

The Migrant in a Service Village in the City: Working Conditions and Rights

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Background and context

The spatial re-organisation of land, and housing in urban planning has been the subject of much discussion in the making of space and place in the city. Such reorganisations, as our work on Rajarhat, New Town in Kolkata show is also a parallel narrative of displacement of people from their settlements, and livelihood. In Rajarhat, the urban planners had retained some villages amidst high-rises and central business districts. These villages were not acquired and became “service” villages to cater to the needs of the new town. Such presumptions of “service villages” in urban settings are part of the socio-imaginings of the city spaces and New Delhi which attracts migrants from across the country is no exception. Drawing upon the urban planner’s use of the term service village for the villages that form the urban geography of New Town, I use the term “service-village” to argue that city spaces are sites of production of goods and services and the notion of service village can be used to understand the juxtapositions of city spaces particularly when it comes to certain kinds of work, and migrant work-spaces in particular.

For the Urban Planners of HIDCO in Kolkata these service villages were retained to provide service to the people who will settle in New Town. Care economy in general and domestic work in particular has to be read as a parallel development of new urban spaces, particularly satellite towns across metropolitan cities. The rapid urbanisation across India has led to development of new towns, as well as an increase in internal migration. The inter-state migration figures indicate around 40 percent of internal migrants in selected million plus cities (Census of India 2001) including Delhi. Studies on internal migration (National Sample Surveys and Census Data) have shown that seventy percent of women migrate due to marriage. But micro- level studies across states have shown that increasing participation of women in temporary and circular migration in construction, brick-kiln and domestic work (UNESCO and UNICEF 2013). The increasing rate of participation of female migrant workers makes it an important site to understand the making of service village. According to estimates by National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), out of four million domestic workers, ninety two percent are women, girls and children, and twenty percent are under fourteen years of age (UNESCO and UNICEF 2013).

In this context of internal migration, how do gender, caste reconfigure the figure of a migrant worker in a service village. In this paper, through the existing notions of gendered division of labour, I try and see how women and men negotiate with the changing needs of labour market.

Scholars have argued that the options available to migrant women in a way re-produces gendered nature of work, particularly as women has become part of the domestic workers – a job profile which was restricted to male workers till post-independence as they informed a large segment of the internal rural to urban migration (Mehta 1960). The increased feminisation of domestic work and other forms of work are linked to the increasing rates of migration of women who migrate with and independent of families as well as the increasing professionalisation of domestic work as recruitment agencies train women, men and also act as placement agencies. Newspaper reports have shown the increasing role of such agencies in recognition of domestic work as a profession, and in safe working conditions of ‘migrant’ domestic workers (Austen Soofi 2011). The role of recruitment agencies as the literature on transnational domestic workers have shown will remain a paradoxical one. While on one hand the recruitment agencies have adopted practices that are steeped in racial stereotypes as studies on advertisements by recruitment agencies indicate.

In this context, it is important to understand the following concerns in the light of the above situation:-

- a) Nature of migration and routes of entry in job market
- b) Recruitment networks
- c) Working conditions
- d) Work-space and rights.

Situating the study

The study aims to chronicle the movements and on-going struggles by organisations working towards social justice and inclusive practices of domestic workers and ethnography of recruitment agencies to understand the nature of “service village” of Delhi. While there are no spatial pockets demarcated by the urban planners as service village in Delhi, the study proposes to look into the ways in the making of service is embedded in familial ties, fictive kinship and how these sites become sites of transitory labour (Sen 2012). Parallel to this there is a need to look into the socio-legal provisions for migrant workers as they form an important component of the unorganised and mobile workforce such as the domestic sector to understand the ways in which this category of footloose labour has transformed over the years.

For this purpose, it is important to understand the city’s dependence on these service villages for various kinds of work which are shaped by gender, caste and religious hierarchies. Domestic work is one such instance to look at the shifting profile of workers due to migration as women who migrate to cities with families take up domestic work to supplement income. Women also migrate independently of their families for domestic work through recruitment agencies and the remittances are important source of livelihood. Similarly though women’s entry to labour market begins with supplementing income, they become equal or sole bread earners and it is these changing dynamics of labour market that this study seeks to examine.

Considering a large section of the workforce is constantly on the move, and their role in the electoral democracy is limited, the Indian state has time and again refused to consider “home” as a space of work. The socio-cultural perception around domestic work, and domestic workers percolate the legislative system and the social security system. Are the schemes for the unorganised sector accessible to this mobile population? Organisations working with domestic workers have repeatedly reported about the constraints of accessing the social welfare mechanisms. Rashtriya Swastha BimaYojna will remain inaccessible to most workers because of the four layer of authorisation that the domestic worker would need to process her/his papers. This tedious verification process shows the multiple ways in which exclusionary clauses come at play even in mechanisms instituted to ensure social welfare for domestic workers. Similarly, the seven states in the country (Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Odisha) who have attempted to devise a minimum wage for domestic workers has failed to improve working conditions. N. Neetha (2013) in her analysis argues that the definition of domestic work is driven by “the traditional understanding of house-work as a non-technical, unskilled occupation”. These legal interventions according to Neetha sanction and reproduce caste based hierarchies in grading tasks such as cleaning which is restricted to women from lower castes are at the low end of this minimum wage level. The lack of legal protection of domestic workers also reveals the absence of legal protection of migrant workers (particularly women). The invisibilisation of the migrant workers and yet the city’s dependence on the migrant workforce needs a closer introspection to understand the complex nature of how caste-gender relations in migrant workspaces.

