

## CHAPTER-4

### **Employer-Domestic Worker Relationship: Unfolding Spatial Intricacies in the Work**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In continuation with the previous chapter, this chapter examines further on the structure of paid domestic work in the ‘contact spaces’ (Nare, 2014) of middle-class homes. While, class hierarchies continue to be an overarching aspect in governing domestic work relationship in these spaces, the chapter additionally focuses on the related dimensions of ethnicity, religion and gender, and their interplay in shaping the everyday employer-worker relationship. This has primarily been comprehended from employers’ perspectives. Nevertheless, the chapter in part also underscores the perspectives of domestic workers towards employer perceptions and practices of segregation which unfolds in a space, where the boundaries of distinction are highly permeable.

The first section of the chapter discusses the anxieties of employers in light of blurring ‘class distinction’ with their domestics. This most commonly find reflection through employer accounts of the upward mobile lifestyles of the part-time domestics in the form of symbolic practices emulating the middle-class. Employer anxieties are also reflected in the form of domestic threat posed by their lower-class domestics. This becomes evident when all the employers commonly accentuated ‘honesty’ as one of the most important quality they sought for in a domestic. In this, the chapter examines the class representation of domestics as potential ‘threat’ in middle-class households and the varied measures adopted by employers’ in containing this perceived ‘threat’. The second section of the chapter analyses employers’ preferences and prejudices, and, discusses their concerns in relation to ethnic, religious and gender dimensions in recruitment practices. It reflects that prejudices of the employers’ are partly influenced by social attributes of each category of domestics, and partly by their (employer’s) perceived and socially constructed needs. The third section of the chapter discusses the quotidian practices of segregation which influences the domestic work relationship in the research site. This section highlights that, the discourse of ‘difference’, in the relationship cannot be determined by a single pattern; rather it is a complex interplay of multitude social dimensions of class, caste and religious identity of each domestic worker.

## 4.2 Transgressing the Class Boundaries: Reflections of Class Anxieties

As discussed in the previous chapter, 'class' occupies a central factor in paid domestic work, which determines the everyday work relationship between employer and their domestic worker. In this, the construction of the identity of 'other' in the relationship is developed in a close proximity of the everyday domestic sphere. While domestic workers entail the employers to reproduce their everyday class positions and practices, employers feel threatened when the class boundaries of these positions are transgressed by their domestics. This becomes evident when employers explicitly expressed their discomfort in changing aspirations of their domestics, in contemporary times.

One of the most common manifestations of this discomfort and anxiousness is reflected through the dress habits of the domestics. In this, the employers expressed their concern over the practices of the domestics to purchase clothes that are beyond their 'means'. This, they believed are reflections of the temporal aspirations of the working class, which stood in contrast to their lower class positions. An employer explains this as:

Maids today are very different. Their demands and aspirations are changing. They are very fast in emulating dressing sense of the higher classes. Frankly speaking, it astonishes me to see the maid of my neighbour getting dressed up tip-top to work. She comes up so well-dressed with a small handbag, held in her shoulder that, people at roadside will easily confuse her as someone who works in some office, rather than in people's houses.

Emphasising further on the changing aspirations of the domestic workers, another employer is heard saying:

...the maids today have their own clothing choices. They will not take whatever you give them as gifts. I was surprised to see my maid saying on my face that, she did not like the design of the *saree* which I bought as a gift for her from Delhi. She was explaining to me about her choice, what kind of quality, design and pattern of *sarees* she preferred to wear...And, on our next family vacation to Mumbai, she particularly came to me and spelt out that she wanted a sweater, the colour of which should be *akhah nila* (sky blue), as it will suit her complexion.

Similar sentiments of class contradictions arising from the differences in the 'class habitus' of domestic worker's is echoed by several other employers in this study. Notably, such contradiction and its related anxiety is not unique to Guwahati, as earlier

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scholarship has also highlighted upon this aspect (Tolen, 2000; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). This significantly reflects certain common human attributes and its associated class apprehensions across regions. Moreover, the concern of class contradictions in the work relations is not limited to the lives of domestic's, but it also includes their children. This widely found reflection through employers' notions of '*hi-fi*' sartorial choices of the domestics' children in contemporary times. As employers are frequently heard exclaiming: 'they do not look like servant's children!'. Notably, while such accounts of employers are reflections of their social and moral anxiety of blurring class distinction with their domestic workers, this at the same time hints at the fragility of class positions of the middle-class, where, in contemporary times, people from lower classes could easily join them by acquiring certain consumption practices (Fernandes, 2006; Dickey, 2016). In Madras, Tolen (2000) observed that 'modes of dress' appeared prominently in the (re)negotiation of class distinction between employers residing in the railway colony and their servants. Her study shows the employers unease, when they saw their servants wearing 'fancy' or 'showy' clothes to work, which prompted them to particularly instruct their servants to wear plain and simple clothes to work, in order to keep the class distinction intact in the work. Furthermore, Fernandes (2006) highlights the discomfort of the middle-class women in Mumbai, wherein these women commonly commented on the domestic workers practice of visiting beauty salons and adopting new-age fashion practices.

Considering the discomfort and anxiety of the employers with the domestic workers valuing the symbolic practices of middle-class, it is worth questioning as to: whether domestic work as an occupation in Guwahati has the potential of serving as a medium of class mobility for domestic workers? Are the anxieties of middle-class worth noting in this context?

Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that, studies elsewhere in India has shown working class people climbing up the class ladder. For instance in Madurai, Dickey (2016) showed how the daughter of a poor high-caste bicycle rickshaw puller managed to climb up the ladder to lower-middle class status through her higher education and cultural appropriation. But Dickey argues that, such class mobility should not be seen as an individual accomplishment, rather in case of poor working class people it involved the joint efforts and support of the entire family members (ibid, p. 57). However, in the context of the present study, the fear of the middle-class employers, seemed somewhat

exaggerated as they failed to consider the over-all ‘being’ of a domestic which hinders their upward class mobility to match the employers stature. In other words, the domestics lacked the combination of capital- economic, cultural and social- which play crucial roles in class mobility for any individual. Moreover, Bihari domestic workers in this study also formed a part of the intergenerational employment, which further accentuates the viciousness of their lower class positions, while the Miya domestic workers formed the part of rural landless migrants in Guwahati, thereby, hindering their process of class mobility.

### 4.3 Domestic Threat and Class Representation

‘Trust is the most important thing in domestic service’, declared an employer when the researcher introduced the research topic to her. And, this was not surprising, as similar sentiments have been echoed in several other employer interactions during the fieldwork.

‘Home’ being the employers’ private space enabled them to be careless with their valuables, yet, this carelessness is widely perceived to be their vulnerabilities. This is particularly because the domestics coming to their houses are entitled to a direct access in to their lives. Moreover, the manifestation of employers’ vulnerability typically get reflected when most of them are frequently heard commenting: ‘my diamond ring was missing from the house after she started working at our place’; ‘These people cannot be trusted with money’; ‘I never found my silk *mekhela sador* from the day she left work at my place’; ‘She took my daughter’s favourite scarf’. Such perception of employers naturally contributed in buttressing the domestics’ as people enticed with ‘greed’.

However, the connotation of the term ‘greed’ is not simply associated with domestics’ temptation of removing material possessions from employers’ household space. But, it also had symbolic implications, as several employers’ retorted: ‘we follow utmost care regarding what we discuss in our maid’s presence’. Intimate information related to family matters are strongly guarded from the public eye, as it enabled middle-class employers to maintain an impression about their family’s social position. But, this very impression starts crumbling when there is slippage of any delicate family affairs through the medium of their domestics. As Dickey observed:

Family reputation is a key factor in securing prestige and honour. One of the greatest threats to reputation is the information that servants pass on to other servants and households they work in (Dickey 2000b, p. 473).

It is significant, however that the propensity to blame domestics with theft and other related delinquent behaviour is nothing new to domestic service. It has been in practice since colonial times when domestic workers started constituting as an essential component for middle-class households. The typecasting of domestic workers nature gets widely reflected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic manuals as:

They (servants) were considered incapable of taking responsibility, and always susceptible to potential slippage- committing crime, bypassing orders or engaging in some other forms of wrongful activity. Thus, the servant remained an object to be controlled, disciplined and punished, but with temperance and love, under the aegis of middle-class paternal authority (Banerjee, 1996, p. 10).

This reflects that the distrust towards domestic workers has been a common aspect amongst employers', both in earlier as well as in recent times. But, why are domestics in contemporary times considered as a threat in the middle-class households? How does the employer mitigate the domestic threat in their households? These are certain pertinent questions which influenced the domestic labour relationship in the present study. The following section examines these issues.

### **4.3.1 Why are Domestics Considered as a Threat?**

#### **4.3.1.1 Attributes of Reliability: Between Part-time and Full-time Domestics**

Although, employer rhetoric of domestic threat has persisted since earlier times, the propensity of this has become more pronounced in recent times. While, this becomes evident from the existing scholarship on domestic work in India (Dickey, 2000b; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Sharma, 2019), the researcher's discussions with employers in Guwahati also underscores a similar understanding.

Employers' in the present study invariably propounded 'reliability' as one of the most sought after quality they look for in their domestics. This becomes more pronounced in light of the contemporary nature of part-time domestic work, which is essentially a short-lived relationship. In this, several employers are seen drawing comparisons of part-time domestics with domestics of the past, predominantly comprising of live-in domestics with long years of association. Their comments entailed a deep sense of nostalgia when they recalled the sincerity of domestics of the past. An employer explains it as:

Earlier we had many servants. Growing up in the tea gardens, we were mainly served by girls from tea-tribes. To be honest, we grew up under the care of these servants. None of them had the habit of stealing. If they found anything out-of-place, they used to give it back to us. They were very trustworthy. But now, time has changed. Such workers are hard to find. We are required to adjust with the part-timers, who cannot be trusted. Being watchful of their activities has become a necessity.

In nostalgically remembering her childhood domestic, the employer's testimony expresses her apprehensions with the change brought along with part-time domestics: 'who cannot be trusted'. Although, the part-time domestics entailed middle-class employers in achieving their class status in contemporary times, as discussed in previous chapter, it at the same time is perceived as a source of their vulnerability. Working in multiple households, the part-time domestics enjoy a relative independence over live-in domestics, which do not bind them under the control of a single employer. The transgression of multiple household boundaries by part-time domestics is particularly viewed with suspicion by employers, as it increases the risk of removing valuable belongings from the protected space of the home (Dickey 2000b: 473). Clearly the mixing of protected valuables- material and symbolic- with the outside world served as an expression of threat to employers (ibid), as also suggested in the above section. In this light, the findings of the present study corroborates with Ray and Qayum's observation:

Given the wealth of intimate information that servants have about the families for whom they work, the employer desire for loyalty should come as no surprise. (Ray & Qayum 2010, p. 105)

Existing scholarship on domestic work in India (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011), has noted that employers' anxiety and relative yearning for 'loyalty' or 'reliability' are particularly manifested by: Firstly, on the grounds of recruitment practices, wherein the servants in contemporary times are primarily recruited through servant and neighbourhood network, and secondly, due to the influx of labour migrants to domestic work, which impeded employers from knowing the actual place of residence of their part-time domestics. This has therefore, contributed to the perception of domestics as 'strangers who enter the home' (Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 107). From this, it could be argued that, the lack of general information over part-time workers' background typically contributed to employer anxiety in contemporary times.

However, one should be wary of drawing overarching conclusions of part-time domestics as a domestic threat. Although, it appeared that with part-time domestics the propensity of employer's anxiety about theft and other potential dangers are central, but, most employers in the present study, at the same time are equally seen voicing their anxiety for full-time live-in domestics in present times. One such employer is Anita, living with her husband and seventeen years old son. Working as a school teacher, she has been hiring part-time domestic for more than a decade, for reasons related to security:

In the past full-time domestics worked under me. They were meek and very grateful towards their employers. But, now, the service of full-time domestics can no longer be trusted. Their minds are sharp and are too intelligent for the work. They will stay at your place for a week or month, and then suddenly, they declare that they no longer want to continue. It causes great risk to the household as a whole. So, now, I prefer part-time domestic over the ones who stays 24\*7 at home. They will come, work and go. The privacy of your house is intact. But, when there is a full-timer around, you need to be mindful of your actions. Your freedom in the house is curtailed with their presence. They observe and listen to everything. Every aspect of your life is revealed to them. This increases the chance of theft, dacoity and other crimes. So, I do not prefer keeping a full-timer in the house.

