# CHAPTER 5

# Care, Market and Social Norms : Hierarchy and Politics of Care Work

## 5.1 The Social Quotient of *Ayah* Work

The labour market of care signifies itself as a distinctive socio-economic institution, sustaining through the relative moral, political and symbolic practices of Kolkata's *ayah* sectors. But, the historical formations of care labour, its organisations, and the blooming commodification of care[57] in the contemporary era, are not neutral to the indices of human life. Instead, care work projects a functional system of binaries, i.e., the ritual and sensorial dynamicity of purity and pollution. Apart from the hierarchies invested and configured in the *ayah*-centres and the clients' households and the social expectations restructuring care work, the normative dictations of the Brahmanical governance also manifest its claim through the relationalities of care work. Such ideological and customary sanctions relative to the work of the *ayahs*, their spatial mobilities, appearances and labour, etc., layers through the intersection of religion, caste, class and gender.

Today, care work of the *ayahs* reflects divergent forms of social identities, histories, or sensibilities of domination as well as subordination. As Ray (2016, p. 63) in claiming about the informalisation of nursing work in India, states that 'inequalities of gender, class and caste have been harnessed to cheapen labour in a sector increasingly dependent on large capital outlay … [*to understand*] shifting balance[*s*] of capital and labour in the healthcare sector'. Relatively, the predominant lower-caste/class location of the *ayahs* and upper-caste/class location of elderly clients, preserve 'differentiation (disjunction) of status and power' where the 'religious ranking' classifies 'things' and 'beings' in terms of the 'degree of dignity' (Madan, 1994, p. 44). This depicts the essential simulation and residues of the *Varna* order, encompassing the pattern of relationship between the care actors like *ayahs*, *ayah*-centre managers, elderly clients, and their care supervisors. In other words, it is the shifting, segmentary and even

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[57] *Ayahs* with varying levels of work performances such as being trained in technical care operations like injections, years of experience in care work and religious appeals (primarily Hinduism) are marketized through the *ayah*-centres, that further reproduces the social discourse of dirt and sacrality.

complementary interaction between the religion, caste, class and gendered values of the care actors, that shapes the performative identity of the *ayahs* and their elderly clients across the work of care.

In the context of this research, rather than isolating caste, class, gender, as well as religion as the impediments influencing the care work practices of the *ayahs*, I attempted to understand the intertwining of and embeddedness of such complex formations and continuations. This has been explored at micro, meso and macro-level patterns of organising, distributing, consuming, and living with care work – from the markets to homes and vice-versa. The dynamic ways in which caste, class, religion and gender function through the social and individual lives of the actors of care, reconstitute *ayah* care work and ageing as the materiality of shifting power relations, agencies and life chances. Care work as legitimised across the *ayah*-centres and the clients' homes as the productive 'goods', maneuvers into what Héritier (2001) would analyse as the markets promoting social cohesion in the contemporary era. Besides, it is the associational power of the social stratification systems that uncover relational practices of *ayah* care work in Kolkata.

If delved broadly, the preoccupation with caste and religion in the Indian context has been owed to naturalisation of inequalities and its movement in the everyday 'social' (Guru and Sarukkai, 2019). As the structures are internalised and authorised, caste operates as the integral divisive and paradoxical characteristic of the Indian socio-economic and political processes, signifying  the social status of the individuals. While religion and its locally contingent trajectories of caste in India form an axis of analysis for Indologists, culturalists and structural-functionalists, some accounts are relevant and instrumental. Louis Dumont, as a theorist using the semi-deductive approach of ideology and observation in his account, refers to caste as 'an institution unique to the Hindus, and he is [*sic*] very critical of scholars who regard it as yet another form of social stratification' (Dumont, 1970, as cited in Srinivas, 2006, p. 93). For Dumont, the caste system indicates the 'subordination of status to power that underlines the Vedic institution of varna, dividing society into four orders, Brahmin (priest), Kshatriyas (warrior), Vaishya (trader and agriculturalist), and Shudra (menial)' (ibid, p. 94). Other Marxist historians like Habib (1987, p. 3) understand caste as 'fairly well-marked, separate community, whose individual members are bound … through endogamy (and hypergamy)' and 'by a common hereditary

profession or duty, actual or supposed'. While this still appears to be a reality, the socio-economic authority of a few caste groups and the appropriation of political power by a few communities, facilitate the mobilisation of care work practices in present-day West Bengal, specifically Kolkata.

In contemporary times, dramatic socio-economic transitions taking place across the institution of the family, encompass a meaning system in representing the axis of caste socialisation. Now, caste and its residues are not merely observed through hierarchal division of labour, initiation ceremonies, and rituals followed for marriage or death, etc., but in the complex articulation of subjectivities, symbolisation of castes/classes and the flow of social, political, cultural and economic resources. As a dichotomous evolution, Srinivas' (2006, p. 96) work might be the inspiration to proceed further where 'dharma represents the ideological dimension, and artha the residual'. Then, it is *artha* (production, accumulation and circulation of wealth in society) and its access across the competing networks of caste and religious groups in Kolkata, that retain the parallels in the systemic processes of the *ayah* care practices. The *ayahs* with their externalisation of moral relations and positions often prefer to work in the *ayah*-centres where centre-managers belong to upper or middle-caste (*Vaishya*) groups. Such a context of consumption and work processes elevates status mobility for *ayahs*, further, they being involved in upper-caste diffusionism. The *Dharmic* (Hindu) prescriptions of each caste, which are also fluid, work through conspicuous principle of labour embedded in *ayah* services. So, when *ayahs* work for their elderly clients, they do not only serve as the subordinated servile class of labour fulfilling idealised hierarchical activity. Instead, the overlapping of consumer-graded religious, caste, class and gendered codes in care work, surrounds the ecology and politics of care, ageing, domestic-moral economy and the public-political conduct of the sociality of the caregivers and care receivers.

The debate here foregrounds care work as embedded within the social performances of durable and transgressive hierarchies. The (re)production and sanctions associated with the hegemonic modelling of the majoritarian religious contexts, routes the care actors' embodied landscapes. This is further issued in transposable social identities, languages of sanctification and purity-pollution dyad of care tasks, layered through the experiences of commodification. Grounding through this, the chapter explores the disparities and conformities across the normative and the traditional social practices

while examining the juncture of domestic integration and the market relations of care. Besides, the chapter also discusses varying resistances and adaptations to the moral and cultural being(ness) of the actors of care, restructured through the *ayah* markets in Kolkata.

## 5.2 Work, Servility and Sacrality

> … sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (Geertz, 1966, p. 3).

Such ideas as expressed by Geertz (ibid) in relation to religious attributes, practices and emotional perseverance, depict a structural quality that influences the shared inhibitions within and across people. Analogising it, the Hindu religious order, meanings and symbols also find space in the testimonies and social behaviour of the *ayahs* and the other actors of care, who internalise these as a reality of their lives, actions, nostalgia, patronage and workmanship.

In the preliminary stages of my fieldwork, religious ideas have been quite vocally represented by social control mechanisms and the forms of empathic sensoriality. This has been observed through different perceptiveness of colours[58], objects of touch and bodily gestures, associated with the legitimisation of *ayahs* and their care labour. Such as, keeping prayer books with one while caring for the clients. A woman in such a scene referred to herself as Shima Baidya (part-time *ayah*, 34 years), who perceived herself as an *ayah* to serve Lord Vishnu. When I conversed with her one sunny morning, her knowledge of the origins of Hinduism, its different schools of thought and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu[59], sounded interesting. Taking this as an opportunity to discuss more about her interest areas, I casually prompted a question, 'Why do you work as an *ayah*?' This awakened her, brimming with joy, as she spoke :

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[58] Often, diffusion through media institutions and popular culture (films, soap operas) subtly circulates prejudgements and stereotypes associated with colours, like 'red' for Hindus and 'green' for Muslims, etc.

[59] A Hindu saint who propagated Vaishnavism in both East (now Bangladesh) and West Bengal.

I find peace! I also earn something. I wanted to join the Police Force but failed to get coaching due to a lack of money. So since then, earning money has been an aim in life but not without any values and morals. Whatever I earn, I keep a share in feeding the orphan children[60] in a local orphanage. I do that as I am childless.

Claims to religion often retract compassion and love within the stratified feminine care labour, performed by lower caste and lower-income women in Kolkata. It is the supervision through the Hindu religious principles such as *Sanatana Dharma*, that invokes associating the roles and relationships of *ayahs* to redefine their occupational strategies and efficiencies. In other words, religious membership or a subtler effect of following the exhibitory 'class-based' religious performance and sociality of a few of her upper-middle income clients doing charity work, also resocialized Shima *Didi* to mobilize her emotional space and identity as an '*ayah*'. In the following discussions, Shima *Didi* spoke with a soft tone, 'One of my client taught me the art of "giving", whatever I can. She did a lot of charity'. This also reproduce the binary between the servility of the *ayahs* who often internalizes such behaviour as a belief system, based on the superior divine concentration of elderly clients' bodies. This can be articulated across the interstices of not mere sacred or profane segregation but the mutually constitutive forces of what I analyse as 'duties of sacrality' and 'sacred production'.

