

CHAPTER-3

Paid Domestic Work: Understanding Pattern of the Work

3.1 Introduction

From the 1990 onwards, urban India has witnessed an exponential growth of workers performing part-time domestic work (Neetha, 2009). These workers typically comprises of those who live in their own houses and perform specific tasks for multiple employers either once or twice a day (Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2009). Ray and Qayum has referred to these workers as ‘freelancers’, since they exercise greater flexibility and autonomy in choosing their employers (Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 67).

In the study area, part-time domestic workers comprise the largest category of workers, although there are no official records accounting to their exact number in Guwahati. Nevertheless, the finding and observation of the study is supported by various micro level studies that indicate the popularity of part-time domestic work being the most common domestic arrangement in urban middle-class households in India (Dickey, 2000b; Raghuram, 2001; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). Neetha (2009) has attributed two main factors to the popularity of part-time domestic arrangement in these houses: Firstly, the limited space in middle-class households which made accommodation for live-in workers difficult. And, secondly, the cost advantages in availing services of part-time workers contributed to their greater demand (Neetha, 2009, p. 495). Again, there are other scholars who argue that the normative construction of domestic responsibilities as women’s domain also contribute towards the demand of part-time domestic workers in the middle-class households, in contemporary times (Dickey, 2000a, 2000b; Mattila, 2011). The part-time domestics, in significant ways, help these women in easing the burden of domestic work, by taking on tasks which are avoided by these women, thus, without disturbing the patriarchal domestic arrangements in such households.

Furthermore, as already discussed in the previous chapter, recent scholarship in India has highlighted that the significant number of these part-time domestic workers are female workers (Dickey, 2000b; Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2004, 2009; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). Indeed, domestic work as a special category of labour received prominence only with the recognition of the sector as female employment (Neetha,

2009). With this backdrop, the present chapter examines the pattern of paid domestic work in Guwahati, which like elsewhere in India is governed by a part-time arrangement predominantly performed by the female workers.

The first section of the chapter focuses on the homes of middle-class employers, as the middle-class homes of employers primarily serves as the contact spaces between employers and workers, on a regular basis. Hence, the central focus in the chapter is on them. The lives of the workers and their homes are explored in Chapter 5. The second section of the chapter examines the various occupational categories of part-time domestic work in Guwahati, wherein the employers' preferences towards these categories are explored. It is to be noted that the segregation of domestic tasks into specific categories enabled the employers to avail its services according to their individual needs. Moreover, this section also highlights the labour regimes of the part-time domestics which structure the domestic work sector in the study area. The last section of the chapter examines the various reasons which necessitate the recruitment of domestic workers in the middle-class households of the present study area.

3.2 Production of Contact Space: The Setting of a Middle-Class Home

A home is widely referred to as a physical place of domicile, as well as an ideological or psychological space to which one has a sense of belonging (Tiengtrakul, 2006 cited in Mattila, 2011). It is a space which is commonly associated with 'inside' (Dickey, 2000b). The normative conception of 'inside' of the home signifies an arena which is to be protected from influences of the outside world, representing dangers and threat to one's being (Chatterjee, 1989; Dickey, 2000b). The association of home with 'inside' appears to be enduring as well as widespread in South Asia (Dickey, 2000b). In India, this is an association which has persisted since the colonial times (as discussed in the previous chapter).

Homes are significantly a reflection of class position of its inhabitants. The members of the household communicate an image to spectators who interpret the symbolic markers of class produced in the home (Dickey, 2000a 2000b). In the present study, the homes of all the middle-class respondents are in an impeccable condition. The decor of the homes give an impression of the middle-class obsession with cleanliness (Mattila, 2011), thereby giving an idea of the dedicated time investment in each and every object and corner of these spaces. For instance, the spacious living rooms with decorative show

pieces and wall hangings are free of any dust gatherings. Even the floors, typically swept and mopped once a day, on a regular basis, no dust particle could be felt with the bare foot. This significantly indicates the standard, long-standing middle-class civic and domestic concerns towards cleanliness and orderliness (Dickey, 2016), thereby, distinguishing their material conditions from those whom they believed to be below their class standing. Taken together, this essentially describes how the middle-class people defined themselves, as well as, presented themselves to the public (ibid).

However, the smooth functioning and maintenance of such an impeccable condition of their homes, which reflected their class positions in society, in turn, required a constant vigilance on their part. And, much like elsewhere in India, in Guwahati too, the household maintenance is largely a woman's responsibility, as domestic work is commonly perceived as a woman's world (Neetha, 2004; Mattila, 2011; Bhattacharyya, 2018). The women concerned also, express a sense of satisfaction in maintaining their home well, wherein they measure their success by creating a home for their family members (Mattila, 2011).

But, to be noted is that, considering the nature of domestic work being labour intensive and largely manual, the middle-class women in the study are seen outsourcing the labour of lower-class women for particular domestic tasks. This new standard of home maintenance has been observed by Ralph Waldo Emerson as:

A house kept to the end of display is impossible to all but a few women, and their success is dearly bought (Emerson, cited in Romero, 1992, p. 53).

This reflects the class differences integral to middle-class homes, with the incorporation of the poor domestics. In other words, middle-class homes are transformed into contact spaces, wherein class is reproduced in close physical proximity, in the realm of everyday lives. The production of contact spaces significantly allows one to examine the intimate and personalised interactions, which form the basis of inequality in the context of paid domestic work (Moors, 2003). Notably, this transforms the identities of the two groups of women – middle-class women employers and lower-class domestic workers – by constructing a hegemonic womanhood which distances both the classes of women. Moreover, this entails the middle-class women in actively contributing towards a continuous process of middle-class making of their respective households (Mattila, 2011; Waldrop, 2011).

While, the middle-class distinguishes them from the lower class domestic workers, a close observation reveals the integration of both the classes (Mattila, 2011). On one hand, the support of domestic workers enabled these women to retain their class standing amongst their class peers, by both maintaining clean and ordered homes. And, on the other hand, domestic workers facilitated their participation in public sphere, indulgence in leisure and other related status producing activities (Dickey, 2000b). Additionally, it also entailed to the maintenance of traditional conception of middle-class respectable femininity¹, wherein these women are seen assigning only those tasks to domestic workers which did not compromise their feminine ‘selves’.

In this sense, domestic workers, as Shah argued, ‘play a crucial (albeit unrecognised) role in economically and culturally subsidizing the advancement of women from another class’ (Shah, 2000, p. 102).



Image 3: A well maintained home of a middle-class employer.

¹Respectable femininity implies particular types of femininity, which manifests as behavioural expectations at workplaces, streets and homes; through which woman add value to their lives (Hussein, 2017).

3.2.1 Gendered Expectations of Domestic Responsibilities

Women in post-colonial Assam are generally believed to enjoy greater freedom in their day-to-day lives, when compared to the position of women in Pan-India level (Bhattacharyya, 2018). The freedom of Assamese women is largely associated with its geographical location, of being a neighbour of the matrilineal society² and the Assamese sub-culture³ (Bhattacharyya, 2009; 2018). However, this does not entail one to believe about a prevailing egalitarian society in Assam. On the contrary, the unequal gender relations in Assamese society are reproduced and sustained in different spaces, in the context of the present study; it is the domestic space i.e. the ‘inside’ space of the home.

In Guwahati, like other Indian cities, the most significant gender norm is that caring and nurturing for home and family are the responsibilities of women (Dickey, 2000b; Neetha, 2004; Mattila, 2011). Caring and nurturing include myriad responsibilities for women, ranging from cleaning, cooking, laundry, and childcare to maintaining ties with the extended family members (Dickey, 2000b). The normative conceptions of women’s femininity which involves prioritizing family through domesticity, caring and socialising roles (Hussein, 2017), thus, continue to shape the everyday articulations of women’s position in the Assamese society. Arguably, these gendered expectations of women’s roles are irrespective of them seeking a paid employment outside home or not.

Padia (2000) observes that the concept of gender and evolving gendered expectations are value-laden, and is particularly derived from the context in which it is used (cited in Bhattacharyya, 2018, p. 5). This has been elucidated as:

When a female child becomes a wife, she acquires the function of a mother; similarly a male child becomes a father. Now, the functions of the mother are mostly confined to activities which quietly take place within the house. The father, on the other hand, earns a living by working in the outer world. What takes place in the open is noticed easily. What happens inside the home does not strike the public eye. So, by the average man, whose way of looking is confined to the externals- that is, whose *drishti is bahirmukhi*- the male is taken to be superior to the females. Those who are careful enough to take a comprehensive view of human life, attach as

²A society which traces its ancestral descent from the female side of the family rather than through paternal lines <https://www.britannica.com/topic/matrilineal-society>, Retrieved on 1.09.2021.

³Historically, Assam has been associated as a society which is free from patriarchal practices like dowry, sati and other rituals embedded in patriarchal values like *Karwa chauth* and *Raksha Bandhan* (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

much values to the mother's activities of producing and nursing children and keeping a family together, as to the breadwinner's outdoor activity of earning a living. It is really a defect in our eyes of looking at things, and not the fact of gender as such, which is at the root of prevailing bias against women (Padia 2000, p. 29-30 cited in Bhattacharyya, 2018, p. 5).

Scholars argue that, it is in this context the traditional perceptions of gender roles help in developing an idea of gender complementarities, whereby, the men are seen as primary breadwinners and women as the bearers of family-oriented roles such as, wife, mother, homemaker, and nurturers (Mattila, 2011; Bhattacharyya, 2018). Raju and Lahiri (2011) categorically argue that such gendered behavioural roles of Indian women are a social construct and are encoded via process of socialisation. For instance, Radhakrishnan (2009) noted amongst the career-oriented Indian women in IT sectors of large cities like Mumbai and Bangalore, sacrificing their jobs at the expense of their families. Considering their careers as secondary, these women mostly resorted to leaving their jobs after childbirth, or declined opportunities for promotion, in order to perform their family-oriented roles (ibid). Similarly, in the context of Assam, Bhattacharyya (2009; 2018) observed that the gender role orientation is deeply ingrained, wherein women engaged in highly paid employment viewed themselves primarily as homemakers, thus, bearing the prime responsibility of domestic work and childcare.

