

# ABSTRACT

## 1. Introduction

The *seva*, i.e. the social, instrumental and moral service for elderly progenitors by their younger kin, glued Indian multi-generational families for years. Such a normative principle often acts as a mechanism of social control, familial integration, patrilocal establishment and a source of prestige. But over the years with manifold changes in familial structures, living arrangements and the global aspirations of people, care work expanded beyond the purview of private familial spaces and entered into the realm of the market transactions. Today, a vibrant form of paid care work can be marked through the *ayahs* and *ayah-centres* in Kolkata. Drawing from this, the thesis discusses the *ayahs* and *ayah-centres* as social resources that shape care work practices, domestic-public politics and relational ageing in Kolkata, the capital city of the Indian state of West Bengal.

The *ayah-centres* can be defined as the ‘semi-formal’ institutions which organise, restructure, distribute and sustain care culture in India, specifically Kolkata. The *ayah-centres* erupted in Kolkata in the first decade of the 21st century when the middle and upper-middle-class women who acted as culturally and morally respectable familial caregivers started taking opportunities in the paid labour markets. Besides, with drastic demographic and structural changes like lower fertility rates (1.2, Census 2011), single-child families, childlessness, out-migration of the adult children of the elderly parents, etc., in Kolkata, the *ayah* market turned into a potential resolve for the elderly people. Such a shifting socio-economic model of development, led the market sphere of *ayahs* to develop for fulfilling the care needs of the families and sustain functionality of patrilocal domesticities.

The *ayahs* offer instrumental, sustainable, and emotional attention to the people, primarily the elderly, such as bathing, feeding, monitoring and interacting with them. The elderly clients in Kolkata receive care services from *ayahs* and the *ayah-centre* managers employ *ayahs* in their *ayah-centres*. All these ‘actors’ of care including clients’ family members, shape the sociability and politics of care work that operates through complex ties of domination and subordination as well as empathy and mutuality. Such entanglements also shape care work practices of *ayahs* as a structure that synchronises transitional discourses, actions and contexts to mobilise social

identities for the care actors, specifically elderly clients. Relative to this, the thesis foregrounds the interaction between various socio-cultural elements like kinship, caste, class, gender and religious behaviour to locate the dynamic experiences of *ayahs*' care work practices in Kolkata. The thesis also analyses the care work of *ayahs* as redefining processes of social ageing across the intersections of the family, market, *ayah*-centres and the state.

## **2. Research Objectives**

The thesis consists of the following objectives –

1. To analyse the norms, expectations, values, meaningfulness and world-views of the *ayahs*, as well as the dynamism of relationship they share with actors within the *ayah*-centres and the domestic households.
2. To analyse the changing kinship relationships within the family with the intervention of the *ayahs*, such as effect on family schedules, degree of closeness and practices related to ageing.
3. To explore the dilemmas of care as an act of social attachment and distance vis-à-vis care as an act of employment.
4. To explore crises in the relationships of care and the social existence or processing of crises within the normative idyllic construction of ageing and *seva*.

## **3. Review of Literature**

*Ayahs* as a cadre of care workforces has been scantily explored in the Indian context. Over the years, a few scholarships have focused on *ayahs* working in healthcare establishments in West Bengal, examining how the linkages of neoliberalism and socio-clinical hierarchies contribute to the oppression of lower-income workers like the *ayahs* (Basu, 2020). While the *ayah*-centres have been located as alternatives that provide socio-economic sustainability for marginalised *ayahs* (Mandal, 2013), the mundane experiences of the *ayahs* within the structure of care work practices have been largely sidelined. A huge chunk of scholarships also equate *ayahs* to that of the 'domestic helps' (Wilks, 2022) who offer services for households and are appointed to reproduce the caste/class inequalities in the context of India. However, when changes related to the demographic and domestic modes or values of production take place

across the global rhetoric, the social and community-based position of the *ayahs* travels beyond the linearity of traditional servitude. Today, this remains pivotal to be explored in the context of West Bengal, specifically Kolkata, through the dynamic interrelationships of care work, kinship, caste/class, gender and the ageing processes.

Historically, the term '*ayahs*' derives its roots from the occupational strata that developed with imperial economy and dominant colonial administration. An Anglo-Indian word '*aia*', literally meant nurse or governess of 'white' British babies (Tiwari, 1963) that later was translated into '*ayah*' - a racial, gendered and work category to subjugate the colonised 'brown' Indian women (Sen, 2009; Haskins, 2009). Certain historical accounts trace the *ayahs*' visibility since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century India in cities like Kolkata and Chennai (Chakraborty, 2019) where colonial and feudal structures entwined. The localised control or collective hegemony of the British officials and feudal lords pressed *ayahs* to perform the household and pastoral work under patriarchal and 'bonded' social, economic, and political systems. But, in contemporary times, *ayah* work incorporates stakeholders beyond the children. Now, elderly people are popularly the 'clients' of the *ayahs*. With the market regulations and institutions, the *ayah* work remains dialectically constituted where they can forge emotional connections with their elderly clients but also resign from care work as required. In the context of other countries like the U.K., U.S. and Sweden where elderly care policies and systems involve the geriatric nursing support, youth caregiving volunteering programmes, caregivers/receivers programmes, or learning platforms such as The University of Third Age (Ney, 2005; Black *et al.*, 2015; Robbins, 2021) (active ageing), *ayahs* are a potential social resource for healthy ageing in India. While feminist writings conceived care as contributing to social and economic distress for women (Fraser, 2016; Aronsson, 2022), it also turns pivotal to understand the care work of the *ayahs* as enhancing social agencies for the different actors of care in India.