The perception of full-time domestics as being an equal threat to their middle-class homes is also reiterated by several other employers in this study. On the one hand, they are seen mourning about the disappearance of docile and faithful full-time domestics of the past. On the other hand, they are seen accommodating the changes brought in with the 'not so reliable' part-time domestic arrangement. Contrasting the limited hours of stay of a part-time domestic at employer's house each day with that of a full-timer, the employer in the above narrative opined that the risk of domestic threat is less with part-timers. This in turn, entitled employer's the freedom of their being, as it required them to be cautious of their actions only for a decent time in the presence of their part-time domestic. Whereas, in the context of full-time domestic, this is a distant possibility: 'Your freedom in the house is curtailed with their presence'. Moreover, the observance of the minute details of employers' lives is believed to give an upper hand to full-time domestics for potential theft and criminal acts, thus, rendering to employers' vulnerability.

### 4.3.1.2 Rendition of Domestic's Crime

Although, employers in the present study unanimously spoke about missing attributes of 'reliability' in domestics of contemporary times, most of them did not have any first-hand experiences of theft or related misdemeanour. It is observed that, their perception of domestic threat is peculiarly influenced partly by media reports and partly by stories of crime against known acquaintances.

In recent years, the role of media in disseminating information to general public has become more pronounced with the increasing use of smart phone and social media. Information happening around the world is at people's fingertips which has enabled them to be aware of their societal problems. For the middle-class employers' in this study, one such problem is related to domestic crime committed by domestic workers. According to the 2011 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in India, every year more than 700 criminal acts are committed by domestic workers in residential premises and the most common offences are theft, murder and kidnapping<sup>1</sup>. It is widely held that the causes of servant crime are due to: huge disparity of incomes between employers and their domestics, which lures the domestics' desperation to steal valuables and get rich; and secondly, it is related to the spurt of seeking revenge from violent employers (*The India Today*, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2011). Such accounts of servant crime often reflected the vulnerability of employers, in which domestics are categorically represented as threats, and accused of duping gullible employers, even before trial of their cases (Mattila, 2011). This typically manifested as a nightmare in several employer narratives in the present study.

Moreover, as per the NCRB data of 2019, Assam is one of the topmost Indian states where highest number of cases related to crime like theft, burglary and robbery has been reported, though, the registration of crime by domestics appears to be minuscule<sup>2</sup>. One reason for this can be inferred as the under-reporting of such crimes by employers themselves, which contribute towards misrepresentation in national data. Although, reasons for this under reporting can be varied from individual employer's perspective, but, in most cases the incidents of thefts narrated by them appeared to be 'petty without a

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/nation/story/20110124-servants-turn-killers-745579-2011-01-15>  
Retrieved on 25.09.2021.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.guwahatipius.com/guwahati/rise-of-theft-cases-in-guwahati-concern-citizens-regarding-police-effectiveness> Retrieved on 25.09.2021.



definite proof against the domestics' (Dickey, 2000b; Mattila, 2011). And, reporting such cases to authorities is commonly perceived in contributing towards maligning their image as employers in front of their class peers. Besides, as discussed earlier, middle-class home being representations of a protected space is closely guarded from the outside world, this also in a way, contributed to under-reporting of matters related to thievery<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, the spectre of an 'unreliable domestic' also haunted the middle-class employers of the present study through tales of their known acquaintances. One such tale is shared by Kalpana:

My husband's colleague used to do his monthly grocery shopping in the 1<sup>st</sup> of every month. He started noticing that rice and lentils used to fall short, for consecutively three months. And, he was required to buy it twice in every month...We generally have an idea when we buy things and for how long things will sustain. So, it acted as an alarm for him, and he installed a CCTV inside his house. The scene he saw blew away his mind. Leave aside stealing rice, lentils and other such petty things. But, more than that, the dangerous crime committed by his part-time maid was that, she was feeding them rice cooked with her urine. She used to take a glass, urinate in that, and mix it in the pressure cooker. Not only that, she used to pour drops of her urine in the drinking water jugs too. It was all recorded in the camera and the footage was seen by my husband.

The particular incident had been sufficient for Kalpana and her family members in typecasting all domestics as a 'threat'. But, what struck the researcher is when she said that, the matter was not reported to local authorities, despite being a serious offence by the domestic. Similar incident has been shared by another employer, wherein, the domestic used to feed *jootha* food to her employer, in the form of sipping water or tea before serving it. In such situations, the most common mechanism resorted by

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<sup>3</sup> However, reports of crime like murder committed by domestic workers do not escape the public scrutiny. In October 20, 2021 people of Guwahati woke up to the news of murder of an elderly couple residing in the Beltola area of the city. While the domestic worker who was residing with the couple, along with his wife and two daughters since the past several years confessed to the murder, the reasons for committing the crime was not disclosed to the media by the police authorities <https://www.sentinelassam.com/guwahati-city/beltola-double-murder-case-prime-accused-akash-choudhary-confesses-murder-560982> Retrieved on 2 November, 2021. Nevertheless, through the word of mouth, it became a central discussion topic amongst the public that, the elderly man molested the wife of the domestic, for which the crime was committed. Interestingly, this was not revealed by the police authorities, thereby, whitewashing the image of the elderly man, and portraying the domestic as the serious offender of the crime. This reflects that, in the context of paid domestic work, the 'threat' in a household space is a double-edged sword. However, class inequalities manifested in the society are more oriented towards highlighting the vulnerabilities of employers, in cases related to the Beltola incident.

employer's concerned was 'dismissal' of the domestic from work. From this it can be argued that, matters related to the above incidents are equally delicate like sexual misdemeanour (as we highlight in later part of this Chapter), as it has the potential of inviting unwarranted ridicule to the family, amongst their class peers. A similar scene was depicted in the novel *The Help* by Stockett (2010), in which a black maid served a pie baked with her 'shit' to her white mistress. And, when the incident was out in public, it became a cause of the mistress's ridicule not only amongst her class peers, but, also amongst the class of black domestics. However, the only difference between the novel and the above narrative is that, the pie was baked in the domestic's house, and, in the above narrative, the food was cooked in the employer's house itself.

#### 4.3.1.3 '*Miyas are dangerous*': Ethnic Typecasting of Domestic Threat

In Guwahati, most of the employers' talk of class mistrust and anxiety is further combined with ethnic stereotyping. For instance, the 'Miyas' are mostly described as 'unreliable'. This becomes evident from the popular verbatim in the field: 'Miyas are dangerous'. However, it is noteworthy that, when most employers quoted the word 'dangerous' to describe the Miya domestics, it is not simply associated with threat related to domestic sphere, but, threat that Miya community in general poses to the Assamese society. Das noted that this societal perception for the Miya community in Assam is both realistic and symbolic (Das, 2016, p. 37). It is a realistic threat when it is related to loss of economic livelihood of the native population, and symbolic threat when the values and worldviews of native population get affected (ibid). The members of the particular community mostly engaged as informal labourers in Guwahati, is typically categorised as dangerous criminals (ibid).

Notably, this typecasting in large part is associated with the historical context of the Miyas in Assam, which is further manipulated in varied ways by some hyper competitive news channel and newspapers, with headlines reading: 'Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants are posing a grave threat to Assam's social milieu'<sup>4</sup>; 'Bangladeshi Muslims in Assam have criminal tendencies'<sup>5</sup>; "'Oust Bangladeshi" cry over spurt in crimes against women'<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup><https://swarajyamag.com/politics/illegal-bangladeshi-migrants-are-posing-a-grave-threat-to-assams-social-milieu> Retrieved on 26.09.2021

<sup>5</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Uyxjx6ENKU> Retrieved on 26.09.2021

<sup>6</sup><https://www.guwahatipius.com/guwahati/oust-bangladeshi-cry-over-spurt-in-crimes-against-women> Retrieved on 26.09.2021

Such representation in media not only influences what we think, but also how we think, as media plays a central role in (re)producing public discourses (Das, 2016). Moreover, such reports in the public forum get complemented when similar sentiments are held by the authorities of the state. In this, the most noteworthy comes from the present Chief Minister of the state, who reiterates that in Assam crimes related to rape, theft, rhino poaching, drug menace, land encroachment are mostly committed by the Miyas<sup>7</sup>. Arguably, it is from the vantage of such viewpoints, that the cultural bias against a particular category of ethnic group strengthens the public imagination of ‘threat’ posed by the group in general.

Moreover, the ethnic slurring against the Miyas has been a part of Assamese society since pre-independence days, which intensified during the years of Assam movement in 1980s, as discussed in Chapter 2. In recent years, stereotyping of the particular community has become alluring with strong fervours of Assamese sub-nationalism, with state imposed processes like National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). In this light, the researcher was not surprised when some employers in this study shared stories about ‘dangers’ posed by Miyas in general, and Miya domestics in particular. As an employer explains:

These miyas cannot be trusted. Whatever crime happens, you will always find the culprits to be some Ali, Hussain and the like. With their increasing number, the rate of crime has increased manifold. They send their women to work as maids. And on the pretext of working, they come to your place and then loot you. These people are too poor compared to other communities, so they do not think twice before committing crimes like theft, robbery and dacoits.

Largely, fuelled by media coverage and political narrative of the state, the employer’s testimony reflects the inextricable links between class and ethnicity while portraying the Miya domestics as ‘unreliable’. Furthermore, there are also employers’ who widely believed that Miyas operate in ‘gangs’ and are dangerous for their middle-class households. One such employer is Ajanta who shared an incident which occurred three years back, in order to substantiate her stance on ‘Miyas are dangerous’. She recalled the incident, wherein a Miya part-time domestic in her mother-in-law’s house, robbed her after mixing sedatives in the tea. Her mother-in-law lied unconscious on the floor for

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/miyas-are-a-threat-to-assam-s-culture-and-identity-bjp-s-himanta-biswa-sarma-1787104-2021-04-04> Retrieved on 26.09.2021

about an hour, before she was spotted by her grandson, whose family resided on the floor above her. Reiterating the common perception held amongst the Assamese people in general, she concluded the discussion by saying: ‘The Miya gangs operate through well connected networks. Although, a case was registered in the police station, but the police could not get hold of anyone’.

Ethnic typecasting of domestic criminals is however not unique to Guwahati. The infamous Arushi Talwar murder case of 2008 in the national capital is a living example to the present day. The police authorities did not spend much time in announcing the Nepali live-in male domestic as the accused, on the pretext of him being missing from the house. But, things went topsy-turvy when the domestic’s body was found lying in a pool of blood from the apartment terrace, on the very next day of the girl’s murder. This led to a huge uproar where Nepali labourers and domestics in the national capital took to the streets and protested against the ethnic typecasting they are subjected to each time a crime occurs. To quote a Nepali domestic taking part in the protest<sup>8</sup>:

We become prime suspects every time there is a crime in the house or neighbourhood we work in. We are poor people trying to earn a living with dignity. Is it fair to suspect us without evidence?

#### **4.3.2 Mitigation of Domestic Threat**

D: I prefer part-time domestics, because I cannot take the responsibility of full-timers. The concern of security is more.

Researcher: But, the same reliability issues hold true in terms of part-time domestics as well?

D: Yes, of course! That is why I do not prefer changing my part-time domestic. The one working for me is here since 2010. What information will she share with others, if she has not in all these years? Now, a few days back while I was waiting near our building gate, a lady approached me seeking for work. She said that she will produce all her documents to me. But, that does not make her reliable. She seemed to be quite ‘pretentious’. You cannot really take any one from the roadside, she could be an informer.

