CHAPTER 4

Distanced, Mediated and Fictive Kinship : Families in Contemporary Kolkata

4.1 The Focus : Changing Attributes of Kinship

Kinship studies has a long-drawn history in the discourses of anthropological as well as sociological thought. Sahlins (2013) in his seminal work titled, *What Kinship Is – And Is Not,* frames kinship as a mutuality of being, i.e., people who are of intrinsic value to each other's existence and being governed by either procreation or social construction, or its combination. Within the purview of classical studies on kinship analysing the segmented patterns of relationships in the primitive societies, Strathern (1992) and few other British social anthropologists conceived kinship as the complex ties formed by the process of reproduction and decision of succession; but however, based on the socio-cultural notions and practices of kinship in the different societies. They further investigated kinship as a form of institution fulfilling a range of functions for families and domestic households in the primitive societies where other institutions translating economic welfare are in its infancy. But, relocating back to the contemporary era, today, it is pivotal to understand that the kinship system of descent, mutuality, or alliance is not about lineal cultural heritage but more about experiencing a complex social sustenance in the work of 'care' and its locally-constructed processes.

The visionary project of deconstructing biological parenthood and socio-traditional legitimisation of 'like-natural' and 'primate' relations in kinship, started taking place in the late 1960s and 1990s. An attempt was made to deconstruct the several ways in which the social status of a 'mother' and a 'father' can be explored, such as through wet nurses and the surrogate mothers (Boon, 1974; Ragone, 1994). This primarily emerged across the rubric of a few primitive societies – the Nuer, New Guinea, etc. where the standardised divisions between the 'natural' and the 'social' domains of membership were conceived to be blurred and ambiguous. In some cases, certain academic works moved beyond the fixed imageries of biological sanctification and the philosophies of unilateral descent, alerting us to form critical and deconstructive knowledge on succession and legacies. As Schieffelin (1985) discusses the Kalulis of

New Guinea, conceiving how a person's mother is not only the 'biological' mother but also the one who offers food to the child, where the act of feeding is equivalent to adoption. In such a cultural context, the debate of 'adoption' and nurturance then traverses from the social rights of parents involved in marital relationships to the unmarried individuals within the larger community. Affiliations of rituality, promises of reciprocity and the dynamic of relatedness then moralise different families to act as a collective social and kinship community. Though such an analysis was proposed in the primitive societies where the resources are often scarce, it is also important to reimagine such a phenomenon of constructed kinship systems in the urban society of Kolkata. The lucrative structures of elderly care such as *ayahs*, embedded within the families in Kolkata, similarly illustrate the varying degrees of permeability between being the genealogical and non-genealogical kin. The *ayahs* through years of care work, often harbour possibilities of turning into like-family members for their elderly clients. This enables the upper and upper-middle-class Bengali families and their *ayahs* to manoeuvre through the multiple loci of kinship as well as power to negotiate with the relationship of care in everyday lives. The mobilisation of kinship relations between *ayahs* and their clients also pertains to capitalising social elements, masked in how they incorporate their intersubjective experiences, bodies of care as well as identity-making processes.

Today, the socio-economic and moral practices of care work in Kolkata restructure and weave different ties of kinship that are not necessarily 'biological'. In other words, *ayahs*' care work and its circulation within the domestic homes resocialises the elderly people to not only adapt to the shifting kinship sociality but also reciprocities at ageing. It is the complexities of kinship bonds between the *ayahs*, the clients and the clients' family members that however offer ways to view ageing as more than a clinical taxonomy. The changing age and familial structures now localise the kinship relations more within 'paid' services than that of genetic associations. The languages, gestures, domesticities, physical mobilities, and conduct of remodelling social bodies, often lead the *ayahs* and their clients to secrete different mannerisms of kinship as well as the reconstruction of a dialogic care community. Ascribing to this, the chapter deals with a few questions and possibilities - How does the elderly care production, distribution and consumption at the markets and domestic households, redefine and contest the cultural conventions around kinship? How does the diffusion of care

ideologies on the agents of the markets such as *ayahs*, shape them as 'care workers' and the adult children of the elderly clients as the 'care supervisors'? This chapter attempts to address such questions by examining the dualisms and networks of cultural relativity, aspirations, emotions, allegiances, crises and reciprocity; which are at once permeable as well as prescriptive. The revelation of these consists of the deep-down subtexts, which can be presented through the exploratory typologies of kinship in-making and the curtailment of it at the different stages of caregiving and receiving processes.

In the context of this research, I argue that the complex relationship between kinship and care work reshapes the social structure of ageing and the different agencies of people negotiating the transgression of filiality as well as economy. This quotient can be analysed through the three forms of kinship practices in Bengali families today – distanced kinship, mediated kinship and fictive kinship. Firstly, distanced kinship can be defined as the distantiation in intergenerational relations that induces collective-social suffering and the existence of the families within it. Secondly, mediated kinship can be defined as the attempt to restructure and moderate inter or intragenerational kin relations by appointing the paid care workers like *ayahs*, i.e., non-market relations sustained by marketization in the neo-liberal era. And lastly, fictive kinship or being kin in a fictional social sense, involves the reformation of kinship sensibilities and the shaping of affective-social identities between the elderly clients and their *ayahs,* who turn into like-kin. However, such forms of kinship practices are not without implicit acknowledgement and development of care roles, performed within the orientations of social stratification.

4.2 Distanced Kinship and Conflictive Emotions

The dominant patrilocal unit or the '*kula*' of three generations (Yadava, 1969; Dube, 1997) in the Indological sense, has always been depicted as a reservoir of Indian kinship. The father in the family is often conceived to be the central authoritarian figure or breadwinner and performs the primary obligations of producing heirs, most preferably sons, for supplementing the lineage and distributing properties in a family. Such discourses on legitimate kinship systems rely on the intimate relationships that are 'formally' and socially formed (if not chosen) by the ties of genesis, blood, marriage and legal adoption (Dyson and Moore, 1983). But in the contemporary era, while family members often consist of blood and affinal associates, the functional

model of domesticity as well as the domestic imaginaries is experiencing shifts from intergenerational centric breadwinner man to multiple people involved in familial economy, irrespective of their gender. With age, the social and domestic authority of both man and woman also transforms, often for them to be pathologized or accorded a passive existence. Consequently, expectations of care also shift that give rise to 'distanced kinship' and care forces such as *ayahs* navigating the tensions of 'distanced kinship' between the elderly clients and their adult children. Such practices of being materially, symbolically, and often emotionally distant from their children, erecting a boundary in kin relations or maintaining selective intimacy with *ayahs* also circulate across multiple exchanges, aspirations, fulfilled and unfulfilled promises as well as responses to the mundanity of kinship.

Observations on 'distanced kinship' in the elderly participants' homes in Kolkata, underpinned intergenerational complexities and its normalisation in detachments. This involves fractures of belongingness not merely within the domestic units but also across relationships built over time and associated with parenting consciousness. The fact that elderly people suffer from mundane distancing or othering and mobilise or contain their emotions for their children can be analysed through Strathern's (1992, p. 222) counsel, 'The idea that culture, and knowledge, is mostly a direct reflection of nature is still very much with us, however inadequate that view is'. In this foundational principle and transcendence, 'distanced kinship' generates a realm of navigating the biological facts of procreation and the changing cultural constructs, such as shifting social obligations and entitlements for the adult children and their elderly parents. Such observations also form a pivotal juncture of my ethnographic readings, where often communicating with the adult children and their elderly parents in their homes was fraught with hospitality, amity, and contradictions in making or denying claims over parent-child relationship.