Relative to many of the observations and interactions made in the field, the 'duties of sacrality' lie at the discretion of the *ayahs* who reproduce the hegemonic social saliences of the Hindu society through care work and the 'sacred production' offers ways to understand the remaking of the bodies of the elderly clients that involves more moral and material work on their social existences by *ayahs*. An *ayah* Ruposhi *Didi* (long-term *ayah*, 45 years), working through Sarthi *Ayah*-Centre once showed me some of her photographs taken with her elderly client. She was an *ayah* working through the ravages of time when her only son left her and her daughter-in-law to fend for themselves. Although she tried to defend her son stating he went off to Kerala to earn a living, her pain sparked when she failed to stop later, shouting in anger, 'It has been two years, I did not hear of him. He used to send money initially, but later,

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[60] She conceives the children as the soul of Lord Vishnu – an aspect of 'sacrality' invested with work and class-based agency.

stopped that too. He does not care about us. Now I heard that he married someone else'. With a ruptured reality of being distant from moral experiences of filial piety, she remarked by wiping off sweat from her face :

> I don't know where God pushed me. My daughter-in-law is so young but she lives like a widow. We are lower-caste women, so *ayah* work is the only alternative for us in serving the *ucchuu jatt* [upper-caste] clients. Our next life [*rebirth*] will be good.

Her self and social identity (re)shaped by internalising and aspiring to resolve the deficiencies that are culturally associated with her caste characteristics, i.e., lower caste, was evident in her voice. It has however been analysed that while the upper-caste bodies, social selves and spaces seek to receive its sanctification through socialising the historicity of their lineages (like upper-caste clients talking about their Sanskritic priest forefathers), the lower-caste *ayahs* lying within a ritually polluted state cannot enjoy their sanctification per se but perform care work to receive the sanctified residues through the patronages of their clients. Care work of the *ayahs* then involves the corporeal labour of the Brahmanical society and economy which is marked by the 'extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence' (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 579). Delving deeper, it stands into a categorical juxtaposition of the 'purity givers', i.e., the elderly clients often belonging to the upper-caste/class backgrounds, sanctioning symbolic and relational purity for their *ayahs* and 'purity receivers', i.e., the *ayahs* who associate themselves with the bodies of the purity givers or their clients (Figure 2).
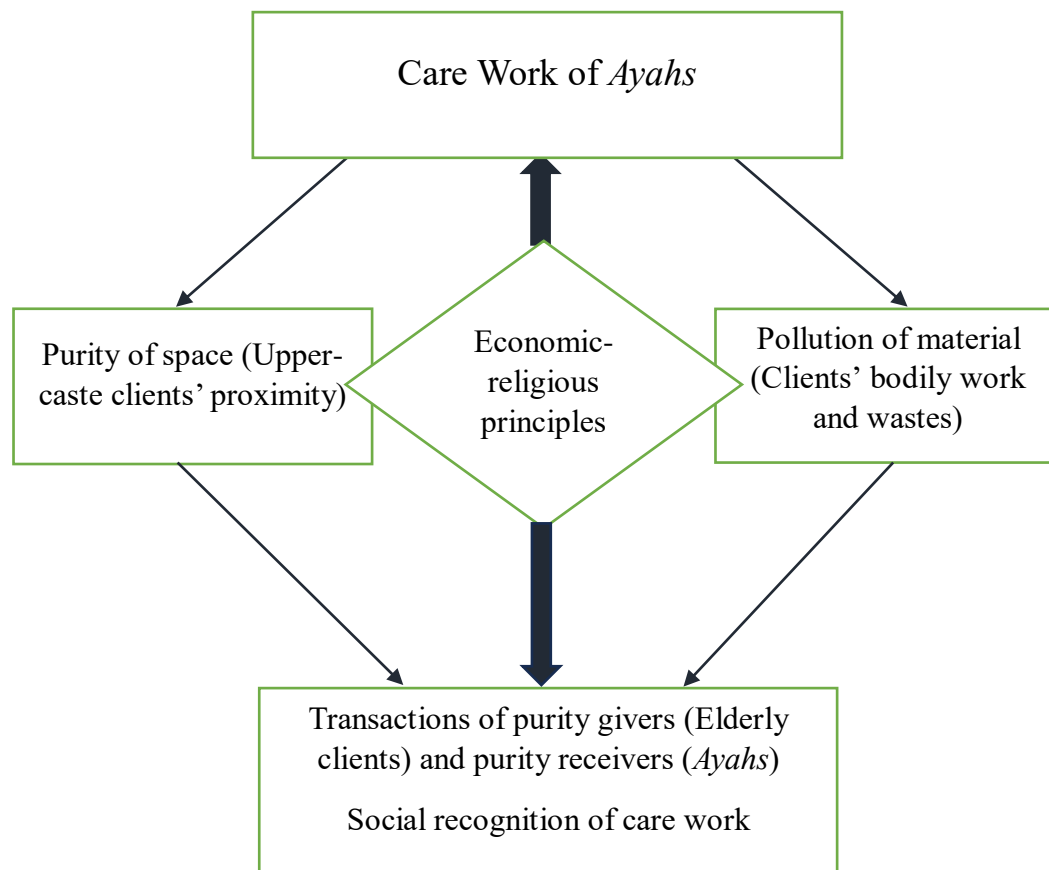
**Figure 2 : Hierarchical Transactions in Care Work (Source : Researcher's own)**

While existing scholarships attributed polarised lower-caste identities for the domestic servants and upper-caste, upper-middle or middle-income status for families hiring them (Barua *et al*., 2016; Basnet and Sandhya, 2020), the proliferation of age has been largely overlooked. Across households and the care work, the age of the *ayahs* functioned as an interstitial attribute with no such rules or records of retirement. This emerges from the capitalistic logic enmeshed within the patriarchal labour market that naturalises and '"deindividuates" women reducing them to … "functions"' (Sangari, 1993, p. 5). But in the context of this research, it is pivotal to analyse that not only *ayahs* but also their elderly clients are 'functions', that reproduce the marketability of age – the *ayahs* who are young are often preferred to work as care workers and the clients are often preferred old (many *ayahs* are refraining from childcare due to difficulties in grasping children's behaviour, as noted from field observations). The social figure of the clients is marketized through the objectivization of their ageing bodies, within the movements of everyday living. The care work of the *ayahs* shaping ageing then entwines the processes of religious sanctification, transpersonal location of self(hood) and assertive tendencies of achieving an upward socio-ritual status for

the elderly clients. Once on a busy sunny morning when I visited Sulanggari, I found Ruposhi *Didi* again. Without wasting a single opportunity to interact with her before she leaves for her *Odisha arr Mashimaa* (as she calls her, since the client's family shifted from Odisha long back), I politely asked if she could spare some time for me. She was quick to utter, 'It is the time … [*pause*] which is less in reserve'. This prompted me to ask further, 'Why?', and she gradually began :

> I work as an *ayah* for two important reasons, to earn money for investing in farming and secondly, to earn heaven. I have been working as an *ayah* since the last 11 to 12 years. After I joined this work, I have been into *Gitapath* [reading the Bhagavat Gita[61] daily]. I talk with my client, perfume her after bathing her, and comb her hair well. She turns into a happy child and I feel fulfilled with something positive and divine around me. As if *Thakur* [God] and *pobitro atma* [good spirits] are looking after me.

In the next moment, I asked, 'What would you do if you fail to work due to your health reasons? You might want some rest in your later life?' In a grim and sarcastic tone, she uttered :

> I don't think I will ever rest! I cannot rest since I don't know any other way to earn a living when old. I am scared to even think of my old age! My farm outputs are also meagre as I might receive Rs. 200 a day when I sell them into the market. Nothing much. Maybe God will show some way!

Like Ruposhi *Didi*, a significant share of *ayahs* spoke about their uncertain old age. Their work as *ayahs* and the visibly timeless labour of their bodies signify an attachment to religiosity and the politics of inequality but within the organising realm of care work. Such acts of performing strenuous work in the markets and the homes at a booming age depict the socio-moral acts of washing sins for *ayahs*. This reinstates the ascriptive order of caste where *ayahs* often express their ritual purification through care work as an acknowledgment of pain and paradoxically as a subtle form of power – where *ayahs* working for their upper-caste clients exert more social prestige for themselves across the *ayah*-centres. Religiosity then is used to mystify the defiling

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[61] One of the primary Hindu scriptures.

'paid-contractual' nature of care work, where caregiving and receiving are conceived to process empathy as well as non-economic elements.

Partly positioning Raghuram's (2001, p. 613) counsel on gender hierarchies and caste in the organisation of paid domestic work in India, she states, 'The exclusivity of work relations is now based on territory, rather than familial bonding'. While familial relations and its influence on the realities of social asymmetries cannot be discounted in the care work practices of *ayahs*, it is the symbolic, cultural, representational and the physical territoriality of religion (structural Dharmic norms) with the divergent constructions of age for the *ayahs* and their elderly clients, that also shapes the social and political entitlements of care.

## 5.3 Religion as Social Performance

The nature of work with the emergence of industrialisation, corporate capitalism and the global economic exchanges has either been linked to thesis of secularisation/de-sacralisation (Morse and Weiss, 1955; Palmer, 1957) or is maneuvered across conflicts between the secular identities at work and religious dogmatism (Ashforth and Vaidyanath, 2002). But, a locally contingent essence of the economy and the affiliations of care work in the context of Kolkata, injects a meaning system that incorporates a congruence between monetary benefits and socio-religious behaviour. The mundane dialogic spaces of care work for the *ayahs*, struggles of power and the dynamicity of religious visibilities, expand complexities in appropriating as well as contesting the consciousness of nationalism. In Kolkata, this occurs through the overriding conflict of the work role demands, domestic and public inclusion, and the competitive acquisition of work between the *ayahs* belonging to different religious groups.

