Of *Rasoi ka Kaam/Bathroom ka Kaam*
Perspectives of Women Domestic Workers

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Practices of purity and pollution have been a critical area of inquiry in paid domestic work relations in India. This paper revisits the idea of purity and pollution in the space of the home in paid domestic work, but with the intent to turn the gaze around. It shifts the focus by looking at workers as the subjects and examining their responses. It argues that the existing frameworks for looking at the space of home and the practices of purity and pollution are limiting and have to be revisited to develop a dynamic understanding of the everyday reality of domestic work and caste hierarchies at work.

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Existing scholarship on domestic work in India has done much to highlight practices of purity and pollution as an aspect governing relationship between employer and worker. Scholars, however, have in general treated the employer as the origin and "doer" of the practice, and worker as passive objects, always at the receiving end of these practices. This linear, popular narrative does not do justice to the complexities of the practices of purity and pollution rooted in caste relations in India. It is a narrative that assumes congruence between caste and class, imagining a world in which the employer is always upper caste and the worker lower caste.

To fully understand how ideas of purity and pollution shape domestic work in India, we must examine workers' perspectives on these practices. Such perspectives unveil an entirely different aspect of the "embeddedness" of these work relations in caste and class hierarchies and unsettle the dominant narrative of lower-class and lower-caste workers employed by middle-class and upper-caste employers. The contours of caste in domestic work relations are complex and intersect with other forms of social distinction, like religion. These multiple and intersecting identities create often confusing and stratified differences even among workers. Looking at these intersecting social structures, we realise that subordinate class position is just one part of domestic workers' social location in general, and in relationship to their middle class employers, in particular.

Caste, Gender and Middle Class Domesticity

Caste finds mention in two distinct ways in contemporary discourse on paid domestic work in India: first, domestic workers' and employers' caste, as an identity, becomes important to understand the organisation of work. For example, studies highlight the assignment of tasks based on workers' caste identities and discriminatory practices by employers based on caste identities (Froystad 2003; Matilla 2011 among others). Studies also look at practices reflecting the structure of caste in everyday relations (Ray and Qayum 2010). The latter engages with more subtle and confusing ways in which caste operates in structuring these relations, as very often there may not be any direct reference to caste at all. Sara Dickey (2000a) argues that it is not caste, but rather class that marks the distinctions employers find relevant; she goes on to say that these markers are signified in material endowment and the employers' notions of "dirt." According to her, employers do not refer to caste so much, and all they care about is the workers' "hygiene," which reflects their class rather than caste biases. Ray and Qayum differ with

this kind of approach as they argue that practices of caste are simply camouflaged by the lexicon of hygiene. Froystad (2003), critiquing Dickey, argues that the idea of "dirt" is itself constructed within a discourse of caste, which may go unnoticed in mundane practices if the discursive details are not examined in relation to these practices.

The relation of "dirt" with household space in general has been identified as really dynamic in terms of how it shapes the identities of the social actors. The everyday practices of cleaning the house, for instance, and removing dirt from it, is a way through which women (re)produce an ideal feminine identity (Chakrabarty 1992). Removal of household dirt, according to Chakrabarty, plays a critical role in the everyday demarcation of the symbolic boundaries of home. However, the idea of "dirt" itself cannot be taken for granted. According to Mary Douglas (1966), we cannot look at "dirt" or "pollution" in isolation as it is "order and schemes," established and re-established through socialisation, that construct the "dirt"—the dirty is not absolute, it is relative. Douglas defines dirt as "a matter *out of place*" (p 37) and through a few examples illustrates how certain objects create situations of "un-cleanliness," "dirt" or "pollution" when they are in places where they should not be. Her approach to "pollution" and "dirt" is very relational, that is, she talks of the relation between sexes, castes and material objects in a space and how a certain relationality produces the dynamics of "purity" and "pollution" between them. In short, she reveals that "dirt" is socially constructed.

The symbolic practices, of segregating "dirty" from the clean, on the basis of "hygiene" or "pollution," are key to the social construction of space (Chakrabarty 1992). In the context of home and in general, the symbolic practices have been instrumental in demonstrating that public/private or inside/outside are not mutually exclusive but rather a continuum: certain symbolic practices try to create boundaries that unsettle these binaries and expose the complex spatialities of everyday life (Warren 2010; Abraham 2010; Ranade 2007). Practices of segregation by middle class employers in their household space in the name of privacy, hygiene, pollution and intimacy, shed light on some of the ways in which boundaries of "home" and "outside" are (re)drawn. These are responses to the intimate interactions of otherwise two distant social classes who tend to inhabit different social and physical spaces. Pierre Bourdieu (1989) draws our attention to the social logic of spatial segregation and underscores the interactions of social and physical spaces as follows:

> It is true that one can observe almost everywhere a tendency toward spatial segregation, people who are close together in social space tending to find themselves, by choice or by necessity, close to one another in geographic space, nevertheless. People who are very distant from each other in social space can encounter one another and interact, if only briefly and intermittently, in physical space (p 16).

