Between Need and Lifestyle: Understanding the Significance of Domestic Workers in Middle-class Households of Guwahati

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Abstract

Framed within a discourse of traditional understanding of middle-class Indian domesticity, this paper looks at contemporary domestic practices of middle-class households in Guwahati. Drawing on fieldwork with Assamese middle-class women who recruited domestic workers, the paper analyses the significance of domestic workers in their day-to-day lives. The analysis focuses on three different, yet partly interrelated factors - practical gains, status reproduction, and showcasing act of benevolence - that influence the recruitment of domestic workers amongst the women employers in Guwahati. The findings reveal that, the recruitment of domestic workers in middle-class households is shaped by a combination of emotional and consumerist aspirations of the women employers, as much as their domestic responsibilities, which in turn, crucially entailed to their reproduction of class and gender identities in the realm of everyday lives.

Introduction

From 1990 onwards, with the initiation of economic liberalization policies, urban India has witnessed an exponential growth of workers performing part-time domestic work (Fernandes, 2006; Neetha, 2009). These workers typically comprise of those who live in their own houses and perform specific tasks for multiple employers either once or twice a day (Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2009). Ray & Qayum has referred to these workers as 'freelancers', since they exercise greater flexibility and autonomy in choosing their employers (Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 67). Nevertheless, while, this period marked a significant growth of part-time domestic workers, it was primarily the emerging group of new middle-class who were recruiting them, marking domestic workers as a 'middle-class and upper middle-class phenomenon' (Neetha, 2004).

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Like elsewhere in India, the present study reveals that in Guwahati too, part-time domestic workers are increasingly being recruited by middle-class households. Although, there are no official records accounting to their exact number in context of Guwahati, the finding and observation is supported by various micro level studies that indicate the popularity of part-time domestic work being the most common domestic arrangement in urban middle-class households in India (Dickey, 2000; Raghuram, 2001; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016).

While, existing scholarship has attributed varied specificities in the increasing recruitment of domestic workers in urban middle-class households in India, this paper primarily builds on how the notions of traditional conceptions of middle-class domesticity are shaping the contemporary recruitment practices of domestic workers in Guwahati. The paper focuses on three different, yet partly interrelated factors - practical gains, status reproduction, and showcasing acts of benevolence - in analysing the significance of domestic workers in the lives of middle-class women employers and argues that domestic workers entailed women employers in fulfilling not only their domestic responsibilities, but, also their emotional and consumerist aspirations, which crucially reproduced their gender and class identities in the realm of everyday lives.

Mapping Middle-Class Domesticity in India

It was in mid-nineteenth century colonial India when the idea of middle-class domesticity began holding its grip in Indian society. This was particularly with the emergence of a newly educated middle-class or *Bhadralok*[3], in the urban social milieu of colonial Bengal[4]. As by-projects of colonial projects, and influenced by modernity, this class held a strong desire to reform Indian society (Ray & Qayum, 2010). However, this reformation was to be achieved without jeopardizing the age-old Indian traditions. It was in this context, Indian society came to be defined by a powerful dichotomy between 'outer' (*bahir*) and 'inner' (*ghar*), in line with a nationalist fervor, and dialectic between tradition and modernity (Chatterjee, 1989). This also marked the gendered division of society, in which, the 'inner' representing the 'home' was typically an arena associated with woman (ibid).

By late nineteenth century, 'home' was accorded the status of a private space, thereby, marking it as an intrinsic part for maintaining public identity of the middle-class (Fernandes, 2006; Matilla, 2011). In this, the middle-class woman i.e. the *bhadramahila*

[3] In Bengal, *bhadralok* means gentleman, and is defined as a social group which is heterogeneous in origin, marked by an ideology of respectability (Ray & Qayum, 2010). The membership of the group was not ascribed and therefore, had to be achieved (Mukherjee, 1977 cited in Ray & Qayum, 2010).

[4] As Calcutta was the imperial capital of colonial India until 1911, most of the accounts of colonial history are centered in West Bengal. Moreover, it was in Calcutta where the 'woman's question' first emerged in nineteenth century India, and soon spread out to the rest of the sub-continent, wherein the changing condition of women and the attendant ideas of domesticity was an all India phenomenon, in terms of caste, class and religious identities (Banerjee, 2010).

(counterparts of *bhadralok*) was assigned crucial roles for conserving integral essence of the 'home' from any Western influences (Chatterjee, 1989). This led to the creation of an ideal middle-class domesticity, in which woman was central in communicating an image of middle-class 'respectability'.

However, the institution of 'home' and middle-class domesticity trembled when middle-class women started imitating the European women (Chatterjee, 1989, Sen, 1999). This converged with the time when issues surrounding women's education under colonial rule were highly debated by the middle-class Indian reformers. For them, moral degeneracy seemed inevitable as they believed women's education would corrupt the 'pure tradition' and 'true womanhood' of Indian women, thereby, debarring from their primary roles as wives and mothers (Sen, 1999). However, prolonged debate and discussion led to a consensus on the attainment of cultural refinements by Indian women through modern education, without jeopardizing her position at 'home' (Chatterjee, 1989).

Yet, soon the educated housewives came under criticism when it became almost certain that all middle-class homes hired servants (Ray & Qayum, 2010). This led to the emergence of domestic manuals, particularly addressed to the young and educated brides to teach them the basic essence of domesticity (Banerjee, 2010). Through the manuals they were given necessary advice for upholding their colonized counterpart's status (Sen, 1999; Banerjee, 2010), and on proper management of servants (Ray & Qayum, 2010).

