

**EXCLUDED FROM THE KITCHEN:  
THE STORY OF MUSLIM  
DOMESTIC WORKERS IN ASSAM**

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Published by Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd 2023

In collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation



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Typeset in Arno Pro 11/13

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Setting*

‘*Aji baai joni nahe*’ (today the maid is not coming) is a sentence most middle-class families dread in Assam. The *baai*—a colloquial term used to refer to a female domestic worker in Assam—is seen as an indispensable part of middle-class households. It is impossible to manage and/or run a household without her help.

But domestic work is mostly unrecognised, undervalued, and often seen as ‘women’s work’. As per the 68<sup>th</sup> round of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) conducted in 2011-12, almost 39 lakh people were employed as domestic workers all over the country. Out of these, around 26 lakh were women (Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India)<sup>1</sup>. But the real numbers are believed to exceed these official figures. Since the nature of domestic

work is informal, it gets almost no economic and social recognition, or ‘with a lot calculation errors even in official numbers.’

The lockdown, which was enforced from 25 March 2020 by the Indian government as a measure to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, restricted mobility in many ways. One of its significant impacts was the non-availability of domestic workers. It is important to clarify that we are talking about domestic workers who do not live with their employers. In fact, the burden of work for live-in domestic workers increased manifold during Covid-19, as did demand for such workers (Dungdung 2020; Pandit 2020).

Most upper and middle-class families in India have had the luxury of hiring a domestic worker or/and a cook. This especially became true with more and more women going out of their homes to work. Most of them had to deal with both housework and outside work. They worked one shift at work and a ‘second shift’ at home (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Turner 2014). Therefore, more middle-class women hired domestic workers.

But with the lockdown and the non-availability of these workers, the burden of doing most of the household work once again fell on the women in middle-class households (Joshi 2020), who struggled to deal with it (Boca et al. 2020). This brought domestic work into the spotlight as there was a lot of debate on the contribution that these workers make to everyday middle-class lives. This is true even in Assam.

While the *baai* is undoubtedly seen as indispensable, the term itself is exclusionary. *Baai* only refers to cleaners and not cooks. While their social composition is diverse, Muslim women form a significant number of *baais* in Assam. According to Momsen (1999), women who are different from their employers in terms of race, class, religion, and citizenship dominate the domestic labour sector in every part of the world. Our research shows that this is somewhat true for Assam as well. Most Hindu households prefer to hire Muslim women as *baais*

as they charge less than other domestic workers. Manju Dekha,<sup>2</sup> a resident of Hengerabari, said,

Muslim women are much better in their work—they are more regular and also demand less. They know that the owners can fire them whenever they want, and are much more obedient. Since they come from villages, they do not want to lose their jobs, and are more sincere.

Most of the decision making regarding hiring domestic workers is done by women of the households. It is the upper-caste, upper-class Hindu women who hire domestic workers based on their religion and caste. The inherent Brahminical and patriarchal biases that these women have play a key role in maintaining unequal structures (Chakravarti 1993; Jackson 2010; Kandiyoti 1988). Most of the cleaners are Muslims and lower-caste, whereas the cooks are upper-caste Hindus. For employers, it is not gender that is their primary identity. They are also aware of the financial helplessness of Muslim women.

It is the vulnerability of being migrants and poor in the city that makes Muslim women preferable as cleaners. Many of these workers come to Guwahati from rural areas, either looking for work or with husbands and families. For instance, Hafeeza—one of the women we interviewed—came to Guwahati looking for work from her village Xorupeta. She said,

After my husband passed away, the responsibility of feeding my three children fell wholly on me. I had heard from people in the village that people like me get hired as domestic workers in Guwahati as there is a lot of demand. So I came with the help of a family who was already here. They helped me out.

Shabana, one of the other women we spoke to came to Guwahati from her village in Dhubri with her husband. It is only after coming to Guwahati that she realised that she had to work to support her family, and sought work as a domestic worker in nearby middle-class colonies.

Shabana says that they were also helped by people from her village who were already living in the city.

Both Hafeeza and Shabana make an interesting point—the role that social networks played in their coming to Guwahati and settling there. This network plays a crucial role in women getting hired as domestic workers. In fact, networks are as important as one's social identity in getting hired as a domestic worker. Most of the networks, however, are identity-based.

Their duties include washing utensils, sweeping, mopping the house and the courtyard, and washing clothes. What is significantly missing from this list is cooking. In most households, they are excluded from cooking duties. They are only allowed to enter the kitchen to clean it. In houses where they are served food and tea, it is done in separate utensils in the verandahs.

We argue that this exclusion is driven both by their religious and class identities. Being Muslim, their religious status makes them 'unfit' to be employed as cooks in middle-class Hindu households. It does not matter if they are higher- or lower-caste Muslims, as their religious status is enough to 'justify' their exclusion. Their lower-class positions add to this exclusion. Domestic workers are seen as 'dirty' and 'unhygienic', so they are not allowed to be involved in kitchen work.

Since we are talking primarily about Muslim domestic workers, it is religion that forms the basis of social exclusion. Caste plays a bigger role when both the employer and the employee are either Hindu or Muslim. For instance, both higher-caste Muslims and Hindus do not prefer to hire cooks who belong to the lower castes, even if they are from the same religion.

This is not to say that caste is not important in the Assamese context, as casteism pervades each and every sphere of society. It is mostly those belonging to lower castes who are engaged in manual activities like scavenging, cleaning, washing, and leather tanning (Goswami 2014). To cite an instance, after Assamese athlete Hima Das became a world champion, there was significant interest in her caste (Baruah 2018). However, it is also important to talk about

social exclusion on religious lines, which many Muslim women face as domestic workers.

