear led to the demarcation of public/private domains, wherein the ideologies of domesticity and domestic world emerged as certain central themes in the local Assamese journals like Orunodoi, Asam Bandhu, Jonaki and Mau (Nath, 2011). Mostly written by Assamese men of middle-class caste-Hindu, these journals reflected the contradictions between the ideals of tradition and modernity in determining the position of women (Sen, 2012; Konwar, 2017). The writers mostly assuming the role of social reformers expressed their fear in the intrusion of western ideas into the Indian tradition (Sen, 2012). Like the Bengali *bhadralok*, they

¹⁵They are the counterparts of the Assamese middle-class men.

too, feared that under the spell of Western influence, there would emerge a class of Assamese *bowari*¹⁶ whose minds would be contaminated by idleness and love for luxury, thereby, making them unfit for domestic tasks, and hence demanding domestic servants beyond the means of most middle-class *babus* (Nath, 2011). This led to re-imagining of the ideology of domesticity, wherein the ‘innocence’ and ‘femininity’ of Assamese middle-class women could be protected from any foreign contamination- European as well as Bengal influences (ibid).

Furthermore, like elsewhere in India, female education under the colonial regime rippled the Assamese middle-class men. It was a long ranging and a highly debatable issue of the time, the impact of which was distinct on Assamese middle-class women (Konwar, 2017). Education was suspected to divert women’s efficacy from domestic duties, thereby creating a group of morally unfit ‘independent woman’ (ibid). Lamodar Bora, a noted Assamese writer of the time defines “*Stri-Swadhinata*” (woman’s independence) in his satirical dictionary as: ‘a woman abandoning her husband and children, refusing a husband, going alone to take to the air in public gardens, meeting educated male friends, running a household without males, chasing away mother-in-law and father-in-law or refusing food to them, making husbands perform cooking and other household chores, release of women from all bindings (*mukali kora*) or allowing them to ride to their males (as *mauts* ride) as elephants, ascending elephants by putting feet on the backs of men’ (Mahanta, 2008, p. 24). However, female education was considered indispensable, but, it was supported only in cultivating the virtues of a good housewife, an enlightened mother and spawning of able sons for the advancement of the country, and not for their self-sufficiency or economic-sufficiency (Sen, 2012; Konwar, 2017). Idolized as a section of dutiful house-wives and reduced to domestic drudgery, the women were expected to indulge in labour of love, keeping the interest of the family before their subjective ‘selves’ (Nath, 2011). As Aparna Mahanta notes, the ideal of an Assamese middle-class Hindu woman at the time was conceptualised by Assamese reformers like Ratneswar Mahanta as ‘hardworking, self-sacrificing, obedient woman untainted by education’ (Mahanta, 2008, p. 64).

In the process, the woman of the middle-class man came to be defined by their cultivated presence in the ‘home’ by engaging in activities like spinning, weaving, embroidery,

¹⁶ A daughter-in-law is referred to as a *bowari* in Assamese.

child-rearing, grooming of men and house-keeping (Nath, 2014; Konwar, 2017). She was trained to be silent and to have *laaj* (shame), who would speak to male members of the family and male servants only when required (Konwar, 2017). An embodiment of family honour, her sexuality was highly guarded by kinsmen (ibid). Her movement outside the domestic domain was highly restricted; this was primarily to mark her distinct status from common girls who moved freely in the streets (Nath, 2011). She was to further distinguish herself from common woman of the street by observing purdah in the form of *odhoni*, and, when in public places she was obliged to cover her face with a *barjapi* (a large umbrella made out of bamboo) (ibid). The ‘common woman’ of the streets mainly comprised of those who were not from the caste Hindu groups, and their relative freedom was determined by their active participation in the production process of society (ibid). It is significant however, that the patriarchal traditions established in undivided Assam was differently exercised, as the people of the hill regions believed in granting liberty to women as part of their tradition (ibid).

Much like the *bhadralok* in Bengal, as discussed earlier, the Assamese middle-class men were also actively engaged in creating a world for their counterparts, where they were relegated to the domestic sphere- materially and ritually- with the responsibility of managing household duties, while deferring to the male patriarch (Ray & Qayum, 2010). A domestic ideology was therefore, constructed whereby, ‘a woman’s life revolved around the concept of *saubhagya* or marital blessedness’ (Nath, 2011, p. 820).

Interestingly, not much has radically altered over the years in terms of power paradigms in the families where the woman is concerned (Chaudhari, 2014). Yet, considerable transformation has taken place in the composition of the middle-class, and their domestic arrangements, which is discussed in the next section.