In a cross-cultural proliferation of Indian values of reciprocity and devotion towards the elderly, the *ayahs* following Islam often depict care work as a service or *khidmot*[62]

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[62] Originally '*khidmat*', an Urdu word translated into English as 'moral service'. Often, Bengali Muslim *ayahs* use some Bengali(zed) Urdu words for their social validation as 'Muslims'. In some observances, the Muslim *ayahs* have been seen using the Urdu words like '*shukriya*' (thanks), '*allah rosul*' (Prophet), '*khala*' (maternal aunt), etc. to make themselves socially and racially equal in status to that of the 'white' Arab race in the Middle East. It is the use of such languages and gestures in the workplace like *ayah*-centres that bespeaks about the complex racialised distances and proximities, located across the global context of 'sacred'

(an Urdu word with a Bangla touch). However, as I met an *ayah*, Amina alias Radha *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 35 years), I observed the monitoring of her statements before her Hindu colleagues in the Shikha *ayah*-centre. As an *ayah* present among the minute share of the Muslim *ayahs* in that *ayah*-centre, I forwarded a question on how she manages to work as a Muslim *ayah* in a Hindu household. While Muslim *ayahs* are often offered housekeeping services than that of elderly care, a few *ayahs* manage to place themselves in elderly care markets when the clients' families arrive from other countries (Bengali NRI families). Amina *Didi* spoke while checking whether her *ayah*-centre manager was eavesdropping on her:

> Families coming from *sahib derr desh*[63] [Western countries] are more *udaar* [open]. They never really poke about an *ayah*'s religion, even if they know I am a practicing Muslim. They just want your time and professional service, not your religious beliefs! That ensures a feeling of freedom.

Amina *Didi*'s words on the transformed state of religious ideology relative to migration, global economic connections and geographical ideas on modernity, fall in an arbitrary dynamic of socio-spatial ordination. Her voice and making of social relations reinstates an uplifted social status for the NRI families. For *ayahs* like Amina *Didi* and others, the NRI families move beyond and resist the traditional social norms associated with Hinduism or other religions like Islam by virtue of their exposure to different countries. In this research, it has been observed that they place their religious and 'spiritual strivings' (Emmons, 1991) more into their private behaviour and agentic practices.

This can be explored more with a fieldwork instance. Once I received a chance to interact with an elderly client's family in Salt Lake, who lived in Canada and travelled back to Kolkata for Durga Puja celebrations and meet their old father in 2022.

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Islamic presentations. That is, Urdu is not merely a language but appropriated as a social role performance by the Muslim *ayahs*.

[63] 'Sahib' is a word often used for the whites (preferably Britishers and Anglo-Indians) in the Indian context. The term was popularised with the colonial settlements and imperialism in India around the mid-18th to 19th century (Roychowdhury and Randhawa, 2015). Today, field observations dictate that it is often used as a localised term or slang in Bangla that indicates 'leisure-loving whites'.

Overjoyed I was to observe their enthusiasm in preparing flowers and *Bel pata*[64] (leaf; Aegle marmelos) before *Maha Shasti*[65] and calling their Muslim *ayah* to have the *prasad* (food offered to Goddess Durga) and finish their father's tasks early; I asked the son Rabi Dasgupta *Dada* (care supervisor, 38 years) holding the *prasad*, 'Your *ayah* belongs to a different religion … does she face any concerns?' His reply was powerful in exploring the relationship between secularism and secular co-existence of different religions :

> We live in Vancouver and often hire governesses for our children, who are mostly the Muslim and Christian immigrants from India or the Middle East. We are so busy that we hardly have any time to think whether one is a Muslim or a Hindu. We believe in humanism! We want service, and they are working. A simple equation! Even in India, I follow this principle and ask my father not to maintain any reservations!

Rather than being disruptive to familial integration of care, the distant practices of faith through multiple essences and routes, reorient the accommodative routines for Muslim and Christian *ayahs* in Kolkata.

However, recourses to intensify one's religious commitments and social linkages to national or regional identities, take place through the mundane interaction of *ayahs* in the *ayah*-centres. Such interactions constitute the *ayahs* as religious subjects, often strategically moulding several discussions to impress their *ayah*-centre managers. The physical and political sanctification[66], lived experiences, and performative contexts of

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[64] A sacred leaf devoted to Goddess Durga, where people enlist their inert prayers – a medium between this-worldly and invisible otherworldly sacred entities. This might also project a symbolic encounter of one's social existence and the interstitial expansion of such existences in mystic orders. Such mysticism reproduces religious and class stratification where *Puja Pandals* (the structures made of wood, bamboo, tents and other materials where the Goddess Durga is placed with ritual elements) often accommodate upper-income 'respectable' families to offer prayers first in line than the other working-class individuals or families.

[65] The first day of Durga Puja or the seventh day in nine-day Navaratri festival, as celebrated in Eastern and Northern India respectively.

[66] In the context of this research, the 'political sanctification' refers to the ways in which the managers of the *ayahs* attune to the values of Hinduism as a social and political affair of addressing the Hindu demography, population decline of Hindus and sustaining Hindu culture in Kolkata. This turns more vocal with the exchanges and contacts of *ayah*-centre managers with the political and youth leaders, specifically belonging to the RSS, further influencing the activities of the *ayahs*.

religion in *ayah*-centres, often take place through visible and sociable reflections. For instance, the Hindu priest known as *Pondit Moshai* (Image 13) in Sulanggari arriving to put vermillion *phota* (a mark on forehead) and *Gangajal*[67] (water from river Ganges) on the *ayah*-centre managers and *ayahs*, performing elaborate rituals during festivals of the Hindu pantheons (Kali, Laxmi, and Durga), distributing *prasad* (sacred food) and fruits served to the deities, opening one's shoes before entering the *ayah*-centres. All reverts to the reproduction of *ayah*-centres as a like-temple of work or what Berger (1967, p. 19) would refer to as 'the social world' in which individuals are constructed as persons with an 'objectively and subjectively recognizable identity … [*through*] ongoing biography'. In this context, the biographies of work and life of the *ayahs* are often shaped through religious markers, emotions and sensorial cultures.

The mobility of the labouring bodies of the *ayahs* across religious norms attracts more legitimisation through public gaze and participation. In many instances, it has been observed that the *ayah*-centre managers often share prayer *prasads* with the Hindu shopkeepers running shops near their *ayah*-centres while the Muslim workers often refuse *prasads* before their *Namaz* (the first prayer of the day). As Etherington's (2019, p. 3) words will help to analyse, 'Religion makes epistemological and metaphysical claims that spill over into the workplace … [*it*] regulates a sense of duty, honour, loyalty, and sentiment in life including how one should behave while at work'. Expanding his argument, certain observations also invited me to interpret how religious trends, values, piety, and law-like sensibilities are transferred to the wider Bengali community from the markets to the domestic spaces and vice-versa. It is the presence of the *ayah*-centres that make market actors more 'sacred'. This has been confirmed by Bibek Sanyal *Dada* (*ayah*-centre manager, 46 years), working in Jagatpur, as he speaks :

> This *ayah*-centre is my temple since it feeds us all. So, I perform all the
> rituals and prayers here. I respect this place where I work along with the *ayah*

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[67] The Ganges river, popularly known as the Ganga has been of socio-cultural relevance in Hinduism, offering a symbolic reverence to the Hindu deity Ganga. Water from this river is popularly conceived to be sacred and purified of evil entities. In the past decades, it was also used by the Brahmins and upper castes to purify (*Shuddhi*) them while coming into contact with 'Untouchables' and Shudras (Sharma, 2017).

sisters and try to share fruits or sweets with others surrounding us, even if they are not Hindus.



**Image 13:** *Pondit Moshai* offering his daily prayers in an *ayah*-centre.

Source : Fieldwork, 2023.

Location : Sulanggari, Kolkata.

In some cases, it has been observed that the sweets sprinkled with Tulsi leaves are often shared across different shops lined with the *ayah*-centres, in order to light a competitive power struggle with other Muslim *ayahs* and shopkeepers. In this manner, *perra* and *Bundiya laddoo* (sweets offered to the deities) form a receptive and diffusionist symbol with a cultural meaning system, lying within the moral-economic discourses of Hinduism. Taking this into account, the *ayah*-centre managers' authority over distributing sweets as the owners of the *ayah*-centres, also shapes the relative 'purity' of their patriarchal control and bodies as the primary agents of religious principles. This reflects a complex interaction between caste, gender and the religious politics across care work which can be supported by Lamb's (2000) analysis of ageing in Bengal. Lamb (ibid, p. 187) states, '… the male body was [*sic*] not usually considered to be wholly bound; it was only relatively bound compared to the greater openness of the female body'. Drawing from it, the mundane practices of expressing religiosity and upward moral hierarchy in the market spaces by the male *ayah*-centre managers, depict their relative cultural boundedness and diffusion in (re)producing the *ayah* work.