It is their Muslim identity that helps women get jobs as cleaners, but acts as a hindrance in their recruitment as cooks. While the *baai* has become a ubiquitous part of Assamese middle-class households, cooks are not common yet. One of the reasons for this is the belief that food is sacred.

Babita Kalita, one of the employers we spoke to, said that she regularly hired Muslim workers but was not comfortable with a Muslim cook, 'The kitchen is a different space. We Hindus regard it as sacred, and only cook after a bath. In fact, girls and women who are menstruating are not allowed to enter the kitchen or cook.'

Consumption of food is thus strictly governed by rules, caste, and religion, which are rooted in the concepts of purity and pollution. Tribals and other religious groups like Muslims face marginalisation in the Hindu caste system based on ritual purity, as they are seen to be located outside it (Thakur 2018). The other reason is that cooks charge higher rates than cleaners. While most of the cleaners are Muslims, a majority of the cooks are Hindus. The latter charge higher rates for both cooking and cleaning, and are seen as irregular and less sincere. Thus, Muslim women are preferred as cleaners. Manju Deka from Hengerabari said,

I have had Bengali Hindus as maids before. But now, I prefer Muslim women. The former used to charge more and had too many demands. Also, they take leave too many times. Muslim women are not like that. They are more sincere and regular. In fact, my current maid also charges less.

Thus, the very identity that hinders their recruitment as cooks facilitates their hiring as cleaners. Sociological literature shows that cooking is seen as one of the most important activities performed in a household, and the kitchen is considered a sacred space (Choudhury and Choudhury 2019; Ray 2015). In Assam, as domestic work was professionalised, lower-class women started being employed as

cleaners, but not as cooks. Their religious identity constrained them as Muslims. Consequently, these domestic workers face a socio-cultural form of exclusion in middle-class households, which is their workplace.

It is the nature of this socio-cultural exclusion in their workplace that we explore in this paper. Existing studies on domestic work focus on its informal, exclusionary, and exploitative nature. Thus, although a study on the exclusion of domestic workers is not new, this study's novelty is in its approach and site. There have been limited studies on the religious composition of domestic workers in Assam and the exclusion that they face in their workplace because of their religious identity. Similarly, urban and public spaces in Assam have rarely been studied. We fill this research gap by exploring the exclusion that Muslim domestic workers face from kitchen activities in urban life.

The kitchen is a space where identities are reflected—'us' versus 'them'. Assam has been in the news over the last few years because of its support for the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which has been widely criticised as discriminatory for the marginalised. Together with the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), it makes poor Muslim women particularly vulnerable. Many of the domestic workers have spent the last two years running around gathering papers and attending court hearings. Thus, their Muslim identities are evident, and their historical exclusion from Hindu middle-class households is not coincidental. Therefore, a study of these domestic workers is an entry point for studying Assamese society.

Domestic workers' exclusion in public spaces (Gupta 2018) has been well-documented in literature—academic writings, reports, and journalistic pieces. There are numerous stories of them being excluded from spaces like lifts, restaurants, and malls. Previous literature on domestic workers has also looked at these workers' socio-economic conditions and their challenges. Despite the provision of minimum wages for domestic workers in most Indian states, many of these workers remain underpaid. Instances of domestic abuse and sexual violence are also known (Tandon 2012). There is also a focus on the condition of domestic workers who are employed through agencies.

They earn less, and have less freedom in choice of work. The Covid-19 crisis has further highlighted the problems that domestic workers face because of the informal nature of their work.

Most of the literature concentrates on the exclusion that domestic workers face because of their gender, caste, and class identities (Adams and Dickey 2000; Ray and Qayum 2009; Uberoi and Chakrabarti 2004). But what is missing from this literature is an exploration of exclusion that domestic workers face based on their religious identity, particularly in the context of Assam.

### *Research Questions*

We focus on the social exclusion that Muslim domestic workers face in their workplace in Assam. This leads us to the following questions:

1. Is there a relationship between social relations and livelihood chances?
2. What role does a domestic worker's identity play in her getting hired as a cleaner? Is there a relationship between identity and livelihood opportunities?
3. What kind of an intersection exists between caste, class, gender, and religion for these domestic workers?
4. How is a domestic worker's socio-religious identity constructed and reflected in the workplace?
5. What does the study of domestic workers reveal about contemporary Assamese society?

### *The Field, the Methods Used, and Challenges*

The setting of our study is Guwahati. It is located on the banks of the Brahmaputra and is populated by people from various communities and religions. The geographical setting of the city is such that middle-class households are not very far from the slums where most of the Muslim domestic workers live. This arrangement suits both parties,

as the workers can easily travel to their workplaces without having to spend a lot of money on travelling.

One such area is Sarumotoria—one of our field sites. It is located near Dispur. The area has a sizeable number of middle-class neighbourhoods and one lane where most of the domestic workers live.

We explored the employers and workers who are the inhabitants of these two spaces. As a qualitative study, some of the methods we followed were auto-ethnography, ethnography, observations, interviews, case studies, and oral history. All the interviews were conducted in Assamese.

We drew our participants based on snowball sampling of both the employers and workers. Our primary point of contact who helped us connect with domestic workers was Sayeda, who works in our neighbourhood. While we tried to do face-to-face interviews with the women, it was not easy because of both space and time constraints. Also, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, so we had to rely on telephonic interviews as a tool for gathering information. It was not easy to interview the women also because they were busy with work. Thus, it was difficult to find time to interview them. Most of the women workers did not have phones, which added to our difficulties. While we tried to use snowball sampling, where one individual leads us to another, most of the women workers could not provide us with the others' phone numbers, either because they did not have a phone or because they did not know their numbers.