2.4.1.2 Employers in Contemporary Assamese Society

Before discussing the composition of the contemporary middle-class women in Assam, an important question to be considered here is who are the Assamese? The answer to this question is highly debatable considering the diverse ethnic composition of the state of Assam. This is further complicated by the successive waves of in-migration in the region

since the colonial period¹⁷. With in-migration of different groups of people like Bengali, Rajasthani, Punjabi, Bihari, and Nepali, at different points of time, Assam became a highly heterogeneous society. These non-Assamese speaking people permanently settled in the region, pursuing their job and business avenues (Bhattacharya, 2009), thereby being an integral part of the Assamese society. The contemporary Assamese society in this regard can be said to be an amalgamation of all these different groups of people living in Assam over several decades. However, in the present study, by Assamese it implies those who are the indigenous non-tribal people, united by a common linguistic identity i.e Assamese.

For the purpose of the study a total of thirty-five female employers have been interviewed. The households of the interviewed employers represented a wide spectrum of middle-class lifestyle. While it has been discussed in the previous chapter that, the middle-class as a conceptual category cannot be reduced to a single-entity in contemporary times, the study locates the employers as middle-class by enumerating the attributes which these households commonly shared. In terms of education, the women are mostly college graduates, with five being university graduates, and one holding a PhD degree. Of them, twelve are employed in various sectors like school, college, non-governmental organization, and in government jobs, while seventeen of them are home-makers, five are retired professionals, and one has her own business on clothing line (*mekhela sador*)¹⁸. The husbands of these women are mostly college graduates, and are working professionals, either in private or government sectors. Moreover, the children of these households are all educated in private English medium schools of the city, with an easy accessibility to private tuitions and coaching institutes. Taken together, this significantly reflects the availability of economic capital of these families, which accelerated further conversion of the economic capital to other forms of capital, thus, upholding their class positions in society.

The women are residents of the residential neighbourhood in the Uzanbazar locality of Guwahati. Being one of the oldest residential areas of the city, and, one of the significant localities with institutions of prominence like Raj Bhawan, Gauhati High Court, Cotton University, and the like located in the vicinity, the value of land is considerably high in

¹⁷The historic in-migration of different ethnic groups and the changed demographic composition of the region have already been mentioned earlier.

¹⁸ An ethnic Assamese outfit.

the Uzanbazar area. This significantly indicates the relative weight of economic and symbolic capital possessed by the women employers of the study. Moreover, Uzanbazar area also has a historical significance attached to it. During the colonial period, the area served as one of the prime setting with government offices and quarters set by the river side. In addition to being a quintessential part of the city, Uzanbazar along with, Fancy bazaar, Bharalamukh, Machkhowa, and Paltan bazaar areas of the city was also predominated with ancient morphological idiosyncrasy which got refurbished under British occupation. Over the years, the area has undergone significant changes with the urban growth of the city. The most common being the mushrooming of apartment buildings, though the single-house pattern continues to exist parallelly. In context of the present study, most of the women lived in single-pattern houses; while ten of them lived in apartment buildings owning a flat of two to three BHK, and two of them are tenants renting a floor in large houses.

Furthermore, these female employers' in the study have been hiring domestic workers for the past three years or more. While the most common form of recruitment was that of part-time workers, however, five families had both full-time and part-time workers at their service. The employers' mostly belonging to the families of businessmen, tea planters, teachers and government employees are frequently heard sharing vivid memories of childhood and past domestic arrangements of their houses. Indeed, they consciously indulged in memories of their past 'idealized' relationships with domestic workers in order to situate their present circumstances. These workers of the past mainly comprised of those who came from the employers native villages in Assam, and served the family as live-in full-timers. While domestic arrangements has undergone several changes in these employing families, as discussed in Chapter 3; a few employers are seen maintaining ties with their workers of the past, even in the present times.

2.4.2 Domestic Workers: Locating the Heterogeneity

2.4.2.1 Socio-physical Space of the Slum Setting

The Settlement

Fieldwork amongst the domestic workers was undertaken in their settlement, which is a recognised slum pocket located in the Uzanbazar area of Guwahati city. It is a slum covering an area of four bighas of land in total. Officially the slum is known as

Uzanbazar Railway Colony. The land where the *basti*¹⁹ (as the inhabitants call it as) stands is a *dhokoli mati* (illegally occupied land), owned by the railways. The initial foundation of the *basti* can be traced to around 1962, with 3-4 families and a few cowsheds. These families belonged to the Bansphor community, a Scheduled Caste²⁰ group from the state of Bihar engaged in scavenging tasks. The Bansphors were brought to Assam by the colonial state to carry out scavenging tasks in growing Guwahati²¹. Later, the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) employed them as *safai karmacharis* and settled them in the said area, in the railway quarters lying vacant there²².

