

Shifting landscapes of Live-in Women Domestic Workers in Uttar Pradesh

Prof. Sangeeta Pandey¹, Jaya Joseph²

¹Professor, Sociology, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University

²Research Scholar, Sociology, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University

Abstract

Shifting landscapes of Live-in Women Domestic Workers in Uttar Pradesh demonstrate the ongoing socio-economic and cultural transformations shaping urban and semi-urban areas of India. With rapid urbanisation and increasing women's labour force participation in formal sector have substantially augmented the dependence on women domestic workers in families living in urban centres of Uttar Pradesh. This paper attempts to examine how women engaged in informal sector as domestic aid are supporting women working in formal sector. Women and families working in villages as "kameens" are often paid less by their "Jajmans" and hence, they tend to look for alternative job opportunities including MNREGA in village itself. But still, they experience monetary difficulties. As a result, they get fascinated by the employment opportunities, quality of education, standard of living and financial freedom of semi-urban and urban centres. These are few pull factors that compel them to migrate to semi-urban and urban areas. On the other hand, the increasing women labour force participation in formal sector has created a vacuum in context of their daily household tasks. Therefore, the women domestic workers play a crucial role in providing help in urban households and taking over the absence by performing all the chores including care-giving and nurturing in these households. With the process of urbanisation, the families who have migrated to urban areas of Uttar Pradesh still have their economic and emotional ties with their villages. In this scenario, they strive to strengthen their rural connects and engage women for household work in urban and semi-urban localities from their native village who were earlier performing the role of kameens. These women from kameen families are often seen as reliable source of support. The present study tries to analyse the shifting landscapes of live-in women domestic workers in Uttar Pradesh through sociological lens. It scrutinizes how the intersection of caste, class and gender hierarchies shape the working and living conditions of these women.

The research paper highlights how live-in domestic workers reveal the blurred lines between domestic space and workspace, care and paid labour, affection and authority within employer-employee relations. The study unwraps the continuation of traditional roles based on kinship, caste and village bonds brings access to employment and often reinforce social hierarchies with the domestic realm. Although the employers treat them like a family member, nevertheless, the deep-rooted asymmetries of power and dependence cannot be ignored. Even without formal labour rights, live-in domestic workers exercise quiet forms of resistance and everyday negotiation to assert dignity within these confined intimate spaces.

Uttar Pradesh is witnessing a transition from an agrarian economy to a diversified urban centre. Historically rooted in agriculture, state's economic profile is being reshaped by the expansion of trade, industries, and the growing service sector. Developments across all sectors have opened new avenues

of employment, particularly for women. This economic expansion led to an increasing dependence on domestic workers to sustain urban lifestyles. With more women entering the formal workforce, the demand for paid domestic labour for tasks such as childcare, eldercare, cleaning, and cooking has amplified.

Introduction

This paper investigates about how the contribution of Live-in Domestic Workers has been reorganised in Uttar Pradesh. Live-in Domestic Workers are individuals who perform the household tasks such as cleaning, cooking, childcare and eldercare, reside at the employer's house as a full-time domestic aid. The accommodation is either within the house or in a separate part of the residence. Since they are always present at the house, they are more prone to overwork and leads to blurring of work-life boundaries. Additionally, they are more exposed to abuse which may be physical, mental or emotional. This review-based study examines the persistence and significance of rural linkages among live-in women domestic workers in urban Uttar Pradesh.