It was easier to contact the employers as we have known most of them from childhood. It was also a conscious decision to speak to both the employers and employees, as it is only when we speak to both sides that we get a better sense of the causes and consequences of the social exclusion of domestic workers in their workplace. Further, given our location and background as two women born and brought up in Guwahati, we are familiar with the city and its people. This helped us in getting access to our informants and talking to them. This essay, thus, is an outcome of our long-term interest in Assamese society.

However, there are both advantages and disadvantages of trying to study one's own community and society. While it is easier to access people to gather the necessary information, it is much more difficult to assess 'what is relevant information' and 'what is not'. Researching one's own community can also be tricky since it might mean that a researcher is familiar with the setting and the people, and thus they can struggle to remain 'objective'. Therefore, as two researchers working and studying our own community, we had to deal with challenges of finding relevance in 'what is already known' and being objective. A lot of our time was, therefore, spent grappling with unfamiliar questions in a familiar setting.

Keeping these challenges in mind, we were able to interview ten employers and eight workers—all of them women—in two months. Out of these ten employers, eight were Hindu and two were Muslim. Among the eight workers, five were cleaners—and Muslim, and three were cooks—and Hindus. Most of these were in-depth interviews conducted over multiple sittings. There was a lot of follow-up and going back to the women whom we spoke to. Although we had hoped to interview more women, both the Covid-19 pandemic and time constraints did not permit this.

## **SOCIAL NETWORKS, MIGRATION, AND LIVELIHOOD**

### *Rural to Urban Migration, Using Social Networks, and Capital*

At this point, let us give a brief description of our field site, Guwahati. It is the largest city in the Northeastern region, and is also known as a gateway to the rest of the area because of its geographical location. It is also one of the fastest-growing cities in India, and is regarded as a centre of economic and cultural activities. Guwahati is classified as an urban agglomeration under Class I UAs/Towns<sup>3</sup> as per the data released by the Government of India from the latest Census of 2011.



Guwahati's location in Assam

Though often insecure and uncertain for poorer migrants, Guwahati is a tenement of several ethnic communities like Ahoms, Bodos, Karbis, and Deuris, and religious groups such as Hindus, Muslims, and Christians seeking economic cover and a semblance of social security. A diffuse socio-cultural substratum characterises the city. Among these ethnic communities, migrants with a highly distinctive physical presence are the labouring poor and the working class who are present as domestic workers, rickshaw pullers, petty shopkeepers, and construction workers.

According to the 2010 Census data<sup>4</sup>, the Kamrup (Metropolitan) district, which Guwahati is a part of, saw the highest internal migration, that is, migration within the state. In 1971, the Census data showed that 59 per cent of Guwahati's population was migrants, with the highest migration from Kamrup district, indicating a high rural-urban population flow. Although the city's population growth has decreased

since 1991, implying a reduction in the migration rate, the city has still seen significant migration. In fact, the Kamrup (Metropolitan) district has more than 11.3 per cent of the total internal migrants in the state, the highest in all the districts, reflecting growing urbanisation.

While the numbers point towards the reality of migration itself, they also lead to a subsequent academic interest in reasons that propel this migration. The argument of economic compulsions is powerful, but there are also social reasons for migration, which should not be ignored. Thus, to rescue migration from the exclusive sway of the classical economic perspective, one must also examine social ties of kinship, region, language, and friendship. Classical economic theories of migration have always looked at 'pull' and 'push' factors and highlighted the inevitability of people from less affluent regions migrating to more affluent areas. These theories fail to understand the social nature of migration. It is noteworthy that social relations of kinship, region, language, and friendship also act as a form of social capital in determining the 'pull' factors that encourage migration to Guwahati.

Drawing from Bourdieu and Coleman, the predominant form of social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988) that was operational among these migrants was information channels. The very medium through which information can be acquired is social relations, which are essentially dynamic and dialogical.

We found that domestic workers migrated to Guwahati based on the information provided by members from their villages. This information had tips about employment opportunities, housing, local social customs, language, and conducive and non-threatening urban spaces as vital resources for the migrants. Social bindings and social capital of mutual trust and goodwill among migrants are relatively well-developed. The informal sector has an advantage because the job structure is governed by primordial ties of kinship, region, language, village, and friendship. These network relations are important in getting domestic workers' jobs. Most of these networks are identity-based.

### *Professionalisation of Domestic Work*

The professionalisation of cooking as an occupation and not just a household task led to it being increasingly performed by men. The process of professionalisation meant that a worker had to be trained in a particular profession, and had to follow professional norms strictly (Wilensky 1964). This coincided with the onset of the industrial revolution in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As people started going out to work in factories and industries, cities grew and restaurants and hotels started flourishing.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a growth in cooking classes and hotel management institutes, cooking and other related activities became professional. This process meant that men, mostly upper and middle-class men, had the upper hand in succeeding in cooking as a profession, keeping in mind their higher position in the socio-economic structure and access to socio-economic capital. Thus, it was mostly men who became professional cooks.

Therefore, it is no surprise that there have been many studies that have found a discrepancy in hiring women as workers in such workplaces when compared to men (Neumark et al. 1996). This is particularly true for the lower-class, lower-caste, and Muslim women. In the Indian context, for middle-class women, professionalisation signalled a partial move to the service sector. For lower-class, lower-caste, and Muslim women, it marked a shift from agriculture to industrial labour (Sangari and Vaid 1989). Because of upper-caste men's superior socio-economic capital, professional activities including cooking, became their stronghold.