Resonating with the findings of previous research, middle-class female employers – housewives and working women – in the present study area in Guwahati also emphasised their sole responsibility of domestic work. They strongly upheld the normative construction of 'women's innate ability for domestic chores and men's constitution for the marketplace' (Romero, 1992, p. 52). An employer in her mid thirties proudly reclaims it as: 'We women are anyway better in the household work. You give the responsibility of the home to your husband, even for a single day, they will turn it into a mess'. Similar sentiments of acknowledgement of doing domestic chores better than men (husbands) are also echoed by other women employers in the study. The men and husbands of the households are mostly limited to domestic duties which required a movement into the public space, like doing grocery shopping, paying of bills, while some indulged in cooking of particular dishes, occasionally. It is in this context, it can be argued that the traditional understanding of masculinity exempted the men of the households from performing domestic chores (Bhattacharyya, 2018), which are menial

and monotonous. And, this is in turn, also supported by their counterparts. Such voices of support on the part of women in performing domestic work better than men can be inferred in the context of socialisation of a girl child from childhood. As Dube emphasises: ‘The distinction between feminine work and masculine work comes early in childhood and becomes sharper as the child grows up’ (Dube, 1988, p. 17). While a single pattern of gender based division of work is difficult to pin down, as such divisions are varied across regions and social groups, nevertheless, work related to kitchen, menial and dirty household work and child care are in general regarded as ‘feminine’ across cultures in India (ibid). In this, the young girls are deliberately socialised into an environment, without generating a sense of discrimination in them by signifying such work as ‘natural’, and an essential quality of service (*sewa*) towards their family (ibid).

It is significant, however that the gendered expectations of domestic responsibilities appears to be true for both the middle-class women employers and the lower-class women domestics, the researcher has interviewed. What distinguishes both the groups of women is the ability of middle-class women to hire these lower-class women as paid domestics in their homes. These paid domestics significantly helped the middle-class women in easing their burden of household work. Dickey observes that by taking on the domestic work of middle-class women, the ‘poor women free both themselves and their employers from gendered expectations – employers from the most onerous household tasks and themselves from the restrictions of staying at home – though each is a complicated freedom’(Dickey, 2000b, p. 468). On one hand, the domestics defied the normative construction of womanhood centred on domesticity and staying within the limits of one’s domestic sphere, and, ironically on the other hand, they could meet their domestic responsibilities of caring and nurturing only when they stepped out of their homes to earn a living (Dickey, 2000b; Romero, 1992). As Romero explains:

All women were not able to achieve the ideal state of woman as unpaid homemaker. Class differences determined that many women would continue to work for a living, in fact many lower-class women found themselves doing housework for higher-classes (Romero, 1992, p. 47).

For the middle-class women in the present study, although, the hiring of paid domestics called for their sharing of domestic responsibilities, this did not entail to their independence from domestic responsibilities. On the contrary, the gendered expectations remained intact, as they are entrusted with the overall household responsibility to ensure

the timely completion of daily domestic tasks (Agarwal, 2000 cited in Mattila, 2011). As Faye Dudden observes:

Domesticity's new view of women's roles, while implicitly assigning the domestic to drudge work, called employers to 'higher' tasks and to supervision (Dudden cited in Romero 1992, p. 54).

The middle-class women employers marked by their supervisory roles are thus, elevated to a position of 'authority and activity, rather than passivity and isolation (Romero, 1992). Supervision of domestic workers required the women to accommodate their time and daily schedules around the domestic's visits. In this, the working women in the study particularly expressed their challenges in coordinating their domestic schedules with that of work schedules. Moreover, it is to be noted that, although domestic work is typically considered as unskilled, the women employers particularly felt the necessity to supervise their domestics. An employer puts it as: 'Managing a house is not easy. You need to constantly observe and supervise the domestic at work. They need to be taught everything. Every minute detail of the tasks at hand needs to be taught, at least for the initial days of their working'. Arguably, for the middle-class employers the successful management of a household required a right combination of domestics.

In the following section by examining two selected cases- a housewife and a wage-earning woman- the researcher reflects on the role of middle-class women as household managers.

3.2.2 Middle-class Women: Role as Supervisors and Household Managers

This section provides a fairly representative case study of two middle-class women - a housewife and a wage-earning woman- assuming their supervisory and managerial roles in running their day-to-day domestic chores. Their everyday lives are reflections of not only supervising their domestic workers in efficient maintenance of their household, but, also, includes their daily routine as managers of their household, right from the time they wake-up, until, they go off to bed at night. While the first case study takes into account a day in the life of a housewife, in her mid-fifties; the second case study is that of Sadhana, a wage-earning woman.

Housewives: A Day in Molly's Life

Molly, the fifty-five year old housewife's day starts at 5:30 am in the morning every day. After a few minutes of her waking up, she sweeps the floor of her three bedroom house. Though a part-time worker comes for sweeping and mopping, Molly holds the belief that one should not step out of a *bahi ghar* (a home that is not swept, and, is therefore, unclean). This, called for, to ritually carrying out the task, before everyone in the family wakes up. Then she heads for her morning walk, and, on her way back to home she buys vegetables from the local market. On reaching home, she quickly takes her shower, and proceeds for the morning *puja*, a worship ritual performed in the small temple of her home. Molly lives in a single-pattern house, and like many other middle-class homes in the study, it mirrors comfort and cleanliness. The spacious living room accommodated a sofa set, a six-seated dining table and a television set attached to the wall. The kitchen was adjacent to the living room, with a large rectangular shape carved out of the wall, allowing for easy visibility and interaction with guests.

At around 8:15 am Molly allows in a man in his late forties. He is a Miya Muslim who visits Molly's house once a week mainly to clean the courtyard, drains, and the two toilets. On his arrival he waits patiently in the veranda, for Molly's instruction for the day. In a few minutes, she offers him tea with bread, and assigns the order of tasks to be carried out. Soon after finishing his tea, he starts with his work as instructed. He has been working in this house for the past one decade, on a daily wage system. On his work days, he worked from 8.30 am in the morning to 5 pm in the evening. As Molly's house stood in a considerably large plot of land, with a small garden, a few plants and flower pots, outsourcing the labour for a decent maintenance of the outer space was an ideal arrangement for Molly.

Sanju, the cook of Molly's house comes in at 9.00 am. Originally hailing from Bihar, she has been working as a cook for the past two years in this house, two shifts a day. On her arrival she directly heads to the kitchen after taking the instructions from Molly regarding the dishes to be cooked for breakfast and lunch. This has been a new domestic arrangement of the house, as earlier; the meals were prepared by Molly herself. But, because of her back pain, and other related health issues she has been unable to stand and work for hours in the kitchen.

By the time, the other members of the family wakes up Sanju lay the table for breakfast. In Molly's family there are a total of four members, which includes her husband, younger daughter, her mother and herself. Molly's husband is a government employee who has been recently transferred to a different district of Assam. He visits the family once in every week, and, sometimes, depending on work load, he pays them a visit once fortnightly. Since his transfer, Molly's mother has been staying with the family. The younger daughter is unmarried and worked in a private bank in the city. Molly's elder daughter was married three years back. However, at the time of the researcher's visit for interview, the elder daughter along with her 2 year old daughter shifted to Molly's place for a brief period.

After breakfast, while, Molly's younger daughter is off to work, Sanju clears the breakfast table and starts preparation for lunch. Molly keeps visiting her in the kitchen once in a while, to make sure if everything is being prepared accordingly. Usually, Sanju finishes cooking the lunch, by 11:30 am, and quickly rushes to her next workplace, after cleaning Molly's kitchen. In the meantime, a little before 12pm, Sabrina the part-time domestic hired for cleaning work – sweeping and mopping - arrives at Molly's place. Sabrina, a Miya Muslim, originally hailing from Barpeta district in Assam, has been working for this family for the past four years. Unlike Sanju, she works in this house for a single shift every day. Her house is located nearby, and apart from Molly's house she worked in two other houses in the same neighbourhood. She comes to this house after finishing her work in the other two houses, and this irritated Molly, as Sabrina usually gets late to work due to the extra work in the previous houses.

Immediately, on reaching, the young woman takes the broom and starts sweeping the rooms one after another. After sweeping, she takes half a bucket of water from the bathroom and mops the floor with a wet piece of cloth. After completion of both the tasks Sabrina washes the small pile of Molly's granddaughter's and mother's clothes. It takes her somewhere between twenty to thirty minutes to wash the clothes. Completing all her assigned tasks in about less than two hours, Sabrina sits on the kitchen floor, patiently waiting for her *nashta*, which usually comprises of a cup of milk tea, and leftovers from the breakfast. The food is warmed in the microwave before serving it to her. After having her tea, she leaves Molly's house after taking the garbage bag from the kitchen, which she throws on the nearest dustbin, on her way back to home.

In the meantime, Molly serves lunch for herself, her mother and elder daughter. After having their lunch, unlike most other houses, in this house the used dishes are not left on the kitchen sink, as no one is hired to perform the task. Each member washed their own dish, while the heavy utensils used for preparing the meals are washed by the cook immediately after she finishes cooking. After the family's lunch, the dining table is cleared by Molly.

At around 5:30 pm in the evening, Molly brings in the dried clothes from outside and makes tea and some snacks for the family. By this time, her younger daughter reaches home from work, and all of them sit together for a cup of tea. After having tea, Molly offers her evening *puja*.

Later in the evening, at around 7.30 pm, Sanju, the cook is back for her evening shift. This time, she finishes her work in less than one hour. She makes about eight *rotis* (unleavened bread), the dough of which she prepares and keeps in a tight container in the refrigerator in her morning shift. Along with the *rotis* she cooks one *sabji*, for which she quickly chops the vegetables. While she cooks dinner, Molly sits on the dining table placed adjacent to the kitchen. Soon after Sanju finishes cooking, she quickly washes the utensils used for cooking and leaves for her home. Molly's supervisory role for the day gets over after Sanju leaves; she then usually joins her mother to watch a daily soap in the television.

Wage-earning Women: A Day in Sadhana's Life

Sadhana, the forty years old mother of two school-going girls is a lawyer in Gauhati High Court. Married for the last thirteen years, her day starts at 6:00 am in the morning on a routine basis regularly. Unlike, Molly who resided in a single-pattern house, Sadhana lived in a three BHK flat. The sizes of the rooms are moderate, and it accommodated all the essential valuables that made up for a comfortable living.