According to United Nations, UDHR (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights) Article 24, "Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay". As per Laslett, "Live-in Domestic Work has been referred to as "life-cycle occupation" meaning that domestic workers begin working with family at young age and stay with the family throughout their life". According to early Vedic texts, Indian Society has been divided into four broad categories with specific duties and occupations. Brahmins were prominent for knowledge, religious authority and ritual purity. Kshatriyas were renowned for warfare and governance. Vaishyas were well-known for commerce and economic production. Shudras were reserved for manual labourers and service providers. Additionally, there were untouchable communities who were placed outside the four-fold varna system and the traditional occupations associated with them were sweeping, sanitation, leather work and manual scavenging etc. Therefore, Brahmins capture a substantial role in ritual and religious life, serving as custodians of Hindu Sacred Practices. They perform various rituals such as Samskaras, griha pravesh, upanayana, shraddha etc. These traditions not only shaped the cultural identity of the region but also reinforced the jajmani system, as priests, barbers, drummers, and other hereditary service providers played essential roles in life-cycle events such as weddings, funerals, and pujas. In this environment, jajmani ties were more than economic arrangements—they were embedded in the social and spiritual fabric of village life. Therefore, Jajmani System was considered as the indispensable feature of the rural economy. It is a system of traditional occupational obligations. Lexically, the term Jajman has been derived from the Sanskrit word "Yajman" which means a person who performs a yajna. However, its usage extended to everyone who hired or received the services. Thus, Jajmani System is a traditional system of distribution in which land owning upper-caste families receive services from lower caste such as Khati (Carpenter), Nai (Barber), Kumhars (Potters), Lohars (Blacksmiths), Dhobi (Washerman), Sweeper (Chuhra) etc. The Jajmani System in rural india is deeply connected with the caste hierarchy. The castes that provide services are known as Kamins, while the recipient castes are called Jajmans. The Village study in Uttar Pradesh by Willian H Wiser also reveals these Jajmani relations among people. The services of both Jajman and Kamin was treated as a moral and religious responsibility especially for the Brahmins who performed religious ceremonies. The relationships lasted for generations and were built on loyalty and trust. Kamins continues serving the same families and in return those families were expected to take care of them. It was beyond work or

money, it was like a social bond similar to a connection between family members. William H. Wiser in his book “The Hindu Jajmani System” stated that Jajmani System serves to maintain the Indian Villages as self-sufficient community.

With the rapid transformation of economic systems, structures and practices over time due to factors like technology, globalisation, policy shifts and societal needs lead to restructuring of Jajmani ties. Additionally, large numbers of *kamins* migrated to cities in search of work, leading to a decline in jajmani networks and weakening of jajmani ties.

As per Oscar Lewis in his book “Village life in Northern India”, “Under this system each caste group within a village is expected to give certain standardized services to the families of other castes. Each one works for certain family or group of families with whom he is hereditary linked”. Edmund R. Leach (1960) stated that Jajmani System maintains and regulates the division of labour and economic interdependence of caste. Additionally, Harold Gould (1987) stated that Jajmani System distributes agricultural produce in exchange for menial and craft services.

Traditionally, women’s roles were deeply rooted in both household responsibilities and community life, shaped by cultural norms, economic demands, and social structures. They managed essential domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and overseeing household resources. In rural and agrarian settings, women engaged in farming, cared for livestock, processed food grains, and supported other forms of subsistence work. They were also key participants in cultural and religious life, taking charge of rituals, preserving oral traditions, and actively joining in festivals. Despite their indispensable contributions to the economic and social fabric of the community, their work was often undervalued and went largely unrecognized, with authority and decision-making remaining predominantly in male hands.

Over time, the role of women has evolved considerably, influenced by social change, economic progress, and shifting cultural perspectives. In the present day, women play an active role in education, the workforce, politics, and leadership positions. Improved access to education, supportive legal frameworks, and expanding economic opportunities have empowered many women to gain financial independence and take part in decision-making at both household and societal levels. Developments in technology and the forces of globalization have further broadened career options and enhanced mobility, while changing social attitudes have fostered a stronger commitment to gender equality. Thus, restructuring of women’s role in public sphere has broadened the need for domestic workers in urban and semi-urban households. The article “Why Urban Women Face a Greater Double Burden of Paid and Unpaid Work” (2025) in *The Wire* express that as more women in urban India engage in paid employment, they continue to bear a significant share of household and caregiving duties. This overlapping pressure of professional and domestic roles creates time scarcity, prompting many families to depend on hired assistance. Consequently, there has been a notable rise in the employment of live-in and part-time domestic workers to balance the increasing demands of urban household management. The weakening of jajmani ties gave space to the development of new era employment agencies who act as an intermediary between households (employers) and individuals seeking domestic work. The nature of the relationship between domestic workers and the households that employ them can be impersonal and task-oriented. For many workers, the job is primarily a means of livelihood, defined by the exchange of services for wages. In such cases, the emphasis is on earning a steady income, maintaining employment, and meeting basic economic needs. Emotional distance may be intentional, allowing workers to maintain clear boundaries, avoid emotional strain, and protect themselves from

disappointment or exploitation — a choice that is particularly understandable in situations where domestic labour is undervalued and employment conditions are uncertain.