While a few upper-class women managed to occupy professional positions, others who were at the margins like lower-caste, lower-class, and Muslim women were relegated to lower-level jobs like cleaning. Domestic work, therefore, became a predominant job for women from lower castes and classes.

### *Intersection of Caste, Class, Gender, and Religion*

Caste and class cannot be seen in isolation. One cannot undermine the material content of caste. Caste is not only about ritual purity and pollution, but is much more than a cultural and idealist construction (Natarajan 2005; Srinivas 1962). To understand the materiality of caste, one has to look at the relationship between caste and class as caste relations get materialised in class.

Many scholars have established that there is a close nexus between caste and class in India. There is an intersection between the two categories. The debate on whether caste or class is more important in the Indian context dates back to the scholarship that began emerging after 1947. Some scholars (Mukherjee 2000; Srinivas 2003) argue that class has been able to overpower caste. They opine that class structures have cut across the hierarchy of caste, forming new alliances and antagonisms in the process (Mukherjee 2000). With an increase in education, government schemes, and understanding the value of freedom, democracy, and equity, it is believed that structures of caste have undergone a decline (Srinivas 2003). What these scholars argue is that it is class, and not caste, that is the most visible and important form of social hierarchy in Indian society today.

However, many other scholars claim that it is too early to declare the death of caste (Natarajan 2005; Vaid 2012). The congruence between class and caste still exists. The higher castes are loosely concentrated in higher social classes such as the professional, large business, and farming classes. This indicates that they dominate white-collar jobs and can avoid manual work (Vaid 2012). Therefore, domestic work, which is seen as a form of manual labour, is mostly performed by people, especially women from lower castes and classes (Gothoskar 2013; Ray 2015).

These women are also severely constrained by caste, community, and religious conventions and do not have the capital or skills to resist them (Banerjee in Sangari and Vaid 1989). Therefore, a significant

number of domestic workers in India are composed of lower-caste, lower-class, and Muslim women.

For instance, one of the workers we interviewed, Shabana, said that she did not go to school and was married quite early. After her husband decided to come to Guwahati from their village in Dhubri district, the only form of employment available to her was domestic work. She said,

Porha xuna najanu, ki beleg kaam korim ami? Xeikarone belegor gharat jharu maru, basan dhu. Guwahati ahi gom paisiliu je khoroch bohot, seye kaam koribo lagibo kiba eta. I did not go to school, did not study. So, I wash utensils and sweep floors in other people's houses. After coming to Guwahati, we got to see that there are a lot of expenses. So, I had to work to support the family.

Domestic work is mostly categorised as informal and casual work. The number of workers is often underestimated, and even official data is lacking. As per the 68<sup>th</sup> round of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) conducted in 2011-12, almost 39 lakh people were employed as domestic workers all over the country. Out of these, around 26 lakh were women<sup>5</sup>. But the real numbers are believed to be more than these official figures.

There is also no information on the state-wise distribution of domestic workers. In Assam, for instance, there is no official data on the social composition of domestic workers. However, a study by Shonchoy and Junankar (2014), using the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) 2005 and the National Sample Survey Organisation's 2012 data, showed that compared to upper-caste Hindus, Muslims and Dalits had a higher probability of being engaged in domestic work. In fact, more Muslim workers were engaged in informal wage employment than they were in formal employment (Shonchoy and Junankar 2014).

This could be largely attributed to the income gap between Muslims and other social groups in India. According to Ghosh (2014),

inequality in India has led to the emergence of a middle class on the one hand and, at the same time, has forced more people into informal labour. Asher et al. (2012) using 2012 data found that Indian Muslims had worse upward mobility than Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs).

According to NSSO 2012 data, Muslims in India had the lowest standard of living, with an average per capita expenditure of Rs 32.66 per day. The income gap between Muslims and non-Muslims in India shows why more Muslim workers are absorbed in the informal labour market. This is in contrast to other groups like upper-caste Hindus, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Dalits, Adivasis, Sikhs, Jains, and Christians. Among the latter, more workers are engaged in formal employment compared to informal wage employment. Although there is lack of data for Assam alone, the large scale rural-urban migration and a substantial share of the Muslim population in the state (34.22 per cent) indicates that the same is true for the state as well, particularly in Guwahati.

In fact, most of the domestic workers we spoke to were Muslim women who had come to Guwahati from rural areas. Additionally, most of them worked as cleaners in middle-class households. The growing number of slums in Guwahati, which remain the primary residence of these domestic workers, are located near middle-class colonies. One such slum is near the Sarumotoria area, one of our primary research sites. .

Increasing urbanisation, rural-urban migration, and the consequent emergence of the urban middle class have led to an increase in the number of domestic workers in urban areas. This is particularly true in a state like Assam, which has witnessed massive migration from rural to urban years in the last decade or so. The 2001 Census data shows that close to 70 per cent of the people in Assam said that they had migrated to urban areas from villages (Desai et al. 2014). Economic theorists claim that large-scale rural-urban migration makes way for

the emergence of an informal market, as the now new urban low-skilled workers compete with each other to earn wages.

One of the pioneering migration theories, the Lewis model of migration (Lewis 1954), argues that people from rural areas will migrate to urban areas till the wages become equal in both the rural agrarian sector and the urban industrial sector. The model claims that there exists an 'unlimited labour supply' in the rural sector. The migrant population who will fail to be absorbed in the urban industries will have to resort to informal markets. Domestic labour in such cases becomes an easier market to enter for migrant women workers. Most of the workers enter the market through networks of caste, ethnicity, and religion.