The home has remained a physical space in which very often people from the same "social space" are welcomed. While domestic workers interact with employers in their intimate physical space, the interaction and the close presence is in conflict with their respective positions in the social space. Domestic

workers' presence in the space of middle-class households is not just about "removing" dirt: from employers' perspective, domestic workers themselves can represent "dirt, disease and danger" (Dickey 2000a). It is in this context that the practices of untouchability—ranging from a separate tumbler/glass to complete denial of access to employers' "private" toilets—have to be seen, as they bring out the ways in which the rhetoric of intimacy and privacy mark symbolic boundaries. According to Pei Chia-Lan (2003), it is through these mundane acts of domesticity that boundaries of distinction are drawn and hierarchies re-established in domestic work relations.

In the light of these claims, it becomes essential to ask what workers think about caste practices in employers' homes. How do they perceive and respond to these practices? Existing ethnographic enquiries that examine how hierarchies of caste and class result in the exclusionary treatment of domestic workers[1] tend to overemphasis employers' voices in this regard, highlighting the power employers have over workers in their household space in particular. This is not to say that workers' perspectives are missing from these accounts altogether, as Ray (2000) and Dickey (2000b) analyse domestic workers' discourse in which workers resist and manoeuvre their subordinate position in relation to their employers, at least in the discursive domain.

This paper turns the gaze around and explores domestic workers' notions of caste and untouchability in employers' homes. By "caste" I mean not just the identity of *varna* or *jati,* but also the practices of purity/pollution which reflect the structure of caste. The idea of ceremonial pollution is not the essence of the caste system, as ceremonial pollution is found in many other religions and contexts (Ambedkar and Rege 2013). A discussion on the practices and identity based on caste enables us to break down the idea of "dirt" and the consequential material and symbolic boundaries that emerge from the domestic workers' points of view. In this paper, workers' narratives that reflect caste-based practices of purity/pollution are thematically arranged in two categories: the first section explores the practices of caste and enquires about the increasing specialisation/segregation of tasks under the dominant arrangement of part-time work, and[2] the second section examines workers' perceptions about their employers and the household space that they work in. The first section demonstrates that domestic workers practise untouchability against each other, while the second section shows that it is not just employers who identify workers based on their caste and function through popularly held notions of purity/pollution: often, workers themselves practise untouchability towards employers. In the last section, I have problematised these practices and unveil a metanarrative that can help us understand and contextualise workers' practices without downplaying the power that prevails in domestic work relations in India today.

Methodology

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Delhi consisting of several semi-structured interviews with women domestic workers, as well as three focus group discussions. This study, by looking at part-time female domestic workers' ways of negotiating

their experience in their workspace, explores how the social hierarchies of caste, class and gender are perceived and manoeuvred by individual workers in the home space. This essentially involved understanding the feelings and perceptions that workers hold of the employers' home.

Heterogeneity among the workers, which is central to the research topic, was a crucial aspect in the sampling as well. Identities like caste, religion, linguistic background and workers' association with any group, placement agency or collective are some crucial factors that can shape domestic workers' experience in their workspace (Vasanthi 2011). The sample is diverse in terms of age, caste, state of origin (in case of migrant workers), religion and marital status as well as the tasks that these workers perform. It has workers from Scheduled Caste (sc), Scheduled Tribe (st) and Other Backward Classes (obc) categories. The sample also has some Muslim, Christian and Buddhist workers, though Hindu workers were in majority, and a mix of married, widowed and unmarried workers. The majority of the respondents moved to Delhi after marriage and started working as domestic workers under various circumstances like death of principal earning member of the family, financial crisis in family, and desire to educate their kids and thus be a "helping hand" to their husband. The sample has workers with states of origin Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, Maharashtra, Odisha and Tamil Nadu. The study focuses on the experiences of part-time and live-out workers. Workers' monthly wages varied between Rs 1,500 and Rs 7,000. In addition to caste-based hierarchy of tasks, which reflects in the most defiling tasks also being the most ill-paid ones, wage differentials were also the consequence of the number of households an individual worker worked for—some workers were working for more households than others. The workers in the study performed the tasks of cooking, mopping and sweeping the floor, dusting, doing dishes and cleaning toilets.

Caste and Domestic Work Relations in Delhi

The domestic workers' narratives reveal the structures in which workers themselves, as social subjects, are embedded (Dickey 2000b). So, the narratives do not just *narrate* social structures but also reflect structures interwoven within them. In Delhi, when workers use the term *ganda* (dirty) in different contexts, the usage has references to an ideology of caste, directly or indirectly. The term is used to refer to objects, spaces, food, living practices, particular types of gendered behaviour by women, and so on. The usage is intended to indicate both "unhygienic" and ritually impure states of these objects and behaviours. More importantly, it is devised to hint at a state of disorder, while drawing on a scheme of "order." For instance, very often the presence of "untouchable" caste groups performing tasks like cooking and entering the kitchen, which have been forbidden to them, creates a context in which the term ganda is used. The term is used to adjectivise employers from certain sociocultural groups and their household space is stereotyped to be a reflection of that.

The varied expressions of the usage of the term ganda reflect the workers' embodiment of the caste ideologies. The narratives show that the source of the embodiment of caste is also employers' notions and practices of purity and pollution, which workers make sense of. While caste-based anxieties might originate from the employer's notions of purity/pollution, and are enhanced by their privilege of class, the narratives show that domestic workers also willingly participate in maintaining and reinforcing these practices. The workers describe both other workers and certain employers as "gande" but with different lexicons and explanations for labelling them so. For instance, some domestic workers deemed to be sexually immoral were labelled as "*gandi ladkiyan*."