On the other hand, the close and continuous contact inherent in domestic work may foster genuine attachment. Through daily care, shared routines, and ongoing interaction, workers may develop affection for those they serve, whether children, elderly family members, or individuals with special needs. Employers may begin to regard long-standing workers as trusted members of the household. However, even when mutual trust and warmth are present, they do not automatically translate into equitable treatment, stable employment, or formal protections for the worker.

Review of Literature

In relation to the present research, a review of relevant literature has been undertaken, including peer-reviewed research papers, scholarly articles, and academic books that provide theoretical and empirical insights into the subject matter. Some of the reviewed literature are as follows:

Peter Laslett (1965), *The World We Have Lost*, Chapter 6 (Life-Cycle Service) where the author states that Live-in Domestic work is a life-cycle occupation and he further reiterate that domestic workers begin working with employer families at a young age and stay with them throughout their life. **International Labour Office (Convention No. 189) (2011), *Decent work for Domestic Workers***, it states certain work related standards pertaining to live-in domestic workers which includes decent working conditions, protection of privacy, regulation of working hours, fair pay etc.

William H. Wiser (1936), *The Hindu Jajmani System*, this book offered an in-depth exploration of the socio-economic structure of Indian Villages which is based on hereditary service and exchange relations among castes. His analysis focused on the economic interrelations and reciprocal obligations among caste communities.

Oscar Lewis and Victor Barnouw (1956), *Caste and Jajmani System in a North Indian Village*, this article delve into the exploration of caste-based occupations among Jajman and Kamin in Rampur Village. For instance, Khati (Carpenter) repair tools, Nai (Barber) cuts hair etc. The author indicated that the transactions were conducted without any monetary exchange.

Kathleen Gough (1960), *The Hindu Jajmani System*, this paper stated that Jajmani system is the feudalistic system of prescribed hereditary obligations of payment and of occupational and ceremonial duties, between two or more specific families of different castes in the same locality.

Rajiv Kumar Nagar and Prof. Kiran Dangwal (2018), *Jajmani System : Factors responsible for changes in Inter-Caste relationship*, this article explains that Jajmani System reflects inter-caste relationship particularly between Jajman and kameen. However, over a period of time, Jajmani System went through many changes. For example, the caste system got weakened due to caste struggle. Also, land reform act introduced which led to changes in ownership of land. The article talks about 21 castes living in village Karimpur Village which is the study area. Notable factors which led to the changes in Jajmani System were improvement of education, occupational mobility, land reform legislative acts, industrialization, urbanization, changes in caste system, payment in form of cash etc. Therefore, in the last two decades, Jajmani System declined rapidly.

Dr. T. Lokeshwar Rao, (2022), *Changing Scenario of the Jajmani System – Role of Rural-Modernization, Urbanisation, Industrialisation*, this article explores the impact modernization, urbanization and industrialisation on Jajmani System. The influence of lifestyle, modern education, western culture has become the barrier in the jajmani system. The rapid expansions of means of

transport and communication have enabled the people to receive improved services somewhere else. Hence, the jajmani system is getting disintegrated. On the other hand, urbanisation is a result of various push and pull factors which led extinction of Jajmani System as people migrated to cities. Additionally, industrialisation led to changes in economic and social roles pertaining to economic development. Therefore, these factors are responsible for the disintegration of the Jajmani System in India.

Mukul Kumar (2016), Contemporary relevance of Jajmani relations in rural India, the study was conducted in Kanpur Nagar district of Northern state of Uttar Pradesh where the author found only 4 households substantially subsisted on Jajmani relations in 2004-2005. He elaborated about a Mali (who sell flowers), a Vishwakarma (whose job is to make wheels for bullock carts), a Potter (who earns his living by making Pots) and a Jamadar (a sweeper). All these four households earn their living through Jajmani services.