It has become a ritual for Sadhana, for the last several years, to wake up at 6.00 am, in order to keep pace with the school timings of her daughters, both students of the city's Saint Mary's Convent school. While, her daughters and husband are still asleep, she quickly offers her morning prayers after taking shower, and directly heads to the kitchen at 6:00 am to prepare breakfast for the family, and, packs the tiffin boxes for her daughters. After finishing everything in about forty-five minutes, she then irons the school uniform of her daughters.

In between 7:45 am to 8 am, Malti the part-time domestic reaches Sadhana's place. Originally, hailing from Bihar, Malti is married to an Assamese man. She has been working in this house for the last six years and has become familiar with Sadhana's family over the years. She raised Sadhana's younger daughter from the age of one, till she started going to school. Earlier she used to work on a full-time live-out arrangement, and her main duty included looking after the kid, along with the other domestic chores, while Sadhana is away, at work. Presently, Malti works in three other houses, and in Sadhana's house, she works two shifts a day. Her main tasks are sweeping, mopping, washing utensils, chopping vegetables and feeding lunch to the children after school. Since Sadhana did not have a cook, the lunch is prepared by her, in the morning before she leaves for work.

In the morning shift, Malti sweeps the floor and washes the utensils from the previous night and morning, used in the breakfast. On her arrival, she directly goes to the kitchen, throws the left-over in the dustbin and starts washing the utensils by standing in the kitchen, followed by sweeping the floor. She takes around forty minutes to complete her assigned tasks. On completion of her work, Sadhana occasionally serves her tea mostly with leftovers from the breakfast. After finishing the tea, Malti rushes to work in a different house in the same apartment building. In the meantime, the sweeper too completes the work in less than fifteen minutes. She cleans the common toilet adjacent to the living room, which is usually used by guests, and sometimes by Malti. The toilet which is in the bedroom is mostly cleaned by Sadhana herself. In the apartment building where Sadhana resides, the sweeper is hired by the building authorities mainly to clean the courtyard, and the residents who avail personal services of the sweeper are required to pay an amount on per day basis to the building committee. In Sadhana's house, she mainly hired the sweeper to take the garbage on a daily basis and clean the toilet of her house, every fourth or fifth day.

Later in the afternoon, by 2:30 pm Malti comes for her second shift to Sadhana's house. This time, she first warms the food cooked by Sadhana in the morning. While, the girls are dropped to school by their father, in the morning, after school they are dropped home by a friend of theirs. After serving food to the girls, Malti mops the floor with a piece of wet cloth. Sadhana usually reaches home while Malti is halfway with her work. After the children and Sadhana finishes their lunch, Malti washes the utensils and leaves for her home.

After Malti leaves, Sadhana manages the household chores herself, for the evening. While, her husband helps in doing the grocery shopping for the house in the evening, she is mostly left to look after her daughters studies. Late in the evening, at around 8:30 pm Sadhana continues with her dinner preparations, for which the vegetables and other ingredients are mostly chopped by Malti in the afternoon.

3.3 Nuances in Organising Paid Domestic Work

The presence of domestic workers in wealthy and middle-class Indian households has been a common phenomenon since the colonial period, as discussed in the previous chapter. What appears to be of a comparatively recent origin is the organisation of the work in a part-time basis, with segmentation of each domestic task- cleaning, cooking, care work- into highly specific tasks, primarily designed to cater to the needs of middle-class families (Mattila, 2011). Recent scholarship has shown that such an arrangement is increasingly acceptable to the consumerist minds of middle-class households (Dickey, 2000b; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). It is significant however; that the task based segmentation of domestic work has been in India from an earlier period, given the caste specific division of task in the organisation of household labour (Mattila, 2011). In India, caste makes the most intricate system of division of labour amongst domestic servants, wherein high caste servants often refused to perform task which they considered as defiling and polluted (Srinivas, 1995). The domestic tasks were particularly categorized as low status or high status, wherein, the low status tasks in general were associated with cleaning like sweeping, laundering clothes, taking out garbage, and, were thus, performed by lower caste servants (ibid). Cooking, on the other hand, was considered as a high status task, and, was primarily performed by the poor Brahmins (ibid).

But, recent research has shown that in urban India flexibility is practiced in caste based division of domestic tasks (Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2009; Mattila, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). Neetha attributes this to significant growth of part-time live-out domestic workers in the cities, mostly comprising of migrants (Neetha, 2009, p. 496). While, on the one hand, people who would not work as paid domestic in their native places do it elsewhere, the employers, on the other hand, also hire domestic irrespective of their caste status for tasks who otherwise would not have been hired in their native places (Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2009).

According to the National Sample Survey Organisation there is an estimated 4.75 million paid domestic workers in India (Barua et.al 2016). However, in reality the estimated figure is assumed to be a gross under-representation, as the Government of India Task Force Report on Domestic Workers of 2011 reported that, the total number of domestic workers in India is likely to be close to 90 million (Neetha, 2009; Barua et.al 2016). The workers are primarily divided into five sub-categories on the basis of their nature of tasks - house maid/servant, cook, governess/babysitter, gardener, and gatekeeper/*chowkidar*/watchman (Neetha, 2009). In this, the categories of gardener and gatekeeper/*chowkidar*/watchman are primarily male-centric, which entails its separation from the other sub-categories where an increasing trend of female concentration is witnessed, with the total female share accounting as high as 71.6 percent (ibid). Of these, the category of housemaid/servant is marked by a highest concentration of female workers with 87.4 percent, followed by governess/babysitter and cook (ibid).

The domestic tasks associated with housemaid/servant category covers a wide range of cleaning tasks, from cleaning of floors to used utensils, clothes, dusting, and other miscellaneous small activities of the employing house. And, existing scholarship has highlighted that in urban India, these are the most common tasks for which domestics are hired on a part-time basis by the middle-class households (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Neetha, 2009; Mattila, 2011).

It is usually observed that women employers outsource domestic tasks that they dislike performing, thereby; retaining only those tasks they are willing to carry out themselves (Froystad, 2003; Mattila, 2011). This implies the existence of a rigid boundary and attachment of differential values to the tasks performed by them and those assigned to their domestics. In the context of Kanpur in North-India, Froystad (2003) noted that her upper-caste Hindu employers outsourced domestic tasks according to an order of avoidance. She listed the domestic tasks roughly in a decreasing order of avoidance as: 1. Cleaning toilets, 2. Washing floors, 3. Dishwashing, 4. Dusting, 5. Washing clothes, 6. Cutting vegetables, 7. Cooking (Froystad, 2003, p. 78). The degree of avoidance was so strong that if a family could pay for only one domestic worker due to insufficient economic means, they chose to have their toilets and bathrooms cleaned (ibid). In Kolkata, Ray and Qayum observed that washing dishes and cleaning toilets were the two main tasks mostly avoided and considered lowly of household tasks by the employers (Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 153). In a similar note, in Jaipur Mattila (2011) noted that the

most common domestic tasks avoided by employers was washing dishes. In this, she noted two other domestic tasks namely, waste removal and sweeping outside the house as strongly avoided by the employers. However, employers in Jaipur differed from both Kanpur and Kolkata in the sense that several employers performed the task of cleaning toilets themselves.

In Guwahati, the employers' responses mostly resonated with that of Jaipur where cleaning toilets is not necessarily considered as a disgraceful and humiliating task. Of the thirty-five employers in the present study, twenty-six employers performed the task themselves, while nine outsourced it. It should be noted that of these nine employers, five are residents of apartment buildings where sweepers are commonly hired by the building associations, the services of which could be availed by the residents with payment of a small sum of money in a daily basis. Nevertheless, by contrast, employers in the study area differed from Jaipur in that waste removal is not considered as a major task by the employers. For in Guwahati, with the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) carrying out the activity of door-to-door waste removal, wastes are collected from residences, in which the employers are required to dump their daily household wastes when the GMC vehicle arrives. Only in six houses, the study finds that it is a task carried out by the part-time domestic. And, while for employers – five of them – residing in apartment buildings, wastes are removed by the building sweeper, in their absence, it is a task carried out by the part-time domestic of the household, who dumps it in the nearest roadside GMC dustbin. What the employers in the present study mostly avoided is washing utensils and mopping of floors, as these two are the most common tasks for which labour is outsourced. From this, it can be argued that the employers' avoidances of certain domestic tasks are not mainly related to Hindu considerations of purity as cited by Froystad (2003) and Ray and Qayum (2010) in their respective studies in Kanpur and Kolkata. In the context of the study area, it could be inferred that, the easy availability of labour with part-time arrangement of domestic work, in addition to the emerging trend of market-oriented services catering to individual needs of employers and their economic standing, significantly contribute towards avoidance of certain domestic tasks, thus, outsourcing the labour.

3.3.1 Part-time Domestic Work: Occupational Categories

3.3.1.1 Cleaning Work

Cleaning work forms the largest occupational category amongst part-time domestic work in India (Neetha, 2009). It comprises of tasks like cleaning of floors, washing used utensils, washing clothes and dusting. These are tasks which are highly segregated on the basis of gender, with a large concentration of female workers (Neetha, 2009; Mattila, 2011). The workers performing these tasks are commonly referred to as *baai*⁴.

Cleaning of Floors

Cleaning of floors particularly involves combination of the tasks of sweeping and mopping of floors. It is to be noted that this task, together with washing of utensils appears to be the largest occupational group of part-time domestic workers, which explains the rise of female workers in paid domestic work sector in India (Neetha, 2009). The data in the present study likewise shows that, this category constituted a significant task amongst the middle-class employers, for which labour is largely outsourced. It is a task which needs to be performed on a regular basis. While, the task of sweeping is essential to remove dust particles from every corner of the house with a broom in a bow-down position, mopping involved sitting in a squat position and cleaning the floor with a wet piece of cloth. However, with the availability of mopping sticks in the market, the performance of the task has become easier, but, this option is seldom given to the part-time domestics. Using of the mopping sticks is typically reserved for employers as a resort, particularly in times when the domestic fail to turn up for work. This is primarily because employers in general believed that floors are better cleaned when workers are on their hands and knees, which reiterates the differences of housework standards with their domestics.

Similar accounts have been shared by Romero (1992) in the context of U.S.A, where employers' request towards their domestics indicated the differences in housework standards:

When housework became another woman's paid work, the activity was redefined to include new definition of tasks, methods of cleaning, work standards and even expectations of the time necessary to complete a task. One of the most common

⁴In Assamese, the term *baai* signifies an elder sister. But, in the context of paid domestic work the term is used derogatorily for domestics performing generic cleaning tasks.

experiences reported by women of color in reference to different standards was the request to scrub floors on their hands and knees rather than simply mopping (Romero, 1992, p. 104).