Experiencing the multiple social worlds of care in Kolkata, I was well aware of the transitioning family systems and cultural behaviour that is often sanctioned as an 'evilness' of modernisation and destructive capitalism (Cohen, 1998; Streeck, 2012). In local phraseology, it has often been captured through the voices of *ayahs*, elderly clients and *ayah*-centre managers as either 'young people with swift personalities', 'younger generations with no deep emotions', 'younger generations with too many ambitions to leave their parents behind', etc. It can be anchored that the effects and

intensities of transnational aspirations in disseminating the modern standards of the nuclear families, generate dichotomies in the cultural representation of the families as the extension of 'identical blood'. This has been echoed through the voices of some of the elderly participants in Kolkata who constantly impose emotionally-loaded phrases, such as '*rokter taan*' (pull and push of blood relations), '*rokto ekta jinish*' (blood is a thing), '*narir taan*' (the ties of the mother's umbilical cord), etc. But in confronting the disoriented(ness) and dysfunctions across the cognatic familial relations, a few localised phrases connoted the suppressed crisis too. These have been claimed by the elderly participants as '*shomporke badha porlo*' (barrier in relationships), '*shomporko nosto hocche*' (relationship is rotten), '*kotha-barta nei*' (no talking terms), '*aponjon arr nei*' (no near ones now), etc. A conversation with an ailing elderly care receiver or client Maya *Dida* (85 years) of an *ayah* Smita *Didi* (part-time *ayah,* 30 years), experiencing life in Kolkata for the last 25 years, enabled me to reflect on her troubled voice and the counter-strivings on the status of her relationship with blood or affinal kin. Precincts of it were initiated in the form of a generative story, reeled by many stages of Maya *Dida*'s, her *ayah*'s, her family members' life courses and their socio-moral communication of personhood.

Interviewer (Researcher) : How do you feel at home? Would you like to share anything about it?

Maya *Dida*: I don't know if I can call it a 'home'. I was the adorable and pampered daughter of my parents, born after three big brothers. Staying in Jadavpur [*south Kolkata*] since my birth and now living in Garia, Kolkata has been my home. But, if you talk about my mini home, my sons are busy on their own, their lives, and their children! We hardly meet.

Interviewer (Researcher) : Do you think it is threatening for a close-knit kinship … *rokter taan* [blood ties] and your *bari* [home]?

Maya *Dida*: Do you know what it takes to build a home? Love and respect. I have been giving this since my marriage. It took my blood and sweat to form my home. When Ronu and Shanu [*her sons*] were children, I used to wait for them when they arrived from school. After that, we used to sit, talk and eat together. Now, Smita feeds me. My sons never come to feed me. But I have given birth to them, so I will always be a mother!

Reflecting upon Smita *Didi*'s gesture while she was taking pride in *Dida*'s acknowledgement of her across an interpersonal social space with me as a researcher (a member from outside their family), she narrated, 'Yes, I perform my duties very well. I feed her as neither her sons nor her daughters-in-law feed her!'. The fact that Smita *Didi* was filling the ears of her client through the multiple verbal and non-verbal cues, made me realise her complex social, material, professional and empathic position in care work practices. Smita *Didi*'s hegemonic voice in reminding her client of her son's 'avoidance', drops hints at analysing the changing values of cooperation and commensality across the upper and the upper-middle-class familial structures. This too points at the *ayahs*' evolved socio-material roles as the figures expanding 'distances' between the clients and their kin while transforming maternal moralities from socio-legal to only legal dispensations – i.e., adult children staying with their parents for heirship if not spatial- emotional interchanges. This also takes place across an altered situation where the *ayahs* often struggle to form intimate associations with their elderly clients, owing to clients' constrictive meanings of relationships and the politics of domination and subjugation. Such as, Smita *Didi*'s talkative nature often makes *Dida* address *Didi* as a dominant figure in the relationship of care while Smita *Didi* reinstates her own 'upright' nature as a reality-check for her elderly client, offering the client a route to social existence and introspection.

A broader observation points to the fact that while for the elderly clients kinship is institutional and intersubjective, for the *ayahs* who work across 'distanced kinship' it reflects the sufferings and internalisation of externalised ruptures, trespassing across the past and present. The *ayahs* are consciously aware of the ways in which they are differentially incorporated into the homes of the elderly clients but also disguise such 'distances' by developing less intensive obligatory bonds and formalising the quality of their care work. For instance, an *ayah* Rimi *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 25 years) once stated, 'I work and report my work progress to my manager. I do not talk much with my elderly client as I do not really connect with her'. In that case, the *ayahs* often shuffle across different homes and perform a denial of emotions that eventually turn into her work identity. This has been captured from the words of an *ayah*-centre manager in Garia when he described his *ayah* Rimi *Didi*, 'She is very good and disciplined since she does not get too emotionally involved'. In the context of the capitalistic production of care and caring as a fast-paced professional work, then the

ambivalence of controlling emotions in care work expresses an irony – as a market of surplus products yet with a commutability of emotions. But this is different from a situation where some *ayahs* develop intimate ties with their clients which expands to several generations, i.e., *ayahs* and their children having contacts with clients' future generations.

4.2.1 Lived Hierarchies and Distanced Kinship

The act of different agents influencing care work practices within homes generates attachments and detachments through redistributive contours of knowledge and celebrated skills. For clients like Sunanda *Dida* (83 years), the blood ties jitter through dissociations which is primarily felt or caused by vivid barriers in the transmission of intergenerational cultures. Sunanda *Dida* who has been a prolific painter of her age lamented that her sons never painted nor discussed any form of paintings with her, casting alienating patterns in her 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1989). The intergenerational transmission of 'cultural capital' in reproducing consanguineal kinship morality or the recognition of families, has been conceived as a loss by Sunanda *Dida,* further affecting her essence of heritage. She expresses this with an anxious gesture, 'My *ayah* likes to paint. But of course, I would expect my sons to paint and pass it to their own children'. Such narrations refer to the ways in which the hierarchical enclaves of caste, class and occupation determine the practice of skills and the boundaries of kinship sanctity. This also symbolically redefines or stereotypes *ayahs*' social status as lower-caste/class 'workers' in care relationships, who cannot turn mindful temperamental skills into a form of cultural ownership. Once, while I interacted with Sunanda *Dida*'s *ayah* Shimi *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 25 years), her words turned embarrassing, pointing to :

> It was *Dida* who taught me some painting. But I have always seen, how she asks me to finish my work first. Even when she tries to teach me some brush thing, she is always in a hurry as if she does not intend to teach me.

Such instances have been observed in other cases where tensions erupt between elderly clients and their *ayahs* relative to knowledge exchanges on food, music, etc. while settling motions of spatial and temporal incompatibility for the *ayahs* and their social memories. The fact that some *ayahs* often feel distanced from their clients emerges not merely from the clients' spatiality in the upper-middle or upper-class

neighbourhoods but also *ayahs*' stigmatised incapacitation to communicate creative skills with their clients.

An attempt to naturalise the biological bonds between the clients and their adult children also takes place through the collective action of eating or tasting as well as discussing their personal issues at the dinner table. But, the incessant denials by adult children and fixed hierarchisation of time and space around the coordination of eating practices for elderly clients, are reflective of 'distanced kinship'. Often, the elderly participants in my field accounts were encountered to lament and insist hard on their *ayahs* and daughters-in-law by hurling pleas to have their meals with their sons or daughters-in-law. Such insists are not only vocal expressions of externalising the 'self' of the elderly but also about reconstructing the customary relations and resocialising authoritative capacities of being the elderly. A paradoxical sensorial-temporal power operates when the *ayahs* were observed gobbling their food in the midst of their work without the clients asking them of their convenience. So, in the context of 'distanced kinship' practices, hierarchies operate between the market and non-market actors where the elderly would wait for their kin even if they do not participate in a collective familial space, and not for the *ayahs*. It is the pain of 'waiting' for kin by the elderly that transforms into an act of power for them, further locating the tensions of making *ayahs* as caregiving subjects. The subjecthood of the *ayahs* within the distanced kinship relations then mobilises between their identities as caregivers and the portrayal of their expected resilience by eating food late. In such a complexity, the recognition of the *ayahs* as the 'paid care workers' externalise the commercialisation of their bodies to be satisfactory for less food and more productive work.

Besides, consciousness and practices of distanced kinship that maintain as well as disintegrate the intergenerational affinities of the elderly, also represent the politics of 'othering'. As elderly people are often taking medicines or going for treatments, some of the adult children were seen to be labelling their parents as well as the *ayahs* as 'pathological', i.e., non-conforming to contemporary social experiences. Associating 'care' with disorders, labelling or the subtle exclusion of the elderly people and their *ayahs* often threatens the domestic affiliations of the elderly people. This too makes receiving care a reality of deviancy in familial culture. This can be analysed through Becker (1963, p. 9), who states :

> Social groups [*here*, *the family and neighbourhood*] create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, … deviance is not the quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules [*informal*] and sanctions.