### 5.3.1 National Entitlements and Domestic Practices

The layered contexts organising care work as a practice, however, bring to the fore the religious involvement that locks hierarchies, categorisation and the labour of care exchanges. The *ayahs* across Kestopur, Sulanggari, Garia, New Town, etc., often engage in conversations of spiritual competencies like the peace of praying, '*tript atman*' (as solacing soul) and '*mitie deba aager jonmer paap*' (cleanse wrongdoings of previous births). While jamming conversations of *ayahs* sitting in the *ayah*-centre benches in their off time might look like a picture-perfect scenario of social interactions and interdependence, the words and statements spoken often manifest the socio-cultural standardisation of *ayah*-centre work. This posits the *ayahs* as 'gate ways to gain direct knowledge through reflections … in understanding … at conscious level of its appearance that how things appear directly to us' (Qutoshi, 2018, p. 217). Such reflections as appeared in this research, invoked different tactics used in care work practices and conflicted subjectivities invested in care. This further depicts the socio-economic redefinitions of religion and caste-based work in Kolkata. An interesting glimpse of a Muslim *ayah* craftily putting '*sindoor*' (vermillion), '*bindi*' (a velvety sticky element often placed on forehead by Indian women) and '*shakha-pola*' (the traditional white and red bangles often worn by the married Hindu Bengali women) in an *ayah*-centre, elevates such complex linkages between retaining the right to work and externalising the dominant socio-moral obligations; which is often not voluntary.

While such a makeup session was going on, an *ayah* being conscious of the secret, softly spoke about the Muslim *ayah*, '*Bon* [referring to me as 'sister'], she is not a Hindu. She is actually a Muslim. She got all *bou* [wifely] materials and I am teaching her how to perfectly put *sindoor*'. Such a teaching transaction might seem to be an unwavering act of friendship between *ayahs*, but this has also been a revelation in Wilks' (2022) analysis of the bargaining power used by the domestic workers in Kolkata. Wilks (ibid) describes that the Muslim *ayahs* often find it difficult to access good domestic work across homes and even if they secure some form of work, they are highly branded as 'illegal'. She further explores that the Muslim *ayahs* often use Hindu names to secure their work.

Wilks' inference projected a social reality scantly traced across the other accounts on care and domestic work. But in this research, it is not only the adoption of Hindu

names but the external material representations of Hindu 'purity', symbols of domesticity, ideal femininity, control of female sexuality and the marital status, which was traceable. Such practices are adopted against the backdrop of reclaiming the cultural ethos of caregiving and fulfilling the market demands of care. In such a case, living and virtually emulating sacred symbols of gendered honour and respectability by the Muslim *ayahs* often enhance their accessibility across the Hindu clients' homes. But this often persists with an underlying tension of hurting sentiments associated with religious beliefs or values. The clients often after discovering the secrets of their Muslim (alias Hindu) *ayahs* felt betrayed and lived with moral contestations, further affecting their sense of self-actualisation – pain and guilt that are temporal as well as dispersed. So, it is the religious hegemony and performances of care work circulated with a systemic power 'produced across Hindu families, neighbourhoods and the care receivers' bodies' that mobilises Hindu sub-nationality (Choudhury and Das, 2023, p. 611).

It is the contextual cycle of socio-cultural norms and semi-legal political discourses reshaping nationalism, that itself processes consciousness of nationalism as a 'sacerrima'. 'Sacerrima' is defined as the 'axiomatic principles and presumptions that do not easily lend themselves to negotiation or alteration' (Turner, 1967, as cited in Nord, 2021, p. 3). Within an ensembled interaction between spatial and symbolic elements in care work structure, the *ayahs* following Hinduism then turn into 'sacra' themselves, i.e., at 'the heart of the liminal matter' (ibid, 2021, p. 3) or sacred mediator of people, places and things, etc. It is this divisiveness yet the social relations present between the Hindu and Muslim *ayahs* that communicate a layered hierarchy of gender and femininity. The Hindu *ayahs* and their communication of care hold an upward social stage than the Muslim *ayahs*, reinstating how care work instills or reshapes the asymmetries between hegemonic and subordinate forms of femininity.

So, throughout the fieldwork, my inner quest as a researcher wanted more reflections from the *ayahs* that can bring their intricate emotions across care work, the rules of being an *ayah*, the dominant religious reproduction within which they work, etc. This safeguarded the method of focus group discussions as a viable supposition. After a lot of negotiations, not *ayah*-centres but Rukmini *Didi*'s (part-term *ayah*, 36 years) house was selected as an option for discussion since few *ayahs* often make evening strolls to her home. This can be textured from Syed *et al.*'s (2017) citing of Bendl *et al.* (2015),

depicting that lack of awareness of religious diversity in workplaces often affects the 'organizational performances as well as employee commitment and engagement' (p. 3). This too has been confirmed from the observations and notes taken from the focus group discussion.

Rukmini *Didi* resided in a rented accommodation in Sulanggari by making a payment of rupees 5500 per month. While it was expensive for her given the cost of her monthly rations and only son's schooling, she still organised kitty parties for her fellow *ayahs* every Sunday (those who worked as part-time *ayahs*). With my research intervention, one such party turned into a space of knowledge exchange and advocacy for human rights. As I engaged with a few Hindu as well as Muslim *ayahs* in such focus group discussion platforms, their conversations were tracked to be fraught with emotions of competition, amity, disclosure and concealment of conflict in care work.

However, the *ayahs*' narratives foregrounded religious nationalism as well as spatial-historical expansion of citizenship. The Hindu *ayahs* often made deeper efforts to prove themselves to be the socio-legal representative of the *Bongo* (as West Bengal). On the other hand, it is through care work that the Muslim *ayahs* often attempt to neutralise in some way the contested political objectification or their stereotyping as illegal migrants. Such scenarios assembled more in the rounds of CAA debate that ignited the risk of scaping the Muslim *ayahs* as the default voters or citizens, resulting in the loss of their work, homes and livelihood. While CAA or struggles to attain formal documents necessary for validating Indian citizenship exists, it can also be seen as a model inflicted on the macro, meso and micro levels of everyday lives. It can be relevant to analyse that the political knowledge-making of CAA and NRC often heralds a shift through the generation of national narratives, marking differences in words used by the Hindu, Muslim and Christian *ayahs*. For the Hindu *ayahs*, CAA is the need of the hour to scare away the infiltrators maligning their religious traditions, culture and work attainment while the Muslim *ayahs* perceive CAA as dismantling their self-identity as 'Indians' that blurs the boundaries of time, space, cultural pluralities and historical contexts.

Some of the Muslim *ayahs* in the field site were tracked using certain phrases like '*alada bhaba hoi*' (thought of as different), '*jongi bhabe*' (think as terrorist) and '*bishash kore naa*' (do not trust us). Besides, some other Muslim *ayahs* also shared their reservations about working for Hindu clients. Once Farida *Didi*, (daily-wage

*ayah*, 33 years) offering me a strange look spoke, 'Yah, we have no option. Otherwise, we prefer Muslim households. Hindu cultures are different from ours. My husband does not really know about my work'. I quietly ended the conversation by analysing how the politics of religion and patterns of micro-expressions are playing divisiveness in the emotionality of care work in Kolkata, where political violence[68] spurred a long history. On the other hand, Christian *ayahs* have been observed to be more immersive and comfortable with their Hindu clients and vice-versa, given their smaller numbers in *ayah* work and relatively neutral socio-political identity in India (no major media debates on religious conflicts). It is the everyday social interactions and fluctuating materialisation of care work practices in Kolkata ported by political liaisons on nationalistic ethics, that structurally construct emotions as a mobilisation of the ritual-moral, economic and symbolic power.

In the light of Das and Poole's (2004) analysis of state aura and the strategic ambivalences in legality, they proposed two contrasting emulations of state operations – rational and magical. It is the 'signature' provided by state agents with sufficient illegibility and magical precarity of rules and regulations, that shapes the socio-legal and generational practices of a community. Further, Das and Poole (ibid, as cited in Stevenson, 2007, p. 144) in accounting for legal and para-legal expansionism of the state remark that, legal '… documents can be forged and used out of context, and … the bureaucratic-legal processes are not legible even to those responsible for implementing them, … the state can penetrate the life of the community and yet remain elusive'. Similarly, the care work of *ayahs* maneuvered through a public landscape of the state-sanctioned papers and the certificates of *ayahs* (specifically for the Muslim *ayahs*), often turns into a social habitus that reinforces communal-body politics, nationalism and stigmatisation of the neighbouring nation, Bangladesh[69].

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[68] Refer: Kar, 2024.