Image 4: *A domestic worker sweeping an employer's home.*



Image 5: *A domestic worker mopping an employer's home.*

Washing Clothes

The task of washing clothes mainly comprises of scrubbing clothes with hand using a soap or detergent powder and hanging of washed clothes for drying. In India, traditionally it has been a task widely outsourced to washer men, *dhobis* (Froystad, 2003). It continues to persist in parts of India, where scholars have highlighted outsourcing the labour of a *dhobi* in many upper middle and middle-class households, to wash the week's heavy laundry, particularly bed sheets, bath towels, curtains and cotton saris that required starch (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). In Guwahati, *dhobis* with their small ironing booths are common within every neighbourhood, but availing their services is not seen amongst the middle-class employers in the present study. The reasons for which can be assumed to be as: firstly, considering the standard rates of a *dhobi*, it is not perceived as a viable option by most middle-class employers. Secondly, with the availability of part-time domestics to perform the task, services of *dhobis* are not regarded as necessary.

However, amongst the middle-class employers in the present study, it is observed that, with the increasing popularity of washing machines, the service of a part-time domestic has become comparatively less common. Only seven employers outsourced the labour of a part-timer to wash the used clothes on a regular basis. In these households, this primarily included the clothes of elderly and children below eight years, while the clothes of other family members as well as the 'heavy laundry' of the house are put to wash in the machine. Moreover, with the growing use of washing machines, the task is no longer perceived as back breaking by almost all the employers. An employer puts it as:

My washing machine is my part-timer. There is no electronics as good as a washing machine. Washing clothes is undeniably the most tiresome task, but the washing machine has eased it all. I have purchased my machine in 2009, and since then it has been a good investment. Like, if I would have kept a maid from 2009 for the task of washing clothes, it would have cost me more till the present date. In lakhs, I must say. But, the machine had saved all my money. In a week, the machine is used thrice a week, and the best part is, even the electricity bill is not much.

Considering washing machine as one of the best household appliance, the employer explicitly upheld the utility of its services, both practically and financially. Practically, the investment in the washing machine eased the burden of washing clothes on a daily

basis, wherein the dirty clothes of the family are assembled together and washed either once, twice or thrice a week. Nevertheless, the clothes used for daily purpose are washed by the employers themselves, while taking their bath. And, financially, it enabled the employer in saving money by not hiring a regular part-timer for the task. Similar sentiments are echoed by several employers in this study, where they regarded their investment in washing machine to be cost effective, in comparison to outsourcing the labour. It is to be noted however that, while the women employers considered the effectiveness of washing machine, it is relatively common in most of these households to assign their part-time domestics with the menial tasks of taking washed clothes out of the machine and hanging them to dry, taking down the dried clothes, and, thereafter, folding it. Moreover, it is also observed in some houses in Guwahati, albeit sparingly, where domestics are also assigned the task of operating washing machines which had a manual system.

Washing Used Utensils

The task of washing used utensils involves throwing the leftover food in the dustbin, followed by scrubbing those used dishes with hand by using a washing soap. In India, the task is particularly affirmed as one of the ritually impure household tasks, as it is associated with leftover, *jootha* food, considered to be highly polluting (Froystad, 2003; Ray & Qayum, 2010). The idea of *jootha*, according to which food that comes into contact with spittle or mouth is considered contaminated and polluted (Dupe, 1996; Das, 1979 cited in Mattila, 2011, p. 121). Moreover, according to Manusmriti, as per Hindu traditions, the saliva consists of one of the twelve secretions or impurities released by the human body (Dumont, 1980). This notably entails to the distinction of the objects that are associated with any of the twelve enlisted impure elements (ibid). In the light of these perceptions, the utensils too, are believed to be *jootha* after eating (Mattila, 2011). This, therefore, necessitates washing of utensils immediately after use, for concerns related to purity.

For the middle-class families in India, washing utensils is one of the significant household tasks, and the most common category for which labour of a part-time domestic is outsourced (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003, Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). It also forms as the category of household task where absence of the part-timer is seldom overlooked. Froystad noted this in the context of the limited availability of plates; spoons and glasses in the middle-class households, which contribute towards the

absenteeism of the dishwashing maid as a matter of great concern for the employers (Froystad, 2003, p. 78).

Similarly, in the present study in Guwahati, washing of used, *jootha* utensils is one of the most common task for which labour is outsourced by all the employers, except one family. The employers detested in performing the task to an extent that, they did not consider it impure to keep piles of *jootha* utensils overnight, to be cleaned by their part-time domestics in the following morning. And, in such situations, the absence of the part-time domestic precipitated strong reactions from the employers. One such employer is Dipashri who is in her early fifties. She has been living alone for a decade now, since separation with her husband, and with their daughter residing in Bangalore. When asked about her preference for household tasks, she explicitly stated her abhorrence for washing utensils as:

The least preferable task is washing of utensils. I can manage all other household chores, if required, but, not this task. I have two to three sets each for all my utensils, particularly the heavy ones like pressure cooker, cooking pots, saucepans which require great effort to be cleaned. These are used whenever the maid fails to turn up for work. Honestly speaking, keeping a stock of these utensils is actually to save myself from the inconvenience caused due to the maid's absence. And, for small utensils like plate and stuffs, disposable items are the most convenient option.

As we can see, it reflects Dipashri's strong avoidance towards the particular task. In order to avoid the disorder which employers most commonly face due to absenteeism of dishwashing domestic, Dipashri devised the solution of purchasing stock of heavy utensils generally used for the purpose of daily cooking. And, for other purposes, she considered using disposable items as the most effective solution. However, it is significant that considering Dipashri's household composition (she being the only member), washing utensils should not have been a herculean task for her. But, her circumvention for the particular task clearly suggests the easy availability of cheap labour force to perform the task. This, therefore, left little doubt about the sentiments of the other middle-class respondents in the study, where they categorically considered washing of used utensils as despicable of all household tasks. Yet, to be noted is the fact

that like Froystad's (2003) study in Kanpur, the employers in the present study too, employers failed to explain as to why they despised the particular task⁵.

The situation may be different in cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore where dishwashers are being increasingly popular household appliance amongst the upper middle and middle-class families⁶. In Guwahati, unlike these larger cities, dishwashers are not common amongst the middle-class employers in the present study. In these households, while, washing machine is one of the most common household appliances, dishwashers are yet to attain popularity. Nevertheless, a few employers did express their desire to invest in one, but, at the same time they are seen questioning its practicality. Thus, unlike washing machine which is considered as cost-effective over a domestic worker, the dishwashers are not regarded as the same. On the contrary, the service of a part-time domestic was unanimously perceived as cost-effective.



Image 6: A domestic worker doing her dishes, while the employer is preparing for a meal.

⁵Nevertheless, two employers in the present study reasoned their dislike for dishwashing as: Firstly, as the task required them to clear *jootha* food with bare hands, it was considered loathsome. Secondly, hiring a domestic for the task helped them in retaining the moisture of their hands, which otherwise was not possible as the task involved continuous touch with water.

⁶<https://www.thehindu.com/business/lockdown-spurs-high-demand-for-dishwashers/article31823146.ece>
Retrieved on 13/08/2021.

3.3.1.2 Sweepers

Sweepers, who are commonly called as *jamadars/jamadarnis* form a large occupational category within part-time domestic work. Unlike other part-time domestic work, sweepers comprise of a diverse group in terms of gender where both male and female participation is seen (Raghuram, 2001; Mattila, 2011). In Guwahati, although sweepers are largely employed under GMC services and other non municipal offices like government and semi-government offices, educational institutions, hospitals and private offices, they are also commonly hired by the residential complexes as part-time workers. They are assigned with the tasks of cleaning common streets of a residential colony, cleaning toilets and carrying of household waste to public GMC dustbins located in the nearest street. These tasks are considered peripheral to the management of the employer's household (Raghuram, 2001). This entailed that, unlike, other categories of part-time domestic work, absenteeism of a sweeper is not considered as problematic, and, are thus, mostly overlooked (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003). The present study reveals that, in such situations the household tasks of a sweeper are mostly done by the employers, and, sometimes, the part-time domestics are asked to carry some task like waste removal. Moreover, in comparison to other part-time domestic tasks, the chores performed by the sweepers are not as time-consuming which required them to stay in each house for a minimum time span. In Noida, located in suburban Delhi, Raghuram notes that the female jamardanis worked in each household for hardly fifteen minutes, which in turn aided to their working in 15 to 60 houses per day (Raghuram, 2001, p. 611).

In India, the tasks performed by sweepers are widely referred to as 'tasks of the caste' (ibid, p. 614), primarily associated with particular Dalit sub-castes. But, in the present study an alternative pattern has been observed where these tasks are not limited to the Bihari Bansphors in the Uzanbazar locality. On the contrary, in recent times, the Miyas are also largely seen undertaking the tasks of a sweeper. This is an issue which has been examined more closely in the following chapter.

3.3.1.3 Cook

Another significant occupational category in part-time domestic work is that of a cook. Traditionally, in India, the performance of the task was in congruence with the caste backgrounds of workers. Marked on the basis of purity consideration, the task was

performed by Brahmins, particularly Brahmin male cooks (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). However, Sen and Sengupta (2016) note that in the contemporary times, urban India has witnessed flexibility in hiring of a cook. In their study on part-time domestic workers in Kolkata, they have pointed out three factors highlighting the flexibility practiced by employers in the appointment of cooks: firstly, the heterogeneity of the urban middle-class in contemporary times has contributed towards indifference about the economy of touch in food preparation and consumption; secondly, the new employers of cooks are themselves lower down in caste hierarchy, which has reduced the exclusiveness of cooks being Brahmins; and, thirdly, due to feminization of domestic service, leading to an increasing supply of female workers from peasant and lower castes.

The tasks of a cook generally included grinding of spices, preparing meals either once or two times a day in each house, and washing of utensils used for the purpose of cooking. Amongst the various categories of part-time domestic tasks, cooking has always been considered as a clean work, and is socially constructed as a skilled task (ibid). It requires the cook to have a proper knowledge about the usage of spices and ingredients. This contributes to their higher wage, unlike the tasks associated with cleaning. According to Mattila (2011), the higher wage associated with the task of cooking mostly make it beyond the reach of an average middle-class family.