In a way, care as an institution, resource or sociality mobilises between paradoxical formations of docility and reclaiming of agency in different ways. The spatial disjointedness and exclusion of the elderly in tasting their favourite dishes like chicken curry or sharing their meals over the memorable familial dining space; further leads to the complexities of 'kin loss' (Allen, 2011) or what Allen (ibid) claims as curbing potentials for a reinterpretation or rebuilding of kinship relations. Relatively, it can be analysed that with the transition in kinship relations, ageing is moulded into a time frame of imposed fragility. Such as, the clients' separate meal times, their *ayahs*' timely interventions, etc., reconstruct time/temporality as a language of care work practices, power, age stratification and intergenerational conflicts.

While some level of financial reciprocity and socio-moral obligations to stay with the elderly people (as parents) do not cease to exist, the qualitative significations of care and the domestic existence of the elderly people turn more classificatory today. The prominence of the *ayahs* as caregivers often transfers the elderly clients to a state of objectification or as a sacred infrastructure, remaking the piousness of the 'home' for a public and social representation. In other words, the elderly clients are sensitised as the people mediating the fluid linkages between modernity and traditional Bangla culture across the '*Bangali*' (Bengali) homes. In one of the many instances, when I met a working couple, the son and daughter-in-law of Romen *Dadu* (elderly client, 75 years) during a holiday, they invited me to join them for an evening tea. Talking about their life and the importance of insurance in the contemporary era, Debanjan *Dada* (care supervisor[47], 40 years), the son, spoke in a lower tone to not let his mother hear from the other room :

[47] Care supervisors can be referred to as the blood or consanguineal kin of the elderly clients, such as sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, etc., who often supervise or manage the care work of the *ayahs* for their elderly kin. The adoption of social roles as the 'care supervisors' depends on several factors such as the geographical proximities of the kin who can afford to take responsibilities of care, the occupational status of the kin, their health conditions, as well as the alternative of siblings.

> *Maa* [mother] has a bad habit of eavesdropping. So, I am speaking low. I know that my mother is ill and I want to try my best to keep her well. She is the *matha* [head][48] of the house. So, I kept an *ayah*, as I want to maintain her well … you know she should look fit, classy, presentable, etc. since I have several visitors from my office.

Perceiving elderly care both as a 'household' task and a sacred duty can be seen as a means to cope with the challenges of caring for an ailing elderly. Such a perspective also tends to obscure the pain and suffering that come with unresponsive kinship relationships. S*eva* of the elderly people/parents then is segregated into two spheres – a superior material space and a subordinate emotional space. In the former, the material body, face and health turn representative of care culture, further satisfying the socio-political act of elderly care as a prime duty of one's family. In some cases, the adult children often beget their elderly parents facial creams and shaving kits, to be routinely poured by their *ayahs* while turning elderly care into a broader spectacle of the society. Some of the elderly though revealed the touch of their *ayahs*' hands as soothing when they put creams to care for them, it also simultaneously reminds them of their children's perceptiveness of them as 'objects'. In case of the latter, emotional and subjective experiences of the elderly are often throned as passive where the elderly staying at home is often conceived to be enjoying 'leisure' while their adult children offering hard labour to the formal sectors of work feel their autonomy to be ruptured. In other words, denigration of the emotional realm of the elderly people often takes place by ripping them from their complex social experiences. As the elderly client Romen *Dadu* once expressed with sadness, '*Amar moner o pushti laage* [my heart requires some nutrition too]'. The narrativization of emotional crises and communication with various phrases and performances then reflects on the elderly clients' attempt to resocialise their kin in reconstituting their families. Besides, the care work of *ayahs* and the articulation of lived experiences of pain and joy with their elderly clients also enable their adaptation to the complex socio-structural changes. In other words, the domesticities marketized through *ayahs* then cut across the life forces

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[48] The literal depiction of '*matha*' (head in the human biological system) purports an analogy with the head or the authority figure of the house. However, contemporary nuclear familial relationships offer paradoxes between the elderly clients as the visible 'head' of the household but not always the functional 'head' of household power (in activities or decisions).

of the different actors of care vis-à-vis the shifting expectations of modern social and global aspirational forms.

4.3 Mediated Kinship and Relations

Marching with the global-local structures of capital accumulation in the contemporary era, the care work of the *ayahs* accrues its vivid characteristics through the multi-layered interrelationships between people, places, things, bodies, subjectivities, and knowledge. While feminist economic approaches and critics of neo-liberal theories often project care work as a process of feminine identity formation where ethics and inequality are played in being like an ideal mother figure of one's family (Gilligan, 1982, pp. 7 - 8), the care work of the *ayahs* and their participation in ageing expands far beyond. A dominant share of scholarships focussing on the gendered lens of care work often reinstates elongated work hours for the nurses in countries such as the U.S. (Christopher, 2022), if not exploring the lived experiences of paid care workers in the informal sectors. Of the scant scholarships, Duffy *et al*. (2015) conceive care work to be a 'relational' and 'interactive' approach sustaining the reciprocal and emotional connections between the two primary people involved in it. But *ayah* work crosses the dyadic practices of care relations. In other words, care work not merely classifies care as empathy (for elderly clients) and power (for caregivers), it elevates a more complex dynamic formulated by the multiple socio-cultural mediations and hierarchies of the care actors. Such debates have been further explored through the veritable nuances of 'mediated kinship'.

Revisiting Mol's (2008, p. 43) meaning of care and its lived representation in care-receiving bodies, she states, 'In care practices, bodies are never something one might, or should try to, escape from. They are to be cherished … flesh and blood do not imply determinism'. Such a continuum of cherishes however leads to the dangers of being materially present in the organisation of elderly care work and experiencing the fluctuation of detachments across the families. In this dilemma of experiencing social transformations, it is then the *ayah*s who supplement their role-relationships through multi-sensoriality in mediating their belonging(ness) across clients' families as well as their own. Across the paradigm of relationality and interdependency in care work practices, the *ayahs* often sustains the distancing reciprocity of the elderly people's care supervisors (i.e. adult children) and contains the physical and emotional stressors

between care supervisors and their parents (Choudhury and Das, 2023) (Image 10). The 'distanced kinship' relations are restructured and converted to 'mediated kinship' through the appointment of *ayahs* who sustain intergenerational relationships between their clients and the clients' kin.

Image 10: An *ayah* with her client and client's 'care supervisor' (daughter).

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

Location : Bansdroni, Kolkata.

In cases where the 'care supervisors' list out certain activities of care to be performed such as pasting medicine schedules in room doors, preparing food charts, managing salaries of *ayahs*, coordinating with *ayah*-centre managers, etc., the complex processes of introducing someone in the circumscribed private cocoons of the home, resituates 'mediated kinship' as an approach to understand the circumstances around kinship transactions. Rather than the direct caregiving experiences of care supervisors due to the paucity of time and an unstable zone of work-life balance, the kin or care supervisors express their concerns and emotions through the *ayahs* today. In a way, the *ayahs* as care workforces uphold emotional-social collectivism or its continuity within the homes, as well as blur the intrinsic division between the 'personal' and the 'political'. What was conceived to be a natural content of emotive exchanges between the elderly parents and their kin (own adult children), now requires a market of *ayahs* to mediate. The *ayahs* now organise and signify the intensity of emotions across the transitional contexts of the familial life. Delving into a conversation with an *ayah*

Kakoli *Didi* (long-term *ayah*, 30 years), dwelling in Garia since the last six years with her client, she expresses :

> You know it is not very normal. I have always seen a huge family of mine where we sit together, have tea and discuss our *moner kotha* [heart-out talks]! But my client's family is problematic as the son and the daughter-in-law even if living together, always ask me how their mother is! Have you seen so anywhere? They don't even talk directly to their own mother. This is all an upper-class thing!