There are two networks at work here—one, the network among the workers; and two, the network between the workers and the households. Domestic workers look for households by asking fellow workers who are mostly from the same religion or ethnicity as them. Existing workers, who are aware of the social dynamics of the domestic labour market, benefit from this too. They often ask the new workers to replace them if they find a better opportunity in another household, or if they are not well. Hafeeza, one of the workers we talked to, introduced her sister-in-law to one of the houses she was already working in when she was unable to manage work in six homes. The network, thus, benefits both the workers as well as the households. What is interesting is that workers' networks are often based on religion or ethnic identity. This is not entirely true of the network that the workers have with the households.

Households often trust their former workers, or make their judgements based on the work that they do. If a family likes a particular worker, and the worker introduces them to another worker, it is more likely that the family will trust the new worker. This does not entirely depend on religion or ethnicity, but on experience. Bina Dutta, one of the employers we talked to, said that she hired the new domestic worker because she was introduced by the previous one, who was notably of the same ethnicity as her. It helped that the new worker was

also of the same ethnicity, but the ‘trust’ in the previous worker was the deciding factor. Dutta said,

Our previous help Anjali got married and left for her village. We were worried that we might not find someone like her. After all, she had been working with us for so many years. She knew our likes and dislikes. But thankfully, she introduced the new help to us,—who was a distant relative of hers. Anjali trained her well before she left for her village. It was such a relief.

Issues of network-based trust thus play a crucial role in how middle-class families hire their domestic workers.

## **SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES**

### *Ideas of Purity, Cleanliness, and Cooking*

Networks are not the only important thing in determining access to livelihood opportunities. The social identity of a worker is equally important. For instance, the Barmans hired one of their previous workers through a relative from their village in Dhubri. They made sure that the worker was Hindu like them, as she was going to be a full-time worker. They said, ‘We are okay with Muslim part-timers, but if we are letting her live with us and if she has to handle kitchen work, it is better if she is one of us.’

The Hindu middle-class households that we spoke to often preferred their full-timers to be of the same religion as them, even if most of them did not mind Muslim part-timers. The Hindus living in the lane in the *namghar* often employed Muslims living near the mosque as construction workers, domestic workers, and daily wage workers. The residents near the mosque also engaged in other informal work like rickshaw and *thela* pulling. Some middle-class Muslims live in the area too, in-between the mosque and the *namghar*. Some of

the workers also live as tenants in their houses. These households also employ the same workers. However, herein lies an important distinction—Muslim middle-class households are more likely to employ workers living near the mosque as cooks compared to middle-class Hindu households. The middle-class Hindu households, who let the workers near the mosque engage in other work, including domestic work, do not prefer them as cooks.

Most Hindu middle-class households let the Muslims who live near the mosque do all other work except cooking. For instance, the Kalitas living in Hengerabari see themselves as a ‘progressive family’. Babita Kalita said that she did not discriminate against anyone based on religion. The cleaner, the carpenter, and many others who work in their house are Muslims, but her cook is a Bengali Hindu. For her, it is important that the person entering and cooking food is a Hindu. She said, ‘I do not believe in any kind of religious discrimination. I hire both Hindus and Muslims. But yes, I have never hired a Muslim cook and will not do so even in the future.’

It is clear from her quote that she does not think that the conscious non-hiring of Muslims as cooks is in practice a form of religious discrimination. She and many others like her believe that what they are doing is because Muslim women are ‘different’ and ‘dirty’. Their food habits, too, are seen as being different. Explaining her reluctance to hire Muslim cooks, Babita Kalita said,

There is nothing wrong with hiring Muslim workers, and as I said, we hire them regularly. But the *pakghar* [kitchen] is a different space, and we cannot trust them as cooks. After all, our food habits are different, and we eat different things.

One may wonder what these ‘different things’ are. In most cases, it means meat, especially beef<sup>6</sup>. The source of most upper-caste Hindu employers’ mistrust and suspicion is located in the belief that Muslims eat beef, which is considered taboo by most upper-caste Hindus. The items that people eat or avoid play a crucial role in defining who they are and marking their membership of a particular religious or cultural

community. Caste and religion-based taboos about beef consumption for upper-caste Hindus mean that beef-eaters are viewed as ‘suspicious’ and ‘different’. Sayeda, a domestic worker, said,

I have worked as a cook in a Hindu household. They are an old couple whose children live out of the state. I cook *rotis*, vegetables, *ghugni*, rice, and many other things for them. But I have never cooked meat. The chicken is always cooked by *baideo* [her employee] herself.

This suspicion is not limited to one’s own kitchen. It is a reflection of what happens in larger society. In many cases, an invitation to a Muslim friend’s place for Eid or lunch/dinner would merit jokes like ‘What if they feed you beef?’ This fear that you might be fed beef in a Muslim home arises from the taboo against eating cow meat among upper-caste Hindus.

An anecdote that we had heard from our cousin illustrates this fear and suspicion. The cousin, who wishes to remain anonymous, had narrated this incident to us during an evening chat.

My mother and I had gone to eat in a hotel once. We do not go out much, but that day it was an emergency. She kept looking for a photo of Lord Krishna or any other [Hindu] god that is usually seen in such hotels. I told her it did not matter, but she kept saying this means it is a Muslim restaurant, and we should not be eating there.

My aunt laughed and added, ‘We immediately rushed out of there.’ She also added how they were ‘saved’ from almost eating in a Muslim restaurant. My cousin kept insisting that they could not be sure that it was a Muslim restaurant. ‘What if it was a Hindu restaurant? I was so hungry!’ she kept telling her mother. My aunt responded by saying one could never be sure but should always take precautions. ‘It is better to not eat anything than being fed beef after all.’