In Guwahati, cooking constitutes one of the most time-consuming tasks amongst the middle-class families as depicted in the present study, since it involved preparing two to three dishes in each meal. As a natural outcome, one might infer that cooking might be a task for which the labour of a part-timer is most commonly outsourced. But, this is not the case. Cooks, commonly referred to as *randhonis* are generally not as common as a *baai* in the employing households of the present study. Only one family in the collected data hired a cook. The female employers voiced their preferences for preparing meals themselves. They reasoned their preferences considering the taste and nutritional need of each family member, which is best known to them. Several employers perceived the task of cooking as an ‘art’, and they held that workers seldom excel in it.

Moreover, food is ubiquitously significant in India (Saunders, 2007 cited in Mattila, 2011, p. 115)⁷, and most of the employers emphasised that ‘food’ is one such component which binds the entire family together. Moreover, it helps in creating solidarity and intimacy amongst the family members. One employer puts it as:

I have grown up seeing my mother preparing meals and feeding the family. This is something which has always remained within me. There is warmth when we cook and feed our family, especially the children. We do it with all our love. This love binds the family together. But, the same cannot be expected from a servant. They will do the task as a part of their duty, for which they are paid. And they might also cook with bad intentions in their minds, which can be harmful for the family’s well-being. So, I have always reserved cooking for myself.

This reflects the common middle-class Hindu preference for food prepared at home and by related women (Saavala, 2010; Donner, 2011). It is significant, however that while the middle-class women employers maintained cooking as one of their primary household task, they are commonly seen seeking help in certain menial tasks like chopping of vegetables, grinding spices, washing rice and lentils from their *baai*.

3.3.1.4 Child Care and Elderly Care

Care work forms another category of essential part-time domestic work in the Indian households. This involves care work related to both elderly and children. In Guwahati, during the course of the present fieldwork, none of the families outsourced the labour for care work – child and elderly care. The reason for this can be inferred as the absence of toddlers or children below the school going age and bed-ridden elderly people in these households.

The middle-class respondents in the study either had one or two children, and they are either of school-going age or grown-up adults, pursuing studies and careers in Guwahati or elsewhere in India. However, several employers admitted to outsourcing the services of a child caretaker when their children were small, particularly below the age of five years. They mainly hired young girls in between 10 to 15 years of age, on a full-time live-in arrangement. Hired through their trusted social networks, these live-in domestic

⁷In a Hindu context, the relevance of food is much more than sustenance for Indians. It contributes in shaping and reshaping the identity and character of a person on a daily basis, and the deep value that food has for Hindus is revealed by both ethnographic and textual data (Saunders, 2007, p. 213 cited in Mattila, 2011, p. 115).

maids mostly hailed from their (employers') native villages. One possible reason for such a recruitment pattern could be issues related to security, considering the task of a child caretaker that required the worker to be trustworthy and possess certain degree of warmth. The employers preferred calling these young domestic maids as 'playmates' of their child, more than a child caretaker, as the primary responsibilities of child care were retained by themselves. It is significant, however that considering the range of tasks that were performed by these live-in domestics, it appeared that in addition to being 'playmates' to their employer's child, they served as a generic live-in worker for the family.

Furthermore, the data suggests that with the children attaining the school-going age, the demand for such 'playmates' appeared to be less significant in these families. Donner observes this in the context of Kolkata, that while child-minders were popular amongst the middle-class families, the middle-class mothers at the same time feared that, their school-going children might adapt the foul language of their domestics (Donner, 2008, p. 144-145). For the middle-class families, raising well-mannered children forms an essential part of 'status producing work', undertaken by the mothers (Papanek, 1989, p. 103 cited in Donner, 2008, p. 145). It served as an indicator of good motherhood, if they are able to successfully supervise the children during their school years (Donner, 2008). This, therefore, entailed the middle-class mothers to dedicate a great amount of time for their children's development, thereby, accentuating the demand of part-time domestics for other household tasks (Mattila, 2011).

Moreover, motherhood, more than anything else, confers a purpose and identity for Indian women (Kakar, 1981 cited in Mattila, 2011, p. 116). Notably, the traditional ideal of motherhood as 'sacrifice' continues to shape the identity of Indian mothers in present times (Donner, 2008). Even for the working mothers, motherhood entailed to their withdrawal from paid work (ibid). The implication of gendered expectations of motherhood is so strong that, it entails the professional women to learn to limit their ambitions, wherein their self-limitation lead to the production of a 'glass-ceiling', which hinders their professional growth (Menon, 2022). The 'mommy track' efficiently contributes to their slower career track upwards, in which most women set aside the productive years of their lives to care for their children (ibid). Nomi, an employer in her mid fifties, explains:

...Why do you think women are not allowed to work? It is because of motherhood! It is she who is responsible for taking care of her children, and making the root of the family tree strong. My daughter who works in an IT company in Bangalore always says about the sacrifice of young mothers. There, it is a ritual of all young mothers working in IT sector to leave their job after having kids. They join work again after their kids are four to five years old. See, if you have your in-laws or mother's family around to look after your kid, you can easily leave them home with maids. But, otherwise, it is very risky to leave kids alone with maids. I have heard innumerable stories from friends and relatives of babies being injected with morphin and put to sleep by maids.

Nomi is a graduate in Zoology, and has been a house-wife since her marriage. Though she wanted to pursue further studies, but upon her marriage after her graduation, this could not materialise. Moreover, her desire to work as a teacher after marriage was also not supported by her husband, as he believed raising of well-mannered children was more essential than working outside, for a woman. Reflecting back on her early years of marriage and motherhood, Nomi now, proudly acknowledges her husband's decision of not allowing her to work. She measured her success as a mother, as she single-handedly guided the success of their two children at school. It has been a fulfilling experience, as both her children are well settled, one in Bangalore and the other in Delhi. She thus, credited her role as a mother in making the 'roots of her family strong' which resulted in the success of her children. It appears from her narrative that based on her own accounts as a mother; she strongly supported the normative conception of stay-at-home mothers, for the overall well-being of the children. For this, she acclaimed the decision of young working mothers in Bangalore who chose motherhood over career. Furthermore, she also hints at the possible dangers that might engulf upon a family, if the child is left alone under the care of an unrelated family member, in the form of domestic workers. Arguably, the foundation of middle-class families - in the form of children, the future generation - in India are perceived to be strongly built, under the care of mothers or other related women of the family. This, however, appears to be contrary to the western parenting style, which is largely stereotyped for their dependency on institutional childcare (Donner, 2008).

With regard to elderly care, as no severely ill people were residing at the respondents' home, workers are not outsourced for the task. However, five middle-aged employers who are residing alone expressed their desires to hire a domestic in their old age,

primarily for companionship rather than for domestic tasks. Hiring of domestic workers for companionship has been observed by Romero as a common form of ‘emotional labour’ particularly outsourced by the aged in United States of America (Romero, 1992, p. 107).

3.3.2 Part-time Domestic Workers: Time and Work Schedule

Like elsewhere in India, part-time domestic workers in Guwahati are an essential component in the middle-class households (Dickey, 2000a, 2000b; Raghuram, 2001; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). In the contemporary times, they are considered as the back-bone of middle-class housekeeping (Mattila, 2011). As discussed earlier, they help the middle-class women in meeting their demands of gendered domestic responsibilities.

The forty part-time domestics in the present study typically worked for three to four households each day. However, of these, five workers worked in five houses, four worked in two houses and one worked in only one house. With part-time domestic work being highly segregated into specified tasks (as discussed in the earlier section), the part-time domestics ‘are now on a schedule’ (Ray & Qayum 2010, p. 85). They are primarily hired to perform either a particular task or a set of tasks, and are required to visit the employers’ households at specified time. As noted by Ray and Qayum, the part-time domestics ‘are especially task and time driven’(Ray & Qayum 2010, p. 89). Working in multiple households, they tend to divide their work schedule in each house in a way that is suitable for both themselves and their employers. This arrangement of part-time work does not restrict their labour and time exclusively for one particular employer, which thereby, enabled them to maintain a steady pace of work, without jeopardising their tight work schedules.

The part-time domestics in the present study, in general followed a particular work pattern in each household. All, except five of them visited their employer’s house two times a day, which the workers categorised as two separate shifts i.e. the morning and evening shift. The morning shift comprised of a demanding work schedule, where the domestics are required to perform a set of heavier tasks, resulting in their spending longer duration of time in each house. The evening shift, on the other hand, which typically started after 3:30 pm is comparatively less demanding, as the tasks performed are lighter in nature. For instance, if in a household a worker performed a combination of three tasks – sweeping, mopping, washing utensils – in the morning shift, the evening

shift required her to only wash the utensils from lunch in the particular household. And, in some cases, the workers are assigned the additional task of bringing down the clothes hanged for drying either in the terrace or backyard. This arrangement appeared to be common for all the domestics, except Sumitra, who has a particularly demanding work schedule in her evening shift. Out of her three workplaces, she is required to visit in only one house for her evening shift, where she worked from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm in the evening. Unlike others, in her evening shift she is assigned a range of tasks from sweeping the floor to washing utensils, grinding of spices, chopping vegetables, taking down the dried clothes and folding them.

Furthermore, considering the number of households that the workers worked in and the combination of tasks performed in each house, they are typically required to start their morning shift mostly in between 8:00 am to 9:00 am. However, workers like Hajera whose one or more employers are wage-earning women, started their morning shift as early as 7:00 am: ‘One of my employer is a school teacher, so I need to start early at work. I go to her place first in the morning. *Baideo* (her female employer) prefers that I finish my work while she is still at home. It takes me around one and half hours to complete the assigned tasks of sweeping, mopping and washing of utensils at her place’. The employers’ preference to stay at home when the workers came for work is mainly related to issues of trust and security (Mattila, 2011). Workers in the present study echoed similar preferences of working in presence of their employers. These issues related to trust and fear is discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters.

Moreover, it is common for all the part-time domestics to manage their time and work schedule in a way, which enabled them a couple of free hours mostly in the afternoon, in between their morning and evening shift. They dedicated this time in the afternoon to perform domestic chores of their own households like – preparing lunch, washing utensils and clothes, tidying the home, fetching water, taking care of children and other miscellaneous chores, as for them too, domesticity served as the prime marker of femininity. However, in households where the domestics had grown-up children or an extended female member, their burden of domestic chores at home was considerably less. These issues related to the lives of domestic workers have been discussed in detail in chapter 5.