[69] Bangladesh, a South Asian country, lies in the East of India. It shares its national borders with the Indian states of Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and West Bengal. Being a republic with Islam as the majoritarian religion, it carries elongated history of forced proselytization, village burnings, rapes, bombings, and the genocide of non-Muslim minorities, such as Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Jumma tribes, etc. (Kundu, 2023). A massive share of the non-Muslims fled the country in fear of saving their lives and religion. At this backdrop, the politically motivated action of the CAA (2019) was reintroduced to assimilate the minorities facing discrimination or persecution in Islamic countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan while issuing the Muslims living in India with the

Over the years, visiting the *ayah*-centres, accompanying *ayahs* to the work homes and walking with them, turned into a punctual routine that I undertook satisfactorily. Once chatting with an octogenarian client Nondini *Dida* (86 years), I noted a significant act that communicated fear and the sustenance of familial heritage across the domestic space. It was on 26th April 2022, as I remember by *Dida*'s act of giving me *prasad* (the food offered to the God) quite early in the morning at 8.45 am. *Dida* in a two-bedroom flat of Salt Lake was living alone with none of her kin/children around to provide daily care. Being an asthmatic patient, she required care round the clock, prompting her to book an *ayah*. While her long-term *ayah* Sonali *Didi* (a Hindu) was on leave, the Sebika *ayah*-centre manager replaced Sonali *Didi* with an *ayah* named Sukti[70] (a Muslim originally named, Sofia) (part-time *ayah*, 26 years). However, not very satisfied with her, *Dida* rested in her old moving chair and spoke, 'See, I am a ritualistic person. I follow certain things. As the situation occurs, I compromise too! … I am ill and require care 24*7'. But, as her *ayah* Sukti entered the room for a talk at that time, a more dramatic event occurred. *Dida* asked me to gobble the *prasad* fast and offered the fruits on the table to Sukti *Didi*, but not the food offered to the Hindu deity, Krishna. Sensing my look, *Dida* reacted, 'These *prasad* were offered in *shokaler pujo* [morning prayers], so these are … more ritualistic'. This reflected the subtle mannerisms through which the emotional and ritual attachments to food are embodied and expressed through the domestic atmospheres, where the individuals reinforce the relationship of the sacred foods to self and society. It is the politics and temporality of food and bodies that shape religious distances but within a different set of proximities. Such practices also redefine ageing where structural forces influence symbolic and social processes of ageing religiously, culturally and politically – transforming purity-pollution divide to the mechanisms of power. It is through rituals,

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responsibility of verifying their documents for detecting (if or not) about their illegal immigration. Such a diasporic discursive ideology of the Muslims being conceived as the 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh, stigmatised the Indian Muslims too, as many have been listed as the D voters. Similarly, Muslim *ayahs* working in Kolkata face stigmatised comments on their origins and religious-communal practices.

[70] While Sukti *Didi* acted as a Hindu *ayah* initially, one day she suddenly revealed to her elderly client that she was a Muslim, as she was feeling guilty about betraying her client. It was one of the very few cases where the client, Nondini *Dida*, concealed the matter due to her tiredness in booking and re-booking *ayahs*. She uttered, 'It is fine. I haven't spoken about it to the manager. How many times would I change *ayah*?'

work and social differentiation that *Dida* asserts her authority against being subservient to her *ayah* sometimes, as she is partially mobile (due to her arthritis condition).

*Dida* sustains her agency at ageing by internalising gendered, caste/class and religious prestige of being the 'mother' and the 'daughter-in-law' of her husband's extended kin or family (even if most of them passed away) and by being involved in retaining the traditional rituals. This is conducted daily by protecting her authoritative self-image, passing the social purity to her kin and keeping away utensils gifted by her mother-in-law when she was married, from her *ayah*'s touch. In one of the field instances observed, *Dida* was incessantly refusing Sukti *Didi* to touch her bronze utensils which she used for eating porridge and which was also used by her mother-in-law in the past. Once taking an opportunity to talk to Sukti *Didi*, I asked her casually, whether she would like to continue her work as an *ayah* in the near future. She explained, 'I don't know. But I would not like to … as it is difficult to work as an *ayah* being from a different religion. Often, we are thought of as the culprit of the client and country'. Her expressive voice reinstated her social and domesticated-public identity as an 'outlier' that further invites questions on the performance of her national citizenship. This imagery has been historically constructed with a blurred connection to the present decade where Muslims in general are located in stereotypical vision of being the descendants of Arabs, Turks, Iranian royals, etc. who orchestrated many Islamic crusades, invasions, oppressions, and the killings of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and the people following other faiths in the Indian subcontinent (Talbot, 2015). Muslim *ayahs* whose ancestors adopted Islam or participated in the conversions of their faith from Hinduism generations before, are regarded as inhabiting lower and contested social status relative to food cultures of eating beef[71], global terrorism, etc.

So, care work as an experiential, interactive and identity-in-making practice, attaches religious stratification and people's faith as a medium to understand relationship between spatial politics, nationalism, conflict, consensus, legality of existence and cross-cultural transfers. Besides, the care work practices ensure dynamic interplays between the state's authority over nation-making, ageing and citizens' micro-social

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[71] Cows are revered and prayed by the Hindus as a 'mother' who serves milk to her children (as human beings), nourishing and building them.

resilience to access the different forms of sustainable resources (Shani, 2017). For instance, the majority and minority citizenship debate is also utilised as an effective strategy by the Muslim *ayahs* to receive work, like shouting in front of *ayah*-centres about being from a different religion or gathering huge crowds to take a look at their manager's behaviour[72].

## 5.4 Caste across Care

Caste as a social institution, system and ideology remains intractable to the shaping of community relationships, care work processes and the domestic habitus in India. As a dynamic reality, the practices of caste intensify the categorisation of social contexts, events as well as activities in which it makes its presence evident. This occurs in two ways, firstly, fostering the permeability of services for people belonging to different caste groups and secondly, paradoxically reinstating the complex ties between labour, power and oppression. Such dilemmas can be uncovered through the care work practices of the *ayahs* in Kolkata. Though the above-analysed accounts on religion have been indicative of the culture and politics of 'othering' that originates from a historicity of ethics, nationality and governance, the interplay of caste as civic-social participation also engenders the shifting collectives of care work. The work of the *ayahs* that involves nourishing the bodies of the elderly clients is sowed as a congregation of values penetrating the Indian culture. As Lamb (2000, p. 89) on the versions of interpreting filial reciprocity explores, 'The "joint family", a multigenerational household in which elders make up an intrinsic part, is often described as something "uniquely Indian" or "characteristic of Indian culture"'. Today, this is visible across the specters of the market too where the elderly people are conceived as the central units of divine corporeality and profit-making. This induces care work performed by the *ayahs* as a command over maintaining the socio-cultural purity of the elderly clients and their kindreds. In other words, it is the women (here the *ayahs* and even elderly women clients) who are located as the pivotal elements of honour, shame and the preservation of caste Hindu society. Demonstrating a transformation in the social status of women with the evolution of the class-based societies in India and the social control of women prescribed in Hindu legal texts like

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[72] Field observations.

*Manusmriti*, Chakravarti (1993, p. 579) analyse, 'Women are regarded as gateways – literally points of entrance into the caste system'. But, relatively in debates jammed around ritual quality and progeny maintained through women's sexual and gendered codes or patriarchal polity, it is also important to understand the purity-pollution divide that connotes the dynamic exercises of religion and caste.

As an Indian, I have been deeply socialised into the intrusive and inflictive nature of the caste order across mundane events and social histories. This also influenced me to understand caste and its formations in *ayah* work. An ambivalent restructuring of domination and subordination within the moral economic production of *ayah* care work is far from the unilineal bearings of the *ayah*s' lower-caste/class and the elderly clients' upper-caste/class bodies. The domains of socialising the values and belief systems of caste and its transformations within the complex sub-castes, speak about the institutionalisation of care. In engagement with the scholarships on caste practices in India, the hegemonic construction of caste structure depicted socio-political and economic hierarchy present between the various castes or sub-castes. This spreads to the consciousness of ascriptive occupations[73] and social inequities in work, education, and health (Jodhka, 2015; Subramanian, 2015; Anikin, 2021). But once, as I was scribbling some of my field notes, sitting on a bench in an *ayah*-centre, some faint sounds on *jat* (caste) crossed my ears. My mind was already looking for some information on how *ayahs* construct their socio-cultural worlds and negotiate caste across care work practices. Surprisingly, one *ayah*, Soumi *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 29 years) clarified me and other *ayahs* in the *ayah*-centre that, '*Jat shob khaanei aache* [Caste is everywhere]'. She failed to stop even if her tea was turning cold :

> I do work for an elderly client. They are Bagdis themselves, a lower caste, like me. But when I do my work at their home, the rude daughter-in-law of the client lands me a *bashi ruti* [stale flat bread]. I have noticed, she even avoids touching my hands. Then she asks me to change myself into an old torn suit while placing an old newspaper instead of a table mat for me to eat on the dining table.

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[73] Occupations performed by virtue of birth in a specific caste group.

This testimony offers insights into the social processes through which people from lower-caste groups with the attainment of education and state-affirmative facilities in the context of India's politico-economic policies, too practice purity-impurity divide. This occurs within the structure of caste socialisation, representing a multi-layered expression of class status, intra-caste group stratification and utilisation of the weapon of class interests over material and symbolic politics of market, state and the family. The elderly client (as Shyamol *Dadu* here) belonging to a lower caste but upper-income and class status might signify the symbolic upliftment of his caste identity, ensuring its sacrality through generations of receiving institutional state patronages. More than living and conforming to the social order of caste, it is the 'state' that functions as the agent of sacralisation and social recognition for the lower caste clients' families. So, apart from religion, lineage and family, the state administration works as a moral economic reality of modulating caste and class citizenship in the contemporary times.

