

Life and Work of Women Domestic Helpers in The Urban Agglomeration of Asansol-Durgapur in Bardhaman District of West Bengal: A Case Study

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Abstract

Domestic servants now known as domestic helper or house help, emerged as a ‘class’ due to socio-economic change in society. They are the support system of an urban household. Domestic workers form one of the largest informal sector workforces in urban areas that too lower class women the majority. However, the nature of their class has regional specifications and features. Similarly rural and urban areas portray different pictures of domestic workers. Socio- economic backwardness makes them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Bardhaman (presently Paschim/ West Bardhaman) district of West Bengal, India emerged as an industrial hub on the map of Bengal post 1947, the country’s year of independence. Economic disparity intensified resulting in the growth of an acute hierarchal order based on imbalanced economic distribution. Number of domestic workers increased with every passing decade and they comprise a considerable female workforce in towns. The research paper attempts to highlight the lives, work, every day struggles of a large marginalised section of women workers and also construct their identity as individuals through some specific case studies. Several studies have been conducted on domestic workers in recent years however they fit in the large corpus of macro studies centring the capital cities in particular. Present research is a micro level initiative to bring forward the picture of women domestic workers in the urban agglomeration of Asansol-Durgapur, the two most industrious and populous city of Paschim Bardhaman.

Keywords: class, exploitation, identity, informal, marginalisation

1. INTRODUCTION

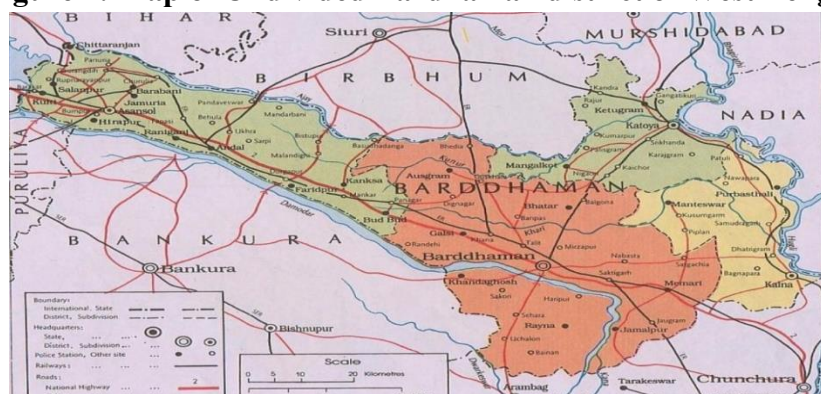
“O Poltu’r Ma, edike esho, ei jaigata bhalo kore porishkar kore dao” [Come here, Paltu’s mother, and clean this place properly]. Such peremptory orders are commonly heard in most houses every morning. Paltu’s mother, Chumki’s mother, Naru’s mother and likewise several others are the support system of an urban household sharing a common status of domestic servants. According to the definition of the Report of the Sub-committee on Labour, domestic helpers include the largest number of workers engaged in household and personal services [2]. Our caste-ridden societal norms have always kept the vulnerable section at its margins. The picture of domestic workers since ages shows that they belong to the same caste as of their *sahebs* i.e owners or just the rank lower with a poor economic background. Therefore, caste bindings remained the pivot in appointing domestic helpers.

However, the nature of their class has regional specifications and features, rural and urban areas portray different pictures of domestic workers. In rural areas mostly the rich could afford to keep house helps. They come from nearby villages and get much respect. Agriculture being the primary occupation, quite a large number of people is engaged and women form a considerable workforce. An interesting fact about earlier domestic helpers in rural areas is that men formed the majority. In later years women joined in large numbers. On the contrary domestic workers form one of the largest informal sector workforces in urban areas. Instances of recruiting house helps by wealthy populace like doctors, lawyers, officers, businessmen were common in our society.

Colonial rule marked the beginning of a new era in the country. Bardhaman district of present West Bengal, India witnessed the epoch of British colonial interests with the development in coal mining and railways. Thus, a door opened for a new source of earning. The process further continued when Bardhaman emerged as an industrial hub on the map of Bengal, post- 1947 years. As an industrial belt the western part of the district exhibit a composite culture. Therefore, religious and caste bindings tended to loosen and acute economic differences in terms of money earnings could be noticed. This is one of the marked differences between the rural and urban.