During the initial years of settlement in 1962, there was no electricity and water in the area. It was a shallow lying land, where habitation was not conceivable, as the large tracts of the vacant spaces was used for dumping the city's solid waste, and carcasses of foxes and cows, thereby, making vultures a common sight. The railway line in the area was functional for passenger and goods train during the early years of settlement. It was only in 1984, the railway line was removed and it became a home for many poor migrants in the city, as they gradually started filling up the vacant spaces. These early settlers cleaned the area by cutting the existing forest, and by filling up the shallow land with new soil, thus, making the area suitable for habitation. With passing years more people settled in the area, thereby, transforming the small settlement into a dense settlement of almost 300 households. The early settlers were predominantly from Bansphor and Paswan community, another Scheduled Caste group hailing from Bihar, with a few Assamese families from the rural areas of lower-Assam.

The early settlers in the *basti* can be divided into two groups, one that directly came and settled in the area, and one who had settled with the help of prior connections in the settlement. But, over the years other ethnic groups have also come to inhabit the area

¹⁹*Bastis* are squatter settlements that occupy large tracts of vacant public land (Grover, 2017).

²⁰ In modern India, Scheduled castes are the officially designated groups of people recognised under the constitution of India. It consists of sub-communities within the Hindu caste structure who have historically been subjected to oppression and social isolation in India on the pretext of their perceived low status. Formerly known as depressed classes or untouchables under the colonial state, this class comprises of 16.6% of India's total population as per 2011 census
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scheduled_Castes_and_Scheduled_Tribes .

²¹ Jayanta Kumar Sharma in 'Shillong Viloence in 2018: Subjugation and Struggle of Dalit Sikhs' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 23, 2019, discusses on the bringing in of the Dalit Sikhs in North-East India by the British, in order to carry out sanitary and manual scavenging tasks.

²²Information received from the NGO named YUVA, working in the particular slum. It is noteworthy that, major information provided here related to historicity of the selected slum settlement has been collected from the said NGO, which is closely associated with the settlement rights of the inhabitants, since the past several years.

making it a multi-ethnic settlement, and, thereby, dividing the massive settlement area into three clusters namely; railway line, dolki and arikati basti. Presently, the settlement predominantly houses the Bihari Bansphor, Bihari Paswan, and East Bengal-origin Muslim, while a handful of families belong to the Assamese Hindu, Bengali Hindu, and Assamese Muslim community.

Housing and Related Amenities

The settlement does not possess any land patta or land lease. And the residents do not pay any property tax, however some of the Bansphor families (whose family members are employed under GMC) do pay *khazana* (treasury tax) to the GMC. The inhabitants of the settlement comprises of three categories: some pay rent, some own their houses i.e. they bought it from the early settlers at a price and some have encroached upon the space without any monetary exchange. The third category mainly comprises of those inhabitants whose parents were amongst the early settlers in the area around 1980s. Over the years these third category people got hold of a sizeable portion of the vacant land, and accordingly built houses in order to rent out to others, thus, enjoying a reasonable income from rent. While, some owners resided adjacent to their tenants, in some cases the owners of these houses had altogether moved out of the settlement. They visit once in a month to collect the rent. However, it is worth mentioning that irrespective of the inhabitant's definition of their occupancy status, these settlements are mostly deemed illegal. Although, unlike, other informal settlements in railway land, they have not faced any forced evictions till date, but the inhabitants were served with eviction notices several times in the past by the railway department.

The narrow kaccha alleys of the slum connect the area to the banks of the river Brahmaputra, in the Southern side. The narrow alleys of the settlement are sufficient for only a two wheeler to pass in some parts, while some parts are sufficient for only walking. On both sides of the alleys there are small shops of essential items run by a few local *basti* dwellers. The houses in the settlement are a mix of semi-pucca and bamboo thatch, the structures of which are attached to one another with one or more common walls, and some have narrow alleys between them. The size of most of the houses is 10 by 10 sq. feet, with a maximum of four to five family members. A mix of nuclear and extended families is visible across the settlement. The inhabitants build toilets on their own, which are shared between families. These are mostly used by men and women, while the children often use open spaces for defecation.