However, the performance of caste and its divisive social actions within households retrieves not only the adoption of upper-caste rituals or vegetarianism (in the North and South India) by the lower-caste communities - sociologically contributed as 'Sanskritization' (Srinivas, 1956). In hindsight, I analyse a growth in the care work regime of Kolkata where the interactional and environmental influences of emulating upper-caste ideologies by the lower-castes (or upper-caste differentiation with lower-caste) might not always be in a vertical movement of cultures or dyadic rituals (from the high to the low). The structure of caste might also invoke social differentiations between the people or the actors of care occupying a similar strata in the caste order, within similar caste groups or sub-castes. This is fashioned by complex entanglements of caste, class and the socio-economic nature of care work (Figure 3), embroiled within the substrata of sensorial politics, such as the domestic or customary rules of 'touch' prescribed for *ayahs*. The euphemistic and material practices of 'avoidance' of *ayahs*' touch by clients' families in some cases reflect a dispersed tying between the socio-cultural discourses and the devaluing or valuing of such discourses. This also perpetuates a web of stratified action where *ayahs*' touch often comforts their clients in care occupation if not the clients' blood/affinal kin – in turn also 'othering' the elderly clients (or parents). So, touch and aesthetic diversification of touch in care

work redefines 'home' as a socio-political space where the cohesiveness between the actors of care functions in subverted forms of resentment.
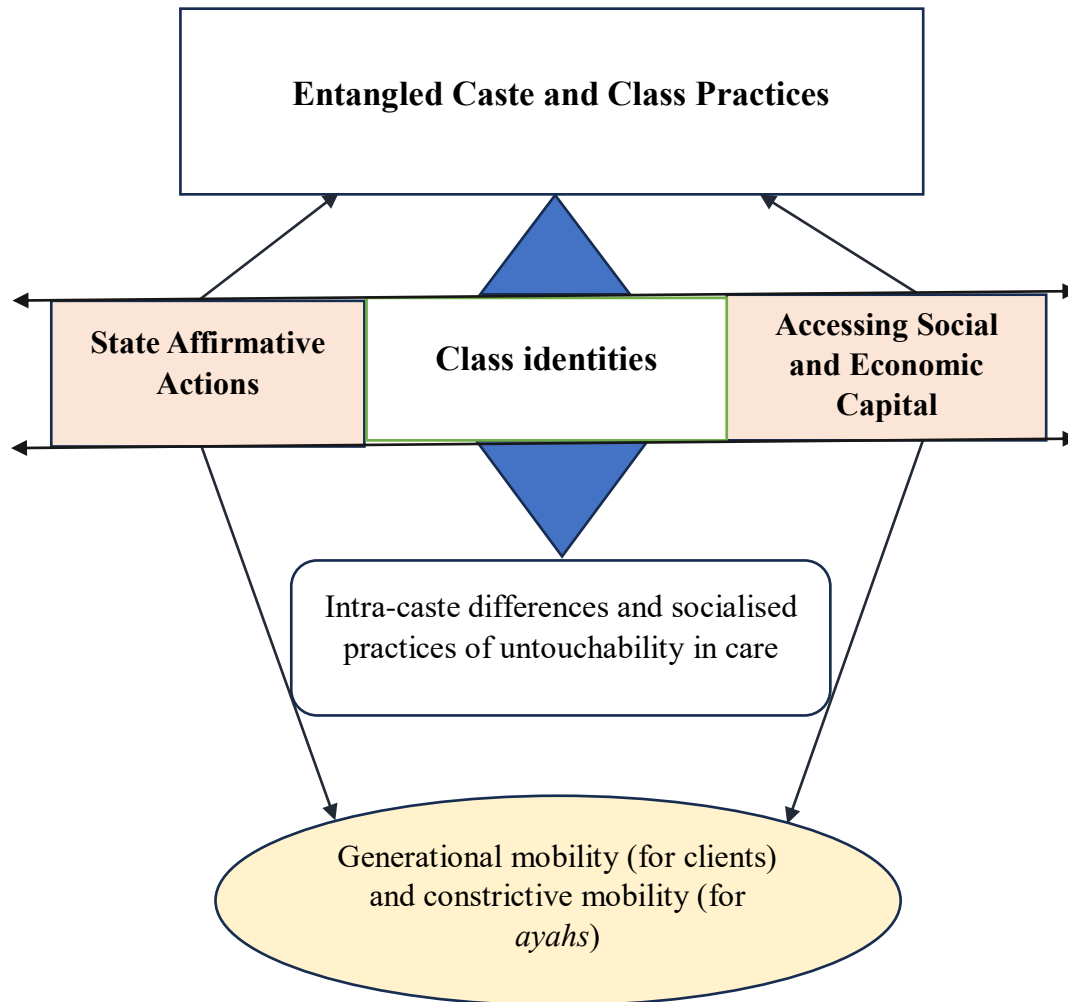


**Figure 3 : Caste and Class Mobilities in Care Work (Source : Researcher's own)**

Once in visiting Shyamol *Dadu*'s (elderly client, 73 years) home, I interacted with his *boumaa* (daughter-in-law) who showed me their *ayah*'s place of work and her sitting arrangements with some joy. Her behaviour altered into a sense of pride and social affirmation of elitism when she suddenly folded her legs in a crossed position, further portraying the upper-middle class status or standing she enjoys. She speaks frankly, 'See, today we are somewhat *obosthaponno* [well off]'. It reminded me of Bapuji and Chrispal's (2020 , p. 538) argument :

> … affirmative action programs are constructed to enable socioeconomic mobility of "lower" castes, they can further entrench the chasms of inequality and rigidify social identities … individuals with a tenacious social identity tend to fixate on the group and the elements that connect them to that group.

While this underpins subtexts of caste in the framework of Indian families, polity and economy, the experiences of Shyamol *Dadu*'s family (and other such families) reflect a complex impulse of social relations and power practices. It is the upper or upper-middle-class families that might socialise themselves to the upper-caste ideologies, shifting some sub-castes (of *ayahs*) below their (of clients') own caste order even if they might share equal positions in the hierarchy. On the other hand, this might also be due to the stigmatising, semi-skilled/unskilled and the 'polluted' work that the *ayahs* perform, like cleaning the waste of the elderly clients, washing their utensils, rubbing their bodies with oil, etc. − indicating *ayahs*' fewer chances of generational mobility from their traditional social positions as Dalits. This is in contrast to Shyamol *Dadu*'s family, who could secure potential opportunities in their time. Today, relative to nursing roles, 'it is not just a woman's labour brought outside the private realm; it is produced by the female Dalit labouring body' (Ray, 2016, p. 66). With modernity[74], migration for work, the changing notions on marriages or enjoying singlehood throughout life, many elderly clients living alone habituated comfortably with the *ayahs* feeding them. An elderly client Sushobhon Dasgupta (89 years) once confirmed to me in a conversation on untouchability, 'I don't know what would have happened if I had some kindred living in my home. Right now, I am alone, so I am fine with my *ayah*'s services, be it feeding or helping me to walk'. Such statements also guide us to analyse that the caste practices and its cultural aura are dependent on the material, spatial, social, economic, and the kinship arrangements of the domestic households.

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[74] In the context of this research, 'modernity' is a reference to the dramatic socio-economic and cultural transformations that are taking place around Kolkata and other Indian cities. The modern social life in Kolkata and other parts of West Bengal is now even changing from the nuclear family structure to the families where 'functional survival' of the individuals (*ayahs* and their clients in some cases) gains more traction, such as open families. So, modernity exhibits a continuum as well as a shifting understanding of heritage, culture, ideology, power/authority and finances.

### 5.4.1 Caste, Class and Economic Impulses

Throughout the disciplinary accounts on class and the systemic forces of inequality unleashed in the Indian context, a larger share has been produced on income parities, division of labour in the formal and informal sectors, and the rising standards of living (Vakulabharanam, 2010; Kumar *et al*., 2010; Vanneman and Dubey, 2013). It was during the economic liberalisation programmes that were implemented in India in 1991 that scholarly interests in the generation of the new 'middle' classes boomed. Roy (2018, p. 33) reclaims that, 'The substantial pace of growth of this class [*the new middle class*] was primarily attributable to the incentivization for private capital investment and opening the economy to foreign investments'.

In the context of this research, the *ayah*-centre managers belonged to the middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds, the clients located them as upper-middle class even if half of them were from what can be attributed as the upper-class 'elite' families and the *ayahs* through their language or self-expression connoted them as 'lower-class' or poor. While 'class' is a multilinear and complex category to address, the observations as made in the fieldwork reinstated class as a dynamic social process that reproduces authority in care relationships and enhances the objective and embodied mobility of generational knowledge for *ayahs* and their families. Moving beyond understanding class as a mere economic indicator, Deshpande (1997) refers to 'class' as a mode of knowledge that is often involved with identities as well as tensions of representing differences. He analyses the middle-class [*that is also accountable for elderly clients in Kolkata*] as a hegemonic bloc that consolidates the 'cultural capital' which may 'consist of particular types of *identities* (caste, community, or region) and *competences* (educational credentials, linguistic and other social skills' (p. 302). Locating the access and consumption patterns of the middle-class, he reinstates the advantages of inherited skills and ideologies as a transmittable material in the next generation of middle-class families, excluding other social groups from it.

But, the question in the frame of this ethnographic research is : Even if class and consumption are often interchangeable as 'culture', both material and immaterial, in the voices of the elderly clients and their family members, do aspirational emotions of partaking in competences make class identities flexible? This can be highlighted from an instance of fieldwork observation where care work reverberates a diffusion of the social practices from the clients to that of the *ayahs*. Despite the structural continuities

of *ayahs'* poverty, some of the *ayahs* while observing the younger generations of their clients are striving not only to educate their children but also organise their training in some vocational skills like music, dance, art and makeup artistry. Maya *Didi* (part-time *ayah,* 34 years), once stated with pride when I met her in her small dilapidated home :

> My daughter knows everything. She is multi-talented … she knows how to paint, do good makeup, sing, dance, etc. I realised that education is important but you also need to do other things as well to be the best in the world. I will not let her into *ayah* work.