Industrialisation followed by urban development circumscribes a certain economic structure. Since access to land is negligible hence work pattern shows a shift from formal to informal. Urban areas host the largest section of the informal workforce. Among which lower-class women form the majority. They mostly work as contract labour and domestic workers. Inter- and intra-district migration further stimulates the flow of labour, women in particular. Economic backwardness is the truth of their life. To meet family expenses, women go out to work as maids. Domestic workers became an inseparable part of a household from the late 1980s in Bardhaman district. Earlier only the wealthy would keep servants for domestic help. Women members of a middle-class house had to shoulder all household duties. But as time progressed a distinct difference could be noticed between owners and servants. Society experienced a new hierarchal structure but never thought to include this largest informal sector in everyday processes of living. They remained at the margins not only in social- economic hierarchy but even labour as well. In fact, work of domestic helpers is not measured in terms of labour index and hence it becomes easy to exploit them. As found by Rimli Sengupta, “an estimated 10 million domestic workers, overwhelmingly female, have essentially no access to grievance redressal or collective bargaining”. [4] Yet there exists a sharp distinction between older and younger generations. They have come a long way—officially the word ‘servant’ has now been replaced by ‘helpers’ or ‘assistants’. Also, somehow the earlier feudal mentalities and relationships between the owner and servants have loosened to a certain extent.

Figure 1: Map of Undivided Bardhaman district of West Bengal



2. Methodology

Literary sources, census reports and field surveys reveal to some extent the number and nature of women domestic workers for the past decades. According to Tripti Lahiri, in the Census of 1971, their number was only a quarter of the number of servants recorded in the census of 1911 [3]. However, they are the ones totally ignored in governmental surveys and records. Therefore, to understand their lives, work, everyday struggles and construct their identity as individuals, the author has chosen the case study method. This may help to come to a conclusion regarding the lifestyle and pattern of work of domestic workers in the urban agglomeration of Asansol-Durgapur.

3. Discussion

Case Study 1

Name- Manju Rani Das; Age- 62; Residence- Asansol

Manju Rani Das, a woman in her sixties, has been serving as a maid for nearly forty years. Originally a resident of Raghunathpur village, Purulia, her family migrated to Asansol during the late 1970s after her father hoped to make a good fortune in a city. She along with her mother and elder sister joined hands to earn money by working in urban houses. The third of five children, Manju was married at twenty and her husband worked as a labourer at construction sites. Earlier they lived in a slum near Narsingbandh in Burnpur. After her marriage she shifted to her in-laws house in Tantipara situated at a close proximity to her previous house. She continued to work as a maid and eventually became mother of two children. In those days not many people kept maids, so finding work proved a bit difficult for Manju during her initial days. Moreover, she was new in this locality and therefore had to face the challenge of winning trust and belief—the foremost qualities people search in maids. At first, she worked in two houses, at walking distances from Tantipara and then three by the time her second child was born. Her husband Lokai Das hardly remained at home and, being an old lady, her mother-in-law could not take care of her grandchildren. This left Manju with no other option than to carry her children, mostly the younger one, with herself to work. She feels thankful that the owners of her working houses were sympathetic towards her; one of them even admitted her children to school and bore the expenses. Till now Manju admits that their debts could not be returned. She used to cook, clean the house and then went out for work.