In the early twentieth century as movement for India's independence gained momentum, position of respectable middle-class woman was further refined. She was entrusted with cultural responsibility for building the inner life of her home, and embodied the virtues of a chaste, self-sacrificing traditional Hindu woman by distinguishing herself from both European women and women of lower socio-economic strata (Chaterjee, 1989; Banerjee, 2010). Consequently, this period experienced a steady increase in employment of servants from lower classes, as it became a crucial marker of status for the emerging new middle-class families (Banerjee, 2004).

Following independence, interestingly not much has radically altered in terms of power paradigms in middle-class families where the position of 'woman' is concerned (Chaudhuri, 2014). Yet, a considerable transformation has taken place in composition of the middle-class, and their domestic arrangements. This further proliferated with the initiation of economic liberalization policies in 1990s, which led to a notable growth of a new middle-class[5] (Fernandes, 2006). Unlike the colonial era, this class in the

[5] Fernandes argues that, this post-liberalization middle-class is not "new" in terms of its structural or social composition, but rather their newness refers to a process, in which they assert a middle-class identity by laying claims to benefits of liberalization (Fernandes, 2006, p. xviii). Moreover, the construction of this social group is not a homogeneous category, as other middle-class or upwardly mobile working class too, has the capacity to be a part of it (ibid).

post-colonial India built itself as agents of modernity, primarily deriving its power from the market forces, rather than the state (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Barua, et al., 2017). The women of this class increasingly attained higher levels of education, which contributed in their steady rise into paid employment outside the home (Neetha, 2004; Ghotoskar, 2013). This mostly resulted in the growth of dual careers as a new family norm in urban areas (Neetha, 2004). However, the traditional ideal of domesticity and associated femininity continued to influence contemporary relationships in these families (Donner, 2011). A natural outcome to this was the sudden increase in demand of paid domestic workers, as employing of domestic workers in contemporary times is 'largely a middle-class and upper middle-class phenomenon' (Neetha, 2004, p. 1682). The paid domestic workers, thus, enabled the middle-class women to fulfil their varied domestic roles, without interrupting the traditional patriarchal set-up of these families. Furthermore, the increasing recruitment of domestic workers in urban areas is also attributed to the decline of extended and joint family system, which earlier served as a source of helping hand in smooth functioning of middle-class households (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Barua, et.al, 2017).

Recent scholarship has shown part-time domestic work being the most common form of contemporary domestic arrangement in urban middle-class households in India, shouldered particularly by the female workforce (Dickey, 2000; Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2004; 2009; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). With this arrangement, domestic tasks are categorically divided into sweeping and mopping, cooking, washing dishes, washing clothes, child care and elderly care. Employers, in return, are empowered to choose specialized domestic workers based on their respective needs. Furthermore, it is pertinent to note that, this arrangement of domestic work continues to prevail with traditional full-time domestic work, specifically recruited by families which have both the means and space to accommodate full-timers (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Barua, et.al, 2017).

Methodology

The paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Guwahati, the capital of Assam. Guwahati, popularly known as 'Gateway to North-East India' came to prominence as a city in 1972, with reorganization of the state capital from Shillong. It was only after attainment of the status of state capital, the city witnessed rapid urban development, which has left its impact on social, economic and political life of the residents. In the contemporary times, the city is accredited as one of the fastest-growing urban centers of India and is recognized as the largest metropolis of northesat region and a major regional hub for commercial and educational activities. These developments make Guwahati an interesting area of study, as there is sizeable concentration of middle-class population in the city.

The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with thirty-five caste Hindu Assamese women[6]. The women are between the age group of thirty-four to seventy-five years. They were interviewed in their respective homes, with each interview lasting between one to two hours. Interviews conducted at their home helped in understanding of the class positions and daily domestic managements by these women better. The sampled women were married, with five being widowed, two being separated from their husbands, and one living separately owing to work-related reasons[7]. Initial contact with a few of these women was established through a network of the first researcher's family. Subsequently, the interviewed women helped in further establishing contact within their circle of friends. The households of these interviewed women represented a wide spectrum of middle-class lifestyle, wherein they shared certain common attributes. Although, in contemporary times, the middle-class as a conceptual category cannot be reduced to any single-entity, this study locates the middle-class households in Guwahati through the classificatory practices of: educational and occupational aspects, symbolic aspects like their practices of consumption and lifestyle, embodied cultural practices of traditional values of domesticity and morality[8]. The interviewed women had access to higher education, and are mostly college graduates, with five being university graduates, and one holding a PhD degree. Of them, twelve are employed in various sectors like school, college, non-governmental organization, and in government jobs, while seventeen of them are home-makers, five are retired professionals, and one has her own business on apparels (mekhela sador)[9]. Moreover, the husbands of these women are mostly college graduates, and are all working professionals, either in private or government sectors. The women are residents of the Uzanbazar locality of Guwahati[10]. Most of these women lived in single-pattern houses; while eight of them lived in apartment buildings owning a flat of two to three BHK, and two of them are tenants renting a floor in large houses. The ideal living arrangement for the women

[6] The study restricts to the category of caste Hindu Assamese women because it tries to understand the significance of domestic workers for this category vis-a-vis the notion of domesticity evolving in the middle-class caste Hindu Assamese society since the pre-independence days. By Assamese, the scholars here refer to the indigenous non-tribal people, united by a common linguistic identity, i.e. Assamese.

[7] As this paper tries to understand the significance of domestic workers in the lives of married women considering the expectations of the ideology of feminine domesticity in a married woman's life, the dimension of the dependency of unmarried women on domestic workers is not taken into account.