Hinting at her client Ruma Dasgupta (71 years), she began showing off her daughter's school medals hanging on the flaky wall, 'Even my client's granddaughters do not know these many things. When I talk about her [*her daughter*], people look up to me. *Bole, orr ekta culture acche* [People tell, yes, she has a culture!]'. Maya *Didi*'s statement offers a meaning to 'class' where learning and making visible the skills of cognitive and social development, uplift aspirations of procuring an upper-middle-class 'intelligentsia' identity symbolically, if not materially. The *ayahs* often take loans to fulfill their children's choices or dreams, leading to the different forms of generational experiences of culture, socialisation and class – all within the landscape of care work practices. While this might be suggestive of a consumerist or global cosmopolitan ethic (in urban Kolkata), an underlying socket falls into ways in which class indicates the reproduction of life chances and the transitional investments of knowledge capital to develop a new way of being as *ayahs,* a mother and a wife dawned with duties of familial respectability. Also, the fact that the elderly clients in their life participated in certain economic opportunities offered by the state or as economic agents (in established businesses), led them to transfer their valued capital to kin or family members – shaping a reservoir for health-informed ageing and the receptiveness of paid and unpaid care. Such acquisition and utilisation of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital by the elderly clients to organise their social positions in terms of the upper/upper-middle class people, enhance their capabilities to aspire the others. The *ayahs* then add a dominant value to their life processes. So, understanding class from the perspective of the *ayahs* and their clients reconstruct ideas around care work and ageing, where the fulfilled and unfulfilled caregiving and receiving functions synchronise generational cultures and disciplines.

Following Bourdieu's (1984, as cited in Joppke, 1986, p. 57) work on class and class relations, class is conceived to be operating as the structure of 'unconscious group activities … by means of the symbolic struggle for distinction'. Drawing such a cue of class interest around specters of moral economic classification on caregiving and *ayah* markets, it forges another interesting dynamic of the diffusion of intergenerational trade ideologies. During my fieldwork days, I encountered the *ayah*-centre managers mostly belonging to the Brahmin and Vaishya caste groups. Even if in some cases I refrained from putting out such questions directly, it was probable from their declared surnames (knowledge of castes in India is developed with a socialisation process since one's childhood, often as a part of the familial discussions and marital endogamy). But once, as I did visit the Sarthi *ayah*-centre manager's home on his invite, I saw his *poita* (the loosely-braided white thread worn by Brahmin men, given to them during the *upanayana*[75] ceremony) hanging in the balcony for letting it to be dry. In a turn of events, I also learned that the *ayah*-centre market in Sulanggari is largely dominated by the Brahmin relatives of the Sarthi *ayah*-centre manager, running the other *ayah*-centres through family monopolism and power practices, and often sustained through socio-political resources (support of political party volunteers). The manager of Sarthi *ayah*-centre, B. Mukherjee *Kaku* (50 years), once stated :

> My ancestors were knowledgeable priests in Bankura [*a city in West Bengal*]. My elder brother was a *purohit*, my other young brother was a vendor of festival items like idols, designing materials, glitters, polystyrene sheets, etc. I was unemployed. After opening my *ayah*-centre, I encouraged my brothers to open *ayah*-centres too, as it is a profitable business. Now, we all are popular in the market!

Such a scenario of economic systems, competitive market (among the *ayah*-centres) and the interplays of administrative regulations, etc., propelled the destabilisation of traditional caste occupations and maximised the structure of hegemonic, collective, and exclusive caste networks. In a way, it is the socio-moral and geographical impetus of care work practices in Kolkata that enhances the quotient of market, appropriating assets, bodies of workers, people, investors and things, etc., across the structure of

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[75] Rites of passage or initiation ceremony to legitimise one's membership within the Brahmanical folds.

financial capitalism. An interesting glimpse of it can also be made from the scenarios of hospitals in Kolkata where the *ayahs* also work. In a turn of events, when I visited ESI hospitals, a group of *ayahs* claimed that they were being administered by the Non-Medical Superintendent and more functionally by the hospital canteen managers. The hospital canteen managers are often from the lower-caste and lower-middle-class backgrounds (as noted in the fieldwork) who are dispatched to reinforce *ayahs* as not merely the 'non-medical' forces but also workers doing 'polluting' work. The visible distancing and the exclusionary boundedness of *ayahs* and canteen managers make hospitals a structural power that reconstructs informality and systems of caste-class bondage for the *ayahs*.

So, it can also be analysed that capitalism functions and co-exist with caste structures and relationships in India. In a metropolitan city like Kolkata, the urban character, inclusion and work of the *ayah*-centre managers (Mukherjee *Kaku*'s case specifically) offered them possibilities of reimagining the archaic caste practices. But this could not jolt hegemonic material production and culturally categorising habitus the *ayah*-centre managers often share with the *ayahs*. Locating Munshi (2019, pp. 781 - 782), he states :

> Caste plays a role at every stage of an Indian's economic life … Overlapping caste-based networks will provide him with credit, help him start a business if he is endowed with entrepreneurial talent, and provide him with insurance against income shocks and major contingencies into old age … cooperation within the caste can lead to an increased supply of non-excludable public goods.

Today, it is not merely the caste category performed through semi-legal jurisprudence, rituals, territorial division, division of labour in an economic system, etc. that works to situate casteism. Instead, caste and class politics distributed across the domestic-public spaces offer significant insights into analysing the interdependencies as well as separatisms, which are operational within the domain of institutionalising care work in the socio-cultural context of Kolkata.

## 5.5 State, Identity and Care

Exploring the complex accountability between the castes and the shifting material status across classes, it is also important to analyse the social dichotomies in caste

identities. The fieldwork experiences depicted that caste membership and glorification are often played in the spectres of state governance and experiences across political citizenship. Today, this can be implicated through *ayahs* belonging to the Namashudra community.

While the Namashudras are the second largest lower-caste group in West Bengal with a share of 17.4 per cent (CNN News18, 2021), their revolutionary history often places them as massive sect of sharecroppers, a sub-religious Hindu group, a vote bank for the political parties, social movement interest groups or a Dalit militant community (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Today, they are socio-politically recognised as the Scheduled Caste in Census Reports and populate significant villages in the North 24 Parganas districts of West Bengal. Their presence testifies the historical legacies in their fights against the oppression of the Brahminical society and exclusionary elitist nationalist movements. In West Bengal, the Namashudra movement started with a resistance against caste hierarchies and land inequities. They were primarily peasant labourers and were exploited by the upper-caste landowners through the control of the rule of law and their access to administrative resources (Samaddar, 2012). Later with the imperial rule in the 19$^{th}$ century, the Namashudras received state concessions and refrained from participating in the Swadeshi and Civil Disobedience movements by showing loyalty to the colonial state. As in this context, Bandyopadhyay (2012, p. 43) states :

> The nationalists … failed to dispel this [*sic*] influence as they could not evolve an alternative political ideology rooted in mass consciousness. They were certainly aware of the problem, but the prejudices of the society they belonged to and the interests of the classes they came from prevented them from offering any effective social or economic programmes for integrating these aggrieved lower castes with the rest of the nation.

However, the Namashudra movement remained rooted in divinity, spirituality, and celebration of the Matua community, originally spearheaded by a peasant leader Harichand Thakur in the 1870s and carried forward by his son Guruchand Thakur. The movement was to inculcate the Namashudras within the effective structures of power and resources (Gupta, 2019). The Namashudras erupted from the Untouchables Chandala and sometimes have been considered to be lying even below the Dalits. It might be the reason that Namashudras often identify them with a distinct faith of

devotion to Vaishnavism and Lord Krishna than the Sanskritic folds of Hinduism that naturalise their state of subordination (Lahiri, 2016). But today, apart from their social status as the lower-caste labourers, they are simultaneously making a space that valorises their commitment to the Hindu(ised) culture of care.

The Namashudras make up a significant number of the *ayahs* in Kolkata. This was visible from their symbolic and aesthetic appropriation of sandalwood-dipped wooden necklaces, bracelets and the pivotal element of purification, i.e., *Chandan phota* (the sandalwood marks on forehead) (Image 14), that enable them to forge a social space and hegemonic moral position within *ayah* care work sector. Such religious and caste practices further generate social and work hierarchies among the *ayahs* themselves as *ayah*-centre managers often post (WhatsApp) the picture of Namashudra *ayahs* to their clients for better approvals and market promotions. In other words, Namashudra *ayahs* are offered more preferences than the other *ayahs* in the care market. Their externalised representation and activities across the socio-political making of different spaces (*ayah*-centres and the clients' homes) not merely lead to a collective language of mobilisation but also utilises 'morality' and 'purity' as commodified value of their bodies and organisational memberships. So, not mere gender and caste but the power relationships across 'sub-castes' work through semi-formal structures like the *ayah*-centres for the Namashudras, Barui, Rajwar *ayahs* (sub-castes within the Shudras[76], differently expropriated as well as made sacrosanct). In a way, care work economy in India functions through forms of social stratification and the systemic politics of existence around it.

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[76] Shudras, the fourth tier of the caste group, are conceived to lie in the lowest rung of the Indian caste hierarchy.

**Image 14:** An *ayah* from Namashudra community.

Source : Fieldwork, 2023.

Location : Garia, Kolkata.