3.3.3 Part-time Domestic Tasks and Workers Preferences

Sweeping, mopping, and washing of used utensils are the predominant tasks performed by the part-time domestics in this study. However, some of the workers also performed the tasks of washing clothes and dusting. The interviewed workers in general preferred performing the task of sweeping and mopping, and detested the task of washing utensils. While, they performed the tasks of sweeping and mopping at least once a day in each house, the task of washing utensils is performed twice a day. The morning shift typically consisted of used and dirty utensils from the previous night and breakfast, and the evening shift comprised of utensils from the lunch. Mattila observes that according to traditional Hindu thought keeping of dirty dishes overnight is a bad practice (Mattila, 2011, p. 121). However, in the present study it has been found that, excluding one family, none followed this principle. In this family, while the heavy utensils used in preparing of meals are washed by their part-time cook in both the shifts, the *jootha* utensils like plate, spoon, glass, and cup are washed by the family members (mostly the woman employer) themselves after each meal.

To be noted is that although the workers in the present study expressed their aversion towards the task of washing utensils, they are not in a position to avoid the task. This is mainly because most employers usually preferred domestics who performed a set of cleaning tasks together, viz, sweeping and mopping with washing utensils. While it has already been argued earlier that assigning of a combination of cleaning tasks to an individual domestic is cost effective for the middle-class employers, the domestics on the other hand, without much option are bound to perform the task of washing utensils, at least in one of their employer's house.

One primary reason for the domestics' abhorrence towards the task of washing used utensils is related to issues of purity. They considered the task impure firstly because it required them to throw the *jootha* leftovers into the dustbin. In this, they are heard vehemently criticizing about their employers for not clearing their own *jootha* utensils. The used utensils are mostly left in the kitchen sink with leftovers on it, and, this often led to blocking of the water pipe, requiring the workers to clear it using their hands. Secondly, they are critical about the employers' habit of dumping used utensils in the kitchen sink without pouring water, due to which the remnants of food gets stuck in the utensils when kept overnight. One worker explained it as: 'These people (employers) find it hard to even pour water in their *sua paat* (used utensils). They keep it as it is,

overnight. And, in order to clean the dirt, we are required to scrub the utensils extra hard the following morning'. Similar accounts are shared by the domestics in Mattila's (2011) study in Jaipur. Workers in Jaipur particularly detested the task of dishwashing and vehemently complained about cleaning of greasy plates with cold water during chilly winter nights. Even in houses which had hot running water in the taps, the workers were not permitted to use it. The inherent class distinctions gets reflected through such employer practices, where the luxury of using running hot water in a water-scarce state like Rajasthan was reserved for the rich.

These issues in Guwahati and Jaipur, reflects the daily struggle of poor domestics at their workplaces. Considering their subordinate class positions in relation to employers, the workers are hardly in a position to complain about any of the employer habits. A worker puts it as: 'We are meant to do such work only. We do not have the right to question them (employers), about any of their dirty habits like leaving utensils with leftovers in the kitchen sink'.

Additionally, the part-time domestics in the present study are seen practicing avoidance towards the task of cooking. Reasons for which they rationalised as the excessive 'work' required in performing the task. The task of a cook is particularly a strenuous one, with no possibility of shortcuts. Though the task is considered as dignified amongst the paid domestic tasks, the return in terms of respect is low, as the domestics are subjected to frequent bitter words of employers regarding taste and usage of ingredients. Moreover, the familial set up of the employer makes them obligatory to confront multiple hierarchies considering the taste of each member of the family. This appears to be in contrast to cleaning tasks, where the workers are generally under supervision of the woman employer of the particular house.

3.4 Reasons for Hiring Domestic Workers

3.4.1 Practical Gains: Wage-earning Women and Housewives

Recruitment of domestic workers in general appeared to be an ideal domestic arrangement for the middle-class employers- wage earners and housewives- as it called for their sharing of domestic responsibilities, which in turn, aided to easing their work load as primary nurturers of the family. This section discusses the perspectives of wage-earning women and housewives on their practicality of hiring domestic workers.

Emphasising on the utilitarian aspect of domestic workers, a common thread tied all the working women employers in the present study, when they are asked about the reasons for hiring workers. Juggling between work and home they particularly emphasised on workers being a ‘necessity’ for continuing their daily lives: ‘It is next to impossible to manage the domestic chores for working people like us. A maid is a necessity for us to manage the house smoothly’. Over the years significant changes has taken place in terms of familial relationships, where a large number of women are seen shouldering economic responsibility together with men. But, the enduring gendered expectations from these women continue to persist as a norm, for suitable ‘femininity’. Arguably, these expectations are reflections of patriarchal practices deeply ingrained in Assamese society, which accompanies a married woman at every stage of her life (Bhattacharyya, 2009). This naturally entails women to excel in homemaking roles irrespective of their work status outside home. In such situations, domestic workers played a crucial role in sailing through the domestic responsibilities of the wage-earning women in this study.

While, it is perceptible that all the wage-earning women in the study are largely dependent on domestic workers by emphasising the utilitarian gains, peculiarly the housewives in this study are equally found to be dependent on an external help for sustaining their daily chores. This can be best elucidated from the testimony of Radha, living with her father-in-law, husband and a ten-year-old daughter. Currently, employing one part-time worker who works at her place from 9:00 am in the morning to 3:00 pm in the afternoon, she speaks at length about her dependency on domestic workers since the time of her marriage. While, she has been married for the past fourteen years, in the initial years of her marriage, it was her mother-in-law who used to manage the domestic workers. But, ever since her death, the reigns of domestic responsibilities has been managed by Radha single-handedly, for the last six years. She explains it as:

In my mother’s place, we always had servants to work for us. But, here, after my marriage, though we had servants, I had to equally work with them. The whole situation was very annoying when my mother-in-law was alive. My entire day used to pass by doing household chores. There was no time for myself. My mother-in-law’s treatment towards these people was not good. No one used to work at our place for long, and in their absence the burden of housework was all on me. Gradually, I started interfering in her domestic practices, as my interest was involved in it, and the servants continued working under me, for many years. Even

the present maid working for us, has been with me for the last five years. She does sweeping, mopping, utensils, dusting and all other xyz duties of the house.

Like the wage-earning women, Radha's testimony reflects the expectation from a daughter-in-law (*bowari*) in Indian households, where they are required to shoulder domestic responsibilities almost entirely, and, this therefore, suggests the practicality of hiring a domestic worker. She portrayed herself as being totally dependent on domestic workers, as the other housewives in this study. But, her comments take one to several other dominant reasons for hiring a domestic worker. Being socialised into a domestic world, where domestic workers has been an integral part in household maintenance reflects her internalised dependency, absorbed in a reproduction of class: 'In my mother's place, we always had servants to work for us'. However, the alternative domestic arrangement in the house of her in-laws placed her in a chaotic situation, which required her to equally labour with workers. This being in negation of her class status compelled her to intervene in the domestic affairs of her mother-in-law, thereby, bringing necessary changes to domestic arrangement of the household. Thus, taking a morally superior stance by explicitly contrasting her domestic arrangement with that of her mother-in-law, she is seen reclaiming her class position by hiring a worker, who performed the menial and 'xyz duties' of the house.

However, although it appeared that for wage-earning women practical gains are central, and for most of the housewives the reasons are sometimes masked with symbolic gains, the study reveals that, both groups are united by the fact that all of them hired domestic workers for doing their impure and menial domestic tasks. The women employers mostly considered themselves as capable of doing particular tasks like cooking, thereby, repeatedly emphasising their dependence on workers for a range of 'demeaning tasks' (Romero, 1992, p. 100)⁸. Even the wage-earning women, for instance, who portrayed themselves as being totally dependent on domestic workers, are actively involved in meal preparation for their respective families, as they proudly retorted during the interviews: 'Cooking is my department'. Although, cooking constituted one of the most time-consuming domestic tasks (as depicted by the women themselves) amongst the Assamese middle-class families, since it involved preparing two to three dishes in each

⁸In Romero's study in U.S.A, the domestics' routine comprised of performing demeaning tasks like vacuuming behind sofas, washing and waxing floors, scrubbing ovens, sinks, tubs and toilet, picking up of toys, papers and clothes (Romero, 1992, p.130).

meal, strangely labour for the particular task is not outsourced. This has been observed by Romero as:

As employers, ...[women] decide what aspects of their physical labour they no longer want to perform and in doing so they determine the employee's work. The needs fulfilled through domestic's physical labour structure the work: thus some employers choose to include tasks that they feel are demeaning, others add new tasks and methods of housekeeping that they never engage in (Romero, 1992, p. 100).

Significantly, the testimonies of the employers in the present study are a reflection of contemporary domestic practice, wherein they inculcate traditionalism by preserving the task of cooking as the 'ultimate labour of love' (Donner, 2011). This therefore, transcended into a primary arena for Assamese middle-class women employers to redefine their gendered selves embodying respectability. As Donner observes amongst Bengali middle-class families in Kolkata that, married women as guardians of tradition are expected to embody certain familial values which communicated an image of respectable femininity in public (Donner, 2011, p. 65)⁹. Nevertheless, the middle-class women in this study actively sought help from their domestic workers for certain menial tasks associated with cooking, like chopping of vegetables, grinding spices, washing rice and lentils, as discussed earlier.

From this it can be argued that employers- wage-earning women and housewives- predominantly hired domestic workers to alleviate themselves from certain domestic responsibilities involving the manual and impure tasks. In this, in addition to creating an image of their gendered selves, they actively cultivated a practice of status reproduction, which is dealt upon next.

3.4.2 Symbolic Gains: Enhancing Status Superiority

You can do the domestic chores for maximum of two days, but when you need to follow the same routine on a regular basis, it really gets into your nerves. And, if you can afford workers, there is no harm in hiring them.