Kakoli *Didi*'s words indicate an asymmetry in familial structures based on class, care, regional and kinship identities, in the context of the 'mediated kinship' practices. She reprises her social role as a farmer back in her village when she goes for a holiday, where the collective as well as the cultural continuity of the farmlands manifests into a stronger kinship network. Throughout the years, focussing on *ayahs* as caregivers, I realised how I missed putting forward the most vital question, 'Who would care for them once they are old?'. With no such easy answers, their testimonies or stories were full of ambiguities and lack of clarities, that however shaped their social world and relations. An *ayah* Nolok *Didi* (long-term *ayah*, 29 years) with tears in her eyes once stated, 'You are asking me? I did not expect such a question!'. Asking them about the aspect of 'care' itself drew a social and local context to assert their personhood or ability to feel human. This strokes a juxtaposed reality where their normative behaviour as 'care workers' often exists in counter-spaces to 'care' itself – socially constructing the *ayahs*' bodies in denial of care. But, the futuristic aspirations towards socio-economic and intergenerational mobilities often lead the *ayahs* to participate in paid care work practices with the motive of accumulating capital for their lands and families. In other words, *ayah*-centres are banks for them. An *ayah* Rimpi *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 41 years) expressed about her rural kin network :

> We have a gigantic family consisting of my sons, their families, and my brother-in-law's family. We all live together as a group. So, I expect my sons to care for me as I care for them. I know they will! I married them off quite young so that I could have grandchildren too!

This indicates a wider paradox between the families of the *ayahs* and their elderly clients. As informed by a significant number of the *ayahs*, the *ayahs* often possess

close-knit large families consisting of multi-generations in rural areas. This resembles an analysis of Aruna's (2017, p. 251) sibling relationships of care in the rural context of South India, where she writes :

> The sibling relationships are strong and are made stronger through the community norms of conformity. They ridicule the brother or sister if they are unable to retain amicable contacts with each other and have repercussions in the social standing as well as in the future prospects of children, especially during marriage.

In the context of rural West Bengal, while ties between brothers and sisters turn less expansive with the marriage of the sisters, the ties between brothers are often marred with commensalities and conflicts. This is due to the communal conformism to multi-generational living of brothers' families in the rural West Bengal, in contrast to urban areas. However, in this research, some of the *ayahs*' own strategies to depend on the congregated joint families living in their villages, stem from the linkages between the management of care resources, gendered morality, and the sustenance of collective economic capital throughout life courses. More explorations propose that the elderly clients belonging to the upper and upper-middle-class families not merely have small family sizes or human resources but also have no agricultural lands in the rural areas to tie families together for any emotional and instrumental care. In a way, it is the occupational communitarianism or the sources of household sustenance that shape the socio-structural process of ageing and care. On the other hand, the women who are migrating from the rural to urban areas to function as *ayahs* often face a vacuum(ness) that they attempt to mitigate by conversing with their colleagues and sharing complex emotions with their clients. This in a way also enhances their social status as well as prestige by inducing a feeling of self-worth as 'care workers', who are simultaneously cared for in a certain manner.

However, with opportunities maneuvered across education and formal sector work or the large-scale processes of internal migration and emigration relative to high-paying skilled work, one encounters a rupture in elderly clients' familial equilibrium. This also makes the clients drawn more towards their *ayahs*. Even if the elderly clients possess optimal resources to enhance their socio-economic capital and appropriate property lands, their lands reflect the spatial boundedness of personalised urban

living, leisure, social standing, and the essence of modern-elite domesticities. The entanglements of livelihood-generating farmlands, work as *ayahs* and farmers and the reproduction of kinship care community are processed differently from the trajectories of elderly clients' lives where the apartments are seen as investments in familial status (but for future generations' wealth asset), if not necessarily a collective space of the intergenerations.

In Kolkata, the intervention of *ayahs* today is not merely a social status symbol of the upper/upper-middle-class families but also explicates transitional cultural fulfillment of mediative emotions[49] as a class identity. Bulbul *Didi*, a part-time baker and care supervisor (43 years) to her cancer-affected mother-in-law Minoti Roy (71 years), speaks about her repentance as well as longing for relief – relief she found much after Rimpa (their *ayah*) entered their lives.

Bulbul *Didi* began depicting her journey skilfully with a mythological cue that she learned as a child :

> Do you know about Shravan Kumar, the poor heroic caregiver to his blind parents? He lifted them wherever he went and catered to their needs until King Dasharath [*story from the renowned Indian epic Ramayana*] killed him. I attempted to be good Shravan Kumar, but soon I realised I was unfit for it. I failed to give *Maa* [Minoti *Dida*] her medicines on time!

With the onset of illness for the elderly, the role of the care supervisors turns more ambivalent as well as experimental. The sudden adoption of care supervisors' roles without the imagination or preparation of it beforehand, turns challenging relative to the dichotomous constructions of their newer 'selves' and retaining meaningful self-concepts. While gender expectations remain to be a viable factor in determining the care supervisors who are specifically the daughters-in-law/daughters of the homes (Modiri and Sadeghi, 2021), the unequal sexual division of labour does not merely emerge out of the overburdened care duties. Instead, the cultural naturalisation or the overt celebration of the authority of wives or daughters-in-law within their homes,

[49] Some of the adult children even fail to practice their familial-public role as 'care supervisors', further making the elderly parents and the *ayahs*' caregiving as something which is not a compulsion for them. While asking a few adult children staying abroad (via international calls) about their duties, they often preferred to maintain silence or hang their calls mid-way, not willing to talk about their contribution to the care routine of their parents.

acting as the reservoirs of familial expectations, also gives rise to the sensibilities of (dis)empowerment. As Bulbul *Didi* says :

> I am given enough respect, as everyone often waits for my decision in *ghorua* [homely] affairs. *Bole naa, shongshar shukher hoe romonir gunne* [As known, a happy family is formed by a woman's character and skill!]. But sometimes, it too takes a toll on you! You cannot leave it or live by yourself! All are dependent on you.

So, performing kinship relationships through the intrahousehold dynamics of claims, negotiations and bargains also involves the making and managing of decisions by women as an expression of their vulnerabilities. In appointing the *ayahs* and paying them wages, the complex movements of care work across the elderly clients' homes then redefine relationships between the familial care supervisors and their 'repressed desire' (Stevenson, 2014, p. 45), often expressed without a formulated language. This however does not lie without the complexities of caste or class dynamics where the material and aesthetic work underpinned by the taxing crises of care are passed down from the women-wives of the household to that of the *ayahs*, projecting the *ayahs* to fulfill the *daityo* (duties) of reshaping 'healthy' homes. Such transference of duties also generate tensions between the *ayahs* and their care supervisors when the *ayahs* control the experiential knowledge of their clients more than their clients' kin. In one of the instances of observing tensions between the *ayahs* and care supervisors, an *ayah* Renuka *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 24 years) was revealing secret information to the care supervisor, 'Do you even know your mother had a cousin who was never found? I got to know that day'. In a fit of rage and shock, the care supervisor Shonali Basu *Didi* (45 years) blurted, 'Mother, how do I not know this and she [*the ayah*] knows? I am kept out nowadays!' In this situation, it was quite possible to understand how the 'secrets' and the ways of knowing a person through intersubjective sharing of stories influence the social roles and identities of the actors of care. It is the 'secret' and the personal narratives remaking the spaces of care that exude the emotional affinities and distances between the clients, *ayahs* and clients' own children. This also enlarges the issue of social shame and distress where the care supervisors often navigate through the complexities of sustaining formal career aspirations vis-à-vis the achievement of bliss in their domestic spaces. So, mediated kinship experiences mobilise domestic meanings and structures through the intersections of the market and family.

4.3.1 *Ayahs* Mediating Collateral Relations

Until now, it can be perceived that the contemporary practices or realities of ageing lie between elderly people's expectations of kinship morality and recuperating 'distanced kinship' through paid care like the *ayah* services. The observations in some cases explicated *ayahs*' roles in making relatedness across their clients' extended families more evident by mediating their subjective agencies. The *ayahs* in a way practice their work and craft through the life courses of their clients' families. If we place such a phenomenon relative to Bourdieu's (1980, p. 10) agential and structural dynamics, the spaces of the homes can be analysed as 'incorporated dispositions … the ordering principle … capable of orienting practices in a way that is at once unconscious and systematic'. Similarly, the ordering of relations and the advantages across familial networks through the *ayahs*, manifests with the *ayahs*' negotiation across the clients' collateral bonds. This also is being shaped through individual events, social histories, working conditions, and newer possibilities of caregiving and receiving.