The area is criss-crossed with small *nullahs* (drains) with no proper sewage facilities, which make the waste water, dribble and accumulate on the narrow alleys. At all times, rotting waste lies in heaps around the area and stray dogs are seen scrounging in the waste. During monsoon the rainwater carries along with it the waste, including solid waste and fills up the alleys, thereby spreading around the area. Over the last few years flash floods, even with a slight shower of rain have become a common phenomenon in the settlement, due to new construction in the surrounding Kharguli hills. In addition to this, the inhabitants receive inadequate basic services in terms of water and electricity. There is a municipality water tap in the area, the water of which is woefully insufficient for the total number of inhabitants in the settlement. Majority of the inhabitants are dependent on the water wells dug by some of the settlers. At any given day women and young boys are seen collecting buckets of water from these wells, for which they are required to make a monetary payment to the respective well owners. In terms of electricity, some of the houses have electricity with their own meters, while some have shared or subcontracted electric connections.

Social Space

The social ambience of the slum is found to be similar on any given day. Overcrowding of the colony lanes is a common sight. Many households have television sets, the women of which are seen engrossed in *Savdhan India*²³ in their leisure time. Young boys and girls are seen engaging with smart phones which has become a common gadget now-a-days. Outside the main entrance of the slum, the auto-rickshaw drivers' crowd around with their autos parked in line, while vendors roam the *galis* (narrow lanes) either on foot or on their bicycles. Additionally, children playing marbles and carom in groups with enthusiasm are a common sight. Furthermore, in the late afternoons, women are mostly seen sitting in groups and sharing their joys and sorrows of workplace as well as their household. Men mostly engage in playing cards and loiter around the illegal *daru bhatti* (brewery) situated inside the *basti*. As evening falls, the number of men outside these *bhattis* increases, as men from outside the *basti* also throngs these. There are a total of six such *daru bhattis* inside the *basti*. And according to the residents, these *bhattis* operate in close connection with the local police station, where the police raids only leads to its brief closure, and it starts functioning again.

²³ It is a daily show through which awareness is generated amongst the audiences, about the potential criminal instances happening in the Indian society.

Occupation

With regard to the occupation of the settlers, while some of the Bansphor families are primarily seen retaining their services as sweepers for generations under Government offices, majority of the inhabitants belonging to other communities are engaged in the low income informal jobs, characterised by insecurity and uncertainty. The male population mainly work as daily wage labourers, railway contractors, cattle owners, shopkeepers, rickshaw pullers, construction workers and the like. The female population, on the other hand, predominantly work as domestic workers, which require them to travel to upper-class and middle-class colonies on a regular basis; while some are seen engaging in vegetable vending and other low-income random jobs. However, in case of unmarried adolescent girls, while most of them do not seek work outside home, those that do, they seek employment in comparatively newer avenues like beauty parlours and tailor shops.



Image 1: *The entrance towards the Uzanbazar Railway Colony slum settlement.*



Image 2: *The rooms of the inhabitants of the slum settlement adjacent to one another.*

2.4.2.2 The Bansphor, Paswan and East Bengal-origin Muslim in Assam: A Brief Background of the Predominant Communities in the Settlement

As mentioned earlier, the Uzanbazar Railway Colony exhibits a high degree of heterogeneity with people of various communities living in close proximity to each other. While, the female population of the colony predominantly work as domestic workers in the upper-middle and middle-class neighbourhood of the larger Uzanbazar locality, this does not constitute them as a homogeneous group. On the contrary, they are identified on the basis of their caste, religious and ethnic affiliations, and each category has its own historical, political and social standing in society. In the colony, it is particularly the women of Bansphor, Paswan and East Bengal- origin Muslim communities who service as domestic workers on a part-time arrangement in the

neighbourhood. While the Bansphor women are engaged in tasks of toilet cleaning and waste removal, the Paswan and East Bengal- origin Muslim are engaged in regular domestic tasks. The following section discusses the historical background of the particular communities in Assam.

Bihari Bansphor and Paswan community

The Bansphors and Paswans are Scheduled caste (SC) group originally hailing from the state of Bihar. The Bansphors are identified as a sweeper community and their members are primarily engaged in work related to cleaning of streets, latrines, sewers and drains. In Guwahati they formally introduce themselves as Bansphor, Harijan or SC. The group's other term of reference in the local parlance is '*metor*', derived from the Hindi term '*mehtar*', signifying a caste of sweepers and scavengers.

