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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Ethics and Production : Care Work

'Neither we move away, nor we are always together! We not only work for elderly clients but also for restoring values. But this work also takes a lot of energy' (Shanti, 30 years, part-time ayah)

Sitting leisurely in a tea shop with a cup of warm brewing tea, Shanti Didi, an exhausted *ayah* recounted her compelling and emotive experiences on caregiving. Over the decade, the popular writings and discourses on care work claimed validity through two paradoxical camps, either humanism or inequality. Though studies on care work located mutuality, relationality, purity and the solidarity of moral co-existence, the edges of exploitation, oppression, burden as well as vulnerability also persisted. But the actors involved in care work, moving within and across its structure through their generative powers, i.e., *ayahs*, *ayah*-centre managers, their elderly clients and kindred of elderly clients, present a complex reproduction of knowledge, ideologies, activities, responsibilities and fleeting emotions. Today, this is primarily visible in the mundane context of Kolkata, the capital city of the Eastern Indian state of West Bengal.

In the discourse of care work in Kolkata, Shanti Didi denotes the shaping of her life-course to the work of an *ayah* that holds her essence, her identity, the quality of her relationship with the others and her intrinsic 'self', that reflects her performance across different institutions such as her home, her elderly clients' homes, the *ayah*-centres, etc. The *ayahs* are paid care workers who offer instrumental, functional, and emotional care to their clients, specifically the elderly. On the other hand, *ayah*-centres are establishments that organise, marketize and distribute the care work of the *ayahs* under the supervision of an *ayah*-centre manager (discussed in detail in Chapter 2 and 3) (Image 1). Apart from the structural order, the routine care work of the *ayahs* also reveals an intersubjectivity in communication, ethos, familialism and the meaning-making practices of ageing and care in Kolkata. Foregrounding this, the chapter introduces the primary elements of this research such as the research problem, questions, and objectives. It analyses the socio-demographic and historical context of the development of *ayahs'* care work as well as elderly care in Kolkata and the larger India. To examine the broader knowledge constructs on care, the chapter also traces the existing scholarships that explore ageing, care and care work practices in India and across the globe. It reviews the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings,

Care Work and the Elderly Clients: A Study of Ayahs and Ayah-centres in Kolkata, India

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