The *ayahs* who were providing care work services in their clients' kinsman's homes, either the brother, sister, cousin, etc., enhanced the relationship of kinship where the care labour of *ayahs* is utilised. This function of *ayahs* lies beyond their construction as workers who provide the categorical paid labour, are the ideal victims of labour, or semi-skilled/non-skilled forces, etc. While the alliance school of kinship scholars like Levi-Strauss referred to the nuclear families as a self-perpetuating unit ruled by the parents, children and the exchanges of women between different dyadic groups (Holy, 1996), the contemporary role of the *ayahs* forges an integration of several elements in the social system of families and their intricate endowments. With the breakdown of intergenerational families and the formation of nuclear family structures, the families related by blood or affinity often grids distances. This is where *ayahs* materialise their work to readjust the distant linkages. In exploring the *ayahs*' response to familial conflicts, Bhagyashree *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 30 years) working for her elderly male client Rupankar Bose *Kaku* (86 years), stated while checking around :

> *Kon ghore e jhogra hoe na ?* [In which home quarrels do not take place?]. This is normal. But my job is more challenging and fruitful. Even if I fight with *Kaku* [the elderly client] and *Didi* [the client's daughter-in-law], they too know, *bati toh amar haath ei pathabe* (laughing!) [they will send tiffin by my

> hands only!]. I enjoy the fact that I too work for *Kaku*'s sister … which enhances my feeling of linking a family!

Later, when she left for *Kaku*'s sister's home, I took a chance to ask *Kaku* (as I was interacting with *Kaku* since February 2021; *Kaku* being an acquaintance of one of my known informants in Kolkata), 'How do you think Bhagya *Didi* is helping you and your family?' With a beaming hope in his old eyes, he spoke :

> Bhagyashree is the reason today I have my family. I can identify myself with others … my sister … It has been many years since my bond with my sister grew strong. We care for each other. But neither of us gets any sufficient time and energy to meet each other due to our physical mobility issues … Bhagyashree today not merely works for us but sometimes carries special dishes like brinjal fry from my home to that of hers! The taste of the fries reminds my sister of our mother and childhood!

The familial food cultures and shared sensoriality transported through the *ayahs* and their flexible social roles invoke the remembrances and activities shared across the memories of belonging(ness), to different people and places. In that axis, *ayahs* are incorporated as symbolic and material mechanisms of forging commensalities and mutuality in ageing. This is also determined 'by the location of each family member, … pointing to the importance of proximity' (Merrill, 1997, p. 33). In hindsight, the *ayahs* also participate in the culmination of tensions across clients' families where the issues of misinterpreting any information and passing it to the other wing of the clients' family, form a stimulus of power and resistance for the *ayahs*. Once, Bhagya *Didi* in a fit of rage told me, 'Sometimes I pass on certain information when I think *Kaku* is wrong about his sister. His sister is so nice … why does he need to speak wrongly about her?' This might also be an expression of authorising *ayahs*' status as one of the pivotal members working in clients' families, without whom clients cannot function. An underlying experience of it also emerges from their fractured social worlds and victimisation, where often transferring delicious food items (chicken, mutton, eggs, pastries) across clients' homes demonstrates their class and financial lapses to afford such food for their own children. This incurs an analysis where the sensoriality of food is encultured relative to the class as well as work hierarchies – where *ayahs* are a medium of interactions and clients' consumption of tasty food is

about reproducing them as cultural systems and subjects. This would be analysed by Bourdieu (1984) as the construction of 'taste' which is intrinsically related to the class structures that influence people's perceptions within both oppositional and the shared social relationships. So, 'mediated kinship' fosters interpersonal negotiations across different actors and spaces of care, and often pushes socio-economic valences, roles, identities, as well as transcendences of families linked by alliance and descent.

4.4 Fictive Kinship and Care Work

From a systemic and institutionalised resource fulfilling socio-economic functions in primitive societies to being influenced by other domains such as gender, politics, spirituality, technology (artificial insemination), etc., kinship studies treaded through a course of shifting lenses. The contemporary urban societies in the present decade, however, are expanding 'fictive kinship' relationships, which are distinct from the associations established by descent. In such kinship formations, the centrality of choice as well as investment of time has been stimulated as a major reference in the making and unmaking of relatedness across different spaces (Nelson, 2013). This has been analysed by sociologists working in family studies such as Voorpostel (2013, p. 816):

> As the supportive role of specific family relationships is negotiated over the life course … and as both the importance of various relationships as well as family constellations are dynamic and change over the life course …, there may well be important differences in the prevalence of fictive kin relationships in different age groups.

Fictive kinship can be analysed through the ways in which various actors experience transience in relations materialised across various forms of embodied communication. Such familial circumstances and equations of inconsistency constructing the families then work as a reflective notion of fictive kinship relationships in Kolkata's homes. The cultural theorists often explicated 'fictive kinship' as a meta-theory of relations. As Isben and Klobus (1972, p. 615) profess, 'The first description of fictive kin term usage is based primarily on its functional utility for the American kinship system … best illustrated by the custom of godparenthood … in Latin America'.

However, with time, the terminology was shifted to 'situational kinship' by different schools, conceiving non-blood relationships developed on verge of marginalisation,

patterns of living and organisational goals. Such as, the children begging in the streets forming situational kinship relations with each other (Nelson, 2013). Such an analysis was initiated to understand the void formed through a lack of familial roles and emotions. The classical account of 'fictive kinship' by Freed (1963, p. 86) describes it as the relationships governed by 'genealogically unrelated people' in India and Norbeck and Befu (1958, p. 102) expand it as 'quasi-kinship' relations fulfilling the ritual and economic functions. Such writings still occupy a predominant line of thought. However, as my research connotes like-kinship relationships within the variabilities of care work as well as ageing, certain questions destabilised the known directions - Are fictive kinship relationships merely formed between socially 'equal' people who occupy similar positions? Is this 'fulfilling' the essence of endurance, persistence and adaptations in the families consisting of kin, market forces and power relations? In other words, the context of this research locates the formation of fictive kinship relations between the *ayahs* and their elderly clients that expands to involve complex layers of symbolic and material hierarchies as well as different economic and embodied interests linked with those hierarchies (Image 11). The fictive kinship relations rather than being a mere expression of deficit or the loss of blood relatives, might have more complex implications of caregiving by *ayahs* and their clients' care-receiving routines.

Image 11: An *ayah* and her client's enjoyable moment (picture shared by an *ayah*).

Source : Fieldwork, 2022.

Location : Garia, Kolkata.

While in some homes fictive kinship relationships are developed between the elderly clients and their *ayahs*, this might not be a preoccupation in other homes. Likewise, even if elderly clients' sons and daughters form fictive kinship bonds with the *ayahs*, this might not be a reality for the others. Such affinities are primarily formed through the exchanges of multivocal meanings of personhood between the *ayahs*, the elderly clients and their care supervisors in Kolkata's homes. Such as, the personality of the *ayahs* as either chatty or expressing themselves emotionally and the clients or clients' blood/affinal kin responding to them in their mundane lives, determines the evolution of fictive kinship relations between them.

In a rapidly changing demographic milieu like Kolkata where the population of the lone elderly is surging (Ghosh, 2014), the valorising narratives around fictive kinship inform the meaning systems of ageing and care work. The transitions taking place within the families in Kolkata now lead to shifting emotional enactments as well as responsibilities where borne children of the elderly people turn more distant and the *ayahs* take intimate accountability as 'fictive kin'. So, the following section discusses how 'fictive kinship' arranges care work not only at the level of bodily accumulations but also through mundane negotiations of social values as well as power structures.

4.4.1 Interrelatedness in Care

As I developed my impression of the *ayahs* as care workers working through the *ayah*-centres, a realisation came upon me to note the 'social' terms that are often used to address the *ayahs.* This has been a significant exercise in reinstating the complex fabric of care work practices, mobilised from within the markets to the domestic spaces and vice-versa. It has been observed that the *ayahs* are often referred to by their first names and if they are older than clients' sons or daughters, they are referred as '*mashi*' (maternal aunt) while excluding the morally sanctified word '*maa*' (mother) from it. The word '*mashimaa*' (maternal aunt like mother) often depicts or encompasses the dominant hierarchical order of class and maternal respectability, either used by *ayahs* for their clients or clients' family members for their blood-affinal relatives. So, words like '*mashi*' spoken in a casual tone often connote the first-hand expression of fictive kinship as a relationship-in-making. In other words, calling the *ayahs* by names or as '*mashi*' baked with the differences across age, socio-domestic

positions, spatial attunement[50] as well as the bodily gestures, invoke an understanding of fictive belongingness and care work practices in Kolkata.