#### **4. Methodologies/Approaches Applied**

The thesis draws from Bourdieu's (1990) 'practices' as a theoretical framework with concepts such as 'habitus', 'field' and 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). To explore the diverse consciousness and the complex interplay of power and affinities involved in *ayahs*' role as the paid caregivers and the elderly clients' role as the care receivers,

Mol *et al.*'s (2010) 'care practices' and Sen and Sengupta's (2016) concept of 'pragmatic intimacy' have also been followed.

Making references to the 'practice' theory facilitated the research to move beyond the existing socialist feminist approaches (Fraser, 2016; Clark *et al.*, 2019) that analyse care work as a rigid reality of gender discrimination, inequities and social inequality. While such social, historical and cultural legacies cannot be discounted across care work, this research focuses primarily on care work practices that shape the everyday lives, actions, behaviour, knowledge and meanings of the different actors of care – *ayahs*, *ayah*-centre managers, elderly clients and the clients' family members. In turn, 'practice' theory enabled to explore the socio-cultural complexities and messiness in the discourses of *ayah* care work in Kolkata.

Delving in deeper, the thesis utilises a qualitative research design with a sensory ethnographic approach (Pink, 2009) to entrap the sensorial narratives, gestures, voices, calmness, bitterness and confusion in the paid care work practices of the *ayahs*, the elderly clients, the *ayah*-centre managers and the clients' own kin or family members. The sensoriality of care work has been derived through the in-depth field observations on the socio-material practices of touch, taste, sights, sounds and smells, that shape the mundane allegiances between *ayahs*, their clients and other actors involved in elderly care. Besides, the thesis incorporates certain auto-ethnographic elements to understand the linkages between my personal experiences as a 'researcher' and my interaction with the complex social culture of *ayahs*' care work in Kolkata. The fieldwork for this research has been conducted in East and South Kolkata as well as North and South 24 Parganas regions of Greater Kolkata, relative to the availability of *ayah*-centre managers and *ayahs* in those *ayah*-centres. This is further synthesised through the methods of data collection involved in this ethnographic research, like interview, focus group discussions, participant observation and informal conversations. Relatively, 50 *ayahs*, 10 *ayah*-centre managers, 18 elderly clients, and 07 kindred of the elderly clients were interviewed. While *ayahs* and *ayah*-centre managers were selected through a purposive sampling technique, the clients and their kin were primarily traced through the snowball sampling technique.

## 5. Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into seven chapters with five core chapters. The first chapter delivers an introductory framework by exploring and reviewing the larger social, moral, economic as well as political debates on care work in India and across the globe. The second chapter locates the theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework of the research conducted. The third chapter analyses the organisational structure of the *ayah*-centres and its multiple influences on the social lives and collective legitimacies of the *ayahs* in Kolkata. In other words, the chapter addresses how the *ayahs* through routes of dietary, spatial and temporal site-making assert care work as a social structure and a way of living. The fourth chapter examines the influence of the transitional kinship relationships and its practices in reconstituting the social status and roles of the *ayahs* and their elderly clients in their homes and the larger community. The fifth chapter analyses the ways in which the socio-cultural and moral reproduction of care work takes place through the complex embeddedness of caste, class, gender and religious identities in workplace and familial-occupational spaces. The sixth chapter redraws the power relations that operate in the care relationship between the *ayahs* and their clients while deconstructing the dominant imaginaries of care work as fulfilling the notions of solidarity and bliss. Instead, the chapter explores care work practices as processing ruptures, mechanisms of social control and the lived experiences across care work. Lastly, the seventh chapter concludes the thesis by focussing on arguments around labour and emotions while reinstating the major findings of the research.

## 6. Results

The care work of the *ayahs* in Kolkata's elderly care system shapes the social identities of the actors of care. *Ayah* care mobilises between structured professional services to 'fictive' kinship-based models that influence ageing and care work as a socio-cultural, economic, symbolic and moral discourse of personhood. In a way, care is not only about physical-emotional health but also about familial-moral structures that reflect hierarchies and norms across life-processes. Today, the *ayahs* work within the junctures of moral and political economy where the politics of caste, class, gender, and religion configure the complex role-relationships between the *ayahs* and their clients. So, the thesis explores ways in which *ayah* services in urban Kolkata reflect

the shifting ideologies and practices across ageing, family and care, prompting to recognise the *ayahs* as ‘skilled’ workers through policy interventions and a sustainable work environment.

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