However, something was destined that would turn her world upside down. Manju Rani's husband left her to marry another woman—a distressing turn of events for a mother of two. Such incidents were not uncommon among them. She was aware of such happenings, but when the same happened with her, Manju certainly broke down. But her morale and steadiness hardly allowed her to be let down. She was determined to raise her children alone. Now both of them have passed the matriculation. During the conversation Manju narrated how her life had been: she woke up at 5 a.m., completed all household chores and went to her first house at 8 a.m. Returning at 1 p.m., she had lunch, fed her children and again left for afternoon work. Finally, she would return at 6:00–6:30 p.m. At one point of time, she confidently remarked that she was glad that her husband left her. He would hardly stay at the house, made only meagre economic contribution, came home drunk and misbehaved with her. But her neighbours left no opportunity to accuse her. As her children grew up, she needed extra money for their upbringing and education. For that she used to make paper packets in the evening, a very tiring job after the whole day's hard work. She shared accounts of several incidents of insult and grief faced by her in her long years of work. Once a family blamed her of theft and sacked her, an incident which still haunts her. Her employers largely, however, are happy with her dedication to work and paid enough to keep her

daily life going comfortably. From her words, it becomes clear that she could never defy their orders. At present Manju works in only two houses and loves to spend time with her grandchildren. After her daughter's marriage turned out to be an unsuccessful one, they all live together with her in their two-room rented house.

The case study of Manju Rani Das reveals an instance of will, determination and self-confidence which generally was absent among this class of workers. Patriarchy exists at every level of our society in varied forms. A woman has to face wrath of the society whenever her husband disowns her. Manju however never broke down even in her toughest times. Herself being uneducated, she had the firm will to educate her children in all way possible, even while facing extreme social and economic duress. She was aware of her responsibilities and also earned enough goodwill in her workplace. When facing accusations and hearing filthy words became the order of the day in her own neighbourhood, she found some solace thinking that her employers extended so much of their support to her.

Case Study 2

Name- Champa Dutta; Age- 50; Residence- Durgapur

Champa Dutta, a widow in her fifties, has been living in the house of Swapan and Reba Chakraborty for nearly ten years. Mrs. Chakraborty worked as a school teacher and her husband was an employee of Durgapur Steel Plant (DSP). They had two daughters. The couple being both out for work the whole day, Champa was in charge of the household. When she came to work for the Chakraborty's from Barjora in Bakura, she was a lady in her forties. Married at a very early age her husband died when their only son was four years old. She went through severe hard times to bring up her son. Champa worked in the fields and also made plates out of *sal* leaves to earn some more. She faced everyday humiliation from her in-laws who were never compassionate towards her. But misfortune again struck her when her son, a young boy of twenty-two was hit by thunder while returning from the field in the evening. Her world turned upside down losing her child. Left with nobody and tired of accusations and abusive words, Champa started living with her younger sister and her husband. Those were the days, Champa pensively sighs, when life seemed miserable and she had lost all hope of living. It took several years to come back to normal and her sister always remained by her side. But all she needed was to get out of that place which was the cause of her sorrows.

It was during this time that the Chakraborty's were looking for a whole-time housekeeper. Champa Dutta stepped in the bustling city of Durgapur in 1988. Her employers were initially doubtful about whether a woman with such a tragic past would be able to manage their house. However, Champa lived up to the trust, belief and love they showered on her. She never let them down. Eventually Mrs. Chakraborty left the entire household on her shoulders and now calls her 'home manager'. Their daughter lovingly calls her Champa '*pishi*' (paternal aunt). When asked how she managed to do all the work, Champa spontaneously replied work kept her busy from the greatest grief life has given her. For the first few years she did all housework—cleaning, washing, even assisting Mrs. Chakraborty in cooking. But as the child grew up, the workload increased. Therefore, they appointed another maid for cleaning and washing. Then onwards Champa supervises her and takes care of everyday needs. Though she started working as a domestic help, in these years she has become one of their family members. Her hard work and dedication paid for the love she receives from the Chakraborty's. She expressed her delight when she wrote her name for the first time. It was Mrs. Chakraborty's continuous venture which made her able to read and write. During festivals she got new clothes and enjoyed together. Once in a year she goes to visit her sister, a time when Mrs. Chakraborty finds it really difficult to manage all the

work alone.

The story of Champa Dutta vividly shows the transformation of a domestic helper into a 'home manager'. Once she did all the work as an ordinary maid; now she supervises another maid—a clear example of hierarchal system among maids. This shift of work and position went a long way in shaping her identity and thoughts.