Ishita Dey (2016), The Migrant in a service village in the city : Working conditions and rights, the study highlighted that urban clusters often develop around networks of kinship and close social ties, both real and symbolic, which help maintain community cohesion. Employment within these clusters is strongly influenced by caste, gender, and religious affiliations. Workers sometimes alter or conceal their identities to appear connected by family, ethnicity, or religion, making it easier to gain trust and secure jobs with employers. This shows how social relationships continue to shape labour practices in urban settings.

On the basis of the above sociological studies in the form of existing literature, I have tried to explore the historical essence of Jajmani system, its decline over the past decades and the continuation of rural relationships reshaped into new social order in urban spaces.

Research Methodology

The study is based on secondary data which include books, journals, research papers and internet sources related to various aspects of live-in domestic workers and the relevance of their informal relationships with their native place. Furthermore, in urban families, women domestic workers are essential for ensuring the smooth running of daily life. With the rise of women participating in formal employment, the need for domestic help has grown significantly. As women take on professional responsibilities outside the home, domestic workers manage household chores and other domestic tasks, playing a key role in maintaining the stability and proper functioning of urban households. Their contribution supports both the daily operations of the home and the overall balance of family life in a rapidly changing urban environment.

Objectives

- To trace the shift of live-in domestic workers as an occupation from traditional forms of servitude to more contractual and market driven arrangements.
- To explore the impact of informal ties via-viz jajmani ties influencing the role of live-in women domestic workers.
- To investigate the role of caste in shaping the everyday interactions of live-in women domestic workers.
- To navigate the impact of urbanisation and economic restructuring on the work patterns of live-in women domestic workers.

Analysis

Historically, Indian society witnessed caste-based occupations in the form of Hindu Jajmani System. Similar rural ties existed in Uttar Pradesh, where agriculture was the chief livelihood and operated mainly through family and village-based networks. The social structure was sustained by a network of relationships, where kinship, caste identity, community belonging, and occupational roles created systems of reciprocity and collective functioning. However, with the passage of time, economic restructuring in the form of industrialization, urbanisation, modernisation together with improvement in education, occupational mobility and various other pull factors led to the disintegration of Jajmani System. Therefore, the relationships are slowly being replaced by formal contracts and market-based arrangements. Kinship and caste networks are important in helping women find work and survive in the city. Recruitment usually happens through community or family connections and urbanisation and economic changes are shaping new patterns of domestic work. On the other hand, the demand for women domestic workers has increased drastically in urban setup as women are entering into the formal workforce. These women domestic workers play a very crucial role in managing their homes and perform various households which were traditionally carried out by women herself.

Conclusion

The historical evolution of caste-based occupations in India, particularly embodied in the Hindu Jajmani System, reveal deeply rooted rural networks shapes economic and social life. In regions like Uttar Pradesh, these ties operated through agriculture-dependent families and tightly knit village communities, where kinship, caste, and occupational identities formed the basis of cooperation, exchange, and mutual support. Over time, however, broader processes of industrialization, urbanisation, and modernization gradually eroded the traditional foundations of this system. As rural economies reconfigured and people migrated to cities in search of work, the former web of hereditary obligations was increasingly replaced by contractual and market-driven arrangements.

Despite this shift, rural linkages continue to shape the lives and employment opportunities of women domestic workers in urban Uttar Pradesh. Kinship and caste-based networks remain crucial in guiding their migration, facilitating access to jobs, and offering emotional and social support in unfamiliar urban environments. Simultaneously, urban economic changes, particularly the growing participation of middle-class women in the formal workforce, have created an unprecedented demand for domestic labour. Within this context, women domestic workers have emerged as indispensable contributors to urban households, performing a wide range of tasks that were traditionally managed by women within the family. Although employment agencies contribute to the supply of domestic labour by connecting workers with potential employers, many urban households avoid this channel. Their reluctance stems from a lack of confidence in agency-based verification processes, as they perceive them as impersonal and less trustworthy compared to workers recruited through personal references or known networks.

Thus, while the older structures of the Jajmani System have weakened, the underlying logic of social dependence and network-based support still persists in new forms. The interplay between enduring rural ties and evolving urban labour markets highlights the complex nature of women's domestic work in contemporary Uttar Pradesh which is situated at the intersection of tradition, mobility, and modern economic change.

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