The arrival of the Bansphors in undivided Assam can be traced back to the pre-independence days, when they were largely brought in by the colonial state for sanitation and scavenging tasks. They were scattered in different parts of the province. Their presence in Guwahati was, however limited in number. This was mainly because of the limited urban potentiality of Guwahati, with the hill city of Shillong in undivided Assam serving as the colonial headquarters. It was only in post-independence years, followed by the separation of Shillong from Assam in 1972, with Guwahati subsequently being the capital city of Assam, there was a considerable rise in the number of Harijans in the city (Banerjee, 2010).

The rapid expansion of Guwahati, both in physical space and population, in the post-independence years created demands for sweepers. With the abhorrence of the local populace for such jobs, the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) employed the Harijans for these jobs and settled them in certain secluded slum settlements away from the civic population. This inevitably led to their ghettoization, signifying their marginality. However, with the urban growth of Guwahati in the past few decades, these slums in present times have come to be situated in certain central localities of the city (ibid). The sweepers, were historically strictly directed to reside within their restricted settlements, and this have halted their process of settlement to newer areas, the consequences of which resulted in the form of an additional pressure on their existing physical space, thereby, turning their settlements into pockets surrounded by other ethnic groups (ibid). Similar is the case with the Uzanbazar Railway Colony.

The Bansphors in the Colony has retained sweeping as their primary occupation. While a majority of them are employed as sweepers for the GMC, in secured government jobs (*sarkari sakori*), others are seen accommodating in similar jobs in semi-governmental offices, and non-municipal offices like educational institutions, hospitals, residential complexes, private residences and the like.

Similar to the Bansphors, the Paswans, who are also known as Dusadh, is one of the lowest caste groups (Dalit)²⁴ hailing from the state of Bihar. The members of the Paswan are the most Sanskritized²⁵, and are relatively more powerful and socio-economically better-off than other Dalit groups in Bihar²⁶. Historically, in India, they have been associated with *chowkidari* (watchmen) jobs, but over the years they have diversified their work. Unlike other Dalit communities, they are not viewed as an outcaste, because of their disassociation with the ‘impure work’. The community in the study area of Guwahati formally introduces themselves as Paswan or SC. They migrated to Assam, specifically to the study area in Guwahati over a period of several decades, mainly during the 1970s and 1980s as economic migrants. While, the men are mainly associated with low income jobs as labourers in factories, construction sites, rickshaw pullers and the like, the women predominantly worked as domestic workers in people’s houses.

In Guwahati, the Bansphors are ranked the lowest in their societal position and are assigned a separate and inferior status among the SCs. Their profession, which brings them into close contact with dirt, filth and excreta, is regarded as the most polluting, and other castes and communities continually construct the Bansphors as impure and inferior (Grover, 2017).

East Bengal-origin Muslim community

In addition to caste identities, the ethnic and religious identities of the domestics also feature in these differentiations, with East Bengal-origin Muslims of Assam being placed in the same level as the Bansphors. They are the descendants of the Muslims from East

²⁴Dalit signifies those people who belong to the lowest castes in India. They are technically considered to be outside the four-fold varna schema, thereby, forming a fifth varna formerly referred to as “untouchables” (Sadana, 2015).

²⁵Sanskritization is a theory of social change put forward by M.N Srinivas in 1952, denoting the upward mobility in India’s caste society, where the lower-caste groups attempts to attain a higher status by emulating the rituals and norms of upper-caste groups (Sadana, 2015).

²⁶<https://theprint.in/politics/who-are-the-paswans-upwardly-mobile-powerful-dalit-group-at-centre-of-bihar-polls-buzz/528964> Retrieved on 25 May, 2021.

Bengal (now Bangladesh), who migrated to the region in large numbers mainly during the early twentieth century, that continued after the post partition years, until the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. They were poor peasants, whose migration to the province was induced by the colonial state in the late nineteenth century to maximise revenue generation from the low-lying areas of the Brahmaputra valley. The colonial administrators settled them in the large tracts of the ‘wasteland’ along the river Brahmaputra called as *chars*²⁷. However, this transfer of human population did not gather momentum until the Partition of Bengal in 1905, when Assam and East Bengal was a single province (Chakraborty, 2014). It was only in the 1930s and 1940s; the region witnessed a significant flow of these migrants. There was a steady rise in their population as they settled in the region over a period of many decades, leaving a deep impact on the state’s religious demographic profile. The census of 2011 noted that the Muslim constitute 34.2 percent of the population of Assam, making it the second major Muslim state of India after Jammu and Kashmir (Baruah, 2020).