One of the manifestations of the prejudice of caste in domestic work relations is discrimination at the time of recruitment. One set of workers suggest that caste does not matter anymore for them and even for the employers. According to some upper caste workers, these days, irrespective of caste identity, people work as domestic workers, as increasingly employers do not care about caste. To underscore the process of disappearing social distinctions, one worker says, "Caste is not important to employers anymore." To exemplify the disappearing caste-based distinctions in hiring workers, the workers usually say that these days *jamadars*[3] are also working inside intimate and sacred portions of home, like the kitchen, from which they had been traditionally excluded.

When workers talk about employers' preference for workers based on their caste and religious identities, jamadar and Muslims are the two social groups they describe as the most undesirable by the employers. According to workers, these days, only elderly women in the house practise untouchability while "the new generation" does not pay much attention to workers' caste. However, practices of untouchability, in the form of separate utensils for domestic workers, come out in many narratives and workers share the sense of humiliation they feel in such an arrangement. Heena[4] (21, sc), a Dalit worker, expresses her inability to grasp the logic of untouchability as, "It feels strange…What is it that we have within our bodies [which makes untouchable]?" ("*Ajeeb sa lagta hai (Smiles in embarrassment)… aisa kya hai humare andar*?"). Dalit and Muslim workers' narratives of untouchability in employers' homes are most stark, but all workers seem to have experienced untouchability to some extent. Some workers share that often employers justify untouchability/segregation by referring to workers' caste and religion; however very often employers carry out practices of segregation, signifying untouchability, irrespective of workers' caste and religious identity. Sometimes, the cases in which workers are not asked their caste at the time of recruitment, it is apparent that there are other ways through which caste identity is signalled to the employer. These cases include situations in which workers start working through a family member, and the caste of the referee is known to the employers and thus it does not get verified again. As one upper caste worker shares that in her first place of work she was not asked her caste since it was already known to the prospective employer due to their native village link—*jinke yahan maine pehle kaam kiya wo mere Bihar ke hain na. Unhone mujhe pehchan liya, maine unhe pehchan liya. Isliye nahi poochhi*

jaati. (The first household I had worked for were Biharis. They knew me, and so they did not ask my caste.)

Caste alone cannot explain the structures of power that shape everyday politics in domestic work. Workers' practices reveal that while caste plays a crucial role in structuring the relations, it is not the only identity at work. The narratives highlight the importance of religion and region in producing the inequalities that characterise the interactions not only between employers and workers but also among workers. Some of these contours are explored in detail in the following sections.

Unsettling the Homogeneity

Various micro-level studies show that non-Dalit workers do not like to clean toilets and that the workers who clean toilets are always from the lowest castes (Ray and Qayum 2010; Froystad 2003). Historically, non-Dalit workers have resisted assignment of tasks that are considered lower in the caste hierarchy and hence polluting. According to Srinivas (1995), in the colonial era, due to such practices of resistance "the British were forced to learn from the confusing array of castes and religions whom they could hire for what job" (p 271).

In my interactions with workers, most non-Dalit workers share that they refuse to clean bathrooms saying that it should be done by jamadars only. However, some of them also share that they have no option but to perform the "polluting" task reluctantly. Rosie, a migrant from Jharkhand, shares that she feels she should not be made to clean the toilet and some employers in the locality, she works in, call the jamadar to do it. Seema shares her experience about when she was asked to clean the bathroom, she was reluctant and suggested her employer to hire a jamadar for the tasks. Employers segregate tasks for their notions of "purity" and "pollution," which has often been seen as reproducing caste relations (Froystad 2003). Workers' responses suggest how caste-based segregation of tasks by employers can often become part of workers' subjectivity and get institutionalised in work relations. Rameshwari (42, OBC) very categorically explains to me that people from her caste do only *rasoi ka kaam* (kitchen-related work) and do not do bathroom ka kaam (any task involving bathroom). These responses clearly indicate that sometimes workers do not only know what they should or should not do, but also, in their schema of task-segregation, who should do it. Ideas of pollution as "avoidance" (Froystad 2003) apply not only to employers, but workers also "avoid" certain activities as well as certain places within the household, like the bathroom. Based on identities, some workers have preferences to work in certain parts of a house, while some workers may get "trapped" in certain places or have limited access within employers' home. The identity-based access (or lack of it) within the home has consequences for workers' everyday experience of workplace, as the following two cases will show.

The hierarchies of caste and religion are negotiated not just between workers and employers but, as the following narrative shows, are subject to negotiation among workers themselves. Jummi (58), Muslim by faith, works for several Hindu employers. Most employers refused to hire her for washing utensils, among other tasks, as they do not want Muslims entering the kitchen. In these homes, Jummi does other tasks like cleaning the house and washing clothes but does not perform any tasks that require her to enter the kitchen. If she needs water to drink, she has to ask the employer as the water is always in the kitchen. Similarly, Heena (21) is not allowed to enter the kitchen because she is *Valmiki* by caste. She has been told that if she wants water she needs to ask other workers, who are "higher" in caste and can enter the kitchen, for water: "They tell us, 'do not take water on your own. Do not touch it.'" It is established that domestic workers have unequal claims to the use of space in relation to employers. I argue that workers have unequal claims to space also in relation to each other. Muslim and Dalit workers' experience of accessing various spaces in an employer's home is very different from workers from other social groups. This in turn shows their inability to access better-paid tasks like cooking. As Parwati Raghuram's (2001) work shows, women domestic workers' caste identity determines the tasks they are assigned, while the nature of tasks determines their relationship with the employers and the household space, which in turn decides their entitlement to various benefits like gifts, better wages, and bargaining power. Vimla (60), Valmiki by caste, works for extremely wealthy employers, each of whom employs 8–9 workers at a time. Surprisingly, Vimla does not get to meet her employers, as usually it is their live-in workers who supervise her. Vimla shares in a low voice that if she goes to work hungry and asks any of the full-time or live-in workers to give her something to eat, or if she is having a headache and asks for tea, the other workers refuse. When asked about her relationship with these co-workers, Vimla says:

> We [she and her daughter, Heena] do our work and come back. There's no warmth in the relationships with other workers. The feeling that we [Vimla and other workers] work for the same employer is just not there.[5] They do not feel like giving me anything to eat in spite of the fact that I also work like them in the same house. They eat and share amongst each other. Nobody offers anything to us.

The other workers being referred to perform tasks like cooking, babysitting, driving the private car of the employer. Vimla works in five such households where she cleans bathrooms, which is often seen as a "peripheral" task. Her work does not require her to spend much time within the space of home unlike the other workers she mentions. For Vimla, to access amenities like food and tea, she has to negotiate with other workers who have more, and better claim over the household resources and places like the kitchen. Vimla cannot directly access some of these basic amenities also because the tasks which she performs are closely linked to her caste due to which she cannot move around freely, as she will "pollute" the house. This particular experience dovetails with Gul Ozyegin's (2001) formulation of power in domestic work relations, wherein she suggests that power is something which is not given, but rather "constructed, maintained, and negotiated" (p 150) between employer and workers. This particular experience highlights how workers can be in subordinate positions in the space of the home not only in relation to employers but also in relation to other workers. Domestic workers in relation to employers

may have less power; however that is not the only form in which power shapes work relations in the household space. Workers' claims on household resources, which are also basic amenities in this case, can be linked to the tasks they perform, and very often, the tasks performed are linked to their caste and religious identities.

Non-Dalit workers express a sense of ambivalence about the "disappearing" caste-based segregation (referred to in this paper earlier): while some of them look at it as a loss, others view it as a welcome change. Workers who are subject to discrimination do not agree with the discriminatory practices of employers, but only some of them have the courage to question them. However, the way of questioning can often hide contradictions. Non-Dalit workers can counter the practices of untouchability and the humiliation it entails by confronting employers, but the difference in social positions can often generate very different forms of resistance. For instance, the very lexicon of resistance can often legitimise the untouchability against Dalits, at least in the discursive domain. Non-Dalit workers while confronting employers' untouchability say *"main koi bhangi nahi hoon"* (I am not *Bhangi*—an "untouchable" caste) is an example of the rhetoric of protest in everyday politics of domestic work. Adib and Guerrier (2003), drawing upon the critical literature on resistance, in the context of women in hotel work have argued: "the multiplicity of the types of resistance and the contradictory nature of resistance itself suggests that workers' resistance can both reproduce as well as transform" the structures of power (p 418). The responses also indicate the importance of seeing female domestic workers as both subjects and objects in middle-class homes. While they are shaped by various practices they also make sense of these practices and position themselves accordingly. This element of strategic positioning in the light of employers' practices shines through in what Geeta and Raj say about employers.

Geeta (60) and Raj (55) answer their employers' questions about caste by identifying themselves as Buddhist, which is not really a caste. Both the workers, who are from Maharashtra and are neighbours, shared that they trust sardar (Sikh) employers and prefer working for them and, in return, how the sardars also trust and prefer them. Such views echo what Barbara Harris-White and Valentina Prosperi (2014) call "micro-political economy of gains." According to Harris-White and Prosperi, workers in the informal economy deploy strategies, including those of excluding other social groups, and thus securing small gains like better wages at the cost of these other groups. The two contrasted themselves from Bhangi based on employers' practices, as the following conversation reveals:

Me: So, what kind of questions do sardar [employers] ask you while hiring for work?
Raj: They ask us about our place of origin. That's all. We tell them that we are from Maharashtra.
Me: Do they ever ask your caste?
Raj: Yes, we tell them that we are Buddhist.
Me: So, do they express any objection on that?
Raj: No. They eat food cooked by us. We cook for them. They ask caste because they do not want *Mochi* (leather-processing caste) to work at their home, and they doubt Bhangis for the "purity"-related reasons

(in a lower voice). So, they [Mochi and Bhangi][6] lie about their caste, but employers ultimately recognise them and do not hire them.
Me: But how do they [employers] recognise them?
(Geeta pitches in)
Geeta: By their way of talking and living. They are always tip-top dressed up. They say: *'kya ri,' 'kahan ja rahi ri'* (where are you going?), *'aa rahi ri'* (are you coming?) (In a tone of mimicry).