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna25083907> Retrieved on 26.09.2021.

Certainly, opening of one's intimate and protected spaces of the 'home', to people not related to family makes one feel anxious and vulnerable. From this perspective, the concerns of employers' related to issues of 'reliability' and 'honesty' amongst their domestics appears to be justifiable. As already discussed, such concerns has become more pronounced in recent years, partly because of transition of the nature of the work to a part-time arrangement and partly, due to waning of 'loyalty'<sup>9</sup> amongst domestics in general. But, employers' at the same time are seen accommodating changes in order to mitigate potential 'threat' elicited from their domestics.

One such way as reflected in the above testimony is by establishing long-term association with part-time domestics, as they appeared to be a predominant arrangement in most middle- class households of this study. Several employers' believed that, a long-term association with part-time domestics, particularly those whom they believed to be 'trustworthy' enabled security of their home. Employers are typically seen establishing this long-term work association with their part-time domestics through disposition of a 'maternal' behaviour. This becomes evident when several employers are frequently heard commenting: 'I believe in giving love to my domestic'; 'Whenever, she is in need, she comes running to me'; 'Be it anything, taking her child to doctor or paying her medical expenses, she gets help from me'; 'She has all the freedom in my house'; 'In times of her crisis, she gets advance payment from me'. It reflects that by disposition of behaviour as embedded in maternalism, the employers' are entitled to create an image of a 'good employer' in the eyes of their domestics. Moreover, this ensured continuity in work relations, and prevented any 'unwarranted worker behaviour' (Mattila 2011, p.176) in the employer's household space. Indeed, 'charity' as a form of social control has also found reflection in Scott's (1985) study amongst Hindu peasants in Malaysia. The landowners were explicit in their discussion which reflected that, despite their awareness of the poor labourers lying and stealing from their fields, they had to continue giving them alms, in order to control the acts of further stealing in them (Scott, 1985, p. 11)

Furthermore, in Guwahati security concerns are also governed by whether an employer hired a full-time live-in or part-time live-out domestic, as the above section as well as the narrative above suggests. Resonating with Mattila's (2011) findings in Jaipur, employers

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<sup>9</sup> In Kolkata, Ray and Qayum observed that the meaning of servant 'loyalty' is idiosyncratic in the history of big houses of the past, where: 'loyalty is not diminished by petty thievery, but, rather, is characterised by constancy, fidelity, and the willingness to stand by the employer' (Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 106) .

in the present study held that a live-in worker in present times could be hired only when there is at least one adult family member in the house throughout the day. But, considering the nuclear familial set-up of most interviewed employers, such a possibility appeared to be grim, which shaped employer preferences for part-time domestics. Consequently, the five families seeking services of live-in domestics also said about never leaving their domestics alone in the house. However, it is pertinent that, even in terms of part-time arrangement, employers believed that their presence in the house is essential in order to keep misdemeanour of domestics at far. One such employer is Jogeshri, who strongly believed that domestics are always tempted to steal if they are left on their own. And as a safety strategy she always maintained a minimum level of surveillance when her part-time domestic is at work. For instance, by making frequent short visits to the rooms where the domestic is working, and on days when she is occupied with other chores, she asked her eight year old daughter to be vigilant of the domestic's actions.

But, exercising such vigilance and balancing work schedules with part-time domestics has been an extremely challenging task for dual- earning couples and single working women in this study. Yet, none are in support of their domestic working in their absence, except one employer who said about handing the keys of her house to the domestic<sup>10</sup>. Working as a school teacher, the employer has been staying alone since the death of her husband. Living in the large ancestral home of her in-laws, she says about being completely dependent on her part-time domestic, who has been serving her since a decade. But, she maintained that the bedroom, where valuables like jewellery and cash are kept is always locked, and is cleaned only after she reaches home after work:

My house is otherwise all open; it is only the bedroom keys that I do not hand it to her. She cleans the bedroom only when I am back from work. I hand over the house keys with great trust. If you do not show that much trust, people like us will not be able to sustain our lives. It is only when you show trust on them; they will keep that trust. Moreover, I believe if you treat your domestic with love, that person will never commit any crime. She will always be protective towards you.

The testimony reflects the paradox of domestic labour relationship, wherein, on the one hand, she establishes a relationship of trust with her domestic by allowing her to work in

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<sup>10</sup>In contrast to the present study, in USA, Romero's (1992) study shows the Chicana day-workers coming to clean the employers' houses only after they moved out to their respective workplaces.

her absence, and, on the other hand, she mitigates the potential domestic threat by locking the most intimate space of her home where valuables are stored. This, therefore, unveils the intricacies of domestic work relationship, where despite the decade long association she failed to reckon her domestic in position of trust. Moreover, her maternalistic inclination towards her domestic also signified the aspect of fear integral to the relationship, as she believed in treating the domestic with love ‘in order to feel protected herself’. Significantly, in the study, locking valuables in safe spaces of the home appeared to be one of the major control practices by all employers, in mitigating domestic threat. However, in studies elsewhere in India, scholars have also noted that exposing domestics to temptations by leaving money and valuables in open appears to be a crucial mechanism by employers, in order to test ‘reliability’ of their domestics (Dickey, 2000b; Mattila, 2011; Sharma, 2019).

Furthermore, stealing food is another threat which has been reflected on several occasions by the employers. While, some employers of part-time domestic shared tales of missing onions, potatoes, fish and other such raw food items, employers of live-in workers particularly stressed on missing cooked food from the kitchen. Nevertheless, it is the employers of live-in domestics who explicitly shared their control mechanism in this aspect. This can be best elucidated from Sudha’s testimony, who hired both a live-in and part-time domestic:

You see, she states, these people are very poor. At home they do not get good food to eat, so naturally they tend to steal food at our places. What I do is I feed the servant in plenty when they are new at work, in order to satiate their greed. This helps and their tendency to steal gradually disappears. I always make sure to feed them with the biggest and best of what we eat, that way you can control their habit of stealing and eating.

Significantly, although, employers’ overtly expressed their concerns of domestic threat, none of them considered it essential in verifying their domestics with the local police stations, as part of security mechanism<sup>11</sup>. Arguably, the process of police verification is

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<sup>11</sup>Newspaper accounts widely reflect that this appears to be one of the most significant measures advised by the police administration in mitigating potential domestic threat. Some other measures advised by the police are: installation of iron grills, door alarms, CCTV cameras, electronic door bells <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/nation/story/20110124-servants-turn-killers-745579-2011-01-15> Retrieved on 30.09.2021. However, in Guwahati, it is observed that as per the year of 2021, only five requests has been registered by employers for the category of domestic help verification under the Assam police <https://assampolice.assam.gov.in/citizen/login.aspx> Retrieved on 30.09.2021.

effective in terms of full-time live-in domestics, as in the case of part-time domestics this is not always feasible considering the flexible nature of their work regimes. Nevertheless, the researcher believed that, seeking identity documents of their part-time domestics could very well contribute in pacifying the anxiousness of employers, with regard to potential crime by domestic workers. Conversely, no employer in this study procured the documents of their part-time domestics. Moreover, the petty theft and pilfering of domestics perceived as ‘threat’ to their middle-class households are often mended by resorting to mechanisms like ‘dismissal’ of such domestics. This reflects the paradoxical safety concerns of employers, wherein despite perception of domestics as ‘usual threats’ in their protected spaces, the employers refrained from pursuing any legal recourse. Such overt mistrust and suspicion towards domestics generate questions like: how do the domestics negotiate the general perception of being potential thieves at their workplace? This has been explained in the next chapter.

#### **4.4 Preferences and Prejudices: Reflections of Ethnic, Religious, and Gender Concerns in Domestic Work Relationship**

##### **4.4.1 Construction of Ethnic Prejudices**

The employers’ characterisation of domestic workers on the basis of their race/ethnic background has been extensively dealt in the existing scholarship on domestic work, in transnational context (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Glenn, 1992; Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Constable, 2007; de Regt, 2009). Considering the ethnic categories of domestic workers, employers actively engage in practices of constructing their preferences, wherein some women are stereotyped as ‘ideal employees’ and ‘inherently suitable’ over others (Romero, 1992; Glenn, 1992).

Dovetailing with existing scholarship, in Guwahati, it is observed that ethnic background of a domestic served as an important determinant in employers’ recruitment practices. Employers’ in the present study are invariably heard expressing their prejudices against Assamese<sup>12</sup>domestics, thereby, deeming them as least preferable for paid domestic work. This essentially raises the question as to: why are the Assamese women considered unsuitable for paid domestic work? Who are the employers’ preferred categories of

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<sup>12</sup>Here, by Assamese, the employers mainly referred to the non-tribal Hindu people, united by a common linguistic identity, Assamese. It is an ongoing debate as to ‘who are the Assamese?’, as there is no clear definition on the term. But, in context of the present study, when the employers referred to as ‘Assamese’, they clearly meant only those who are from the non-tribal groups of Assam.



domestics? What are the factors determining the employers' preferences? In the following section we examine these issues in detail.

#### 4.4.1.1 '*Assamese domestics are too proud*': Subservience at Workplace

Assamese domestics' have an attitude problem. They think too highly of themselves, and are very proud. They do not like performing all kinds of work. As employers you are required to allot them only those tasks which they are willing to perform. – Abhalakhi, 45years

These Assamese domestics are very arrogant. Before starting their work, they have the tendency to say right on your face 'I will do only the fixed tasks. Do not expect me to clean your windows and do dusting'. You see, they stay in this imaginary bubble where they forget whom they are speaking to. - Ponkhi, 35 years

You need to be mindful while allotting any extra task to Assamese domestics. Their demands are very high; they do not hesitate or feel ashamed to ask for exorbitant pay for an extra task. – Molly, 50years

*Axomiya manuh khinik mur tita loga hoise* (I have started finding Assamese people bitter). They are too demanding, with a high wage rate. They try to extract more wages than the work that they actually perform. – Dipashri, 58 years

*Axomiya khiniye kunu kothate tol nopore* (An Assamese domestic will never bow down to a single thing also). They always try to make their point above us. I must admit, they have a very sharp tongue. – Sumi, 37 years

The above testimonies are a reflection of the perception of employers' towards Assamese domestics in the present study. Similar sentiments are echoed by several other employers during their conversations, wherein they anticipated a subservient behaviour from their Assamese domestics. As subordinate "others" in the employer's household space, domestic workers in general are expected to possess qualities of subservience. Subservient behaviour forms the basic fundamental requirement in a domestic work relationship because, 'it confirms the inequality and each party's position in relationship to the other' (Rollins 1985, p. 157). However, in context of the present study, employers' reactions towards Assamese domestics mostly appeared to be manifestations of defiance to such a subservient behaviour. In this, the Assamese domestics overtly negotiating their work conditions majorly acted as dismay for most employers. As Rollins observes: 'the personality of the worker and the kinds of relationships employers were able to establish

with them were as or more important considerations' (Rollins, 1985, p. 156). The domestics, are therefore, expected to convey a certain attitude toward the work, wherein, she displays willingness to undertake any assigned tasks, and express pleasure in serving (ibid). Arguably, undermining such acts of subservience by Assamese domestics' is seen as a deterrent by the employers, thus, fuelling ethnic stereotypes.