[8] During the colonial period, the middle-class as a social group was recognized more or less as homogeneous through their engagement in reform movements and institutions like school, legal system, state-run offices and urban infrastructure (Donner & Neve, 2011). Middle-class during this period overwhelmingly represented the Hindu middle-class culture comprising mainly of the upper-caste norms (Chaterjee, 1989).

[9] Ethnic Assamese outfit.

[10] Uzanbazar is selected as the field site because it is one of the oldest residential areas of the city. Moreover, the significance of the area is also related to its historical specificities, wherein it served as one of the quintessential part of the colonial period with government offices and quarters set by the river side. In present times, the significance of the area continues to persist with institutions of prominence like Raj Bhawan, Gauhati High Court, Cotton University, located in the vicinity. This significantly indicates the value of immovable assets in the Uzanbazar area, thereby, marking the relative weight of 'economic and symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) possessed by the women of the study

are a nuclear family set-up, however, ten households are seen accommodating an extended family member of one or two generations. In addition, the existing scholarship on domestic work in India has highlighted that hiring of paid domestic workers also serves as an essential parameter for classifying the 'middle-class', whether it is lower, upper or wealthiest section (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). The sampled women in this study had been employing domestic workers for the past five years and more either on full time or part time basis.

Middle-Class Domesticity in the Assam Context

In Assam, the impact of reformist movements considering the 'woman's question' was felt only during the twentieth century, unlike Bengal and other parts of India (Nath, 2011). Nevertheless, ideal of middle-class domesticity in Assam is often believed to echo the Bengal example, as most Assamese middle-class men[11] during late nineteenth and early twentieth century were educated in Calcutta, and brought these ideas home (Chaudhuri, 2014).

Emulating the Bengal model (as discussed above), ideologies of domesticity and domestic world emerged as certain central themes in the local Assamese journals like Orunodoi, Asam Bandhu, Jonaki and Mau (Nath, 2011; Konwar, 2017). Mostly written by Assamese middle-class men belonging to caste-Hindu, these journals reflected the contradictions between the ideals of tradition and modernity in determining the position of women (Sen, 2012; Konwar, 2017). Like the Bengali *bhadralok,* they too, feared that under the spell of Western influence, there would emerge a class of Assamese *bowari*[12] whose minds would be contaminated by idleness, thus, deeming them unfit for domestic tasks, thereby, making demands of domestic servants beyond the means of most middle-class *babus* (Nath, 2011). This led to re-imagination of the ideology of domesticity, wherein the 'innocence' and 'femininity' of Assamese middle-class women could be protected from any foreign contamination- European as well as Bengal influences (ibid). In this context, like elsewhere in colonial India, female education in Assam was supported only in cultivating the virtues of a good housewife, an enlightened mother and spawning of able sons for the advancement of the country, and not for women's self-sufficiency or economic-sufficiency (Sen, 2012; Konwar, 2017). As Aparna Mahanta noted, the idea of an Assamese middle-class Hindu woman during the period was mostly conceptualized by Assamese reformers

[11] Unlike other colonial regions, in Assam the growth of Assamese middle-class took several years, wherein the connotation of the term frequently kept changing (Kalita, 2011). Their growth was not a result of single historical event, but had passed through four stages of development: first, the period of gestation from late 18th century to about 1820; second, the rise and growth from 1820 to 1850; third, further growth and development from 1850 to 1880; and fourth, growth and expansion from 1880 to 1947 (ibid). It is nevertheless significant, that the Assamese caste-Hindu men were among the first to partake colonial educational project (Gohain, 1973). Armed with western education, the members of caste-Hindus like Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kalitas were quick to take up government jobs that subsequently played a major role in their emergence as middle-class in Assam (ibid).

[12] A married woman is referred to as a *bowari* in Assamese.

like Ratneswar Mahanta as a 'hardworking, self-sacrificing, obedient woman untainted by education' (Mahanta, 2008, p. 64).

In the process, women were defined by their cultivated presence in the 'home' by engaging in activities like spinning, weaving, embroidery, child-rearing, grooming of men and housekeeping (Nath, 2011; Konwar, 2017). She was trained to be silent and have *laaj* (shame), who would speak to male family members and servants only when required (Konwar, 2017). And, when in public places, she was to distinguish herself from 'common woman' by observing purdah in the form of *odhoni* (a long veil covering from head to face), or was obliged to cover her face with a *barjapi* (a large umbrella made out of bamboo) (Nath, 2011)[13]. Arguably, the Assamese middle-class men actively created a world for their counterparts, by relegating them to domestic sphere- materially and ritually- with the responsibility of managing household duties while deferring to the male patriarch (Ray & Qayum, 2010). This led to the construction of a domestic ideology whereby, 'a woman's life revolved around the concept of *saubhagya* or marital blessedness' (Nath 2011, p. 820).

Nevertheless, although, historically women in Assam were subdued under a patriarchal tradition, they held a higher status than women in other parts of India (Konwar, 2017). Even in post-colonial Assam, Assamese women are generally believed to enjoy greater freedom in their day-to-day lives, when compared to position of women in Pan-India level (Bhattacharyya, 2018). The freedom of these women is largely associated with its geographical location of being a neighbour of the matrilineal society[14] and for the Assamese sub-culture[15] (Bhattacharyya, 2009; 2018). However, this does not entail one to believe about a prevailing egalitarian society in contemporary Assam. On the contrary, unequal gender relations in Assamese society are reproduced and sustained in different spaces, in context of the present study; it is the domestic space i.e. the 'inside' or 'private' space called 'home'.