Even though Geeta and Raj do not reveal their caste origin, they are almost certainly Dalit converts themselves, and converting to Buddhism allows them to hide their caste identity. It is more than a mere speculation for two reasons: first, they hail from the state of Maharasthra that has witnessed mass conversion of Dalits (predominantly from Mahar caste) to Buddhism following Ambedkar, as a collective resistance to caste system, and second, the duo are not the only Buddhists in their locality, there are a few more migrants from Maharashtra who are Buddhists, as I was told. One of the benefits (for the lack of a better word) of converting to Buddhism and removing the markers of caste in terms of surname and others has been the reduced susceptibility to caste-based discrimination.[7] However, being a Buddhist in this context also enables them to claim similar status as upper castes in relation to the untouchable workers by being able to get hired for tasks like cooking and by embodying the ideal femininities, which comes out in their mocking of "tip-top" dressing.

According to M N Srinivas (1956), eating, way of speaking, and dressing habits are critical spheres wherein the caste hierarchies are marked and these are the symbols through which a group can claim higher caste status and deny what is deemed lower. He termed the process of appropriating the symbols indicating higher caste status by lower caste individuals, "Sanskritization." Both the workers make fun of the way in which Valmiki women converse in Hindi (in which they add *'ri'* while addressing others, usually fellow workers) and that becomes a marker of distinction between them, non-Dalit, and Dalit workers. In a way, it is a mockery of a group's lack of knowledge of rules of a language, which also becomes part of identity of that group. The duo mocks Dalit women's way of dressing up and talking in a tone that conveys the condemnation of certain types of feminine behaviour. The mockery echoes the upper-caste discourse, according to which, Dalit women's femininity is constructed as "fallen" and in opposition to those of upper caste women (Chakravarti 1993). The same discourse also constructs Dalit women as sexually immoral and thus dangerous. Geeta's and Raj's understanding of "tip-top" dressing as an obvious marker of lower caste women and something which is impossible to hide even after efforts emanates from the same discourse, and somewhere naturalises the caste distinction, which are beyond manoeuvring. In other words, these are expressions of body-politics of caste, in which one's attire becomes a trigger for tensions and also the site of those tensions (Gidwani and Sivaramkrishnan 2003). It has been observed that Muslim women, like Dalit women, hide their identity and present themselves as Hindu by assuming Hindu-sounding names and by wearing bindi, *sindoor* and other markers of upper-caste Hindu women's femininity (Rahman 2013). Often,

workers interpret the importance of caste as an identity, of their own and others, through employers' notions about certain "other" castes and social groups, particularly the stigmatised ones. As a response, workers also learn about the ideal feminine dressing behaviour and come to embody the same, as it is appreciated and rewarded by employers.

The question arises: what do employers' practices of asking for caste and their attendant hiring decisions have to say about home as a space? Employers want to ascertain their prospective domestic workers' caste to make sure that the sociocultural others do not enter the space of home, which also includes its material boundaries (see, for example, Froystad 2003). By keeping people from certain groups out of the home, home is produced symbolically in a desired manner. Female domestic workers, as social subjects with different social positions, when making sense of these practices, resist, collaborate and often do both in such a production of home. When employers prefer workers only from certain groups, they try to create boundaries.

However, this narrative of socio-spatial boundaries demarcated and defended by employers against the possible transgression of workers is limiting. The popular narrative of transgression of household boundaries presents an employer's home as the "inside," which is vulnerable to transgression from the "outside." However, the following section will show that the workers' perspective subverts the meaning of the inside/outside in this context.

Workers' Notions of Employers' Identity

The meaning associated with a place changes when multiple standpoints are included in constructing the narrative about that place—this is the spirit of Doreen Massey's (1994) famous essay "A Place Called Home?" Certain places can be sites of "nostalgia, safety, belonging and identity," but that is not the only form in which they exist: in Massey's opinion, "of course places can be home, but they do not have to be thought of [only] in that way" (p 172). In the public policy context, for a very long time domestic work and working conditions therein have not been regulated in the name of privacy of the employer, which highlights how there is one dominant image of home, which overrules all other aspects, including that of it being workplace for domestic workers.[8] In the existing scholarship, while examining the spatiality of middle class homes, only employers have been seen as the subjects, workers have been at the margin or absent in these narratives. The narratives pose questions to Dickey's analysis, according to which:

> The asymmetrical movements in domestic service account in part for why domestic workers do not join their employers in raising fears about the mixing of inside and outside. It is not that the distinction between inside and outside is insignificant to domestic workers or to the poor in general. Rather, while domestic workers regularly enter others' domestic spaces, they rarely face employers' entrances into their own. Concerns with purity are also greater among higher castes, which have a proportionately higher representation among the middle and upper classes. All told, crossing the threshold of employers' households does not create parallel anxieties for domestic workers (p 480).

Dickey's analysis is based on "class" as the core organising principle and employers are certainly superior in terms of class position. However, religion and caste turn the social hierarchies around to a great extent. More importantly, the boundaries of social differences are not just marked out in the material space—"out there"—but also embodied by the subjects and often enacted through practices of bodies, symbols and speech. While Dickey's reading of differences marked out in the household space is rich and insightful, it remains greatly misplaced simply because of the assumption that just because employers are not entering worker's homes, they are not threatening the "inside" workers embody.