Presumably, employers' perception towards Assamese domestics can also be associated with the increasing variety of alternative ethnic categories of domestics in Guwahati. This enabled employers to make comparisons amongst various available categories, whereby, their preferences for one group resulted in stereotyping the other groups. Similar shifts in employer preferences of domestics, wherein, they actively replaced one community with another dominant community were also observed by scholars in other countries (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Constable, 2007; Lan, 2006; de Regt, 2008). In context of the present study, while, the Bihari<sup>13</sup> women has already been serving as part-time domestic since the past several decades, the Miya women as a preferred alternative category, is comparatively new. And, for live-in positions, employers' particularly expressed their preference for girls from tea-tribe communities<sup>14</sup> of Assam. From the vantage point of employers, women from the particular ethnic groups are attractive for domestic work because unlike, the Assamese domestics, they displayed outward signs of subservience. This gets reflected from employer comments like: 'Miya women are docile, 'A Miya or a Bihari worker does not argue on your face', 'The Miyas are intelligent, they will never do anything which offends you as an employer', 'The tea-tribe girls are hard working, quick learners and are quiet'. It is significant however, that displaying of a subservient behaviour is also used as a strategy by many domestics in satisfying the employer's desire for it, as Rollins (1985) has shown in her study with Afro-American domestics in United States. For the domestic, this yielded in attaining psychological rewards, as she enjoys the success of being able to fool her white employer (ibid, p. 169). Similarly, in the present study, during the group conversation conducted separately with Bihari and Miya domestics, several of them expressed consciousness in their acts of subservience, and commonly remarked: 'We need the

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<sup>13</sup>As they have been working as domestics in the study area for several decades, they were perceived as "too clever" for domestic work by some employers.

<sup>14</sup>The tea-tribes form a distinct population in Assam, and are descendents of the Adivasi communities like Munda, Santhal, Oraon and other mainland tribes from the states of Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, who were brought during the colonial times by the British-raj, for growing Assam's tea estates (Sharma, 2018).

money and they need our labour. So, mostly we avoid unnecessary arguments, and abide by what is asked, otherwise the loss is ours'. Arguably, their subservience towards employers appears as a 'protective disguise' (Cock 1980, p. 103), which entailed them in creating a positive outlook in the minds of employers, towards them, without jeopardising the work relationship. The aspect of subservience or deference as a strategy of resistance has been further discussed in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, it is significant that, in the case of a few Miya domestics, their display of subservience was more than monetary. These women particularly consisted of those, who mainly migrated to the city as labour migrants to earn a living. They mostly started off with odd jobs in public spaces of the city, mostly as construction site workers or as cleaners in roadside hotels. But, such jobs were perceived as insecure by these women, wherein they said about facing unwarranted sexual advances from male counterparts. In this regard, finding work in private space of employer's home as a domestic acted as a source of security for them, as they worked under women employers. Henceforth, in order to sustain their work as paid domestics, it can be inferred from their responses that, they had fewer difficulties in outwardly expressing their subservience at work. Several of them are also seen undertaking any tasks assigned to them, even toilet-cleaning, which they essentially considered as a low task. Various micro-level studies in domestic work in India have shown that workers who clean toilets are always from the lowest castes (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). Historically, non-Dalit workers have resisted assignment of tasks that are considered lower in caste hierarchy and hence polluting (Sharma, 2016a). According to Srinivas, in the colonial period, due to such resistances 'the British were forced to learn from the confusing array of castes and religion whom they could hire for what job' (Srinivas 1995, p. 7). In the context of present study, although, most Miya domestics shared their consciousness that, they are not sweepers to perform the task, their desperation to earn an income for living made them surrender to circumstances.

In Guwahati, in all the residential apartment buildings, sweepers are hired to sweep the yard, where they also cleaned the toilets of a few households. Nevertheless, during the interactions with employers, most of them shared that they either preferred cleaning their toilets themselves or asked their part-time domestics, particularly a Miya domestic to clean it, for which they paid an extra 50 rupees for the day. One employer is particularly heard praising her Miya domestic because she never hesitated to clean the toilet, a task

which she could not ask other workers to perform. On being asked why that is the case, she flatly responded: ‘Cleaning shit in people’s houses is associated with low dignity. And not all does such tasks. Even you as an employer will feel embarrassed to ask an Assamese or Bihari or a Bengali Hindu in that matter to clean your toilet. What if they get offended?’. Further, offering pragmatic reasons for her preferences for Miya domestics, she says that the Miyas are the best alternatives of *metors* (sweepers), as *metors* are too demanding: ‘They are always up to robbing you off, with an unimaginable rate. They will come to your place in the pretext of cleaning your toilets and while leaving, they will damage a part of your toilet, so that it leads to overflowing of shit, and you call them again. This way they get a chance to rob you again’. Miya domestics in this light are mostly perceived as ‘*chhalak*’ by employers, who ‘knows to keep their employer happy’. It is significant, however, that the usage of the word ‘*chhalak*’ here is not used in negative sense of the term, but, rather in a way of appreciating the domestics’ subservient behaviour at workplace.

#### 4.4.1.2 Negotiating Social Boundaries of Work

Employers’ ethnic preferences in large part are also shaped by the ways in which the domestics negotiated their social boundaries of work. Considering the unique nature of domestic work, where employers and workers meet as ‘isolated pairs’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994) in employers’ private space, both the groups build their own mechanisms in dealing with the inequality that characterises the relationship. Lan (2003) in her work in Taiwan highlights the various strategies resorted by Filipina domestic workers in negotiating boundaries with their employers. One such strategy is ‘highlighting status similarity’ with their employers. This is mainly resorted to by workers who see themselves as equal to their employers. For instance the highly educated Filipinas defined domestic service as skilled work and underscore its similarity to their previous working experience in Phillipines or they used English to communicate with their employers to show that they belong to the middle-class (Lan, 2003, p. 545). De Regt (2009) mentions similar trajectories in the Republic of Yemen, where Yemeni and Somali women found difficult to accept their positions as domestic workers based on their social, cultural and religious closeness with their Yemeni employers. In a similar vein, the Assamese domestics are perceived by employers as a category of workers who downplayed the inequality inherent in the work. This can be best illustrated from Nami’s

testimony, wherein drawing comparisons between her Miya domestic with an Assamese domestic of the past she explained:

Assamese domestics are always ready with a list of their personal problems. They do not know to balance their work and home. They bring their personal problems to work place. I am speaking from my experience. Like my previous Assamese maid, she was always busy with her phone during work hours, and that irritated me a lot. She being unmarried, and the only earning member of her house was always in the thought of her own problems. At times of emergency when I needed her the most, she was never able to turn up. But, with Noori (her curent Miya domestic) that is not the case. She is always available, although she too had her own set of familial issues. My point is that she knows to manage things. And, a good thing about her is that she lives alone in Guwahati, while both her kids' are in village with her mother. So, that really works. Moreover, Assamese people belonging to the working class are largely *aram bhal pua manuh* (leisure loving people). They have a lot of do's and dont's, and lack the basic respect in the relationship. Probably, they think they are the natives of Assam, so why bother people so much. This is the reason why the Bangladeshi Miyas are entering everywhere. They are better and sincere at work. They do not shy away from hard labour, which clearly makes them a preferred choice.

As it is observed, in addition to reinforcing the lack of subservience of Assamese women working as domestics, Nami takes one to several other reasons in constructing prejudices against Assamese domestics. In this, she goes beyond the domestic sphere by emphasising the attributes of working class Assamese people in general as: 'leisure loving people'. Similar sentiments are echoed by almost all employers in the study, wherein they commonly retorted Assamese domestics as 'lazy'. This is particularly done by contrasting them with Miya domestics who are believed to be 'hard-working'. Such categorisations are hugely influenced by fading social boundaries with Assamese domestics. Even though, class differences are intact in the relationship, the withering boundary in contemporary times is mainly associated in the context of them sharing similar traces of Assamese identity. In this, the main distinction appears to be between natives and immigrants, wherein unlike other ethnic categories, Assamese domestics endured the tag of 'natives' of Assam. This is perceived by employers in buttressing the self-conception of a superior status in the minds of Assamese domestics in Guwahati. Arguably, from employers' stance this acted as a negative attribution in the relationship,

as it provided the grounds for Assamese domestics in downplaying the inherent inequality: ‘Probably, they think they are the natives of Assam, so why bother people so much’<sup>15</sup>.

However, it is significant to note that employers’ preference for Miya women does not entail one to believe that they had a high status amongst domestic workers in Guwahati. On the contrary, they are required to confront regular prejudices on similar grounds related to the discourse on native vs. immigrants. For instance, the labelling as ‘Bangladeshi’ while addressing the group by the employer in above narrative is an example of deep rooted prejudices towards them<sup>16</sup>. It bears testament to common sentiments of the Assamese people<sup>17</sup> in general, wherein they failed to accept the Miyas as one amongst them, thus, stimulating adverse reactions towards the group. In the past, such adversity against the Miyas culminated in the form of ethnic clashes between Miyas and other ethnic groups in Assam<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, in Assam, the most common perceived notion against the Miyas is as, a ‘threat’ to Assamese society. The impressions of this ‘threat’ are also reflected through employer narratives in the context of domestic labour (as mentioned earlier), in which Miya domestics are perceived as ‘dangerous’ outsiders in the everyday contact spaces of employer’s home. While, the question as to why the Miyas are perceived as dangerous has been discussed in the first section of this chapter, here, the researcher intends to engage with the point that is relevant for the ongoing discussion.

Significantly, although, the presence of Miyas in the region draws severe public resistance, the present study reveals several middle-class Assamese employers being heavily dependent on them. In this light, those employers hiring Miya domestics are seen

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<sup>15</sup>As the discourse on the debate of native vs immigrants is beyond the scope of my study, it has not been further dealt with.

<sup>16</sup>The questions related to citizenship of Miyas have been an ongoing debate in the political scenario of Assam, dating back to the formation of Bangladesh as a separate nation, which aggravated during days of Assam Movement in 1980s. In recent times, in 2019 with the political processes of National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the apprehensions related to citizenship of the particular community is further highlighted in Assam. According to the official report of NRC published on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2019, 1.9 million people of Assam are tagged as illegal migrants from Bangladesh, of which people from East-Bengal origin Muslims constituted a substantial number (Punathil, 2022). However, as the issues related to citizenship and identity of the Miyas in Assam is beyond the scope of the present study, it has not been further dealt with, here. But, the historical origin of the Miyas in Assam and the labelling of the group as ‘Bangladeshi’ have been discussed in Chapter 2 of the thesis.

<sup>17</sup>Assamese people, here, signify the tribes, Hindus and Muslims united by the Assamese dialect.

<sup>18</sup>For example, in the past, the most violent ethnic clash was the Nellie Massacre of 1983 in Nagaon district (Assam) between the East-Bengal origin Muslim and the Tiwa tribe of Assam (with the help of Assamese Hindus) and the more recent episodes of violence are in 2012 and 2014 in BTAD areas of Assam with the Bodos (Punathil, 2021).

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mitigating the perceived 'threat' by monitoring the movement of these workers when at work. In addition to this, employers also adopt precautionary mechanism by recruiting a Miya domestic, only through their trusted network and recommendation.

From this, it can be inferred that Miya domestics are considered as a preferred category, albeit the stereotypes, because they entailed employers' in maintaining the unequal power equation in the relationship. They mostly accepted their inferior position at workplace, in relation to their employers, thus maintaining the status quo. Moreover, their socially distant positions from Assamese employers provided an easy ground for employers to establish a hierarchical relationship with them. The boundaries inherent in domestic labour, thus, do not get blurred with the hiring of the Miya women as domestic workers. This resembles to Hansen's observation that, domestic service 'can only operate smoothly when servants and employers are considered different from each other' (Hansen 1989, p. 7). From this, it could be argued that, although class differences are central in defining the hierarchical relationship in domestic work, the ethnic differences with their domestics, further contributed in buttressing the employers' superior position.

Furthermore, the significance of domestic workers other than an Assamese can also be attributed from the ways leave of absence is negotiated during festive seasons. This gets reflected when some employers emphasised in the context of Assamese domestics as: 'Just because you are Assamese, an Assamese domestic always try to take advantage from you. They keep asking for unnecessary leave for every occasion, every *puja*, *Bihu* and all other festival'. During the festive seasons the workload in each household increases manifold and in such situations the help from workers becomes a topmost priority for women employers. But, with their unavailability during such festive times, the burden of work falls on them. In this regard, households where religious affinities served as a significant criterion of recruitment, the preference of employers manifested in recruitment of Bihari women. These women, while being religiously close to their employers, are culturally distant (de Regt, 2009). And, they mostly take an extended leave, consecutively for five days, only during their *Chhath puja*<sup>19</sup>, which did not disrupt the employers' work arrangement at times of their own festive occasions.