The evolution of fictive kinship relationships between the *ayahs* and their clients often involves the assortment of performances by the actors of care. It involves the transmissions, adjustments, experimentations and navigations of different skills, cultures, knowledge as well as networks, taking place within the domestic homes, *ayah*-centres and larger public spaces. The markets in which the *ayah*-centres are located mobilise care work not only through paid digital promotions (Justdial), but also by socialising *ayahs* into experiencing fictive kinship relations.

In Western countries like the U.K., where the counselling services or the social and supportive ecosystems of coaching and communication are available for familial caregivers, like Carers Support West Sussex (Milne *et al*., 2023), India's national and regional reserves operate scantly across such issues. Besides, the countries like Canada also offer initiatives at the level of the 'individual' and 'system', where not mere cash or material supplies are provided for caregivers but also 'trained care coordinators' who navigate 'problem-identification and problem-solving' (Williams *et al*., 2014, pp. 20 - 21). This however underlines the socio-political re-modelling of 'families' as the ideal cocoon of care. The fact that while coaching outlets and spaces for the mental, spiritual and financial well-being of familial caregivers (often with out-of-pocket costs) who encounter uncertainties and anxieties in their care work exist, the acknowledgements and administrative interventions of such services for 'paid' caregivers or care workers, are heavily undermined. The paid care workers are often discoursed as enduring work personalities relative to their market position and the commodification of 'labour', i.e., taking monetary payments for providing care. In highlighting the politico-economic ventures of care, the consumer behaviour in care work is often equalised to the *ayahs*' reduction of 'stress'. In some of the fieldwork instances, I noticed the clients' sons or daughters speaking about *ayahs*' monetary benefits in care work. A client's daughter, Nayan *Didi* (36 years) expressed, 'Our *ayah* is receiving money. So, what problem she might have?'.

[50] Observations made in the field depicted that the everyday tones of calling an *ayah* differed from the clients to that of the blood/affinal kin of the clients. The clients often spoke softly due to their physical discomfort while the 'care supervisors' always in a hurry for their office or other work, addressed *ayahs* more loudly and sternly.

In the context of countries like India, counselling services and the programmes of civil societies are bleak for the paid care workers. While familial caregivers still maneuver access to different social clubs at the disposal of their economic capital which affirms their neo-liberal citizenship and market-driven autonomy, the paid care workers like the *ayahs* possess no such outlets of formalised associations. In that gap, fictive kinship relations developed with some *ayahs* at the *ayah*-centres and the clients at the domestic households, constitute a resource for the *ayahs* to rehabilitate their material, symbolic and relational fractures associated with care work. Fictive kinship relations also transmute models of informal and interpersonal counselling between the *ayahs* and their clients who share their struggles with each other and evocate the reciprocation in care; despite the law-like generalisations and utilitarian consciousness of the market forces. The *ayah*-centre managers often vocalise disdains for fictive relations in fear of *ayahs* leaving care work[51] and further affecting managers' surplus profit of labourers. In a way, fictive kinship relations travel through the complex micro, meso and macro practices of care, which will be explored more in the subsequent sections.

4.4.2 Fictive Kinship, Piety and Resources

In the broader context of knowledge, 'market' is chiefly referred to as an economic phenomenon where the 'rational allocation of scarce resources' is processed to 'obtain the most from the means available' (Trigilia, 2002, p. 2). But, the individuality and attachments of the *ayahs* to their care work and clients indicate a reality beyond the economic product of satisfaction. It is the fictive kinship relations in care work that express the co-existence of economy, sociality as well as morality, influenced by the interaction of the care actors who are simultaneously the social and economic actors.

Fictive kinship is a localised expression of relatedness (Carsten, 2000). Even if *ayahs* register their work progress with their *ayah*-centre manager's call, their work of care manifests through the spatialised practice of 'resting' and throwing bodies to sleep. While few *ayahs* do sleep in the *ayah*-centres, the rest or leisure they experience in their clients' homes during the summers, encompasses the elements of developing a

[51] The *ayah*-centre managers in constructing, culturing and socialising *ayahs* to be service providers for the market of the clients (consumers) often conceive the *ayahs*' celebration of leisure as a deviant and disordered system of production, revealing power practices.

fictive kinship consciousness. Not merely the act of communication and fellowship in care work practices, but the fictive kinship relationships also require physical energies of the body and its rejuvenation to reciprocate well. Parvati *Didi* (part-time *ayah,* 32 years) working for Kona Basu (*Dida* [52] as I called her, 76 years), an elderly client living in Salt Lake, emoted her testimony with enthusiasm while rubbing her sweat with her saree's end:

> Yah, I love my work as well as sleep [*chuckles*!]. In summers when the Sun burns me, I find solace in the AC room of Kona *Mashimaa* [maternal aunt]. I sleep and rest on the floor and talk with her for hours, on family, soap operas and what not. I feel so relieved and close to her as if my own aunt is talking and giving me peace.

Parvati *Didi*'s 'rest' reinforces her fictive kinship relationship, that she socially and subjectively recognises with Kona *Dida*. While fictive kinship relations have always been justified as forms of contesting, differentiating and substituting one's 'biogenetic kin', care work do present a complex interpersonal modality of fictive kinship. For *ayahs* and their clients, fictive equation also reflect aspirations and collectivisation of social existentialism. Not mere working and sharing emotions but reproducing the sensorial materialities of the working bodies, longing for rest and experiencing the temporary pleasure of immobility on the cold floors of the client's room, that fosters the assertion of *ayahs'* social and individual rights.

Once as I was taking shelter in an *ayah*-centre to beat the scorching summer heat, I noticed an *ayah* requesting her *ayah*-centre manager to take an attendance over the phone as she was quite tired of arriving at the *ayah*-centre every ten days. She was sweating as she voiced her concerns, '*Dada* [manager], I will now call and give my name. I cannot come here again and again. *Shorir theke shob jol berie jacche* [all the water is coming out from my body]'. To this, the manager replied, 'Yes … I know, you want rest! You just need an excuse to gossip with your client'. Such a statement pointed to the ways in which the power relations operate between the *ayahs*, *ayah*-centre managers and the clients, where the *ayah*-centre managers control care work culture by intervening in the relationship of the *ayahs* and their elderly clients. While

[52] The local kinship terminologies are marketized to press a moral imagination and practice to care work – revering the elderly people.

on one hand, the elderly clients are perceived to be the economic agents of *ayahs* and managers' social welfare, the managers also demonstrate the communicatory rules and practices for the clients to refix economic relationships, i.e., controlling the influence of their clients into *ayah*-centres. So, the fictive kinship residues generate complex frictions between market affiliations and moralising domestic sociability.

In the manifold journeys of my fieldwork, the unwrapping of the participants' voices through phrases like '*meye err moton*' (like a daughter), '*maa err moton*' (like a mother), etc. shaped Kolkata as a social geography of care work. In an interesting insight, I observed an *ayah* Ritu *Didi* (long-term *ayah*, 40 years) sitting beside the daughters-in-law of a client to participate in his *Shraddho* (death ritual) ceremony (Image 12). Since the client considered *Didi* as his own daughter, *Shraddho* ceremony for *Didi* was also a crossing across the caste where she despite being from a lower-caste group ritually links her to her upper-caste father-like client. Performing the *Shraddho* rituals and touching 'sacred' things like flowers, then symbolically uplifts her social and caste identity in a public ceremonial space. It is the institution of care work that then act as a mechanism of social inclusion for the *ayahs*. Such an instance made me realise that participating in the multi-level sensoriality of care work, fictive kinship is no less than a 'hope' for actors involved in care work practices.

Image 12. An *ayah* (first from the right) performing *Shraddho* (death ritual) with her client's daughters-in-law

Source : Field work, 2024

Location : Salt Lake, Kolkata

This brings me to Hannah Arendt's (1958, as cited in Bergdahl and Langmann, 2022, p. 415) understanding of 'hope', as she explores hope as a 'worldly category' vouching for :

> the renewal of the (old) world made possible in and through political action by the old generation (adults) – a possibility, however, that has its ontological roots in the potentiality for future action embodied in, and represented by, the new generation.