The normative conceptions of domesticity which involves a woman to prioritize her family through caring and socialising roles (Dickey, 2000; Neetha, 2004; Mattila, 2011; Hussein, 2017); continue to shape the everyday articulations of women's position in the Assamese society. And, these gendered constructs of women's roles are irrespective of whether they seek a paid employment outside home or not.

Scholars argue that, it is in this context, the traditional perceptions of gender roles help in developing an idea of gender complementarities, whereby, men are continued

[13] The 'common woman' comprised of those who were not from caste Hindus, and actively participated in the production process of society (Nath, 2011).

[14] A society which traces its ancestral descent from the female side of the family rather than through paternal lineshttps://www.britannica.com/topic/matrilineal-society, retrieved on 1.09.2022.

[15] Historically, Assam as a society has been free from practices like dowry, sati and other rituals embedded in patriarchal values like *Karwa chauth* and *Raksha Bandhan* to name a few (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

to be seen as primary breadwinners and women as bearers of family-oriented roles such as, wife, mother, homemaker, and nurturers (Mattila, 2011; Bhattacharyya, 2018). Raju and Lahiri (2011) categorically argue that such gendered behavioural roles of Indian women are encoded via process of socialisation (cited in Bhattacharyya, 2018, p. 4-5). Radhakrishnan (2009) noted that amongst the Indian women working in IT sectors in large cities like Mumbai and Bangalore, women mostly resorted to leaving their jobs after childbirth, or declined opportunities for promotion, in order to perform their family-oriented roles sacrificing their jobs at the expense of their families was. Similarly, in Assam, gender role orientation was found to be deeply ingrained, wherein women engaged in highly paid employment viewed themselves primarily as homemakers, thus, bearing the prime responsibility of domestic work and childcare (Bhattacharyya, 2009).

In the present study also it was observed that the middle-class employers – working women[16] and housewives - also emphasised upon their primary responsibility of domestic work. They strongly upheld the normative construction of 'women's innate ability for domestic chores and men's constitution for the marketplace' (Romero, 1992, p. 52). An employer in her mid-thirties proudly said: 'We women are anyway better in the household work. You give the responsibility of the home to your husband, even for a single day, they will turn it into a mess'. Similar sentiments of acknowledgement of doing domestic chores better than their male counterparts are echoed by all the middle-class women in the study. The male members of these households mostly engage themselves in doing grocery shopping, paying bills and cooking of particular dishes, occasionally in order to exhibit their culinary skills. The traditional understanding of masculinity appeared to be deeply ingrained in these households, which is also endorsed by the women, as it entailed to their middle-class femininity.

Considering the labour intensive and largely manual nature of domestic work, the middle-class women actively engaged in outsourcing this 'labour' to women from lower-economic class. This new standard of home maintenance has been observed by Ralph Waldo Emerson as:

> *A house kept to the end of display is impossible to all but a few women, and their success is dearly bought. (Emerson cited in Romero, 1992, p. 53)*

With outsourcing labour of the poor domestic workers, these women actively contribute to a continuous process of middle-class making of their respective households (Mattila, 2011; Waldrop, 2011). For instance, on one hand, the domestic workers enabled them to retain their class standing amongst their class peers, by maintaining a clean and ordered home, on the other, domestic workers facilitated their participation in job market and other related status producing activities (Dickey, 2000). Notably, as the increasing

[16] By the term 'working women' the paper implies those middle-class women who are engaged in a paid employment outside their home. However, the term does not intend to vilify the work – physical and emotional-performed by the housewives towards their family as 'non-work'.

participation of women in job market has not been accompanied by a simultaneous participation of men in sharing the daily domestic chores at home, these women are typically strained with what Hochschild and Machung (2012) calls as 'second shift' of work[17]. It is in such situations, the pressures of domestic labour in these households is intertwined with their class positions, which entails these women the privilege of outsourcing the labour for domestic tasks in their daily lives. Moreover, it also entailed to the maintenance of traditional conception of middle-class respectable femininity[18], wherein the middle-class women in the present study are seen assigning only those tasks to domestic workers which did not compromise their feminine 'selves'.

It is from vantage of such a perspective, the researchers view the recruitment of domestic workers in middle-class households of the present study. The following section therefore, discusses the three main factors related to recruitment of domestic workers, which appeared to be significant for Assamese middle-class women employers, for crucially reproducing their gendered and class positions.

Practical Gains: Working Women and Housewives

Engaging domestic workers in general appeared to be an ideal domestic arrangement for the middle-class employers – working women and housewives - as it facilitated sharing of domestic responsibilities, which in turn, aided to easing their work load as primary nurturers of the family.

Juggling between work and home, the working women in the present study particularly emphasised on domestic workers being a 'necessity' for continuing their daily lives: 'It is next to impossible to manage the domestic chores for working people like us. A maid is a necessity for us to manage the house smoothly'. Significantly, although over the years, positive changes have taken place in terms of familial relationships, where a large number of women are seen shouldering economic responsibility together with men, the enduring gendered expectations from these women continue to persist as a norm, for suitable 'femininity'. Arguably, these expectations are reflections of patriarchal practices deeply ingrained in Assamese society since the colonial period, which accompanies a married woman at every stage of her life (Bhattacharyya, 2009). This naturally entails women to excel in homemaking roles irrespective of their work status outside home.

Besides, the inclination of women towards excelling in homemaking roles, in part can also be inferred in relation to the socialisation of a girl child from childhood.