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<sup>19</sup>It is a four day ancient Hindu festival celebrated by people belonging to the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, and is dedicated to Sun God. Married women mostly observe fast during this period for the well-being and prosperity of their family members. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lifestyle/festivals/chhath-puja-2021-significance-rituals-of-nahay-khay-kharna-four-day-festival-101636116509976.html>

It is pertinent that, although the above discussion illustrates multitude of dimensions in which stereotypes are constructed by employers', the main crux of employers' responses reflected their attempts to (re)construct stereotypes against certain categories of domestic workers depending on their ability to exert control over them.

#### **4.4.2 Muslim Domestic in Hindu Homes: Making Sense of Preferences and Beliefs of 'Pollution'**

In the present study, concerns of pollution in Hindu employers' households are widely reflected with the presence of Miya domestics who are Muslims by faith. Although, Miya domestics are preferred for domestic labour by several Hindu employers, the study reveals that, considering their cultural practice of beef consumption, they are perceived as 'polluted'. Such employer perceptions manifest in the form of certain overt practices of distinction against the Miya domestics in the employing households.

While, Muslims in general are considered polluting as per the traditional Hindu perception because of their cultural practice of beef consumption (Dumont, 1980; Butalia, 1998), in relation to Muslim domestics, perception of pollution was shaped by twin factors of beef consumption and their social class. An employer puts it as: 'The Muslims of the lower classes consume beef on a regular basis, as it is cheaper in price'.

##### **4.4.2.1 Pollution Induced Domestic Practices**

###### *Division of Domestic Tasks*

Here, it is pertinent to mention that, in addition to the Muslim domestics being specifically considered as 'polluted', domestic workers in general are widely stereotyped as 'polluted' or 'dirty' beings by employers. Earlier scholars have widely shown that such perception are primarily held, for domestic workers are people living in the margins of society (Dickey, 2000b; Mattila, 2011; Barua, et. al. 2017). This resembles Mary Douglas observation that, 'all margins are dangerous' (Douglas, 1984, p. 122). Influenced by such a perception, employers' in present study are actively seen engaging with practices of segregation with their domestics in general, as we will see in the next section of the chapter. However, here, I limit to the discussion concentrating on Muslim domestics, i.e. Miya domestics in the present study.

One of the manifestations of employer prejudices against Muslim domestics found expression at the time of recruitment. In several households, employers' are seen



negotiating the polluted status of their Muslim domestic, i.e. the Miya woman through division of domestic tasks. In India, food preparation has traditionally been considered as ritually pure, which should be cooked with pure hands. Douglas observes that in the context of India, ritual purity to the process of cooking is significant 'for food is produced by the combined efforts of several castes of varying degrees of purity...Before being admitted to the body some clear symbolic break is needed to express food's separation from necessary but impure contacts. The cooking process, entrusted to pure hands, provides this ritual break' (Douglas, 1984, p. 128). Drawing from this, it can be inferred that, considering the perceived impure status of Miya women, they are not hired as cooks in Hindu households in Guwahati, limiting them to tasks associated with cleaning<sup>20</sup>.

Nevertheless, in most Hindu households, they are assigned the laborious tasks related to cooking like cleaning of rice, grains, lentils, fish, chopping of vegetables and so forth, thus, reiterating the traditional perception of pollution not being transmitted through uncooked food. Arguably, this mirrors the idea of pollution which is testament to the ideology of caste pollution, as reflected in other Indian cities, wherein lower caste *dalits* are prohibited from handling cooked food, but, not uncooked food (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Mattila, 2011). Moreover, moving beyond the dichotomy of cooked and uncooked food, the study also brings light to the concerns of pollution in relation to the task of washing used utensils. There are employers who restrained their Miya domestic from washing utensils like *karahi* (a large round metal pot) and pressure cooker where main meals for the family is prepared. However, they are allowed to wash all other daily utensils used by the family. From the perspective of these employers', such practice of separation is considered essential for maintaining purity of the food to be cooked in these utensils.

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<sup>20</sup>Considering the active participation of middle-class families towards the fast growing culture of new spaces of consumption, in the form of food courts in malls (Donner, 2011), in addition to dine-in fancy restaurants, takeaway services and booming of online food delivery chains (Swiggy, Zomato), one might naturally argue that such division in household tasks stands to be self-contradictory. While, this could be partly true, as the identity of the cook in such spaces of consumption is not known to the consumers. But, it at the same time reflects the traditional beliefs of middle-class families where the boundaries between (*bahir*) public and (*ghar*) private domain are clearly pronounced. In this sense, there is a distinction between foods prepared in one's own home from those in restaurants. And, this, therefore, made concerns related to identity and pollution beliefs a potent factor while hiring a cook amongst middle-class households in the study.

### *Division of Domestic Space*

Another employer practice of negotiating the question of pollution from hiring of Muslim domestics is through division of their domestic space. In any Hindu households, the kitchen and *puja ghor* (prayer house) are the most sacred spaces. While, kitchen is considered as the abode of Goddess Lakshmi, the *puja ghor* consists of numerous idols and images of Hindu God and Goddesses (Das, 2008). Both the spaces considered as an embodiment of purity and holiness is strongly guarded from any forms of polluted contacts. In this context, the Miya domestics perceived as ritually impure beings are best kept away from these spaces. However, to be noted is that, although, the rules regarding inaccessibility of *puja ghor* are upheld by all the Hindu families in the present study, the accessibility of kitchen area varied for different families. While, several employers referred about their acquaintances who strictly kept their Miya domestics out of the kitchen, only one employer reported about the rule being in practice in her household. Married to a Brahmin family, she explicitly discussed about the age-old practices of pollution behaviour being followed by her mother-in-law. Recalling her days as a young bride, she said about her initial difficulties in adjusting to purity rules in her in-laws house. But, with time, she said about incorporating certain change into the family, with minor resistances from her mother-in-law. In this, the most recent change has been the induction of a Miya Muslim domestic into their house, which led to the construction of two separate kitchens under a roof, as she explains:

It was quite a task to convince her (mother-in-law) initially to hire a maid of different faith. But, thankfully, my husband intervened and things worked out. She loves her son a lot, and can never imagine of sidelining his words (*laughs*). That is how it worked out, and we hired Morjina (her domestic). She has been working since the past one year in our house, but, my mother-in-law does not allow her to clean her bedroom. She does it by herself. At first, she also imposed restrictions on the maid from entering the kitchen. This made things very tight for me. So, recently, when we renovated our house, we carved out a separate kitchen for her, adjacent to our kitchen. Now, the rule related to entry of kitchen is strictly limited to her kitchen. At times, I find it so funny when she asks the maid to wash her clothes. It is a sight to watch, after the maid washes her clothes, she rinses the washed clothes again by herself in clean water, before hanging it to dry.

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Similar sentiment of inter-generational differences in hiring a Muslim for domestic work is also reflected in several other employers' narratives in this study. What is particularly intriguing about these narratives is how it echoed a linear pattern, in describing the discriminating domestic practices of their older generations. For instance, the most common being the prohibition from hiring a Muslim for domestic tasks inside the house. And, in situations when they happened to enter the house, every corner which came in contact with these 'impure beings' are sprinkled with *tulsi-pani* (holy basil water), as a ritual of purification. Notably, while such practices formed an integral part of the earlier generations of these families, the employers exonerated themselves from similar discriminatory practices. Indeed, it is found that by recounting such practices of the past, these employers particularly affirmed their liberal and flexible approach towards their Muslim domestic worker in the present times. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, although, these employers sought to emphasise on their flexibility in hiring a Muslim domestic worker at the rhetoric level, they are seen reproducing certain symbolic distinction which bear resemblances to the practices of their earlier generations. In this, the most common distinction found reflection through their recruitment choices, when they expressed their disinclination in hiring a Muslim woman as cook in their kitchen. Moreover, in certain cases, in order to maintain the 'purity' of their homes in the public eye, employers are seen administering fictive Hindu name to their Muslim domestic workers, which have been discussed in the next section.

#### ***Administering Fictive Hindu Names***

Giving a fictive Hindu name to a Muslim domestic worker is a further manifestation of the employer negotiating 'pollution'. In the context of Kolkata, Ray and Qayum (2010) in their study emphasises a similar enactment of fiction in middle-class Hindu families residing adjacent to the areas of Muslim slums. Here, the Hindu employer and the Muslim worker create a fiction, wherein, despite the awareness of employer, the Muslim maid presents herself with a Hindu name, while seeking work, and, the employer in turn, chooses not to respond (Ray & Qayum, 2010). However, in the context of the present study, i.e. Guwahati city, it is different in the sense that, the employer's accessibility of domestic workers is not limited to Muslims, as Hindu domestic workers –both Assamese and Bihari women- has also been employed as domestic workers for the last several decades. It is a social fact as the study reveals, that the Hindu employers deliberately hired Miya Muslim domestic workers, and gave fictive Hindu names to their worker, in

order to avoid unwarranted ordeal from friends and extended family members. One such employer is Dipa, who explained:

In my mother's place, we have never hired any Muslim maid to work in our homes till date. We either had Bengali Hindu or Assamese Hindu working at our place. It was only here, in my in-law's place where I had experience with Muslim maids for the first time. Frankly speaking, when I was new to the house, I had problems with a Muslim working in the house, entering the kitchen. I was shocked to see a Muslim maid washing utensils of the temple (she says that with a raised eyebrow). But, when I came into this family, I did not allow them to wash the utensils of the temple; I used to do it myself. It was only from the past few years, I allowed my maid to wash it. In a way you can say, I have adjusted to it, more so because of the liberal attitude of my in-laws. You can say I have learned from them. But, I used to hide it from my mother and sisters back then that the maid serving us is a Muslim. They would have never come to my house and eat, if I told them. Even now, a Miya woman works for me, but, I have never let my mother's family know about it. Whenever, they are around during her work hours, I address Noori (her Miya domestic) with a Hindu name, and she has no issues with it. In fact, the best thing about Noori is that she does not look like a Miya. She has this dark complexion and wears a nose pin. She looks more like a South Indian. So, that really works, and if anyone from my mother's family inquires if she is of a different ethnic group, I simply nod my head. I do not go for any further explanation.

Much like Abha's narrative in the previous section, Dipa's narrative is also a manifestation of the significant changes she experienced in her in-law's house, upon marriage. However, while, for Abha, the Brahmin origins and rigid domestic practices appeared as a struggle, which in turn led to set-up of two separate kitchens under a roof, Dipa is seen accommodating to the changes she experienced. Nonetheless, her narrative suggests the carefulness in maintaining the perceived 'purity' of her home in front of her mother's family. According to the beliefs of her mother's family, the very presence of a Muslim domestic worker created the context of 'pollution'. This therefore impelled Dipa to 'distort the uncomfortable fact' (Douglas, 1984) of the presence of a Muslim worker in her home. The fictive story, thus, weaved in support of her domestic worker entailed Dipa to protect her home from being stereotyped as 'polluted', in her family's eyes. As Douglas observes, 'so long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous' (Douglas, 1984, p. 161).

Similar stories of giving fictive Hindu names to Muslim domestics are also echoed by several Miya domestics in this study. While, they are aware of the pollution concerns of Hindu employers which influenced such practices, they are at the same time seen being part of these fictions without any resistance, as we see in case of Dipa's domestic above. One such similar story is shared by Mojiron about her relative, who had to present herself as Meena from Toshiron Begum in the house of a Brahmin octogenarian. Since all his daughters are married and the octogenarian's house being adjacent to Toshiron's *basti* (slum), she was hired as a caretaker. She did all the household chores, from cleaning to cooking, and at night her son who is of 13 years, stayed with *bura*<sup>21</sup>. On being asked the reason behind the Hindu name, Mojiron immediately replied: 'if suddenly a visitor comes to their place, they might think something that a Muslim is kept as a caretaker. So, his daughters changed her name and call her Meena. There is no harm in it, as it is not her written name. Her name in the documents will still be Toshiron Begum'. Similar testimony is shared by another Miya domestic, Kulufa, about a 13 year old Miya live-in child domestic at her workplace in a Punjabi household. However, unlike Mojiron, she says in a resentful manner, about the transition of the young girl from Jaspina Begum to Minu, where the little girl is not allowed to offer her *namaz* (prayers). And, neither is she allowed interacting with Kulufa because they belonged to the same community.