Similarly, the work and practices of care inscribed through diverse socially shared situations in Kolkata, mobilise hope. Such hopes are primarily drawn between the parallels of obligations and autonomy, traditional cultures and modern processes, or affinities and guilt between the elderly clients and their younger generations. A vivid scenario syncs *ayahs* as a symbol of social adaptation, further diffusing resistance of the elderly clients against their affinal-consanguineal kin. The observations made in the field record that the elderly clients often use their vocal agencies to inform their affinal or consanguineal kin that their *ayahs* are not 'betrayers'[53]. Here, Maloti *Didi*'s (long-term *ayah*, 34 years) case deserves special attention. As a popular *ayah* known for her regularity, discipline and sagacity, she is respected by all in her *ayah*-centre, located in South Kolkata's Ranikuthi. One summer when she visited the *ayah*-centre for her attendance, I caught a glimpse of her. She stated cheerfully, 'I gained weight as I get good food in *Kaku*'s[54] home'. Soon after, she invited me to her *Kaku*'s home. Her *Kaku* (elderly client, 80 years) asked me to sit as he rushed for a chit-chat in his friend's home nearby. As me and *Didi* sipped a cup of tea, she expressed:

> I have been working with *Kaku* since the last six years. He is unmarried. I really respect him as he is a true man. I separated from my husband long back as he was unwilling to work or even earn. He also used to beat me a lot. I had a miscarriage as he struck me hard in my abdomen when I was pregnant.

[53] Unexpected risks where the elderly parents might be left behind to care for themselves or the parents might not be willing to leave their hometown, further generating a crisis in familial communication and the socio-emotional legitimacy of the adult children (if not legal).

[54] In Maloti *Didi*'s case, the utterance of the word *Kaku* is fused with respect and love for an elderly male client who supports her like a father.

> When I was pregnant again, I decided to leave him as I had a paranoia that I would not survive, if that happens again … [*sad*]!

I exclaimed in a second, 'Is it difficult for you to raise your son as a single mother?' Without much thought, she confirmed:

> Yes, of course! What do you think? Everyone takes advantage. Earlier, I was working in a *bidi* [locally-produced cigarette] factory nearby. I worked overtime, faced dirty sexual advances and was thrashed [*verbally*] off in front of all the co-workers. Someone told me about this [*Progoti ayah-centre*] *ayah*-centre and it proved to be a turning point in my life. *Kaku arr ei centre amar somman* [Uncle and this *ayah*-centre is my dignity!].

For *ayahs* like Maloti *Didi*, the *ayah*-centres are not merely a convenient mode of survival but also an apparel reproducing ideologies on sexual and moral purity. *Ayah*-centres are an effective symbolic capital, reinforcing the feminine code of ethics, boundaries and care within the larger community. This is evident from Maloti *Didi*'s past and the translations of her past through the regulative movements of her body and activity. Although I was skeptical of engaging with her personal traumas, it was Maloti *Didi* who spoke her heart out to share some inner feelings. She continued speaking with pauses, 'My son is happy now … I admitted him to Mission School[55]. For the last five years, he has been staying and studying there. I visit him on Sundays'. Upon further enquiring, it also turned more appropriate to state that the *ayah*-centre and Maloti *Didi*'s *Kaku'*s home turn into a socio-political space where she conforms to sexual containment and distance as a 'single mother' to her son. The *ayah*-centre as a socially acknowledged attribution of *seva* enhanced Maloti *Didi*'s social status and role as a celibate, selflessly serving her client and earning income through her morally valued work and labour – free from any '*nongrami'* (pollution, romantic and sexual temptations), as she remarks distinctly. This turned out to be a distinct element in this research as a share of the 'single mothers' are *ayahs*, cleansing them abstractly-symbolically from their past sexual encounters. It is also an investment made in the fictive kinship relationships between the *ayahs* and their

[55] Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya, Narendrapur, Kolkata, is an institute affiliated with Ramakrishna Mission (see https://www.rkmvnarendrapur.org/). It is well-known as an institution of social welfare for the impoverished and meritorious children.

clients where clients through *ayahs*' purity are often rewarded as transhuman, i.e., entitling the elderly care and ageing as a sacred cultural regeneration of the society if not a mere work. In a way, it is not only the act of service that shapes the sacred and authoritative image of the elderly people in the social memories of care, but also affirmations of such services to be diffused from 'sacred' care workers, even if paid.

Such a sustenance of the bodily purity of the *ayahs* also facilitates their children to participate in the dominant power structures by accessing the necessary resources and support mechanisms for upward social mobility. The range of the dictations made by Maloti *Didi*'s manager through patriarchal surveillance, entrusted her with the task of sustaining the social honour and prestige of not only the *ayah*-centre but also of her own 'son'. Even the usage of her mobile phone in *Kaku*'s home and *ayah*-centre is often depicted to be transgressing the threshold of gendered behaviour, where mobile phones implicate a symbol of deviant romanticism interlinked with work strata and fictive kinship. Since Maloti *Didi* is a fictive kin of *Kaku*, her public-private conduct was sought to be determining the betterment of her son who might not have to listen to 'bad words' about his 'single mother'; which is not a dominant expectation from his promiscuous father. This connotes moral marketization of care work that involves sacrificing the probable outlook on future relationships and intrinsic-natural desires[56] (for Maloti *Didi* and single mothers) while internalising the patriarchal culture and gendered norms of mobility. Once Maloti *Didi* laughingly stated, 'I don't know what will happen in the future. Whether there would be another man in my life! But at least would not prefer until I am into this work'.

In a gloomy weather when winter arrived, I met *Kaku* again in his home. As our conversation remained half-hearted in our previous meetings, we continued our discussions again. Ecstatic, *Kaku* revealed Malot *Didi*'s quality of care work and his addresses towards Maloti *Didi* as like-daughter, uttering, 'Maloti has no such *bairer nesha* [literally, inappropriate outside movements and metaphorically, romantic relations]. She and her son are like my family, a small family!'. In a way, social

[56] Maloti *Didi* and a few other *ayahs* willingly desire to stay single and abstain from sexual encounters throughout their lives. A reason for such a decision lodged in their past exploitations and abuse at the hands of their husbands, that traumatised them for life. Now, sex is not only a deviant activity for them as *ayahs* but represents the hegemonic control of patriarchy, which they resist. Moreover, *ayah*-centre perpetuates as a social force to covertly acknowledge celibacy or monogamian sexuality for the *ayahs* (as discussed in chapter 4).

affirmations of fictive kinship ties with the *ayahs* are influenced by notions of sexuality, class, moral cleanliness and domestic patriarchy. The fact that *Kaku* shared this with me, reflected ways in which the lower-income *ayahs* are often entitled to moral policing in the geographies of care and the power politics of ageing.

The single *ayahs* separated from their husbands and widowed or *ayahs* in general, often utilise fictive kinship relationships with their clients and economic utilities from care work to achieve social respect as well as agency. This is different from what Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014, p. 17) analyse across the heterosexual society of Nigeria, sanctioning virgin young women for marriage and exposing middle-aged single women as worthy of sexual intimacy if not wedlock:

> …. [*single independent women's*] real or assumed possession of much economic resources before marriage limit a women's opportunity to marry owing to prevalent association of wealth with men and stereotypical beliefs about women of high economic means. Crossing the patriarchal bar … to a high-wage paid work imposes limits on single women's opportunity to be "chosen" for marriage.

While in Kolkata's context of care economy, Maloti *Didi* is working and possesses insurance in her name, her singlehood is not for remarriage or re-experiencing any sexuality. Rather, she manoeuvres her singlehood to reinforce her social identity and material world as an '*ayah*', for the care market, domestic sanctity of clients' homes and the institution of the *ayah*-centres. So, the meanings and social practices of ageing and care are shaped by fictive kinship relations in the context of Kolkata where the *ayahs* mobilise between dominant structures and their innate-personal conducts.