[17] The term was first coined by Hochschild (2012) to describe the household arrangement in families, where both husband and wife are engaged in paid employment outside the household, but, at home the woman continues to perform the major share of domestic work by dedicating much of her time to it, thus, making it her second shift of work.

[18] Respectable femininity implies particular types of femininity, which manifests as behavioural expectations at workplaces, streets and homes; through which woman add value to their lives (Hussein, 2017).

The deliberate distinction at household level between feminine work and masculine work comes early in childhood and becomes sharper as the child grows up (Dube, 1988, p. 17). While, it is certain that a single pattern of gender based division of work is difficult to pin down, as such divisions are varied across regions and social groups, nevertheless, reproductive tasks related to preparing meals, menial cleaning work, child care, elderly care, maintaining of familial and social ties are in general constructed as 'feminine' across cultures in India (Dube, 1988; Dickey, 2000). In this, the young girls are consciously socialised into an environment, without generating a sense of discrimination in them by signifying such reproductive labour as 'natural', and an essential quality of service (*sewa*) towards their family (Dube, 1988). Such gendered construction of reproductive labour deeply ingrained in women from a young age, inevitably privileges the men, as they are entitled not only to the free labour of women, but it also releases them from establishing their relationship with reproductive tasks at home. Considering such normative rule of patriarchal ideologies of associating reproductive labour with women, it is, therefore, not surprising when the working women in this study expressed their concerns of fulfilling their daily gendered expectations of domestic duties. However, in this, they do not challenge such gendered division of labour, although, their participation in paid employment intensifies their struggles to reproduce much of their daily domestic chores. Rather, such contradictions are resolved by organising the reproductive labour at the household level through hiring of domestic workers. The labour of domestic workers, in significant ways assisted these women to reproduce their gendered expectations of femininity in the realm of everyday lives, without disrupting the traditional patriarchal set-up.

While, it is perceptible that all working women are largely dependent on domestic workers by emphasising the utilitarian gains, the sample group of housewives under study are equally dependent on an external help for sustaining their daily chores. This can be best elucidated from the testimony of Radha[19], living with her father-in-law, husband and a ten-year-old daughter. Currently, employing one part-time worker who works at her place from 9:00 am in the morning to 3:00 pm in the afternoon, she speaks at length about her dependency on domestic workers since the time of her marriage. While, she has been married for the past fourteen years, in the initial years of her marriage, it was her mother-in-law who managed the domestic workers. But, ever since her death, the reigns of domestic responsibilities has been managed by Radha single-handedly, for the last six years. She explains it as:

> *In my mother's place, we always had servants to work for us. But, here, after my marriage, though we had servants, I had to equally work with them. The whole situation was very annoying when my mother-in-law was alive. My entire day used to pass by doing household chores. There was no time for myself. My mother-in-law's treatment towards these people was not good. No one used to work at our place for long, and in their absence the burden of housework was all*

[19] Pseudonyms have been used for all the respondents.

> *on me. Gradually, I started interfering in her domestic practices, as my interest was involved in it, and the servants continued working under me, for many years. The present maid has been with me for the last five years. She does sweeping, mopping, washing, dusting and all other duties of the house.*

Radha's testimony reflects the traditional expectation from a daughter-in-law (*bowari*) in middle-class Assamese households, where they are required to shoulder domestic responsibilities. However, her testimony at the same time reflects the power relations and status amongst the women members in an intergenerational household, which crucially determined the gendered division of labour within such households. As a daughter-in-law, the women are relegated to a subordinate position in relation to their mother-in-law, who in turn exercised the ultimate control in allocating the domestic responsibilities of a household. Notably, such an understanding of domestic arrangement is found to be deeply entrenched since generations amongst most families in the study, which appears to reconfigure with each passing generation, and, thereby, delineate the lives of the women. In this, the reproductive labour of the daughter-in-law as a wife and a mother is commonly perceived as 'a source of private welfare and comfort' (Papanek, 1979, p. 781) for the family members, where she is expected to undertake the drudgery of daily domestic chores with devotion. Moreover, the involvement of women as mothers, wives or daughter-in-law in reproductive tasks of the household, in part also significantly contributed in 'status production' (Papanek, 1979)[20] of the family in social circles. This in turn justified the enduring gendered expectations of domesticity, which defined the home as a space where women's household work becomes essential marker for construction of middle-class identities. Taken together, much like the working women, such virtues of feminine domesticity deeply impact the lives of housewives, and they are seen juggling between multiple domestic responsibilities throughout the day. This suggests the practicality of housewives in hiring a domestic worker. While, in this sense, Radha's testimony holds weight when she portrayed herself as being totally dependent on her domestic worker, nevertheless, her comments concomitantly take us to several other dominant reasons for hiring a domestic worker in middle-class households. Being socialised into a domestic world, where domestic workers are an integral part in household maintenance reflects her internalised dependency, absorbed in a reproduction of class: 'In my mother's place, we always had servants to work for us'. However, the alternative domestic arrangement in the house of her in-law's placed her in a chaotic situation, which required her to equally labour with domestic workers. This being in negation to her class status compelled her to intervene in the domestic affairs of her mother-in-law,

[20] Papanek (1979) enumerates three types of status production work performed by women in middle-class households: Firstly, they function as support workers for the income earning family members by attending to their daily needs, which significantly contributes towards their efficient contribution in productive work determining the family's class; Secondly, it relates to the training of children as mothers in status appropriate language, behavior, physical and intellectual skills, health, hygiene and presentation of self, which signifies the family's present status as well as their future status aspirations; Thirdly, status is produced through activities like maintenance of social ties with kin, neighbours, peers and also within the family, which essentially required a woman's time, energy and organizational skills.

thereby, bringing necessary changes to domestic arrangement of the household. Thus, taking a morally superior stance by explicitly contrasting her domestic arrangement with that of her mother-in-law, she is seen reclaiming her class position by recruiting a worker, who performed the menial and 'xyz duties' of the house.