However, more layers are spurred in the transnational context where 'globalization of care work' (Misra *et al*., 2006, p. 317) has been primarily explored. The immigrant care workers from the developing countries are often homogenised and exploited in the context of the global-political and migration flows of demand and supply, such as in developed countries like Poland, France, U.S., etc. In healthcare system of Sweden, further occurrences arise with 'discrimination in contract' and the 'discrimination in contact' (Loury, 2002, as cited in Behtoui *et al*., 2020, p. 157). The first form 'denotes the unequal treatment of individuals in formal situations' and the second form 'refers to the unequal treatment of persons in social relations – as when some workers are excluded from friendship networks in the workplace' (p. 157) relative to their race, regional or cultural identities. But, in the context of India, the intersections between kinship, religion, caste, class and gender played out within and across familial-public locales not only organise care work but also synthesise work relations and emotional affinities between the various actors of care.

However, the dominant representation of lower-caste *ayahs* in the sector of care work made me more eager to know about the group of *ayahs* who might not be from lower-caste backgrounds. After the COVID-19 phase subsided in 2022, I visited Kolkata to cross-check the caste groups of the *ayahs*. One sunny day when I was drinking water

and preparing the list of *ayahs*' caste in an *ayah*-centre[77], an *ayah* sat beside me to peep into my notes. While I was happy that she took some interest in what I was doing, she inquired more about me, my work, my religion, my hometown, etc. When I inquired back her name, it opened a new direction with a new addition to the caste list. The *ayah* was from an upper-caste background, Rupsha Ghoshal *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 42 years). In an impromptu, I asked her, 'I have seen *ayahs* belonging to lower-caste groups working here … You are working too?'. She was hesitant but as I resumed my work again, she replied :

> I was from a well-to-do family. But my husband's disease took away everything! He is an alcoholic and invited liver cirrhosis for him. I sold my flat, my land, my jewellery … everything to cure him. When I was left with nothing, I thought I had to survive. This *ayah*-centre was the only option. It was extremely difficult for me as I never imagined my life to be so! I don't even tell my relatives that I work here. I applied for the Laxmi Bhandar scheme but as I belong to the General[78] category, I receive less.

The politicisation of caste differences and the (re)production of discrimination also suffices its way through the reservation policies applied in the availing of several social welfare schemes. While schemes like Laxmi Bhandar modelled under the Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, Government of West Bengal has been implemented to safeguard the financial assistance as well as the empowerment of the household women to meet their daily expenses (icdsupweb.org, 2024), the terms of monetary distribution have been differently set for different caste groups. While earlier women belonging to SC and ST backgrounds were given Rs. 1000/- and women belonging to General category were given Rs. 500/- (monthly), the 2024 - 25 budget increased the amount to Rs. 1200/- for SC/ST women and Rs. 1000/- for Others or the Generals. The differences in the disbursal amount might be due to the increased number of the SC/ST women (who also work as *ayahs*) who not

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[77] The manager of Shruti *Ayah*-Centre was kind enough to offer me a wooden bench to write my field notes. This turned out to be my workstation eventually.

[78] Groups that are considered to be economically and socially advantageous, often belonging to upper-caste Hindu backgrounds or other religions like Muslims, Christians, etc. (Refer : Pew Research Center, 2021). They are primarily excluded from affirmative and redistributive state policies. But this turns more complex as many people from the 'General' category often belong to the lower-income backgrounds.

merely exist as the historically marginalised category but also experience huge stagnancies associated with their social or economic advancements. The 'global MPI estimates, five out of every six multidimensionally poor in India belongs to SC, ST or Other Backward Class (OBC) households : ST with more than 50 % multidimensionally poor, followed by SC with 33.3 % and OBC with 27.2%' (Pradhan *et al*., 2022, p. 2). On the other hand, such endless fractioning of caste affiliations falls within the social practices of caste society and unequal distribution of resources relative to the gendered roles or behaviour.

The observations made throughout fieldwork explicated a paradox where the *ayahs* often spoke about eating less nutritious food while ensuring their family members receive more from the Lakshmi Bhandar scheme. Once while discussing about the scheme with an *ayah* Rotna *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 28 years), she remarked with an underlying sense of deprivation, 'The money I receive, I spend on my children and husband's needs. I don't even remember when I had a full piece of fish. I give everything to them'. Similarly, another *ayah,* Rotna *Didi'*s friend, Bobita *Didi* (part-time *ayah*, 29 years) affirmed, 'Yes. Buying vegetables, paying all the bills, children's school items, etc. … I am left with some rice and lentils'. So, such schemes promote in a way the political model of familiality by reinstating patriarchal appropriation of resources, manifested through women's work[79]. The question then remains : 'How the *ayahs* would care for themselves?' While such schemes ensured an economically sustainable approach for the lower-income families of the *ayahs*, the fact remains that the performance of care labour of the *ayahs* in both their own and clients' homes, demands more nutritious food for their bodies. And, struggles of accessing nourishing meals remain an unresolvable dilemma of structural inequity rooted in social and occupational hierarchies. Such a politically-induced capitalistic hierarchy travels between the extraction of *ayahs'* labour and the socio-structural ideologies that reproduce *ayahs'* gendered bodies.

Nonetheless, the Lakshmi Bhandar scheme invokes the politics of social welfare and the rights of the *ayahs* as the 'beneficiaries' or bodies generating care. In a way, this socio-economic conditioning, I argue can be analysed as 'political clientelism', where

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[79] The scheme defines the women 'head' of the household. But the observations made in the fieldwork inferred that some of the *ayahs'* husbands often leave their work to control their *ayah* wives' income, relative to the dependencies on the scheme.

welfare schemes accrue *ayahs* as lucrative 'vote banks' to consolidate the provincial power of the political parties. But such a scheme also dismisses *ayahs'* struggle for development, social equality and a healthy work environment. In other words, the scheme offers remuneration to the *ayahs* as the clients of the state working through and across market relations but with the dominant expectation for the *ayahs* to signify their reciprocity and loyalty to different political leaders/party workers.

The Namashudra women working as *ayahs* today not only contribute to social support systems for the elderly people in West Bengal but also act as rewarding voters. Their emotive displays and associational faith or *seva* for their elderly clients often make them ideal as *ayahs* or as the paid caregivers in the care market. As Gupta (2019) writes :

> In 2011, the Matua Mahasangha has fully backed the Trinamool Congress (TMC). The political equation, however, has since changed. The community now stands divided in its political loyalties between the TMC and the BJP in the forthcoming 2019 general election.

Over time in the fieldwork, it has also been observed that the elderly clients often preferred and felt emotionally satisfied with the appointment of Namashudra *ayahs* and their sacred objects that coordinate their bodies and care work. Emotions then are also transcended and regulated among the actors of care through larger intersections of politics and religion. The local political leaders or volunteers have often been seen during my fieldwork, promising bicycles and other amenities to Namashudra *ayahs* and other *ayahs* in the *ayah*-centres. After the party workers would leave, *ayahs* were often seen laughing at them while grasping humorous competitions between the party workers of different political parties, visiting the *ayah*-centres for votes. This laughing not only represent the aspirations of the *ayahs* from the state but also upstages their social status as the 'care workers' and agents of the *ayah*-centres, where the political leaders visit. This also leads to the achievement of some form of supremacy for the *ayahs* in reflecting their caste and work identities. As Das (2022, p. 9) writes on the functions of the state intermediaries today :

> Often, members of the political parties mediate between these two [*state and people*] and try to interpret various aspects of governance to the people. It can

be argued that, often, people do not understand the language of governance and that is when they find the role of intermediaries useful.

So, the embeddedness of caste, class, religion, gender, and social welfare at the juncture of the state's communication often shapes the life processes of care workers like *ayahs*, representing varied social behaviour in constructing the society. Even if social welfare schemes work within the politico-economic landscapes of Kolkata minting community agendas, it also reflects how the *ayahs* 'negotiate the state [*and different state agents*] in their everyday life' (Das, 2022, p. 2).

## 5.6 Care Work : *The Artha-Dharma* Incentives

The *ayah*-centres operating in Kolkata embody the nuances of the Hindu social system as the parallel rule of law. The *ayahs*, *ayah*-centre managers, elderly clients and the clients' family members perform the *Dharma* (religious values) by fixating and making permeable the social hierarchies within the production and marketization of the *ayah* care resources. While the *ayahs* share their gendered mental and physical labour to care for their 'sacred' elderly clients, their bodies fluctuate through the politics of work, the social welfare and negotiations over agency. It is the socialised disposition and discourses of Hindu Dharmic structure consisting normative practices on religion, caste and gender, that influence patterns of *ayah* care work. Embedded within negotiations over class identities and struggles, the social prescriptions also determine the spatial segregation in care work, social control over the *ayahs*, the evaluation of national citizenship, etc. Such realities are reflective, forming layered and classificatory relationships between 'nation-making' and *ayahs* as workers within a 'nation' like India. With the escalating elderly population in India, it is *ayahs* who then participate in and shape complex relationships between the social distinctiveness of Hindu culture and the rights of receiving and giving care. So, the practices of care work not only produce a 'capital' or income for *ayahs*. Rather, it aggregates socially integrative utility and crises between the actors of care within the moral and political economy of care, authoritative care as well as (un)cared for performances. This would further find a place in the succeeding chapter while understanding the multiple crises or dilemmas of autonomy, heteronomy, affectivity and selfhood between the actors of care in the context of Kolkata.

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