4.4.3 Transactions of Property and Fictive Relations

Lamb (2000, p. 30) in relation to Marriott (1990) once familiarised herself with the 'fluid and open nature of persons in India'. In this context, she analysed the Indian concept of '*maya*' in old age where Bengali elderly people often experience attachments and love but with the possibility of its future rupture. Lamb (2000) writes that old age is a 'paradoxical time of life, when relations are the most fragile but the pulls of maya the strongest … [*but*] "cutting" maya is something that most Bengalis believe to be extremely difficult to do' (pp.115 - 116). In drawing this account, this research also indicated the conflictive emotions of elderly clients and *ayahs*

associated with *maya*. The families where distanced kinship makes its way, fictive kinship relationships of the clients with their *ayahs* often string '*maya*', that define ageing and its social practices in Kolkata.

In the fictive kinship relatedness developed around paid care work practices, ageing connotes the socio-cultural making of a person through the transactions of material and symbolic assets. Such transactions enable one to move beyond locating ageing as the 'victimisation' of elderly people in post-retirement age, where they are stigmatised to lose their socio-physical abilities in enhancing the generational transmission of knowledge and things. But, in a way, it is ageing as a social process that reconstructs the legitimised boundaries of lineage and intergeneration, which has been explored in this research. The transformability, fluidity of affective substances and permeability of relationships between the elderly clients, the clients' blood or affinal kin, *ayahs* and *ayahs*' families, offered me a deep willingness to look for the elements or properties transacted in the fictive kinship practices of paid care work.

The plural depth of kinship ties formed between the *ayahs* and their elderly clients in Kolkata denotes the pattern of living and the 'field' (Bourdieu, 1984) of social dispositions. Taking an inspiration from Bourdieu's (ibid) 'field' defining social spaces of harmony and struggles, the co-operative residential apartments and old-style houses in Kolkata can be charted as the 'field' of fictive kinship values and proximities of power. It sensitises us not only to socio-economic circulations of care as 'goods' but also care as a system enculturing generational as well as the memorial property (discussed below). Embracing positive expectations of Shima *Didi* (long-term *ayah*, 35 years), I once asked her whether she seeks any new possibilities for her future, apart from her job as an *ayah*. While she is known to be a reclusive one in the *ayah*-centre, her first abrupt reply to me was, 'I really like your happy face! Don't you have any miseries in life?' It was a shocking experience for me. However, I grasped her inner inhibitions, pain and solace, which prompted the response. In a matter of few days when her elderly client was in Bangalore for a holiday, we talked our hearts out. One day, she began :

> I was not ready for this job. I knew how much energy and patience are required for *ayah*'s *kaaj* [work]. However, money and hunger cannot be ignored. I am a widow with a son, where would I go? But my life transformed

> completely when I met my client's family. *Masimaa* [the elderly client] is so good and sweet, she treated me as more than her own daughter [*her eyes filled with tears of joy*].

I asked her back, 'It is understood that you love gifts! But, is your son comfortable with your client?'

> He loves *Masimaa* like his grandmother. As soon as he was born, I was widowed and my in-laws threw us like dirt. *Masimaa* not only loves us but also enjoys our company. We paint with her, sing with her and gossip. *Masimaa* assured us that if she dies [*sad tone*] she will leave her insurance money for my son's education … and also a few utensils, clothes and her precious belongings. Who says so?

Apart from sharing emotions and privacies, the hierarchical communication as well as practices of stratifying the essence of property by the elderly clients, reinstates the intersubjective complexities in reproducing care work practices. As quoting Shima *Didi*'s *Masimaa* (82 years) when she was discussing property and legal wills for her son :

> See, my relationship with my son … is somehow evaporating. What Shima did for me, if I forget ever, *Thakur* [God] will never forgive me! So, for reputation, I will transfer the *bhita-mati* [land] to my son … otherwise … it would lead to a massive question from my kin. But my precious belongings would go to Shima, as I know she will lovingly store my things and show them to her son when he grows old.

Delving into the innate rifts and dynamically transitioning kinship-based relations, *Masimaa*'s words portray the differentiating diffusion of 'generational property' and 'memorial property', for her son and *ayah* respectively. 'Generational property' can be referred to as the tangible or material assets that orient as well as redefine the social, economic, political and moral legitimisation of lineage, membership of descent, familial name, social prestige and the ancestral rights, such as forefather's land, shops, jewellery, etc. On the other hand, the 'memorial property' has a symbolic connotation of affinity as well as social differences within and across clients' families. 'Memorial property' can be both tangible and intangible assets like the recipe book of clients, their stories, their embroidery works, clients' jewellery, copper utensils, insurance

policies, etc., which transgresses the stigma or boundaries of paid care work rules and invoke a socio-domestic inclusion of *ayahs* and their families. In turn, the 'memorial property' is flexible in social orientations and arrangements, without any form of the atypical expectations of the patrilineal and cultural standardisations of property. This adheres to Carruthers and Ariovich (2004, p. 24) as they analyse that property involves the 'dyadic relationship between people and things' while simultaneously lodging assertions beyond what Dodson and Zincavage (2007, p. 906) figures as the paid caregiving of CNAs. They claim that :

> family model posited by both nursing home managers and CNAs as essential for providing good care to frail and dependent people … however, this model of kinship is "one way" benefiting the residents and nursing homes but essentially denying reciprocity to CNAs … [*with the*] racialization of the occupation.

Analysing this in the context of *ayahs*' care work practices in Kolkata, the fictive relationships are multi-layered rather than one-dimensional. The dynamicity of such ties embeds dialectical issues of domination and subordination for different actors involved in care. For instance, elderly clients might feel dominated and subordinated by *ayahs*' turning to 'like-children' where *ayahs* by virtue of their close associations initiate strong directives for their elderly 'like-parents'. This can be analysed by O'Shea Brown's (2021, p. 9) remarks where, 'Controlling-caregiving behavior is characterized by the child's [*ayahs in this context*] attempt to maintain the parent's attention and involvement by entertaining, organizing, and/or directing the parent [*as the*]… "parentified child"'. It is also the fictive kinship relationships that turn more exhaustive with mundane and institutionalised interactions between market, gendered states and the codes of socio-moral belonging(ness) between the actors of care. The stronger kinship expectations on the perfect quality of care work take a toll on *ayahs*' health, such as, doing extra work for the clients or their family members even if they are not willing to do. The *ayahs* might experience a dependency in their work and life with the externalised moral regulations that contest their choices, desires and self-explorations. But in broader terms, 'fictive kinship' relations offer potential emotional resources for both *ayahs* and their elderly clients, transcending the divide between the domestic and public spaces, shaping economies of life-course, home and urbanism.

4.5 Ephemerality of Kinship

Today, kinship functions not merely as the hegemonic manifestation of patrilocal socialisation within and across generations. Kinship in the context of social care in Kolkata also maneuvers into different realities of personality development, work structures and the social changes. The emotional distances and proximities between the *ayahs*, clients and care supervisors across the families in Kolkata, fuse into ambivalent social equations and market roles. This is primarily set through the work organisation, lifestyle aspiration of care supervisors, and appointments of *ayahs* for fulfilling the material and emotional requirements of elderly parents.

So, the chapter explores such transitional relational depths or nuances of kinship, making and remaking families. With observations and recalling of dialogic spaces between the participants and me as a researcher, three forms of kinship practices and shifts have been noticed. Firstly, the 'distanced kinship' realms can be defined as the emotional distances or fractures produced and encoded among the elderly clients or parents and their own adult children. This is further located through rifts in reciprocity, failed expectations and lack of interactive compatibilities between elderly parents and their adult children as care supervisors. Secondly, the 'mediated kinship' occurs when *ayahs* work towards mitigating or containing tensions and contestations associated with distanced kinship relationships, such as informing the care supervisors about the elderly clients and their stock of medicines, illnesses or any other necessities. And thirdly, 'fictive kinship' bonds developed between the *ayahs* and their elderly clients primarily govern, shape and integrate caregiving and receiving within and across the domestic, organisational, and public spaces. Such intersections through language and power using the local terminologies of claiming kinship ties like *Kaku*, *Mashimaa, Didi*, etc. also depict how the kinship relations develop interpersonal and intrapersonal structures of care work constituting care as a habitus that reshape social identities for the actors involved in the care networks. This further influences ageing where ageing is not merely shaped by social and cultural contexts but also through the economic specificities in a particular place or urban metropolis. Even if the everyday conduct on kinship ties and ageing exists within the framework of stratification, this is not without the embodied sensations, overlaps in the social locations of caste, class, gender and religion as well as the interlocking decision-making in care. This would be interpreted in the next chapter.

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