Domestic workers' notions in Delhi challenge the dominant narrative constructed on the basis of employers' anxiety of pollution of their home by "outsider" workers (Froystad 2003; Dickey 2000a). I argue that the apparent "cleanliness" of middle class homes seem to be contested by the workers' own sociocultural understanding of "clean" and "dirty," based on which they draw alternative boundaries within employers' homes. However, these notions also suggest social stigma against certain groups which persist irrespective of which side of work relations they are on. For example, both Muslim workers and Muslim employers are stigmatised.

Workers' agency in selecting employers has largely been overlooked in the Indian context. In Turkey, Ozyegin (2001) observes that workers often assess employers' socio-economic status before they start working for them, as workers expect certain other gains, beyond remuneration, from the employers. In Hong Kong, Paul (2011) finds that workers often use racial stereotypes to select employers and do not get hired "passively." In the case of Delhi, the narratives demonstrate that workers assess employers based on their sociocultural status and this assessment directly reflects in their notion of employer's household space. Some Hindu workers have very strong stereotypes and prejudices against Muslim employers and workers. Most Hindu workers do not want to work in Muslim households because they perceive the living and eating practices of Muslims as "polluting" and unhygienic. Workers, based on these perceive living practices, form very strong notions about the Muslim household spaces. Similarly, there are social groups which have been stereotyped to have clean household space. According to Bhagwati and Raj, for instance, Punjabi and sardar are kind-hearted, considerate, and their homes are clean, and they like to work for them. On the other hand, Mala does not want to work for Bengalis and Muslims because she thinks their homes are filthy and they eat "dirty" food (referring to fish and beef respectively). Bhagwati explained her reluctance to work in Muslim households in the following words:

> It is believed that they eat 'dirty food.' It is because of 'dirty food' that I do not work for them. They also keep spitting around the house. I don't like that, and that's why I do not like working for them. I like working for Sardar (Sikh) and Punjabis, as their homes are clean and children also live hygienically.

Bhagwati does not state this from her own experience, rather knows it through social-belief system, as she herself explained

("it is believed…"). Her perception is particularly telling as it reminds us how the "social" is linked in forming what is "spatial," and the two co-construct each other: here, the stereotypes of behaviour constructs certain imagination of places, and it does not stop there, as those imaginations circulate through discourses in reconstructing these groups as different and the less desirable than others. Kalawati also does not want to work for Muslims because if she works and they insist on her having tea, it will be difficult for her to have tea from their cup, from a kitchen that she identifies as "dirty."

Workers generally do not want to work in households they identify as "dirty"—*gande ghar*. They would prefer a *saaf-suthara ghar*. Some workers share that when they go to a new house they also see how people live there and if the house is clean or not. In some cases, workers clearly stereotype certain sociocultural groups with ritually "impure" and unhygienic living practices, and thereby identify their homes as dirty. Some of these views are shared when I want to know workers' notions of caste. For example, in response to the question, "Does your employer's caste matter to you?" some workers respond by saying that caste does not matter to them, but the employer should not be Muslim. Usually, upper-caste workers are unwilling to work in lower-caste people's homes. Lalti shares that she tries to find out social background of her employers and usually asks them about their caste. She explains the rationale for doing so in following words:

> Lalti: I have to ask [their caste]. I have had food and tea in your home. So, I will also inquire about your caste, what if you are lower in caste…
> Interviewer: so, if any of your prospective employer is lower in caste, will you still work there?
> Lalti: I have to work. Some people do not share their caste.
> Interviewer: Do you have tea-water at such employers' place?
> Lalti: I do not have tea and water at everyone's home. I have tea or water only at the Employers' I have information about [their caste]. I do not even ask anyone to give me to eat or drink. I can have water or tea at employers who are higher in caste and to whom I have revealed my caste. Such homes are good.

Considering an employer's home to be polluted based on his or her identity is one of the approaches workers deploy in forming a perception. Another approach to identifying pollution is to look for breach of social segregation; in such cases workers identify even upper-caste Hindu employers' homes as ritually contaminated. Kalawati (60) expressing her dismay with the increased participation of jamadars and Muslims in the home shares how one of the housing societies she works in has many Bhangi (Valmiki) domestic workers who do all kinds of tasks, including those involving the kitchen. Workers from all social groups performing tasks indiscriminately make her anxious about her purity and this indiscriminate access for all social groups in her opinion makes even the upper-caste Hindu household impure. As a response, Kalawati carries her own water and does not eat at her employers' place because she thinks these days employers have started hiring people irrespective of their social background. Kalawati does not drink tea made by other workers and makes tea for herself, and she has a separate cup. She also adds that she has turned vegetarian "for religious reasons" recently and employers might have been

eating meat so she has to keep these things in mind. In domestic work relations, a "separate cup" has long been a signifier of untouchability and denial of dignity to domestic workers by their employers. In my own interactions, most workers find the practice humiliating and unacceptable. However, in Kalawati's case, the absence of untouchability by employers towards the Dalit workers is one of the reasons why she practises segregation at her own level, which is her way of drawing boundaries of social difference. By having a separate cup for herself, which is not accessible to anyone else, she produces privacy for herself in the employer's home. Thus, intersections of class with caste, religion and gender produce a much complex and conflicting array of social hierarchies wherein workers practise untouchability, as practices of creating boundary, end up "reproducing and contesting social inequalities" (Lan 2003: 526) within employers' homes.