The rise of the population of East Bengal- origin Muslims has resulted in anxiety amongst the local population over loss of economic resources and cultural identity (Kumar and Das, 2019). Such feelings has persisted since the days of Independence, and the animosity against the community culminated in the form of mass violence during Assam Movement²⁸ in early 1980s (Das, 2016). It was found that the historicity of the community intertwined with Assamese nationalism in the form of Assam movement, often served as a vantage point for the employers under study while describing the workers of the particular community. This also to an extent determined the negotiation of those working as domestic workers. These issues have been examined in detail in the subsequent chapters.

²⁷The almond shaped river islands that are formed from the silt deposits of the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries are locally called chars (Kumar and Das, 2019).

²⁸The Assam Movement also known as Asom Andolan or Assam Agitation (1979-85), was led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) with the objective of disposing illegal migrants from Bangladesh, from the soil of Assam (Gohain, 1985; cited in Das, 2016). Even in recent times, such practices have continued to exist. During the campaigning of the Lok Sabha elections in 2019, graffiti’s in the walls of Guwahati spoke loud about the migration history of Assam indicating the Bengal-origin Muslim community as ants and termites in the soil of Assam, snatching away the food and rights of the people of the ‘soil’. <https://thewire.in/rights/what-do-walls-in-guwahati-tell-us-about-its-people-and-their-history> Retrieved on 20/4/2019.

The East Bengal- origin Muslims are distinguished from the ethnic Assamese Muslims²⁹ called as *tholua* or *khilonjia* meaning original inhabitant (Baruah, 2020). The East Bengal- origin Muslims are pejoratively called as ‘Miya’, a term that has been traditionally used by the Assamese people while referring to the particular community (ibid). The word ‘Miya’ literally means ‘gentleman’ in Urdu, but in Assam, it has become an ethnic slur implying “Bangladeshi” or “illegal immigrant”³⁰. Over the years, the term has been used to constantly stereotype the community. Sanjib Baruah (2020) notes that, ‘It’s an odd term to use since the community’s roots in Assam are much older than 1971 when Bangladesh was not born’³¹. However, he also notes that, while it is indisputable that there is large presence of ‘foreigners’ or ‘Bangladeshis’ in Assam, who have come after 1971 due to the porous Indo-Bangladesh border, but, there is variation in the implicit definition and the estimated numbers (Baruah, 2020).

Furthermore, to be noted is that in the wake of the violent partition, the community identified themselves as ‘Neo-Assamese’ or ‘Na-Axomiya’ in the census of 1951, thereby, reiterating their belongingness to Assam by adopting Assamese as their language and practicing Islam (Sharma 2011). However, of late, in recent years the community started identifying themselves as ‘Miya’ Muslims. This has also been observed in the field, where all the respondents of East Bengal-origin Muslims identified themselves as Miya Musalman. The study therefore, use the term ‘Miya Muslim’ or ‘Miya’ to refer the domestic workers of the particular community³² (Baruah, 2020).

²⁹Mainly concentrated in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, the Assamese Muslims are the descendents of the prisoners of war, converts from various tribes, and also Syeds who came to Assam during the Ahom rule, and permanently settled in the region by marrying locals <https://www.firstpost.com/india/the-identity-quotient-review-an-unbiased-guide-to-assamese-muslims-their-origin-and-history-9616571.html> Retrieved on 12/06/2021. However, Assamese Muslims are not a homogeneous ethnic community and further distinctions are made among groups such as Goriya, Moriya, Syed and Deshi (Baruah, 2020).

³⁰<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/12/protest-poetry-assam-bengali-muslims-stand-161219094434005.html> Retrieved on 12/5/2018.

³¹<https://www.indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-the-miyas-of-assam-and-their-char-chapori-culture-6943279/> Retrieved on 21/05/2021.

³²In 2016 Assam saw the rise of a radical Miya poetry movement, comprising of young poets who re-appropriated the word ‘Miya’ used as an ethnic slur against the community (Baruah, 2020). Instead of the alternatives ‘Na- Axomiya’ or ‘Neo-Assamese’, these young activists use the term ‘Miya’ “because of its assimilative assumptions, and to *Bengali-origin Muslims* because that designation fails to take into account that newer generations of that community- or even their parents- are not immigrants, but were born in Assam” (Baruah 2020, p. 53).