The above comment by an employer echoes the sentiments of several other employers in the present study. It reflects the monotonous nature of domestic tasks, and how hiring a

⁹In Bangladesh, Hussein (2017) observes that, working women negotiated their respectable femininity by actively performing domestic task of cooking during familial social gatherings, widely visible to public, albeit seeking help from domestic servants in their everyday food preparation.

worker relieved the employers from performing the manual domestic tasks, thus, affirming their status. Hiring of domestic workers has long served as a status indicator, and this has been extensively discussed in the scholarship on domestic work (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Shah, 2000; Mattila, 2011). Rollins in her analysis on the relationship between middle-class employers and their domestics of colour in the United States of America observes that, hiring of domestic workers ‘affords the employers a self-enhancing satisfaction that emanate from having the presence of an inferior and validating the employer’s lifestyle, ideology, and social world, from their familial interrelations to the economically and racially stratified system in which they live’ (Rollins, 1985, p. 156). This dovetails with domestic practices in the present study, where it is not uncommon to observe employers’ deriving a sense of status superiority by hiring domestic workers.

Although, the utilitarian need of domestic workers often manifested in outsourcing labour for time consuming domestic tasks, it is however, striking to observe employers’ dependency on workers for tasks which they could easily perform themselves. While, such dependency is a common sight in households which hired live-in workers, it is at the same time, familiar amongst those hiring part-timers. Some tasks such as bringing the employer’s or their family members shoes from the shoe rack; carrying their bag till the car which is parked a few steps from the main entrance door of the house; opening the gate when employers are home; serving employers with a glass of water immediately on their arrival are part of the daily labour regimes of the live-in workers, which vividly reiterated the status distinction ingrained in the work. Considering the nature of these tasks, it is significant to note that it is in no way defiling, and, hence, could easily be performed by the concerned family member of the employer’s household. Arguably, the performance of such tasks by an inferior ‘other’, only contributed towards reflecting superior status of the employers. To emphasise this point, an employer is heard succinctly remarking about her live-in worker as: ‘Mostly the back breaking tasks like sweeping and mopping are performed by the part-time worker. Her (the live-in worker) presence in the house acts as kind of a satisfaction that there is always someone, at my call’.

In terms of part-time domestic workers on the other hand, it is striking to observe them performing tasks such as dusting and polishing the same clean surfaces on a daily basis, wherein it could be easily carried on an interval of one or two days. Considering most of

the employers houses -who hired workers for the task of dusting- not being located near the roadside, which in a way, lowers the frequency of gathering dust on surfaces often made the researcher wonder about utility of the routine performance of such tasks. This gives an impression of the employers self-enhancing status by the mere presence of someone inferior in their houses, thus, validating their lifestyle. Furthermore, sometimes the researcher felt it would not have required much effort for some of these employers who are doing physically fine; to carry out certain tasks themselves. For instance, it is a common practice for the domestic workers in most of these employing houses, to take washed clothes out of the washing machine and hang them to dry either in the veranda, terrace or backyard. The domestic workers, however, in turn, are not allowed to operate the machine, giving an impression that the household appliances could be operated only by someone of the employer's stature. From this it appears that the main point of the concerned employer is to avoid the physical act of hanging their own clothes, as well as to exhibit their class superiority by hiring someone to perform such a task, which could easily be visualised by their neighbours. As Trigg notes, 'status derives from the judgements that other members of society make of an individual's position in society, and for this position to be established there must be a display of wealth' (Trigg, 2001, p. 100). This display of wealth essentially gets reflected through practices of certain consumer goods. And, in situations when an individual fail to deploy the consumer goods which symbolises a certain class, it makes the individual pitiable and socially invisible (Dickey, 2016). In the context of paid domestic work, the domestic workers served as essential consumer goods which helped the middle-class employers in maintaining and reinforcing their everyday class positions. The class positions in turn, is achieved by middle-class employers not only by keeping up clean and ordered homes, but, also through recruiting domestic workers, specifically for tasks which publicly communicated an image of their status. The public, here, includes not only their neighbours, but also their extended family members and class peers.

3.4.3 Emotional Gains: Acts of Maternalism and Feelings of Gratification

Another dominant aspect of hiring domestic workers is the emotional gains attained by employers. Employers in this study derived emotional gains through varied acts of maternalism, which they exhibit within the domestic space. These acts of maternalism are commonly consolidated through the practice of giving gifts to their domestic workers. In domestic service, the practice of gift-giving to domestics is a universal

phenomenon which has been extensively dealt in the existing scholarship (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011, Barua, et.al, 2017). Rollins in her analysis on the custom of gift-giving in domestic service have argued that ‘gifts’ in domestic service has an intrinsic meaning where the type of goods and the way it is exchanged ‘communicates to the parties involved and to the larger social group who the giver and receiver are and what their relationship to one another and to the community is’ (Rollins, 1985, p. 192). Notably, unlike the practice of gift-giving which occurs between ‘equals’, governed by a norm of mutual reciprocity, the specificity of gift-giving in domestic service is marked by an absence of reciprocity (ibid). Here, the gifts given mostly comprises of new and old clothes, food and all other items which are generally out-of-use for the employer concerned. In some, acts of maternalism are also exhibited in the form of extending financial help to domestic workers in times of their crises or by supporting certain educational needs of their children. This in general conveys the perception of domestic workers as someone who is needy, unable to provide for herself and is ever willing to accept discarded goods, thereby, reiterating the class distinctions ingrained in the work (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992).

Significantly, such acts of maternalism often contributed in amplifying emotional gratification of the middle-class employers in the present study. Most commonly employers give new clothes to their domestic workers particularly during Durga puja and Bihu¹⁰, the two most important festive occasions celebrated with much fervour in Assam. But, it is striking to see several employers count on the used goods, ranging from clothes to other material possessions, transferred to their domestic workers throughout the year, rather than the new clothes given during festivals. A reason for this might be because of the non-significant financial cost of the new clothes, most commonly a *saree* or a combination of blouse piece and a petticoat, given to the domestics. The question of *saree* in return is of much contestation, as the workers in the study, are frequently heard complaining about its cheap quality. This aspect has been discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Moreover, the significance of used goods (though worn out), from employers stance can be attributed to it being prized possession of the concerned employer, at certain point of

¹⁰There are three types of Bihu celebrated in Assam, namely Magh Bihu, Bohag Bihu and Kati Bihu. It is during Bohag Bihu which marks the celebration of Assamese New Year and beginning of spring, people exchange new clothes as gifts with much avidity. But, in the context of domestic work, it is only the employer who gives new clothes to their domestics, while the domestics are not expected to reciprocate this.

time. As they are frequently heard commenting: 'I gave her my branded shoes'; 'the clothes given were very costly'; 'she could open a shop out of the things that I gave her'. This naturally contributed in buttressing the employers self-portrayal as 'kind and generous' (Romero, 1992), thus, fulfilling their emotional gratification. It is pertinent that, such sentiment of emotional gratification derived from acts of generosity is a recurrent topic in almost all interviews with the employers. One such employer is Anita who exemplified her generosity of giving used items to her domestic by attributing it as her 'act of charity':

I provide for my maid round the year. Recently, when I got a new gas burner for myself, I gave away the old burner to my maid. This is just one case; there are other uncountable stuffs which I give her from time to time. Whom else will I give? I have only Noor (her domestic) whom I can give. There is no use keeping old stuffs in the house, when it can be of use to someone needy. I believe such gestures of charity should begin at home. You do not need to hunt down on people to showcase such kind gestures. It gives you a satisfaction, which is hard to put in words. To be honest, I am someone who cannot see such people in pain. And, most importantly, Noor is someone who is forever grateful for all that I have done for her.

As it is observed, in addition to reinforcing the class distinction by emphasising the domestic worker as 'needy', Anita takes one to other reasons of hiring domestic workers. By redefining the meaning of 'gifts' which could have easily gone to the trash (Romero, 1992), she fulfilled her psychological aspirations of carrying out 'acts of charity': 'I am someone who cannot see such people in pain'. The presence of the domestic helped her in attaining this within the space of her home, which otherwise, would have been inconceivable to her. Moreover, her domestic's acknowledgement towards her maternal 'acts of charity' further contributed in validating her psychological aspirations, as it perpetuated a sense of dependency in the domestic worker. The acceptance of employers' acts of benevolence has been noted by Romero as a form of 'emotional labour' on the part of the domestics, as it required them 'to manipulate their feelings in order to fulfil employers' psychological needs' (Romero, 1992, p. 109). The domestics' perception towards employers' acts of maternalism has been explored in chapter 5.

Further, emphasising the emotional gratification derived from acts of maternalism, another employer hiring one live-in full-time domestic and one part-time domestic says:

I do not have the system of the Marwari households; I never buy a sari worth 200 rupees for any of my maids, just because they are working for me. When I give things, I give the best to them. I give clothes worth of 800 rupees to 1000 rupees. My main motto is that, it should be of my taste. Even if it is something which would cost me around 1500 rupees, I will buy it for them. And, moreover, whenever I go for vacations, I always make sure to buy them gifts, just like other family members. My part-time maid often tells me about her unpleasant working experience in Marwari houses. They serve the maids *sabji* made from scraps of watermelon and *rotis* of previous night with pickle. And, here, look at me, I serve them stuffed *rotis* with curd. I even serve them ghee, if I myself am eating ghee.

The testimony reflects how the employer takes a morally superior stance by explicitly contrasting her domestic practices with that of the ‘discriminatory’ practices of Marwari households. Her constant comparisons with her Marwari neighbours enabled her to create a self-image of herself as someone kind, who provides for her domestics irrespective of the price of the items. However, the overt concerns of the employer that she provided the ‘best’ to her workers, felt like a mere exaggeration considering the worn-out clothes of her live-in domestic who served us with tea and snacks during the course of our discussion. If she provided the ‘best’ to her workers, the contradictory physical appearance of her live-in domestic seemed somewhat strange. In this light, it can be argued, the explanation for such manoeuvring is that the main point of the employer is to retain the perception of herself as someone kind and thoughtful, by merely dissociating her domestic practices from that of her neighbours, in this case the Marwari families.