Case Study 3

Name- Arati Bauri; Age- 35; Residence- ChhotoDighari

The case study of Arati Bauri reflects the present status of domestic helpers in an urban settlement like Asansol. Presently Arati works as a maid in five houses. She lives with her husband and two daughters in their own house in ChhotoDighari in Mithani, Asansol. Her in-laws also stay in their neighbourhood. Arati's life as a domestic helper started before her marriage when she accompanied her mother and older sisters. She was married at twenty and became mother of two children by 28. Haru Bauri, her husband, works in a marble factory. After marriage she had spent several years in the slums near Surja Sen Colony, where they used to live in a joint family. Her day started at 5 a.m. when she woke up and along with her mother and sister-in-law did all household work. Her duty was to fetch water from a roadside tap, clean the house and help in cooking. By 8 a.m. she was ready to board the bus and went off to work. She carried rice, onion and chilly, sometimes some potato fries, for lunch and had tea and puffed rice for breakfast. Sometimes she was given to eat something by her owners. Her entire day was spent hopping from one house to the other. Even during her initial months of pregnancy, she continued her work. However, she regretted that when she joined work after a leave of three months, two of her houses were gone. But her energetic nature and sincerity did not make her wait long. Arati found new houses in no time. According to her, she does her work seriously but that which suits her. She is confident about finding work easily in the Asansol- Burnpur industrial belt even if she loses work at a house. This clearly indicates the demand for house helps and that a large percentage of urban population is dependent on them. When asked how much she earns, her proud voice declared, about 3,000–3,500 rupees per month. However, the festive month gets her some more in the form of bonuses. Now that she has got her own house under the governmental initiative of Prime Minister's Housing Scheme, she has something of her own. She sends both her daughters to school, herself being illiterate. In spite of lacking formal education, her dedication and will power has driven her to become suitable for today's society. She has also learnt cycling and even keeps a cell phone. It is obvious that with each passing year her salary is also increasing.

Arati's example bears testimony to the society's changing attitude. The earlier conservative thoughts where caste formed the core of social relations are seen to be becoming lax. Upper-caste households before could never imagine keeping Bauris, once considered the lowest of castes, as domestic help. The present scenario shows a marked difference. Moreover, Arati is the face of several such maids today. They have become conscious about their due share and rights. Their identity as individual independent workers is on the verge of bloom. They possess the ability to make themselves acceptable and ready in today's era of rapid change, both socio-cultural and economic.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said domestic helpers, or 'servants' as designated by societal tradition, have always been kept at the lowest strata. Working as a domestic help has never found mention in any governmental records and surveys in past decades. After a detailed study, the author feels they have

never been included in the category of marginal workers or even non-workers. Very few literary works on the lives of domestic helpers, more particularly females, have come forward and that too at the turn of the twenty-first century. First such literary piece, named *Alo Andhari*, came out in 2006 and was written by Baby Halder, later on translated in English by Urvashi Butalia. She herself worked as a domestic help and the book explicitly describes her journey and life experiences. With passing years, the nature of maids, their work pattern, wages, lifestyles have undergone several changes. However, the core aspect remains the same—discrimination, exploitation and violence. Since they had no unions and were not protected by any labour laws, they became vulnerable to easy methods of exploitation, especially wage exploitation. During the survey, the author also came across instances of violence against house- helps. It makes clear that urban life styles have made people aggressive and impatient, where even educated people lack basic elements of human nature and moral value. To quote Rimli Sengupta, “Further, there is the pervasive fear that empowering domestic workers would rupture well-tended class membranes.” [4] Therefore, the above case studies serve as eye-openers for understanding the nature of domestic helpers and their position in everyday life of the industrious bustling region of Bardhaman district. After the 1990s their numbers have increased further and they comprise a considerable female workforce in towns.

5. Acknowledgements

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Author’s Biography

This is Dr. Sayantika Chatteraj from West Bengal, India. I have done my schooling from the Assembly of God Church School, Asansol. I am a student of History and have completed the Graduation, Post-Graduation and Ph.D degree from Viva- Bharati University, renowned world- wide. My specialisation is in Economic History and the area of research is Women Labour in both formal and informal economic sectors. My work attempts to incorporate micro level women study in the broad arena of macro study.

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