Trajectories of Migration and Work Histories

Families residing in the Uzanbazar Railway Colony have migration histories dating back to the years of 1970s and 1980s. As already stated, the early migrants predominantly arrived from the states of Bihar, with a few families coming from the rural hinterland of Assam. Migration to the colony has been permanent, in the form of 'family migration', rather than circular in nature. The colony does not experience any new or emerging migration patterns, the current inhabitants mostly comprising of the urban born children and grandchildren of the original migrants.

However, the families of the East Bengal-origin Muslim have different migration histories to the colony. Settled as tenants in the colony approximately for less than two decades, they hail from various districts of lower Assam. Though permanent inhabitants in the colony for the past several years, most of them aspire to settle in their native villages in later years of life. They reasoned their aspirations with factors like, cost of living being high in the city, despise towards life-long labour, lower acceptance amongst the mainstream society. This enables them to mostly toil as work migrants in the city, and, thereby, retain an interest in the rural economy. Though they do not possess any immovable properties in their villages; this did not make them severe ties with their extended family members in villages. In order to keep their rural contacts intact, majority of them make periodic visits to their village for various social occasions, and particularly, during elections to exercise their franchise. They have managed to find accommodation in the colony through the help of such familial and kin resources, which also entailed to their city-ward migration.

As the focus of the study is on domestic workers who are the present inhabitants of the settlement, the question of migration has not been dealt. Nevertheless, I discuss migration here, as it emerged from the findings, and, the focus therefore, is not on migrant domestic workers. The study primarily focuses on employer - domestic relations and negotiations, which makes the analysis of the migration processes and dynamics beyond the scope of this study.

For the purpose of the study, a total of forty domestic workers residing in Uzanbazar Railway Colony have been interviewed. Work in domestic service is largely governed by personal networks or word of the mouth. Most of these women reported relying on an acquaintance in the form of friend or kinswomen in order to avail work as domestic

workers. This corroborates with earlier findings that personal network open up occupational fields similar to those already accessed by the networks, thereby, restricting the new entrants from searching any alternative occupations (Sen & Sengupta, 2016). Moreover, these networks also serve as important security mechanisms for a new entrant. It help the workers in getting familiar with their work environment before taking up work in a new household. The networks also play a vital role in providing assistance to workers in times of need. Sen and Sengupta observes that it is primarily because of the social networks, many women feel familial domestic spaces to be ‘safer’ workplace in comparison to petty trading and other informal occupations which requires regular confrontation with absolute strangers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016, p. 90). It was found that in the present study too, majority of the workers preferred domestic work because it entailed a workspace where they felt secured. Unlike other workspaces, they worked under women employers, which significantly attributed to their feelings of security at workspace. However, this does not affirm that cases of sexual misconduct are not unknown in the domestic work context, as this often gets highlighted in media reports³³ from the region.

As in Uzanbazar Railway Colony, the women engaged as part-time domestic workers are predominantly from Bihari³⁴ Paswan and East Bengal-origin Muslim community; the present study focuses on these two groups. Unlike the East Bengal-origin Muslim as mentioned above, the Bihari dwellers have weak ties with their extended families in villages. They consider themselves as permanent residents of Guwahati, by exercising their franchise in the city, and, therefore, asserting their belongingness to the state of Assam.

³³For instance, in a recent infamous horrifying incident from the central Assam district of Nagaon, a minor Karbi live-in girl of 12 years was burnt to death by her male employers. As per the media reports, apart from the girl being an underage, she was sexually assaulted by the father-son duo of the household, and was pregnant at the time of death <https://theguwahatitimes.info/2021/04/25/assam-minor-girl-working-as-domestic-help-burnt-alive>. The incident raised a huge hue and cry in the region, which reflected the paradoxical safety concerns in the context of paid domestic work. While on one hand, the women domestic are assured security on the pretext of the work being the domain of woman employers, on the other hand, they are subjected to vulnerability from the male members of the household. Significantly, such instances of vulnerability are more prone for live-in domestics; however, this does not entail us to dismiss the case of part-time domestics. Moreover, although, the women domestics in the present study did not come across similar situations of sexual harassment, but, they nevertheless, shared accounts when they felt insecure to work when their female employers are not physically present, while they are at work.

³⁴The women from the Bihari Bansphor community are not part of the sample, as they did not want to be interviewed, and, were therefore, not willing to share information, apart from their general migration and work history in the settlement. In this light, the study considers the two predominant communities from Uzanbazar Railway Colony working as paid domestics – Bihari Paswan and East Bengal-origin Muslim.