However, although it appeared that for working women practical gains are central, and for most of the housewives the reasons are sometimes masked with symbolic gains, the study reveals that, both groups are united by the fact that all of them hired domestic workers for doing their menial domestic tasks. The women employers mostly considered themselves as capable of doing particular tasks like cooking, and, repeatedly emphasising their dependence on workers for a range of 'demeaning tasks' (Romero, 1992, p. 100)[21]. Even the working women, for instance, who portrayed themselves as being totally dependent on domestic workers, are actively involved in meal preparation for their respective families, as they proudly declared during the interviews: 'Cooking is my department'. Although, cooking constituted one of the most time-consuming domestic tasks (as depicted by the women themselves) amongst these women from Assamese middle-class families, since it involved preparing two to three dishes in each meal, yet labour for the particular task is not outsourced. The preferences of all the women under study – working and housewives - in preparing meals for family is primarily reasoned on two grounds: first, in terms of taste and nutritional requirement of each family member which is best known to them; second, most women perceived the task as an 'art', which they believed domestic workers seldom excelled in. Moreover, in India food is ubiquitously significant (Saunders, 2007 cited in Mattila, 2011, p. 115), wherein the women mostly emphasised 'food' cooked at home as a prime component which binds the entire family together. One woman under study puts it as:

> *I have grown up seeing my mother preparing meals and feeding the family. This is something which has always remained within me. There is warmth when we cook and feed our family, especially the children. We do it with all our love. This love binds the family together. But, the same cannot be expected from a servant. They will do the task as a part of their duty. And, they might also cook with bad intentions in their minds which can be harmful for the family's well-being. So, I have always kept cooking as a task for myself.*

Such sentiments are shared by majority of sample urban middle class women in the study, and this in a way reflects the contemporary domestic practice of inculcating traditionalism by preserving the task of cooking as the 'ultimate labour of love' (Donner, 2011). It reflects the attitude in which Assamese middle-class women sought to redefine their gendered selves embodying respectability. As Donner observes

[21] In Romero's study in U.S.A, the domestics' routine comprised of performing demeaning tasks like vacuuming behind sofas, washing and waxing floors, scrubbing ovens, sinks, tubs and toilet, picking up of toys, papers and clothes (Romero 1992, p.130).

amongst Bengali middle-class families in Kolkata that, married women as guardians of tradition are expected to embody certain familial values which communicated an image of respectable femininity in public (Donner, 2011, p. 65)[22]. Nevertheless, the middle-class women in this study actively sought help from their domestic workers for certain menial tasks associated with cooking, like chopping of vegetables, grinding spices, washing rice and pulses.

Thus, working women and housewives from middle class families predominantly hired domestic workers to alleviate themselves from certain domestic responsibilities involving the menial tasks. In this, in addition to creating an image of their gendered selves, they actively cultivated a practice of status reproduction.

Reproduction of Status

> *You can do the domestic chores for maximum of two days, but, when you need to follow the same routine on a regular basis, it really gets into your nerves. And, if you can afford maids, there is no harm in hiring them.*

While, it is generally inferred that the participation of middle-class women in the labour market contributed towards an increasing recruitment of domestic workers, more specifically part-timers in contemporary India (Neetha, 2004; 2009), however engagement of domestic workers in middle-class households is not limited only to working women as observed in the study findings. By outsourcing the reproductive labour of poor domestic workers, both working women and housewives in middle class families contributed towards the over-all well-being of their families, without compromising on their gendered expectations of 'respectable' femininity. However, given the monotonous nature of domestic tasks, hiring of domestic workers not only helped in practical gains of redefining their feminine 'selves', but also relieved the middle-class women from performing the menial domestic tasks, thus, affirming their status. While, this has been significantly highlighted in the above comment by one middle class woman under study, it echoes the sentiments of several other women under study, which attenuate the symbolic gains of middle-class women from hiring the services of domestic workers.

Hiring of domestic workers has long served as a status indicator, and this has been extensively discussed in the scholarship on domestic work (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Shah, 2000; Mattila, 2011). Rollins in her analysis on the relationship between middle-class employers and their domestics of colour in the United States of America observes that, hiring of domestic workers 'affords the employers a self-enhancing satisfaction that emanate from having the presence of an inferior and validating the

[22] In Bangladesh, Hussein (2017) observes that, working women negotiated their respectable femininity by actively performing domestic task of cooking during familial social gatherings, widely visible to public, albeit seeking help from domestic servants in their everyday food preparation.

employer's lifestyle, ideology, and social world, from their familial interrelations to the economically and racially stratified system in which they live' (Rollins, 1985, p. 156). This dovetails with domestic practices in the present study, where it is not uncommon to observe middle class women as 'employers' deriving a sense of status superiority by hiring domestic workers.