Arguably, on the surface, such testimonies might appear as a representation of beliefs surrounding pollution concerns. However, concomitantly it can be linked to 'religious othering' in the context of paid domestic work. For instance, employer practice of giving Hindu names to their Muslim domestics is one such practice, which strengthens this 'othering', wherein prejudices against certain religious groups are re-established in society.

#### 4.4.2.2 Domestic Worker's Notions of 'Pollution'

Furthermore, religious preferences and its associated beliefs of pollution are also shared by the workers while choosing a workplace. It is observed that in comparison to employers, the workers, particularly the Bihari Hindu domestics, maintained a more rigid boundary in selecting their employers. While, their boundary making practices are

<sup>21</sup> The term was used by Mojiron while narrating the account. In Assamese, it is a casual, often derogatory way of referring to an elderly man.

guided by their own socio-cultural understandings of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’, social stigma against groups like Muslims continue to persist, just like the employers (Sharma, 2016a). This becomes evident when the workers expressed their astonishment to the researcher’s question, ‘Why the religion of employers matter?’, and they remarked: ‘Muslims eat cows! How can you expect us to clean their *jootha bartan* (used utensils) and house? *Sua lagibo amar* (We will be polluted)’<sup>22</sup>. There are also workers like Sumitra, who said about working in a Muslim household unknowingly. She said about working in the particular house for a week considering them to be Hindu. Cursing her situation of being deceived by the employer’s physical appearance she says, ‘Today most of the young married women refrain from wearing *bindi* and *sindoor*<sup>23</sup>, and we tend to get deceived. But the *paap* (curse) will not be on us, and it is them who will be cursed for keeping me in dark’. However, two domestics in their late twenties had a different perception towards working in Muslim households. They believed that purity can be maintained while working in Muslim houses by abstaining from taking any cooked food or water in their houses. While this resembles the notions of caste induced beliefs of pollution and untouchability on the part of domestics, this in large also reflects their agency in maintaining work relationship in consonance with the spaces of their work. In Turkey, Ozyegin (2001) observes the agency of Turkish domestic workers in selecting employers based on their economic positions, which in the long run could yield them with material benefits from employers.

The Miya domestics, on the other hand, worked in both Hindu and Muslim households. When asked about their preferences, a couple of workers said they prefer working for Hindus over Muslim employers. However, unlike the Bihari domestics in this study, their preferences are not shaped by the notions of purity and pollution. On the contrary, it is based on their religious closeness with Muslim employers. As a domestic says, ‘Our Muslim people makes us labour more, they try to take advantage because we are Muslims. So I stopped taking up work in Muslim households and try to hold on to my current work in Hindu households, under every circumstance’. The extraction of more labour by Muslim employers is echoed by several other Miya domestics in the study. The Miya domestics sharing same religion with their Assamese Muslim employers expect a

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<sup>22</sup>In a similar vein, Sharma (2016) observes in Delhi that Hindu workers had strong stereotypes against Muslim employers and their household spaces, based on their perception of living and eating practices of Muslims as ‘polluting’ and unhygienic.

<sup>23</sup>Bindi and sindoor are considered as markers of Hindu identity.

relationship where they are fairly treated. But to their dismay, they felt exploited and stereotyped in these houses. Why this was so? This can be partly explained as: The Muslims in South Asia are ranked in some kind of prestige hierarchy amongst themselves and in relation to Hindu castes (Vatuk, 1997 cited in Matilla, 2011), which validates their practices as employers<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, in the context of Assam, (this can be inferred) considering the historical background, the distinction between Assamese Muslims and Bengali Muslims of immigrant origin i.e. the Miyas appear to be stark, where the Miya people are often labelled as ‘illegal immigrants’<sup>25</sup>.

Taken together, the intersection of social dimensions of class and religion contributes towards a complex array of social hierarchies, which reflects that, domestic workers are not only subjects of inequality and untouchability, but as Sharma (2016) contends, they too, practice untouchability. This, therefore, implies that much like employers, the domestics end up ‘reproducing and contesting social inequalities’ (Lan, 2003, p. 526) within the spaces of their work, i.e. their employer’s home.

#### **4.4.3 Gendered Preferences of Domestics**

Boys, they are good for work outside the house, but, inside the house security is main thing.

The above comment by an employer echoed the sentiments of almost all employers in the present study, in expressing their preferences between a male and a female domestic. Male domestics are typically considered essential for tasks which are held to be ‘masculine’ like running errands, driving, gardening, and cleaning the courtyard and the like. But, their presence inside the employer’s house is highly held questionable. They are perceived as a ‘threat’ to vulnerable members of the employer’s family, particularly young unmarried daughters in the house. In this light, female domestic are considered as a source of ‘security’, for well-being of employer’s vulnerable family members.

While, such concerns of gender preferences is better suited for live-in domestic work, as part-time domestic work is predominantly performed by female domestics, as stated in the previous chapter. But, for most employers in the present study, there appeared a thin line between live-in and part-time domestic workers when they expressed their gender

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<sup>24</sup>As the stratification prevalent amongst Muslims is beyond the scope of my study, it has not been further dealt into.

<sup>25</sup>This historicity of the Muslims in Assam has been highlighted in Chapter 2.

preferences. This is primarily because most of them had experiences of hiring live-in domestics -male and female- in the past. Moreover, the reflections of these past domestic labour relationships also served as a significant criterion in most employer narratives, in determining their shift to a part-time domestic in present times.

Significantly, while, male live-in domestics, irrespective of their age are invariably perceived as a threat to daughters of employers' family<sup>26</sup>, those female employers who did not have young unmarried daughters also deemed them as least preferable. They are typically categorised as 'unruly', who could be handled effectively only by an adult family member, preferably a male. The only household of the collected data, who hired a male live-in domestic, is that of Nina's. Although, Nina had a grown up daughter, fears of unwanted transgression of boundaries of misconduct, on the part of their male domestic never bothered her much, as her mother-in-law is always present in the house. Moreover, along with this, her male live-in domestic had a separate living arrangement within their residential campus, and that acted as a shield in her case. This however, contrasted with the living situation of most female employers' in the present study. Moreover, in Nina's case, her family's association with their male live-in domestic has been for almost about fifteen years, which strengthened her 'trust' on him. Proudly, calling Pranab (the male live-in domestic) as her man-Friday, she says that his main tasks are to carry out the so-called 'masculine' tasks of the house, in addition to supervising the part-time domestic who came for sweeping, mopping and dusting:

I believe in having both male and female domestics to run a household. The qualities and tasks performed by both are certainly different. With boys you can easily send them in running errands at any hour of the day, and then they are good if you have dogs to look after. For all this, boys are very active. But, the same is not possible with girl live-in, as hiring them comes with a responsibility. You cannot send them anywhere and everywhere. We need to be very careful as employers. I must certainly admit that they are good in tasks related to cleaning the house; they perform it with dexterity, wherein these small detailing are missed by the boys. But, when nobody is around to work, the boys will undoubtedly perform all these tasks. I have seen that with Pranab (her male live-in domestic), when my part-time maid

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<sup>26</sup>Similar opinions were held by Ray (2000) and Mattila's (2011) respondents in Kolkata and Jaipur respectively, where employers did not prefer hiring male domestics if there were young daughters in the house.



does not turn up, he does all the sweeping, mopping and dusting of the house. He serves more as my man-Friday (*laughs*).

As observed from Nina's testimony, while, reiterating the dichotomy between masculine and feminine tasks in determining gender preferences of a domestic, she also takes us to the complexities of hiring a girl live-in domestic: 'Hiring them comes with a responsibility'. Responsibility here is indicative of the concerns related to security of girl live-in domestics. This responsibility bears resemblances to that of the security concerns of employers' own daughters, wherein a girl, in a patriarchal Indian society is typically considered to be most vulnerable between the onset of puberty and marriage (Dube, 1988). Significantly, much like the case of employer's daughters, this entails to protecting the 'respectability' of young unmarried girls in Indian society.

In South Asia, 'respectability' is a gendered construct which manifests in certain behavioural expectations on the part of women (Fernando & Cohen, 2014; Hussein, 2017). One such expectation is maintaining appropriate behaviour of conduct which is directly associated with family honour and desirable marriage prospects in case of unmarried girls (Mattila, 2011). For the young unmarried girls working as live-in domestic in wealthy households, protecting their respectability naturally shifts to employers' albeit partly, the moment they hire these girls. However, unlike responsibility of their daughters, this responsibility is 'unwanted' by the employers. This is primarily because any allegations of misconduct could bear undue consequences not only to the girl and her family's honour, but, also for the employer.

Most employers' explicitly shared stories of unmarried live-in girl domestics falling in love, and of elopement in the past, which bore consequences for them. One such instance is shared by Nina in the later part of the discussion, where, in recent past; her live-in girl domestic eloped with their neighbour's driver. And, this created much problem for Nina's family as they were directly held responsible by the girl's family members. To put in her words:

It is very difficult to get *ghorua* (homely) girls these days. The ones that are available are too smart for the work. They come to Guwahati and in no time they start having love affairs with male servants of the locality. And, as I do not have much time to run after them, I always asked Pranab (male live-in domestic) to keep an eye on them. He used to inform me everything. It was through him only I got to know about my last maid's affair with our neighbour's driver. When I confronted

her about the affair, the next day itself she eloped on the pretext of buying shampoo from the nearby shop. On informing her parents about their daughter; they created a *hungama* (ruckus) at my place. This also led to huge arguments between me and my husband, as he was very ashamed with the whole incident.

In this, the employer narratives suggest ‘dismissal’ as a common mechanism in terms of fear related to unwarranted transgression of boundaries, on the part of a live-in domestic. But, there are also employers like Berny, who believed in ensuring security and fulfilling their duties of a responsible employer, by imposing strict patriarchal ideologies of regulation like controlling mobility and behaviour of their live-in girl domestics. Berny, who had hired live-in girls until three years back explained it as:

...I always made sure to tell my networks (previous servants who worked in her house) to find girls who abides by my household rules. Once she is with me means she cannot go out freely and do whatever she wishes. If she wants anything she will ask me instead of getting it herself. These are the things I make clear at the very beginning. And, anybody willing to work should strictly abide by these rules. To be honest, I have always preferred maids who are younger; say below 17 years, so that they do not have eyes on anybody’s husband. The age group in between 18 to say 26 are a bit ‘*chulbulia*’ (flirtatious) type. They are problematic and risky to handle. Even the middle-age group is dangerous. So, if in future even if I keep a live-in domestic at work, I will hire someone who is either small or someone above 45 years.

Similar observations were made in Malaysia by Hierofani (2016), where the Malay employers exhibited various mechanisms to discipline the Indonesian migrant domestics in the spaces of employer’s home. This, she observes, even included altering the bodies of the domestics in the form of giving them a short hair cut, controlling their clothing, prohibiting them from wearing make-up or body care products. As all this is associated with feminine beauty and had the potential of attracting man’s attention particularly their husbands, the women employers typically considered it essential to regulate the gendered body of their domestics, through these mechanisms (ibid).