The Muslims of East Bengal-origin between the age group of 20-40 are the first generation domestic workers in the city, and comparatively new entrants to the selected colony, while, the Bihari women are between the age group of 25-57 years. They are mostly the second generation domestic workers, inheriting the profession of paid domestic work from their mothers, whom they used to accompany in their workplaces. Married at the tender age between 12-14 years, they continued working as domestics post their marriage. Marriage generally entails a daughter to move out from their natal place and move in their marital place. But the Bihari women under study, marrying mostly within households of the colony continued being an essential part of the colony both as daughters and as daughter-in-laws, which helped them in sustaining their work in the locality. And, a few daughters, who were married off outside the colony, are seen relocating to their natal place post their separation with husband. All this together brings the association of most Bihari women with paid domestic work since the last 20-35 years. Furthermore, the women who became part of the colony as brides were seen inheriting the work of a domestic from their mother- in- laws.

Although, the study confirms that the interviewed women from both the groups have been part of family migration in different periods of time; nevertheless, there are a few adult women (East Bengal-origin Muslim) in the sample who reported migrating to the city on their own. These women mainly comprises of those who migrated primarily due to widowhood, separation from husband or marital abuse. There are also a few women in the sample who came to the city with one or two children, leaving some in the village under the care of relatives, for which remittances are sent on a monthly basis. Domestic work seemed to be a viable employment for them. Arguably, the ease of access and stability, in addition to the security mostly guaranteed by their social networks (as stated above) makes domestic work an easily preferable occupation for these women. Moreover, like elsewhere in Indian cities, in Guwahati too, the accessibility of women in domestic service is largely governed by the demand factor. The concept of smaller families in the city has created a situation where women employers' of domestic workers are seen preferring workers based on a part-time arrangement. Various considerations ranging from security to maintenance of privacy guided the preference of the employers' for part-time domestic workers. The question of preference by employers has been dealt with in the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

2.5 Conclusion

Tracing the historical evolution of paid domestic work in India, the chapter highlights the transition of middle-class Indian domesticity and domestic work relations from colonial to contemporary times. Domestic service experienced major transformation with the emergence of a newly educated ‘middle-class’, in the urban social milieu of nineteenth century colonial India. As a powerful and dominant class serving under the colonial rule, this class actively engaged in shaping the ideologies of domestic work, where employment of servants emerged as a crucial marker of middle-class status in Indian society. In post colonial India, increased modernisation and advancement of western education further contributed towards the notable growth of a ‘new middle class’, which derived its power from the market forces rather than the state. This marked considerable changes in the domestic work relations in contemporary times. However, it is significant that the colonial and contemporary domestic practices are not two separate phases; on the contrary, they exist in a continuum, contributing towards transformation of the labour relations. The contemporary domestic arrangement largely governed by part-time live-out workers is marked by a process of transformation, where domestic tasks are categorically divided and it is primarily the labour power which is sold by the workers.

Drawing on the historical evolution of paid domestic work in India, the chapter contextualizes the study in Guwahati by developing an understanding of the city as a “city of migrants”. The city came to prominence and witnessed an exponential population growth post 1971, with the reorganization of the state capital from Shillong. The urban growth and development of the city transformed the demographic landscape of the city, with people of different communities residing together. Taking this into consideration, the chapter marks the transition of the servant employing class in Guwahati, by tracing the growth of the Assamese middle-class under the colonial legacy in Assam.

Like elsewhere in India, in this part of the region too, the ideologies of domestic work were shaped by the middle-class men, where the women were assigned with pivotal domestic roles, and as managers of servants who served the family on a full-time arrangement. In recent times, the transformation of workers to primarily part-timers has enabled the employers to make adjustments with this alternative rhythm of paid domestic work. The indispensability of domestic workers has been marked by all the employers in the study, and it was beyond their imagination to sustain domestic life without the help

of a domestic. This often resulted in their uneasy compromises with their domestics, as we will see in the subsequent chapters.

Furthermore, the chapter brings out the heterogeneity and differentiation amongst the domestic workers in the study area, by throwing light on the aspects of caste, ethnic and religious affiliations of the workers, thus, linking it with their historical, political and social standing in Assam. It is significant to note that, 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 skilfully used by the employers for their own advantage. All this together determined the domestic work relations, and, thereby, shaped the negotiations between employer and worker in Guwahati, as has been examined in the subsequent chapters.

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