It is interesting to note that middle class women 'employers' of domestic workers depend on these workers for tasks which they could otherwise easily perform themselves. While, such dependency is a common sight in households which hired live-in workers, it is at the same time, familiar amongst those hiring part-time workers too. Some tasks such as bringing the employer's or their family members shoes from the shoe rack; carrying their bag till the car parked a few steps from the main entrance of the house; opening the gate when employers are home; serving employers with a glass of water immediately on their arrival are part of the daily tasks of the live-in workers, which vividly reiterated the status distinction ingrained in the work. Arguably, the performance of such tasks by an inferior 'other', only contributed towards reflecting superior status of these middle class women employers. One woman from the study succinctly remarked about her live-in worker as: 'Mostly the back breaking tasks like sweeping and mopping are performed by the part-time worker. Her (the live-in worker) presence in the house acts as a kind of satisfaction that there is always someone, at my call'.

The part-time domestic workers perform tasks such as dusting and polishing as part of their regular routine work which otherwise does not add much value in upkeep of the family but enhances the perecived lifestyle status of these women. Certain tasks performed by these domestic workers also have a class division. For instance, it is a common practice for the domestic workers in most of these houses, to take washed clothes out of the washing machine and hang them for drying, but, the same worker is not allowed to operate the machine, as she is perceived to be incompetent to operate such household appliances by her employer. As Trigg notes, 'status derives from the judgments that other members of society make of an individual's position in society, and for this position to be established there must be a display of wealth' (Trigg, 2001, p. 100). This display of wealth essentially gets reflected through procurement of certain consumer goods. And, in situations when an individual fail to deploy the consumer goods which symbolises a certain class, it makes the individual pitiable and socially invisible (Dickey, 2016). In the context of paid domestic work, the domestic workers by providing their range of services essentially served as consumer goods in middle-class households. By purchasing their services, the middle-class women employers not only reproduced their everyday class positions by keeping up clean and ordered homes at public display, but, also indulged in domestic practices like hiring domestic workers for insignificant domestic tasks which communicated an image of their status to the public. The public, here, includes not only their neighbours, but also their extended family members and class peers.

Act of Benevolence and Feelings of Gratification

Another dominant aspect of hiring domestic workers is that it offers an opportunity for middle-class employers to exhibit their acts of benevolence within the domestic sphere. These acts of benevolence are commonly consolidated through the practice of giving gifts to their domestic workers. In domestic service, the practice of gift-giving to domestic workers is a universal phenomenon which has been extensively dealt in the existing scholarship (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011, Barua, et.al, 2017). Unlike the practice of gift-giving which occurs between 'equals', governed by a norm of mutual reciprocity, the specificity of gift-giving in domestic service is marked by an absence of reciprocity (Rollins, 1985). Here, the gifts given mostly comprises of new and old clothes, food and all other items which are generally out-of-use at the house where the domestic worker is employed. At times such acts of benevolence also extend in the form of financial help provided in times of crises or by supporting certain educational needs of the children. Such support create a perception about domestic workers as someone who is needy, unable to provide for herself and is ever willing to accept any kind of help either in kind or cash thereby, reiterating the class distinctions ingrained in the work (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992).

It was observed that these acts of benevolence often contributed in amplifying emotional gratification of the middle-class female employers in the present study. During festivals like Bihu[23] and Durga Puja, the domestic workers were given new clothes. Most of the females who had engaged domestic helps recollected with satisfaction the support extended throughout the year either in cash and kind to their domestic workers, rather than the new gifts given during festivals. One of the reasons could be the minimal cost involved in such gifts provided during festivals. On the other hand, the used goods (though worn out), given away by the female employers were narrated with emphasis as many a times as used '*branded'* goods which otherwise would be beyond the reach of the concerned domestic worker. Statements like 'I gave her my branded shoes'; 'the clothes given were very costly'; 'she could open a shop out of the things that I gave her' were often reiterated by the female employers of the domestic helps. This naturally contributed in buttressing the employers' self-portrayal as 'kind and generous' (Romero, 1992), thus, fulfilling their emotional gratification. It is pertinent to note that, such sentiment of emotional gratification derived from so-called acts of generosity was observed among most of the females interviewed under the study. One employer exemplified her generosity of giving used items to her domestic help by attributing it as her 'act of charity':

> *I provide for my maid round the year. Recently, when I got a new gas burner for myself, I gave away the old burner to my maid. This is just one case; there are*

[23] There are three types of Bihu celebrated in Assam, namely Magh Bihu, Bohag Bihu and Kati Bihu. It is during Bohag Bihu which marks the celebration of Assamese New Year and beginning of spring, people exchange new clothes as gifts with much avidity. But, in the context of domestic work, it is only the employer who gives new clothes to their domestics, while the domestics are not expected to reciprocate this.

other uncountable stuffs which I give her from time to time. Whom else will I give? I have only her (domestic help) whom I can give. There is no use keeping old stuffs in the house, when it can be of use to someone needy. I believe such gestures of charity should begin at home. You do not need to hunt down on people to showcase such kind gestures. It gives you a satisfaction, which is hard to put in words. To be honest, I am someone who cannot see such people in pain. And, most importantly, my help is someone who is forever grateful for all that I have done for her.

By redefining the meaning of 'gifts' which could have easily gone to the trash (Romero, 1992), she fulfilled her psychological aspirations of carrying out 'acts of charity': 'I am someone who cannot see such people in pain'. The presence of the domestic worker helped her in attaining this within the sphere of her home, which otherwise, would have been inconceivable to her. Moreover, the domestic worker's acknowledgement towards her so-called 'charity' further contributed in validating her psychological aspirations, as it perpetuated a sense of dependency in the domestic worker.