The taboos and suspicions associated with cow meat mean that beef eaters are viewed with fear and suspicion. This is what significantly

diminishes the chances of Muslim domestic workers getting recruited as cooks.

Sayedā's case is especially interesting since she works as both a cook and a cleaner in the same household. She is trusted with everything other than cooking meat. Sayeda claims that she earns the same amount in the Hindu household as in a Muslim household. She had earlier worked in a Muslim family's house. In the Muslim household, she was 'trusted' to cook meat. While Sayeda is not directly excluded from the kitchen in the Hindu household, she is not trusted with cooking meat. Sayeda is not seen as unfit to cook, but her religious identity makes her unfit to cook meat.

These notions of viewing others as 'dirty' are not new. In fact, in colonial India, the British viewed Indians as 'uncivilised' and 'dirty'. An Indian home and kitchen, compared to a British household, was seen as dirty, unhygienic, and dishevelled (Hancock 2001). Thus, those who occupy positions of power look down upon those who are lower in the hierarchy. This is particularly true for food tasks, as it is a site for constructing and retaining identities.

Cooking is seen as the most important activity performed in a household as it deals with food, and the kitchen is considered a sacred space (Ray 2015). Food constitutes a critical element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution rooted in caste structures that govern Hindu households. The notion of ritual purity creates barriers between lower castes and Muslims and the upper castes. Thus, members of the former two groups are employed for cleaning activities in Assam, but the boundary is drawn at kitchen work.

Since food is a major part of a Hindu's existence and his/her essence, it is not surprising that sacred texts are full of instructions and directives about what to eat, and with whom one should eat or not eat. Many of these taboos are based on caste relations between different groups of people dependent on the notions of purity and pollution. Although the Hindu sacred texts are also extremely concerned about what one should eat, it is also how one should eat that attracts a lot of

attention. While there are prohibitions for almost everyone, it is a fact that there are more restrictions for castes that are ranked higher than those that are low in the hierarchy (Doniger 1999). The assumption is that since those ranked lower in the hierarchy are impure, what and from whom they eat matters less. Since the higher castes are responsible for maintaining their purity and sanctity, they have more food taboos than the 'lower' castes (Dumont 1966).

Thus, it is not surprising that Muslim domestic workers are not preferred as cooks. They are consciously kept out of kitchen work. The question of food thus cannot be separated from the socio-political context in which it operates.

## **CONSTRUCTION AND REFLECTION OF IDENTITY IN THE WORKPLACE**

### *Identity and Lived Experiences*

Identity is not an accomplished fact but a 'production' that is never complete and is always in process (Hall 1994). It is a 'sense of becoming' and, thus, constructed and reflected in everyday mundane life. The relationship between a domestic worker's identity and her occupation does not stop at the recruitment process. It is reflected in her workplace in everyday interactions, with the kitchen is a space that becomes the centre of this.

Homes and kitchens are more than sites of consumption. They are, in fact, spaces where food and power intersect in the performance of identity negotiations, formations, and re-formations. Food, including what it is, who prepares it, and sometimes how and when it is consumed, is intensely personal. Food is instrumental in highlighting how situated daily practices can reveal processes of identity formation and place-making (Williams-Forson 2010).

A closer look at the lives of these domestic workers in their workplace shows that they face what we can call differential treatment. An example makes this clearer. Almost all the employers we spoke to stated that they served food and drinks to their domestic workers in separate utensils. While many of them cited maintaining hygiene and cleanliness as the reason, some directly attributed it to preserving religious and caste purity. Sayeda said, 'I have worked and cooked in both Hindu and Muslim households, where I am often offered food to eat. But the utensils are always different, irrespective of whether it is a Hindu household or a Muslim one.'

It is interesting to note that this is considered 'normal' by both the employers and the workers. 'It is how it is,' said Kalita, Sayeda's employer, when we asked her about the importance of separate utensils. Sayeda agreed saying, 'This is how it works', laughing at what she thought was an 'absurd' question. The normalisation of this meant that most of the respondents did not respond to why this is done. For most of them, it was 'nothing extraordinary'.

A few, however, underlined what they felt were 'strong' reasons behind their actions. Kamala Ojha said, 'Do you eat on the same plate as your sister or parents? No, right Everyone has different plates. We do not even drink water from the same glass. Of course, the workers will have different utensils.'

The utensils are also kept separately; they are not mixed with the other utensils. This, too, has been normalised on the grounds of 'cleanliness'. 'We wash our utensils once again with water before eating after she does the cleaning. No matter what, something is lacking in their cleaning. That is why we cannot keep the utensils together,' said Kamala Ojha.

However, the separation of utensils is not just limited to domestic workers. It also extends to other Muslim workers like carpenters and labourers who work in these middle-class households. Even they are served in separate utensils, and sometimes in disposable ones. Thus, there is a strong connection that is drawn between religion and cleanliness, which means that members of a particular religion are seen

as ‘dirty’. However, most people do not even realise that this behaviour can be considered exclusionary or discriminatory.

For instance, Ojha explained the idea of cleanliness by saying that women, including herself, do not cook without having a bath. She explained, ‘My mother taught me to enter the kitchen in the morning only after a bath. I have always followed that. But if we hire a cook, there is no way that I will know if she has actually had a bath or not!’

The practice of women having a bath before cooking in the morning has been carried forward by many middle-class women even in urban areas. The sanctity of cooking needs to be maintained at all times; menstruating women are not allowed to enter the kitchen. Only ‘pure’ and ‘clean’ women should cook, and cooking and eating are practices that should uphold notions of ‘purity’ and ‘cleanliness’.