However, ironically, the concerns related to protecting the ‘respectability’ of girl live-in domestics in the present study appeared to be rather one-sided. Considering the peculiarities of paid domestic work, wherein the work is performed in employer’s private living space and the live-in domestics share this space with employers, it naturally aids to

the vulnerability of such domestics. But, the employers in the present study failed to reflect on this aspect. While, the female employers explicitly shared instances of love affairs and flings of their live-in girl domestics, which they recounted as part of ‘horror’ stories, they seldom spoke about the possibilities of unwarranted advances on the part of their own male members of the family. By reiterating their preferences for a ‘*ghorua girl*’, and those who are not ‘*chulbulia*’, employers ascertained the security of their own homes. But, this failed to address the potential misconduct which their husbands or sons might engage into, thus, contributing to vulnerability of the girl live-in domestic in such spaces of work. Gill noted this in the context of Bolivia, as:

The sexual harassment of domestic workers by employers’ husbands and sons jeopardized class-based notions of morality that white women were supposed to uphold. Sometimes white employers tried to shield young workers from the sexual advances of men by locking them in rooms at night or offering advice about men, which underscored their own subordination within the household. At other times, they quietly assented to male behaviour by looking the other way. (Gill 1994, p. 146)

In Madurai, Dickey observed that sex between servants and household members was intensely feared by the female employers (Dickey, 2000b, p. 477). Although, such fears were rarely discussed by them, it found expression through controlling the movement of servants in spaces like bedroom, where family is reproduced (ibid). Similar fears gets reflected through Berny’s testimony above, where she expresses her preferences for girl domestics of specific age category peculiarly because ‘they do not have eyes on anybody’s husband’. Whether she had encountered such unpleasant episodes in her household is a matter of conjecture, as she did not give any elaborate explanation on it<sup>27</sup>. However, this could be well inferred as a reason for employers’ preferences of part-time women domestics, which enabled them to manage their time schedule with the visit of their domestics.

#### **4.5 Practices of Spatial Segregation: The Discourse of ‘Difference’**

While, it is seen from the discussions above, certain degree of flexibility is witnessed in domestic work relations, the overriding perception of domestic workers in general being

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<sup>27</sup>In Dickey’s (2000b) study in Madurai, one of the employers believed that servants were influenced by ideas of love affairs with male employers from Indian movies, which in turn, were box office hits amongst the servant class.

‘different’ continues to hold strong amongst all employers in this study. And, this perception of difference typically reflects from the quotidian practices of segregation followed in the employer’s household space.

Although, the practices related to ‘spatial segregation’ in employer’s home, has been widely reflected in the scholarship on domestic work in India and elsewhere (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Dickey, 2000b; Lan, 2003; Muttarak, 2004; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Barua, et.al, 2016; Sharma, 2016a), the pertinent question is how do we make sense of this discourse of ‘difference’ in the context of Guwahati. According to Judith Rollins, spatial segregation in a domestic work relation primarily takes two forms: firstly, the unequal rights of the domestic and the employer to the space around the other’s body; secondly, controlling of the domestic’s use of house space (Rollins, 1985, p. 171). These forms find expression through certain unspoken rules that are internalised and reproduced by both employers and domestics, in the realm of everyday ‘contact space’ (Nare, 2014).

#### **4.5.1 Spatial Segregation Related to Sitting**

One of the most dominating rules related to the act of spatial segregation is the ‘politics of sitting’ (Ray & Qayum, 2010). This implies to the positioning of employer and domestic’s bodies in the contact spaces i.e. employer’s home. For instance, while, the employers sit on a higher position like sofa, chair or bed, the domestics never sit on the same position, thus, either sitting on the bare floor or a *mora* (a lower stool). This being a reflection of inequality deeply entrenched in the relationship; any defiance to it results in discomfort amongst employers. One such employer is Mahi, who puts it as:

The maids these days think very highly of themselves. For instance the one who used to work previously for us, you should have seen her attitude. The attitude with which she used to sit, with her legs crossed on the chair while having her tea. Frankly speaking, that scene used to irk me a lot. I just could not stop myself further, and after a few days of work I asked her to get the stool. And, that worked, she never used the chair again during the tenure of her work at my place.

The testimony is a manifestation of the embodiment of a hierarchical relationship, which entailed the subordination of domestics at workplace. Employers feel threatened when they see any negation to the well-established rules of domestic service, thereby,

demanding explicit reaction, as the case above<sup>28</sup>. However, to be noted is that such situations of negation appeared mostly as an exaggeration, as all the domestics in the present study, said about willingly enacting spatial deference related to sitting arrangement at employer's household space. Their consciousness to the employers' rules of distinction resonated with Ray and Qayum's study in Kolkata, where a domestic explained:

...As a rule, we don't sit on chairs in case somebody says something- it hurts our pride. In many houses they insult you which is why we don't do it. (Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 148)

That such practice did not entail any challenge from domestics is testament of the 'normalisation' of these rules of difference practiced on a regular basis. Moreover, it is also the domestics' sense of self-respect which prevented them from negating the particular unspoken rule in employer's house. This gets reflected from the fact that, even in houses where such avoidance practices are not followed, the domestics restrained themselves from bypassing the particular spatial boundary, by sitting on an equal position as employers. In this context, Meena Paswan, a domestic in her late forties shared her experience about a particular household where she has been working for the past fifteen years as:

*Dada* and *baideo* is very good. They do not practice any discrimination with me. They ask me to sit on their sofa and eat on their dining table. But, I myself do not like it; I prefer sitting on the floor only. I tell them that the floor is more comforting to me.

On being further asked why she did not prefer sitting on the dining table, she flatly says: 'They are rich people, will it suit if I sit with them in their same position?'. Though she reiterated that her employer's are good beings and she viewed the particular practice of her employer as a positive change, the consciousness of her class position impelled her to maintain a physical distance from them. However, this does not entail one to believe that Meena accepted herself as an inferior being in comparison to her employer. On the contrary, her deferential behaviour related to spatial arrangement of sitting can be inferred as a mechanism of protecting herself from unsought humiliation (Barua, et.al

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<sup>28</sup>In Mattila's (2011) study in Jaipur even the Bengali Brahmin domestics were explicitly directed by their employers to stay away from their sofa or bed, a practice which highlighted that the lower class identity of the domestics superseded their high caste identity.

2016). This becomes evident when in the later part of the discussion she says: ‘today if I start sitting on their sofa and chair, and tomorrow if for some reason they ask me to sit on the floor, I will not be able to take such an insult. It is better to avoid such situation beforehand’. This has been aptly noted by Muttarak as:

Perhaps domestic workers accept the status discrepancy and therefore avoid crossing the boundary; yet at the same time, since they have learnt that they are different and have accepted the fact, they attempt to negotiate their own importance and independence (Muttarak, 2004, p. 515).

#### **4.5.2 Spatial Segregation Related to Eating**

The rule related to sitting arrangement further converges with eating arrangement at employer’s home. However, unlike rules considering the act of sitting, in the latter, the rules are mostly pronounced explicitly. This primarily consists of rules related to where and when a domestic should eat their meals, what food is to be served to domestics and in which set of utensils. Although, these rules are predominantly applicable for the live-in domestics, as the part-time domestics spent only a few hours at employer’s place, it however, served as a powerful marker of subordination for both the categories of domestics. In the case of the live-in domestics it is observed that, they usually had their meals in the kitchen floor, and it was practically impossible for them to have it before their employer’s family<sup>29</sup>. For the part-time domestics, offering of food and tea appeared to be a practice only in a few households, as most older domestics are heard complaining about this lost aspect of ‘humanity’ amongst employers of present times.

Those part-time domestics who are served tea and snacks at workplace, mostly, said about having it either by hunching on the floor or on lower stools either in the veranda, living room, or kitchen. Nevertheless, the most humiliating experience shared by them is related to being served with stale food. This also included packing over-ripe fruits and left-over food for domestic’s children. While, this aspect is dealt in the next chapter; here the researcher highlight the point related to the topic under discussion.

Another humiliating experience with regard to segregation in terms of eating arrangement is food being served in separate utensils. Notably, in Indian households it is a common practice to use a separate set of crockery for people who do not belong to the

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<sup>29</sup>Similar descriptions related to eating arrangement has been illustrated in Ray & Qayum’s (2010) study in Kolkata, and Mattila’s (2011) study in Jaipur.

family (Barua, et al 2016). And, this includes both the lower class domestic workers and guests who are of same class position as employers. However, the difference emerges, wherein, guests are provided with the best crockery set, albeit separate, and domestics in typically worn out ones. Moreover, in order to keep this separation intact with their domestics, the employers are seen taking utmost care, wherein the utensils given to domestics are kept in segregated spaces and are washed by domestics themselves. Chigateri calls this practice of providing food in separate utensils to domestics in Bangalore as ‘symbolic violence’(Chigateri, 2007, p. 11).The underlying aspect of such violence is related to the assumption of domestics being ‘dirty’, despite them maintaining the cleanliness of employer’s houses (ibid).In the present study, it is mostly the Bihari Paswan domestics who are particularly vocal in the group interactions and expressed great offence in such practices of segregation, in which utensils used by them are kept either in the kitchen window pane or behind the gas cylinder. However, although, such practices- serving stale food and assigning separate utensil set- acted as a regular source of humiliation for all domestics, they refrained from any overt reaction. While, most domestics restrained themselves from eating food in such households, on the pretext of their work rush, only a few could overtly express their resistance. One such domestic is Radhia who shared her experience as:

...the practice of *sua-chuth* (untouchability) is high amongst the Brahmins. They follow a lot of *uporia niyom* (unnecessary rules) which I do not like, and that is why I mostly avoid taking up work in Brahmin households. In the past, I was working in one such Brahmin household, where I experienced it all. As I used to be in a rush to reach my next workplace, I never had time to have tea in this particular house. But, one day after her (employer’s) much insistence, I had tea. I did not see from where she gave me the cup, but, when I went to the kitchen to wash my cup and plate, she yelled at me, ‘do not wash there; do not wash there!’ Take some surf in your hand and wash it in the basin placed outside’. I felt very angry, she was asking me to wash the utensils in the basin where they wash their mouth and throw spit. But, I did not react; I washed it silently that day. The next day when she asked me to have tea again, politely, I said it on her face that I find it dirty to wash my utensils outside and, that in the next workplace I am fed plate full of *nashta-pani* (tea and snacks).

Furthermore, in addition to the practices of spatial segregation of sitting and eating, the discourse of ‘difference’ in relation to domestics at workplace also finds expression through practices like preventing domestics to use the same toilets as the employer’s, and

walking barefoot when inside employer's house. These practices are universally applicable to all domestics, however, only one employer who stayed in a rented house said about sharing the bathroom with her live-in domestic. But, this too came with a clear condition of distinction, as she explains:

I stay in this rented house where there is only one bathroom, so I and my maid use the same one. But, she has her separate mug, bucket, toiletries, and I strictly tell her not to use my things. Now, I do not know what she does inside. I can just live with the trust that she is not using my stuffs, and is following my orders.

### **4.5.3 Understanding the Discourse of 'Difference'**

Although, several employers in this study are rarely explicit when asked about the practices which acted as an indication of spatial segregation, yet, at the same time in a few interactions, employers justified their practices in terms of 'cleanliness' concerns of their domestics<sup>30</sup>: 'These people mostly suffer from internal ailments which are innate, and, they hardly share any details with us. They are also typically short on the factor of cleanliness. That is why, it is better to maintain some distance'.

Echoing on a similar note, Leena, an employer of a live-in and part-time domestic explained:

My daughter mixes a lot with these people (servants), and I don't like that. She will allow them to sit on her bed and use her stuffs. I tell her to maintain distance as it is a concern of hygiene. These people, you see, they do not follow any rules of cleanliness and are usually dirty... They mostly suffer from skin diseases which is highly transmissible. So, it becomes very much essential to draw the line.

By generalising the domestics as "these people", the employers here, put forth an argument wherein all domestic workers are perceived as inherently 'dirty'. While the conception of 'dirty' can be applied to a multiple array of objects, people and activities, which are in general negatively evaluated (Froystad, 2003), in the context of paid domestic work this negative perception towards domestic workers mainly emanates from the assumption that all menial labour is degrading and inferior. In this light, both paid domestic work and its performers are particularly considered as inferior as it is associated with 'personalised service' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016), comprising specifically of tasks which are avoided and stigmatised as 'unclean' by the middle-class employers.