Furthermore, moving beyond the immediate gratification achieved by the employers through their acts of maternalism, their narratives often suggest that their domestic practices in large part is also associated with their consumption patterns, which has been widely prevalent amongst the Indian middle-class since the post-liberalization period (Fernandes, 2006; Donner, 2011; Waldrop, 2011). In this new India, products which were once considered as luxury became necessities of the emerging middle-class throughout the country (Fernandes, 2006). This most commonly manifested in a practice of ‘conspicuous consumption’ (Bourdieu, 1984), which marked the distinctive lifestyles of middle-class people. In the context of domestic work, by transferring old out-of-fashion clothes and other material possessions to domestic workers, employers engaged in a practice of making room for their new in-coming material possessions. This in part

is largely motivated by their being ‘up-to-date’ with ongoing consumption trend in market, as the cultural markers defining middle-class position of an individual in contemporary India are in a constant evolution, wherein it creates a sense of competition amongst class peers (Waldrop, 2011). As noted by Trigg, ‘search for status through consumption is never ending...People must always try to acquire new consumption goods in order to distinguish themselves from others’ (Trigg, 2001, p. 101). In this sense, the presence of domestic workers within the employer’s home naturally provided an easy ground to hand over their clutter of old and outdated goods, marking it as their ‘acts of benevolence or charity’. An employer puts it as: ‘I love staying in trend. Any clothes or designs which are in trend, I buy that immediately. And, the old clothes which get piled up, I give it to my maid. She too accepts it happily, as the clothes given to her are always in good condition. They appear to be new only, as it is hardly worn once or twice’.

3.5 Conclusion

The chapter discusses the significance of part-time domestic workers in the maintenance of middle-class households in Guwahati. The increasing recruitment of domestic workers is comprehended in the backdrop of traditional perceptions of middle-class domesticity in India. It was from 1990 onwards, middle-class families in urban India witnessed drastic transformation in the demand of domestic workers. While, this was partly influenced by the increasing number of educated women seeking wage employment, partly it was due to the growing number of nuclear families. This was primarily because middle-class homes continued to persist as the prime responsibility of married women. With homemaking being socially perceived as woman’s primary careers, their status largely revolved around successful maintenance of their homes (Mattila, 2011). However, considering the labour intensive and manual nature of homemaking activities, middle-class women sought for substitute in carrying out certain domestic tasks. This, therefore, entailed outsourcing the labour of poor women in need of work, thus, transforming the middle-class homes into central sites of gender and class reproduction. The poor women domestics enabled the middle-class women in meeting their gendered expectations of domestic responsibilities, as well as facilitated their participation in job market and status enhancing activities (Dickey, 2000b).

However, is to be noted that, gendered expectations of domestic responsibilities are common for both middle-class women and their lower-class domestics, but, the ability of middle-class women to hire them underscored the differences in the hegemonic notions of womanhood between them. Arguably, the findings of the present study resonate with

previous research which highlighted that the ability to hire domestic workers is a sign of achieving middle-class and upper-class status (Dickey, 2000b; Shah, 2000; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011).

The present study highlights that the part-time live-out domestic arrangement appears to be more common amongst the employers. With the distribution of part-time domestic work into various occupational categories, employers are entitled to avail its services as per their needs and economic standing. Cleaning work primarily comprising of sweeping, mopping and washing utensils appear to be the most significant tasks for which labour is outsourced by the employers in the study. Notably, in India, this constitutes to be the largest category of part-time domestic work predominantly performed by female workers (Neetha, 2009).

The part-time domestics in the present study organised their work around two separate shifts i.e. morning and evening shift. The shifts are primarily divided taking into consideration the suitability of both themselves and their employers. Yet, the daily struggles within the labour process is manifested in performing tasks like washing utensils: workers particularly expressed abhorrence in certain employer practices like leaving left over, *jootha* in used plates and dumping of used utensils overnight in the kitchen sink without pouring water.

Moreover, although, it typically appeared that middle-class women in general hired domestics to ease their domestic work burden, in reality, it appeared to be guided by a complex set of needs. While, the wage-earning women emphasised on the utilitarian gains (Shah, 2000) of hiring a domestic, the needs of housewives are a conglomeration of utilitarian and symbolic gains. However, this does not entail one to demarcate both the groups into watertight compartments. On the contrary, they are united by the fact that the tasks assigned to the domestics are largely menial and demeaning. The tasks like cooking and child care perceived to bind the family together are predominantly retained by the employers. This, therefore, reflects the clear distinction amongst the domestic tasks performed by employers and their workers, accentuating the subordinate status of the domestics. Moreover, by disassociating themselves from the daily dirty and unclean domestic tasks the middle-class women also actively engage in redefining their relation to domesticity (Ozyegin, 2001).

Furthermore, the pattern in which paid domestic work is structured by the employers highlighted the significance of 'status enhancement' (Romero, 1992) amongst the middle-class employers. More than just a clean and ordered house, the presence of

domestics also contributed in amplifying the emotional well-being of the employers. For instance, in some cases the employers achieved this by giving away of old branded stuffs to their 'needy' domestics. And, in some, this is achieved by contrasting their domestic practices with neighbours, which enabled them in enhancing their self-image as kind and generous.

It can thus, be concluded that, the chapter elucidated the existence of a diverse pattern of paid domestic work in Guwahati. Significantly, although, domestic tasks are highly segregated, catering to needs of the consumerist minds of middle-class, the employers and workers are bind in an interpersonal relationship. Sen and Sengupta refer to this interpersonal relation as 'pragmatic intimacy' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016, p. 150). Both the groups extract the benefits of this relation suiting to their own needs. Nevertheless, considering the hierarchical relationship between employers and their domestics, it is comprehensible that employers have considerably more power to influence this relation. Moreover, to be noted is that, while, class is the overarching determinant in employer-domestic relationship, there are other related factors like ethnicity, religion and gender that shape the domestic work relationship, in the realm of everyday contact spaces i.e. domestic space. Examining these aspects, the following chapter unfolds the intricacies embedded in employer-worker relationship in domestic work sector of Guwahati.

References

- Barua, P., Haukanes, H. & Waldrop, A. (2016). Maid in India: Negotiating and contesting the boundaries of domestic work. *Forum for Development Studies*, 45(3), 415-436.
- Bhattacharyya, R. (2009). *Examining the changing status and role of middle-class Assamese women: Lessons from the lives of university students*. Ph.D Thesis (Unpublished), Department of Geography, University of New Castle.
- Bhattacharyya, R. (2018). Symbolic violence and misrecognition: Scripting gender among middle-class women, India. *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 5(1), 1 – 28.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (1989). The nationalist resolution of the women's question. In Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Eds.), *Recasting women: Essays in colonial history* (pp. 228- 242). New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Dickey, S. (2000a). Mutual exclusions: Domestic workers and employers on labor, class and character in South India. In Kathleen M. Adams and Sara Dickey (Eds) *Home and hegemony: Domestic service and identity politics in South and*

- Southeast Asia* (pp. 31-62). United States of America: University of Michigan Press.
- Dickey, S. (2000b). Permeable homes: Domestic service, household space and the vulnerability of class boundaries in urban India. *American Ethnologist*, 27(2), 462-489.
- Dickey, S. (2016). *Living class in urban India*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Donner, H. (2008). *Domestic goddesses: Maternity, globalisation and middle-class identity in contemporary India*. United States of America: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Donner, H. (2011). Gendered bodies, domestic work and perfect families: New regimes of gender and food in Bengali middle-class lifestyles. In Hennrike Donner (Eds.), *Being Middle-class in India: A way of life* (pp. 47 - 72). London: Routledge.
- Dube, L. (1988). On the construction of gender: Hindu girls in patrilineal India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30, 11 – 19.
- Dumont, L. (1980). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fernandes, L. (2006). *India's new middle-class: Democratic politics in an era of economic reform*. London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Froystad, K. (2003). Master- servant relations and the domestic reproduction of caste in Northern India. *Ethnos*, 68(1), 73-91.
- Hussein, N. (2017). Negotiating middle-class respectable femininity: Bangladeshi women and their families. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal [Online]*, 16, 1-20.
- Mattila, P. (2011). *Domestic labour relations in India: Vulnerability and gendered life courses in Jaipur*. Ph.D Thesis, Institute of Development Studies, University of Helsinki.
- Menon, N. (2022). *Seeing like a feminist*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Moors, A. (2003). Migrant domestic workers: Transnationalism, identity politics, and family relations. A Review Essay. *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*.
- Neetha, N. (2004). Making of female breadwinners: Migration and social networking of women domestics in Delhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39(17), 1681-1688.
- Neetha, N. (2009). Contours of domestic service: Characteristics, work relations and regulation. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 52(3), 489-506.
- Ozyegin, G. (2001). *Untidy gender: Domestic service in Turkey*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- Radhakrishnan, S. (2009). Professional women, good families: Respectable femininity and the cultural politics of a “new” India. *Qualitative Sociology*, 32, 195 – 212.
- Raju, S., & Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2011). Introduction. In Sarawati Raju and Kuntala Lahiri-Dutta (Eds.), *Doing gender, doing geography: Emerging research in India* (pp. 1-13). New Delhi: Routledge.
- Raghuram, P. (2001). Caste and gender in the organisation of paid domestic work in India. *Work, Employment and Society*, 15(3), 607-617.
- Ray, R., & Qayum, S. (2010). *Cultures of servitude: Modernity, domesticity and class in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rollins, J. (1985). *Between women: Domesticity and their employers*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Romero, M. (1992). *Maid in the U.S.A.* New York: Routledge.
- Saavala, M. (2010). *Middle-class moralities: Everyday struggle over belonging and prestige in India*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan.
- Sen, S., & Sengupta, N. (2016). *Domestic days: Women, work and politics in contemporary Kolkata*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Shah, S. (2000). Service or servitude? The domestication of household labour in Nepal. In In Kathleen M. Adams and Sara Dickey (Eds), *Home and hegemony: Domestic service and identity politics in South and Southeast Asia* (pp.87 - 118). United States of America: University of Michigan Press.
- Srinivas, L. (1995). Master-servant relationship in a cross-cultural perspective. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 30(5), 269-278.
- Trigg, A. B. (2001). Veblen, Bourdieu and conspicuous consumption. *Journal of Economic Issue*, 35(1), 99 – 115.
- Waldrop, A. (2011). Kitty-parties and middle-class femininity in New Delhi. In Henrike Donner (Eds.), *Being Middle-class in India: A way of life* (pp. 162-183). London: Routledge.

Web sources

- Mishra, L. (13 June, 2020). Lockdown spurs high demand for dishwashers. *The Hindu*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thehindu.com/business/lockdown-spurs-high-demand-for-dishwashers/article31823146.ece>
- Narayana, A. (17 August, 2018). Matrilineal society. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/matrilineal-society/Historical-views-of-kinship-and-matrilineal-societies>