Thus, the normalisation of the use of separate utensils for domestic workers is backed by the cleanliness argument. But in reality, these practices are deep-rooted in caste and/or religious differences. Meghali Das said,

They are different, no matter what. They do not have a bath every day, and I know that. There is always an odour coming from them. We do not know what they eat at home—this is why it is safe to keep the utensils separately.

The domestic worker who works at Das’ house is a Muslim worker from Dhubri, who Das thinks consumes meat that Hindus should not consume, that is, beef. While she talks about ‘cleanliness’, in reality, it is more about the religious differences in food.

‘Our help eats on the same plates as us,’ says Dutta, who belongs to the same religious group as her maid. But she adds that they did have a Muslim worker ‘a long time ago’. She insists that she did not differentiate between the two, but admits that the Muslim worker was served in ‘separate’ utensils. She said,

We would have her eat the same food as us. We would even have her children come over to eat sometimes. She would hesitate to

eat if we served chicken, but would eat it eventually. Yes, she did have separate utensils, but that was a long time ago.

It is not easy to break notions of purity and pollution related to caste and religion that permeate through the boundaries of the kitchen. What happens in these middle-class households is a reflection of what happens even in the public domain, that is, in restaurants and hotels.

For instance, if one looks at the functioning of Udupi restaurants in the country, it can be understood that recruitment in these hotels is based on caste and religious lines even today. While the cooks are mostly Brahmins, the food suppliers and cleaners belong to 'lower' castes (Toft Madsen and Gardella in Ray and Srinivas 2012; Iversen and Raghavendra 2006). Many Udupi hotels also had separate dining rooms for Brahmins, or barred Muslims and Dalits from entering, although this practice ended in the 1950s (Sen 2015). It is also interesting to note that women do not do these jobs. Traditional food and cooking practices dictated by caste, religion, and gender are still maintained in these places. Babita Kalita said,

I have no issue with Muslim workers. They are, in fact, much more sincere and obedient than our Hindu ones. But the kitchen is a different space; we cannot let them enter there. It is not just about religion, but also cleanliness.

Thus, it is even tougher to break the notions of purity and pollution in in the kitchen—a space considered sacred and intimate.

## REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY ASSAMESE SOCIETY

### *The Labour of 'Love'*

A study of the domestic unit or the kitchen is important because patterns of food preparation and consumption reflect aspects of the relationships between household members and members of society

(Kemmer 2000). Social relationships and identities are reflected in activities like the preparation of food.

As has been argued, food-related tasks are not just biological acts. Food forms a core component of one's identity. Food is not only a material substance but an 'essence' and an experience (Khare 1992). Women perform most of the food-related work in Indian households. The purchasing, preparation, and presentation of food are strongly associated with mundane, unglamorous housework—women's traditional domain (Beardsworth and Keil 1997).

Feminist scholars have understood women's work related to food from two vantage points. The first sees food as a potential source of power and influence in the family through a woman's ability to give family members food. The second perspective links female subordination to women spending most of their time in household tasks, including food-related ones (Beoku-Betts 1995; Counihan 2005; Turner 2014). However, both these perspectives cannot be seen in isolation. While it is true that women spend a lot of their time engaged in food-related activities, many of them also see it as a domain that gives them a sense of identity, and as a source of power. For many of them, cooking as an activity is much more than work.

The romanticisation of *ma ka haath ka khana* (food made by one's mother) reflects not only the love that a mother shows through her food but also the superiority of her food—nobody else can replace *ma ka haath ka khana*. For most women, this is validation which they are reluctant or unwilling to give up. Ranju Talukdar, a mother of two, who, apart from managing her household, also works in an office, said, 'My children do not like to eat food cooked by anyone else. Every time I think about hiring a cook, they protest that we do not need a cook. You have to cook for us.'

As domestic work was tiring, Mrs Sharma hired a cleaner but did the cooking herself. Cooking as a household chore has underlying meanings of power and love. The food cooked by a woman reflects the 'love' she feels for her family. For a woman, beyond love, it is also about her importance in the family. In the hierarchy of domestic work,

cooking is ranked higher than cleaning and other tasks. Cooking is also perceived as an art, something creative that can transform ‘nature into culture’ (Lévi-Strauss in Counihan 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that it is easier for women to hire cleaners than cooks.

For most women, hiring a cook is not even a choice. Cooking is seen as a job a woman should be able to do easily, something that she should marvel at, a job that is not work but reflects her care for her family. In-laws often do not want their daughters-in-law to hire cooks. Much like the children, they prefer food cooked by the daughter-in-law, even if they complain about her food all the time. Many young married women might want to hire cleaners and cooks, but are often not allowed to if they are living in non-nuclear families.

They are bound by the fact that domestic work, especially cooking, is seen as ‘women’s work’, and glorified as their love and care. What often goes unnoticed is the labour that goes into performing this ‘act of love’.

### *Competing Identities and the Insider-Outsider Question*

A study of a domestic unit also throws light on the contentious relationships that exist between Bengali Hindu and Muslim domestic workers in Assam. There is a lot of hostility and animosity between the two groups, as there is competition between them for work. The former take part in stereotyping Muslim workers as ‘dirty’ and ‘different’. Most of them are aware of their demand because of their religion. Kajal, a Bengali Hindu domestic worker who has been working as both a cook and a cleaner in Guwahati, said, ‘I know that my chances of getting hired as a cook are higher since I am a Hindu. The baideo in whose home I work made it clear that she needs a Hindu cook.’