All told, the narratives should not lead one to conclude that workers' practices of untouchability can be equated with those of employers, as any attempt to do so will entail a complete overlooking of the power inequalities that shape not just the domestic work relations but social relations in general. For instance, a worker choosing not to work for a Dalit/Muslim employer is not parallel to a non-Dalit/non-Muslim employer refusing to hire a Muslim/Dalit worker, simply because such practices have far more serious economic consequences for the latter. In other words, even though workers have their caste and religious prejudices, they do not have the privileged position of class like their middle and upper class employers do.

Making Sense of Domestic Practices

Having found that workers also practise untouchability against other workers and even employers, how do we make sense of these practices? I argue that non-Dalit workers' practices and discourses that support untouchability have to be seen in the context of the stigma[9] that prevails in domestic work.

The servility inherent in the work due to its embeddedness in a history of colonialism and feudal relations makes it less than "work." The reason why it is argued to exist as "servitude" (Ray and Qayum 2010) and not as "service" or work is precisely because of the pre-modern remnants: the widespread usage of the term "servant" is a testament to the legacy. The institution is still governed by the discourse of dependency and loyalty rather than the work contract. Many scholars have looked at the institution of domestic work through master/servant relations (for example, Froystad 2003; Srinivas 1995) and have underscored the servility inherent in the relation.

In addition, the embeddedness of the institution in caste relations has reinforced the stigma of caste-based labour. Many forms of caste-based labour have only contributed to cultivate a sense of "stigma" (Rao 2012). Historically, domestic work relations in India have been governed under the norms of the caste-based patron/client relationship, also known as *Jajmani* (Raghuram 2001). The upper caste groups' ability to command lower caste and Dalit groups' labour through consent and coercion for their household chores, particularly those tasks considered "menial" and "polluted," has been a common

feature of power relations of caste (Gopal 2013; Sinha 1986). The power to command labour of certain caste groups has also been a means of inflicting violence and humiliation on those groups.

Finally, the hegemonic discourse of femininity which is imposed by Brahminical patriarchal discourse (Chakravarti 1993) reinforces the stigma of domestic work. This logic asserts both that a woman's labour is critical for reproduction and demonises the sexualities of women outside the familial space and those performing paid labour (Gopal 2013). Performance of household chores in others' homes thus become "shameful" as it represents a monetary transaction of a "sacred labour" only meant for a woman's own home, similar to sexual labour which is legitimate only in one's own home.

The stigma of domestic work is produced through a complex intermingling of these elements, and workers' practices discussed here unveil a dimension of power emanating from these rudiments of stigma. The workers who supported untouchability were also the ones who shared detailed accounts of the "shame" they grapple with on a daily basis because they work in others' homes. The shame is a reflection of the sense of humiliation the women workers have. The embodied humiliation can be located in multiple and intersecting social hierarchies of caste, class and gender. It is different from the humiliation caused by the insult, degradation, discrimination and exploitation by employers.[10] Among women domestic workers, the embodied humiliation operates in a manner that it becomes "a struggle against self and the other" (Guru 2009: 4). The way in which some domestic workers try to mark themselves as different from the workers of "other" caste and religious groups in the name of pollution or dirt shows their desperation to manoeuvre their lower class position while simultaneously reclaiming a relatively high ritual position in the social hierarchy.

Drawing on Paul's (2011) work on domestic work, I argue that upper-caste Hindu workers' avoidance of Muslim and Dalit employers reflects the acts of "social distancing" while their preference for certain other social groups is a form of "social alignment." One may assume that with the increasing participation of women from diverse social groups,[11] and not merely historically oppressed ones, the stigma of domestic work emanating from caste relations will gradually fade away. However, the situation of women participating from diverse social groups makes the need to demarcate the differences neatly, as the possibility of these differences getting blurred is seen as a threatening sign by the workers for their position in the social hierarchy. Thus, conventionally privileged groups distance themselves from socially unprivileged workers' tasks and avoid employers' from socially undesirable groups to negotiate dignity for themselves.

Through these strategies, workers try to convince not just other family members but also themselves about their social worth and thus such negotiations reflect a hegemonic process at work. I argue these acts of untouchability in the material space of the employer's home are indeed to mark out difference in the discursive social space. These are acts which try to

redefine the social difference and hierarchies by asserting spatial segregations. Kalawati shares that in her family nobody knows that she works as a maid, and that if her relatives find out they will be disgusted at her for cleaning leftovers from others' plates ('*ye doosron ke yahan joothan manjti hai!*') The metaphor of '*joothan manjna* (cleaning left over from others' plate')[12] was used by many workers to signal the shame they experience in being domestic workers. She explains why she has to hide her work and the consequence of her relatives finding out about her work in following words:

> I will be marrying off my daughter one day…what if I do not find a family [due to my work]? [They will say] that I clean left over from others' plates…even today, people have a thinking like this in UP [Uttar Pradesh, her state of origin], back in the village. They socially and economically boycott [on finding out that somebody works as a maid outside caste norms].