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<sup>30</sup>Similar findings have been highlighted by Dickey (2000b), Mattila (2011) and Barua et al (2017) in their studies on Madurai; Jaipur; Mumbai and Chennai respectively.



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This, therefore, accentuates the employers' perception of domestics being 'unclean'. Furthermore, employers' overt concern on the aspect of domestic workers cleanliness also gets reflected from their daily physical hygiene rules. For instance, in case of live-in domestics (both male and female), this included giving them a short hair cut, ensuring they take bath and wash their clothes regularly. And, in one case, an employer boasted about feeding novomax medicine without a doctor's prescription, in order to internally cleanse the live-in girl. In case of part-time domestics, employers are seen ensuring spatialised physical cleanliness from the clothes they wear to workplace i.e. a neatly draped *saree* or *salwar kameez*; their neatly tied hair; washing of hands and feet immediately on their arrival.

Employers' concern of cleanliness has been discussed in great detail by earlier scholars on domestic work (Gill, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Dickey, 2000b; Barua et al 2017). In the context of Madurai, Dickey (2000b) noted that employers' commonly perceived servants as embodiment of dirtiness, who acted as a vehicle to transport dirt and infection into middle-class homes, thereby, jeopardizing the health of clean and vulnerable family members. While, such concerns about dirt, diseases and practices of spatial segregation are manifestations of traditional caste based notions of pollution, Dickey's (2000b, p. 476) study revealed that even the high caste domestics were considered as 'hosts of dirt'. From this, it could be argued that the perceived 'dirtiness' of domestics derives primarily from class prejudices, with reflections of traditionally held caste pollution.

Typically, in this study, as already mentioned, it is mostly the Bihari domestics belonging to the scheduled caste Paswan community who explicitly spoke about the observance of such practices of segregation in their employer's houses. This could be inferred primarily in the context of their caste supremacy in relation to the Bihari Basphor, the scheduled caste group predominantly hired as sweepers in the study area. This becomes evident when several Paswan domestics questioned the employer's practices of segregation, particularly of utensils to the researcher as: 'Are we sweepers to be treated that way?'. Arguably, while, their testimonies on the one hand are a reflection of the marked differences they embodied in order to distinguish themselves from those lower in caste, it at the same time depicted their struggle to manoeuvre their lower caste status, thereby, 'reclaiming a relatively high ritual position in the social hierarchy' (Sharma, 2016a) It is in this light, Radhia found it particularly degrading when practices

of extreme spatial segregation of a 'separate wash basin' was followed by her Brahmin employer. This unveils the 'inequalities that characterise the interactions not only between employers and workers, but also among workers' (Sharma 2016a, p. 55).

It is however, significant that, although such practices of segregation are raised by the Bihari Paswan domestics in this study; it is not exclusively reserved for them. From the employer narratives discussed above, as well as from first-hand experiences encountered in the field, domestics belonging to higher caste are also found to be subjected to similar spatial segregation. One such instance is observed in Dipashri's house, where the Assamese domestic belonging to Kalita caste<sup>31</sup> is provided tea and food in utensils kept separately in a lower compartment of the kitchen. Interestingly, both the employer and domestic in this household belonged to the Kalita caste. In this sense, it could be argued that the inferior class position of domestics has been instrumental in subjecting them to spatial discrimination on a daily basis (Dickey, 2000a, 2000b; Mattila, 2011; Barua et al 2016). Ray and Qayum observed this as:

...domestic servitude is a class relation rooted in extreme inequality and expressed through class distinctions that have been carefully nurtured and maintained over time. (Ray & Qayum 2010, p. 145)

In another striking instance in a different household, where two part-time domestics are employed- a Miya and a Paswan domestic- for cleaning and cooking respectively, the researcher was surprised to observe the difference in deliberate discrimination towards both the domestics. While, it was usual like in other households for both of them to have a separate set of utensils, the set used by the Paswan domestic is kept inside the kitchen, but, the utensils of the miya domestic failed to find a place inside the kitchen. It is kept outside the kitchen, in a rack which stood alone in a separate corner. It could therefore, be argued that, on one hand, this reflected the relative unequal positions of both the domestics in terms of their nature of work. On the other hand, it also reflected that their inequality is based on their religious affiliations, as discussed above. From this, it could be argued that, the practices of characteristic 'difference' in a domestic work relationship is an embodiment of a complex interplay of multitude social dimensions of class, caste and religious identity. And, this therefore, influenced the individual employer practices

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<sup>31</sup> Kalita is a forward caste in Assam, and, as per constitutional categorisation of reservation, Kalitas belong to the General or Unreserved category. Kalita represents a category in the tribe-caste continuum of Assamese society that is placed between the Keot on one side, and Kayastha, Ganak and Brahmin on the other [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalita\\_\(caste\)#Demand\\_of\\_reservation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalita_(caste)#Demand_of_reservation) Retrieved on 25. 11. 2021.

of segregation and subordination of domestics. Intriguingly, this can further be attenuated from Nina's testimony when she narrated about the discriminatory practice towards a Muslim labourer of the past by her mother-in-law. Considering his lower-class position and religious background, he was served food in a banana leaf in a space near the bathroom. But, with his son attaining higher education, and a better socio-economic position, there was a visible change towards his treatment: 'now, whenever, he visits us occasionally, he is given a seat on the chair, and is served food like all. It will be disrespectful to treat him like earlier times'.

Thus, it appears that the Muslim labourer could do away with the perceived idea of 'dirtiness' in Nina's house, with his relative enhancement of class position. But, attaining a similar situation is a rare possibility for domestics in this study, considering their grim chances of similar upward class mobility. Moreover, their ongoing association with stigmatised 'dirty' or 'unclean' domestic tasks in their employer's house also added to their disadvantage. And, for Miya Muslim domestics this is further complicated because of their cultural consumption of beef.



**Image 7:** *A domestic worker sitting on the kitchen floor of an employer and having her nashta (tea and snacks).*

## 4.6 Conclusion

The chapter discusses the significance of social dimensions of class, ethnicity, religion and gender in determining domestic work relationship in Guwahati. While, this has primarily been comprehended from employers' perspectives, the chapter also, in part, underscores the negotiation of domestics towards such employer perceptions.

In continuation with the previous chapter, where 'class' has been highlighted as a central factor in paid domestic work, this chapter further enhances our understanding on the class construction, and the identity of 'other', which is developed in a close proximity of the everyday domestic space. While domestic workers entail the employers to reproduce their everyday class positions and practices, employers feel threatened when the class boundaries of these positions are transgressed by their domestics. This most commonly find reflection through employer accounts of the upward mobile lifestyles of the part-time domestics in the form of symbolic practices emulating the middle-class like change in the sartorial choices of both domestics and the domestic's children, in contemporary times. Significantly, emerging differences in 'class habitus' of the domestics acted as a cause of social and moral anxiety on the part of employers.

Furthermore, class anxieties also found reflection through employer perception of domestic 'threat'. While, domestics in general are perceived as a 'threat' contributing to employer vulnerability, the findings simultaneously suggests peculiar ethnic typecasting of Miya domestics as 'dangerous'. This is largely influenced by wider societal perception of the community as 'dangerous', and partly due to their media representation in Assam.

However, feelings of vulnerability from such perception of 'threat' are not one-sided, as the risk of being projected as potential thieves is a major cause of distress to all domestics, as we will see in the next chapter. This feeling of vulnerability emanated from the same origin, like the employers, i.e. class stratification (Sharma, 2019). Nevertheless, negotiations of such feelings of vulnerability are strikingly different for both the groups. Owing to their superior class positions employers' are seen mitigating domestic threat by resorting to practices like establishing a long-term association with 'reliable' domestics by disposing maternalistic behaviour; keeping vigilance over the domestics when at work; locking valuables in safe lockers and so forth. The domestics, on the other hand, lacking any social, economic and political resources mostly worked in an ever-present fear of accusation (ibid).

The study further reveals that, the social dimensions of ethnic, religion and gender are equally important in determining domestic work relationship, which operates simultaneously in relation to class. This most commonly find reflection in the recruitment practices of employers, in which, employer preferences towards each category of domestics- ethnic, religion, gender- are particularly influenced by their preconceived notions and social attributes of each category of workers. The findings suggest that employers' prejudices of domestics of particular ethnic background perpetuated an 'ethnic hierarchy' (Anderson, 2000) amongst domestics, in which the Assamese women are deemed least preferable as paid domestics. Lacking particularly the qualities of subservience, Assamese domestics in general are negatively prejudiced as 'proud', 'arrogant', 'demanding', 'lazy' and 'hard-talking'. Moreover, prejudices against them are also in part shaped by their negotiation of social boundaries of work with their employers. One of the manifestations of such prejudices is through recruitment of alternative available categories of domestics in Guwahati. In this, the Miya and Bihari women displaying outward signs of subservience at workplace are considered as attractive domestics. However, they too are not free from prejudices. While, the Bihari domestics are perceived as 'too clever' for domestic work, considering their association as paid domestics in the study area for several decades; the Miya domestics are subjected to regular prejudices as 'Bangladeshis' at workplace. Widely held as 'Bangladeshi' in Assam, they are particularly perceived as dangerous outsiders in employer's household space. Yet, the study reveals middle-class employers being heavily dependent on them. This is primarily because they entailed employers' in maintaining status quo, in terms of unequal power equation in the relationship. Arguably, this reflects that the main crux of employers' ethnic preferences is influenced by their ability to exert control over their preferred category of domestics. This unveils that, in addition to class differences, employer's ethnic differences with their domestics further contributed in buttressing their superior position in the relation.

Additionally, considering the religious background of Miya domestics, the findings suggest prejudices against them to be stark. As Muslim domestic in Hindu employer's household, they are particularly perceived as 'polluted beings' for their cultural practices of beef consumption. However, considering employers' sense of dependency on them, they are seen negotiating with these polluted and impure beings. For instance, by maintaining a rigid division of domestic tasks, in which the Miya women are recruited

for only cleaning tasks. In some cases, this is further exhibited through division of employer's domestic space, and by giving Hindu names to Miya domestics. Significantly, such employer practices are reflections of 'religious othering', wherein prejudices against certain religious groups are re-established in society. Moreover, similar perceptions of 'religious othering' also appeared to be strong amongst the Hindu Bihari domestics in this study. However, unlike employers', their boundary making practices are more rigid, which is particularly influenced by their own socio-cultural understandings of 'purity' and 'pollution'.

The gender preferences of employers are specified through dichotomy of masculine and feminine domestic tasks, wherein female domestics are considered efficient for tasks which involved care-giving instinct. Additionally, gender preferences are also influenced by employers' fear of potential misconduct by domestics. While, in case of male domestics such fears are related to unmarried young daughters at employer's home; in case of female domestics, particularly the live-ins, it is typically in relation to possible liaison by these young girls. Arguably, such concerns of misconduct entailed employers to hire part-time domestics which enabled them to manage their time-schedule around the domestic's visit.

Moreover, the struggles of subordination of domestic workers are further reflected through quotidian practices of spatial segregation in employer's household. This ranged from practices related to separate sitting and eating arrangement to serving of stale and left-over food to domestics. Such practices of segregation are reproduction of class distinction in domestic work relationship, with lingering notions of caste pollution. However, a closer observation of such practices reveals that, the characteristic 'differences' in the work relationship is an embodiment of a complex interplay of multitude social dimensions of class, caste and religious identity.

It can thus, be concluded that, while, the chapter reiterated the hierarchical class relationship between employer and domestic, it at the same time, elucidated the related intricacies –ethnicity, religion, caste, gender - that shapes the hierarchy amongst domestic workers in Guwahati. However, it is significant that, while, the hierarchy amongst domestics are particularly constructed by employers' perceived combination of social attributes in each category of domestics, concomitantly it is subject to manipulation by each employer depending on their individual needs. In continuation

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with these aspects, the next chapter primarily focuses on domestic workers' lives, and their perspective towards the work relations.

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