Most of them, including Kajal, are in solidarity with Hindu middle-class employees in believing that Muslim women are ‘different’. Although their class positions are the same, Bengali Hindus have the upper hand in getting hired as cooks because of their religious identity.

It is also not surprising that they want to hold on to their identity-based advantage. Kajal said,

I had once taken my mother and son to the baideo's house that I work in. She asked them to sit on the plastic chairs and not on the sofa. But I told her that we are Hindus; why are you treating us in this way? She did not say anything.

For Kajal, it would be perfectly 'normal' to be asked to sit in plastic chairs if she were a Muslim, but because she is a Hindu, she did not expect it. It is important to locate this relationship in Assam's contemporary context.

Assam has been in the news in recent years for becoming the first state to implement the National Register of Citizenship (NRC). This move is widely seen as discriminatory and marginalising. The demand for an NRC emerged in the wake of the perceived threat from illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, most of whom are perceived to be Muslims. There is thus a constant 'otherisation' of Muslims in everyday life.

Bengalis too have been seen as outsiders many times in Assam. They have been categorised as 'imposing', 'cunning', and 'non-Assamese'. Therefore, domestic workers from both these communities compete to co-exist and work in the city; stereotypes and prejudices against one benefit the other. While the stereotype that Muslims are 'different' helps Bengali Hindus, the belief that the latter are 'demanding' and 'cunning' benefits the former. Babita Kalita said,

My current baai is Muslim. Before her, I had two Bengali Hindu maids. They used to take leave too many times. On top of that, they had so many demands. They wanted new sarees on every Durga puja. One of them, in fact, also demanded that rice, daal, and oil be given as gifts at her son's wedding. It was not a request but a demand. I would not have minded giving all those things, but she was not even regular. Even the other one was like that. So, I let them go. Since then, I have hired Muslim baais, and they are much better.

The ‘demanding’ and ‘imposing’ nature of Bengali Hindu maids made Kalita shift to hiring Muslim maids. But interestingly, her cook is still a Bengali Hindu woman, and Kalita admits that this is because of religion. She says,

The thing is even if I hire a Muslim cook, others may not like it. For instance, if guests come, I cannot ask her to make anything. What if they do not want to eat food made by a Muslim woman? I can ask my present cook to help me when guests come, or if there is a party at home. But if I hire a Muslim one, I will have to do everything myself.

Her words make it clear that Bengali Hindus are preferred as cooks because of their religious identity, although both Muslims and Bengalis have been seen as outsiders at various points in time.

## CONCLUSION

Our research confirms that most domestic workers in Guwahati have migrated from rural areas. This could be either because of marriage or work. For female workers entering the urban labour market, domestic work is an easily available avenue as it does not require much educational qualifications. The rising urban middle-class Assamese population and the increasing number of women working outside homes means that there is high demand for these workers. It is also likely that the growing affluence of some sections of society has led to increasing demand for domestic workers (Ghosh 2013). Urban working Assamese women and/or women in nuclear families mostly prefer to hire domestic workers.

Migrant workers often find employment with the help of their networks, which are highly identity-based. But some of these networks are trust-based as well. It is noteworthy that identity-based networks are also based on the trust—that someone from the same community

is more trustworthy than someone from another community (Munshi 2014). These identity-based networks revolve around caste, ethnicity, region, and religion. Hence, it is not surprising that most of what these workers do or do not do, or where they work and do not work, is also identity-driven.

Religious identity becomes especially important when it comes to accessing the kitchen. With numerous caste and religious meanings associated with food and cooking, Muslim women are not preferred as cooks. While they are hired as cleaners (baais), they are excluded from kitchen activities. Bengali Hindu women are favoured as cooks because of their religious identity.

The kitchen is not just about cooking and eating; it is also a political space. Urban middle-class Hindu women are mostly decision-makers who choose domestic workers based on their preferences, which are primarily rooted in ideas of purity and cleanliness.

The socio-political context of the study and research becomes important as we see how there is competition between women from both the communities for livelihood. Both Bengali Hindus and Muslims have been seen as outsiders at various points of time in Assam's history. Therefore, stereotypes and prejudices against one community benefit the other.

The story of domestic workers in Assam, therefore, is also a reflection of identities, social relationships, and livelihood. It throws light on how religious prejudices and stereotypes are played out in myriad ways in daily and public life.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the respondents for their time and inputs. We would also like to thank the Zubaan team and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation for their continuous support, and

for helping us conduct this research. We would also like to express our gratitude to the mentors for their insightful comments and suggestions. We are particularly thankful to Professor Joy Pachuau and Belinder Dhanoa for taking time out to read our paper and giving us valuable feedback.

## NOTES

1. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Labour & Employment, National Policy on Domestic Workers, 7 January 2019. Available at: <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1558848>, accessed on 25 October 2020.
2. The names of all the respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity and privacy. While we did seek their consent for the interviews, we could not record them, as our informants did not give us permission for this.
- 3 <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/metropolitan/177-guwahati.html>, accessed on 28 November 2020.
- 4 <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/metropolitan/177-guwahati.html>, accessed on 28 November 2020.
5. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Labour & Employment, National Policy on Domestic Workers, 7 January 2019, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1558848>, accessed on 3 November 2020.
6. The consumption of beef has always been a contested issue in India, especially in recent years. Many states have imposed a ban on beef, and many Muslims have been lynched to death on the suspicion that they were 'carrying' beef. According to a report by Reuters, 63 cow vigilante attacks occurred in India between 2010 and 2017, in which 28 people were killed, 24 of them Muslims (Siddiqui et al. 2017).

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