Furthermore, the employer narratives of 'acts of benevolence' often show that this in large part is associated with their consumption patterns, which has been widely prevalent amongst the Indian middle-class since the post-liberalization period (Fernandes, 2006; Donner, 2011; Waldrop, 2011). In this new India, products which were once considered as luxury became necessities of the emerging middle-class throughout the country (Fernandes, 2006). In the context of domestic work, by transferring old out-of-fashion clothes and other material possessions to domestic workers, the urban middle class household engaged in a practice of making room for bringing new possessions. This in part is largely motivated by their being 'up-to-date' with ongoing consumption trend in market, as the cultural markers defining middle-class position of an individual in contemporary India are in a constant evolution, wherein it creates a sense of competition amongst class peers (Waldrop, 2011). As noted by Trigg, 'search for status through consumption is never ending...People must always try to acquire new consumption goods in order to distinguish themselves from others' (Trigg, 2001, p. 101). In this sense, the presence of domestic workers within the employer's home naturally provided an easy ground to hand over their clutter of old and outdated goods, masking it as 'acts of benevolence or charity'. An employer puts it as: 'I love staying in trend. Any clothes or designs which are in trend, I buy immediately, and the old clothes, I give it to my maid. She too accepts it happily, as the clothes given to her are always in good condition. They appear to be new only, as it is hardly worn once or twice'.

Conclusion

Framed within a discourse of middle-class domesticity in India, the paper discusses the significance of domestic workers, specifically part-timers in Assamese middle-class households in Guwahati. It was from 1990 onwards, middle-class families in urban

India witnessed drastic transformation in the demand of domestic workers. While, this was partly influenced by the increasing number of educated women seeking wage employment, partly it was due to the growing number of nuclear families (Neetha, 2004). This was primarily because middle-class homes continued to persist as the prime responsibility of married women. With homemaking being socially perceived as woman's primary careers, their status largely revolved around successful maintenance of their homes (Mattila, 2011), with their identities typically constructed around their roles as a wife, mother or a daughter-in-law. Such gendered construction of domesticity significantly entailed the women to perform not only the manual labour of their household, but also emotional labour embedded in caring and nurturing for their families, wherein the participation of men appears to be miniscule. Interestingly, by all accounts the middle-class women did not challenge such gendered expectation of domesticity. On the contrary, they negotiated the inequitable gendered division of labour by seeking substitute in the form of outsourcing labour of poor women in need of work.

It is worth mentioning that, the middle-class women in the present study primarily outsourced labour of domestic workers to undertake their menial domestic tasks. The domestic tasks involving emotional labour like cooking and nurturing are performed by the women themselves. That is, by transferring the menial burden of domestic work to domestic workers, these urban middle-class women concentrated on the domestic tasks like cooking which is perceived as a matter of motherly and wifely devotion to emotionally bind the family together. The menial nature of domestic work which is usually outsourced not only weighs down on women who are engaged in paid employment outside home, but is also weighing for housewives. This indicates the perceived gains from hiring a domestic worker in middle-class households. However, given the gendered expectations of domesticity in these households, the hiring of domestic workers did not ease their burden of gendered roles in domestic sphere. Conversely, the middle-class women are entrusted with the 'overall household responsibility' (Agarwal, 2000 cited in Mattila, 2011) to ensure the timely completion of daily menial domestic tasks and emphasized upon their supervisory roles. In this regard, the deliberate distinction amongst the domestic tasks performed by females of the middle-class household and those performed by their domestic helps, accentuated the subordinate status of the workers on a daily basis, thereby, creating a polarized version of femininity surrounding the middle-class and lower-class women. Arguably, such distinction is important for the middle-class women because it helps them to redefine their gendered selves embodying respectability. Their domestic involvement and commitment towards their family placed them in a position which vividly constructed them as contrast figures in relation to the lower-class domestic workers at their homes, who could not afford similar involvement with their respective families.

Furthermore, in addition to the practical gains, a closer observation in these Assamese middle-class households in Guwahati reveals that, hiring of domestic workers appeared to be guided by a complex set of needs, wherein the practical gains are further

interrelated with symbolic gains in the form of status reproduction and emotional gains through showcasing act of benevolence. Interestingly, the pattern in which domestic work is organized highlight the significance of 'status enhancement' (Romero, 1992) amongst all the middle-class employers. More than just a clean and ordered house, the presence of domestic workers contributed in amplifying the well-being of these urban middle-class women engaging the domestic helps.

Moving beyond the practical and symbolic gains, emotional gains is most commonly achieved by the employers through 'showcasing an act of benevolence' in the form of help in cash or kind (old and out-of-fashion material possessions) to their domestic workers, which the employers commonly marked as their 'act of charity'. Such a relationship essentially portrayed the domestic workers as 'needy', wherein employers strategize to manipulate the feelings of their workers, by perpetuating a sense of deference and dependency in them. Notably, considering the intimacy of the space where the work is performed, this sense of dependency amongst the domestic workers not only accentuated the class positions of the women in the urban middle-class families, but, also brought emotional gratification portraying themselves as a 'kind', 'generous' and 'benevolent' employer.

Significantly, the study reflects that, the recruitment of domestic workers in Guwahati is a complex interplay of practical, symbolic and emotional gains for women in the urban middle-class households. The three aspects enumerated as discussed in the foregoing sections are however, not ranked in any hierarchical importance from the perspectives of the women engaging the domestic helps. Instead, while, symbolic gains in the form of status reproduction is a crucial element attached to engaging domestic workers since colonial times, practical and emotional gains in contemporary times, satiated certain moral and consumerist aspirations of middle-class employers, thereby, reproducing their gender and class identities in the realm of everyday lives.

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