Similarly, Lalti also does not tell anybody in her extended family about her work and has decided to keep it to herself. They would have taunted her for performing a polluting task like doing dishes, in Lalti's words, "they think that she cleans left over from others' plates in their home" (*'Sochte hain ye paraye ghar mein jhootan dhote hain. Tana marenge'*). Paid domestic work is one of the occupations with a legacy of caste-based stigma, it is not just exploitation that characterises the work but also the stigmatisation that is the context in which it is different from *any other work* (John 2013; Rao 2012). Mary John very aptly in her examination of stigma and female labour discusses how women's unpaid labour which is already devalued is devalued further when domestic workers are employed and this reflects in the way workers are paid and treated. The shame Kalawati and Lalti express emanates not just from their upper-caste status but also from their embodiment of hegemonic femininities, according to which performing household tasks for one's own family is a matter of honour while working in another's home degrades the same labour (Ray 2000). This is the context in which doing dishes at one's own home is different from doing them at another's home.

Conclusions

The voices of these women workers enrich the theoretical understanding of "home" and "outside" emanating from caste and religious othering. However to interpret the dimension of power in these dynamics as that of purity/pollution which are pervasive in the stratified relations between middle class employers and domestic workers, because it is not just employers but also workers who practise untouchability, is only a half truth of underlying power in such practices. In other words, such a reading is devoid of the larger forces in the Indian economy and society, spread across time and space, which situate the micro-reality of the work. While employers may practise untouchability to maintain (or gain) social status, for non-Dalit workers the notions of untouchability are often the strategies of self-preservation and dignity.

This strategy of negotiation should be located in the context of domesticity, which defines domestic work relations. The meta-script of domestic labour relations is written with the

essence of domesticity—gender, caste, purity and pollution—through which the specific forms of class relations are expressed. The strategies of negotiation thus often get expressed in this set terrain of power through a continuum of the same language of hegemonic power in counter-construction of pervasive relational power-scripts. Upper or relatively privileged castes have always practised untouchability to maintain their status and power in relation to other relatively less powerful groups.

However, specific contexts like domestic work expose us to the specific reconfigurations of the social status and power. Actually, the narratives give us insight into the contextual forms of power and vulnerabilities which exist as a continuum rather than as two polar opposites. In these contextual power relations—which are deeply embedded in the extra-contextual relations—the employers and workers become actors who occupy different locations in the spectrum of power and vulnerabilities. Workers are very differently positioned (in relation to each other and employers) in these relations due to the differences of caste and religion, and thus respond to the practices of purity and pollution in general in employers' home space in varied ways, accounting their experiences which are very different from each other. Finally, it is these different social locations which are also directly linked to economic gains, status, and symbolic power which underscore the constantly evolving ruptures in the unionisation of domestic workers as workers.

NOTES

1 See, for instance, Ray and Qayum (2010), and Matilla (2011).
2 I call the arrangement "dominant" because part-time domestic work is dominant whereas full-time, live in and full-time, live-out arrangements are few. The dominance cannot be established based on the existing statistics giving a countrywide picture. However, various micro-level studies confirm the dominance of the arrangement (for example, Ray and Qayum 2010; Vasanthi 2011; Neetha 2004 among others).
3 Usually, people from Valmiki caste are referred to as jamadars. They have been considered an untouchable caste which was socially assigned the task of removing (human and household)

refuse. In addition to Jamadar, another common term often used to refer to the same caste group is Bhangi. In this paper, all the three terms have been used in different contexts depending upon the terms used by different workers during the interviews.
4 All names are pseudonyms.
5 Vimla uses *gulami* and *malik* to refer to "work" and "employer" respectively. The terms, if translated literally, mean "slavery" and "master" respectively.
6 Both the castes have traditionally been assigned to do the "polluting" tasks and by virtue of that, have been considered untouchable.
7 For instance, Sumit Baudh's autobiographical account on his family's conversation to Buddhism and how that changed the experience of
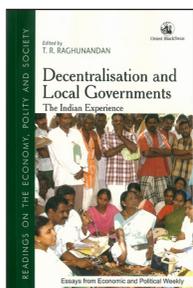
being subject to untouchability is a testimony of this. For details, see Baudh (2015).
8 See, for instance, Sharma (2014). For a detailed exploration of the workers' perspective on employers' home and the practices therein, see Sharma, S (2013), *Reversing the Gaze: Home as a 'Spatial Category' from Domestic Workers 'Lens A Study of Part-Time Female Domestic Workers in Delhi* (unpublished).
9 A detailed elaboration on the genealogy and the contemporary interconnections of the stigma in domestic work is beyond the scope of this paper and it is one of the least explored issues in the contemporary discourse. So, I cannot commit to do justice to the issue in this one section. However, shedding light on its structure is inevitable here.

10 In "*Humiliation: Claims and Context*," Gopal Guru and other contributors (particularly Bhikhu Parekh) establish that how the term "humiliation" captures a particular form in which power functions, which is different from how the power manifests itself in "discrimination," "insult," "injustice" and so on. According to Parekh, for instance, one can feel humiliated, without anybody insulting him/her. For details, see Guru (2009).

11 Recently, for example, one study conducted in Bengaluru found that it is not just the women from the oppressed classes who participate in paid domestic work. Increasingly women from other, traditionally privileged groups, are also participating. For details, see Staff Reporter (2015). Also, see *Domestic Workers: Conditions, Rights and Responsibilities—a Study of Part-time Domestic Workers* in Delhi (2010) by Jagori.

12 The idea of "*Jootha*"/"*Joothan*" is peculiar to Indian society. The term carries a spirit of ritual pollution. It is impossible to find its synonym in English and it was a challenge to translate it into English. I borrow the translation from Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*.

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