Plan of the study

The study aims to look at the making of ‘service village’ in Delhi and Gurgaon and the lives of migrant women, mostly employed in the domestic workers. The making of ‘service village’ is a history of urban displacement. The first site that I proposed to look at is Gautampuri Colony Phase II, where families were forced to resettle in a wasteland from areas adjacent to All India Institute of Medical Sciences. Gautampuri’s history can be traced back to the city’s attempts to beautify pockets of Delhi during Asiad Games. Anita Kapoor tracing the history of Gautampuri in the office of Shahri Mahila Kamgar Union, a union which has been instrumental in organising domestic workers of the area tells me that the history of resettlement colonies in Delhi provides us an insight in understanding the conditions of migrant workers. Around one thousand domestic workers across Gautampuri are members of Shahri Mahila Kamgar Union. Resettlement colonies like Gautampuri serve as a useful site to look into the making of a ‘service village’ in the context of ‘urban displacement’.

Amita Baviskar (2004) in her work argues that instances of ‘urban displacement’ “compels us to re-think the ways in which dominant understandings of displacement imagines place.” In this essay, Baviskar argues that understandings of displacement assume a severe of ties from the landscape by violent means. How are we to conceive of place, home for a migrant worker is the question that Amita Baviskar raises in this study? Drawing from this, I would like to argue it is important to understand exercises of place-making in urban landscapes to understand the ‘transitory forms of labour’ (Sen 2012). The ‘transitory forms of labour’, are peculiar to urban

settlements where migrant populations are forced to settle, and evict. The making of a 'service village' as this study will show are shaped by caste, religious and ethnic backgrounds of the migrant worker/s. Studies on urban clusters have shown how 'familiarity', through kin ties both fictive and familial play a crucial role in the making of these clusters which are routinely effaced, and resettled in the name of beautification. New Delhi has been witness to such systemic processes of urban displacement and the making of a place for a migrant lies in what I call 'service village' pockets which supply transitory forms of labour crucial for the functioning of city.

In this context, it would be particularly interesting to examine how gendered forms of work are reproduced through domestic work. At the very outset it is important to foreground that the institution of domestic service in India is not of recent origin. N. Neetha (2003) in her work argues that domestic service is closely tied to domestic slavery and it existed in all parts of India till, it was finally abolished by the enactment of Act V of 1843 (Neetha 2003:7). The shift in gender roles in this sector is interesting as men occupy better paid jobs as cooks and drivers, while the paying operations of cleaning and caring are left to females (ibis:8). The preference for women in domestic work has increased with studies showing preference for young women, and lesser participation of men in this form of work. N. Neetha refers to a survey conducted by Indian Social Institute in Delhi in 1991 where 20% of the male migrants were part of the domestic work. It is against this backdrop that I argue that domestic work continues to dominate the nature of employment in service villages across New Delhi and Gurgaon. While in Gautampuri Colony most of the women are employed as domestic workers, there are instances of women diversifying into other occupations from these service villages. As one of the workers whom I interviewed reminds me that it is important to find work for seven days a week and at least 25 days in a month so women and men take up parallel jobs. Anita Kapoor substantiates this claim through her experience of training women to ride bi-cycles as part of empowerment programmes in South Delhi. She says, the nature of labour market has changed and there are organisations who are taking up interesting projects to train women to diversify and move beyond domestic work. Though the aim of the bicycle project was to train female domestic workers to increase their mobility, she recalls how female construction workers during their leisure hours had joined this initiative. Recalling Azad Foundation's work (training and facilitating recruitment of women as drivers) in the transport sector, she points to the increasing opportunities that such initiatives have brought in to incorporate women in the changing labour market. Despite such changes, there is a chasm as far as recognition of domestic work as 'work'. The social perceptions of domestic work shape the employer-employee relationship but it is an important source of livelihood for most families in the four sites.

Some of the women I have interviewed during pilot study allude to the familiarity of domestic space and work related to domestic space as 'natural' and hence easily available. The 'familiarity' of workspace and lack of recognition of 'domestic work' as 'work' that lies at the heart of this form of work. Coupled with notions of gendered division of work, domestic work produces a relationship shaped by 'affect'. Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2010) argues that it is important to take into account how this 'labour is textured by affects' and primarily so as the nature of employment is steeped in caste-gender-religious ties. Accounts of workers disguising their names to forge familial ethnic-religious ties with an employer are not uncommon. The

sanctity of the 'hearth' is maintained through hiring of workers belong to higher caste and a crosschecking of religious background.

Such internalisation of caste and religious ties also shape the making of a service village. As a volunteer worker remarks, "You can spot a Bengali migrant from the smell of fish". Such cultural stereotypes, some of the volunteers are a source of tension among the migrant workers. The 'familial associations' are a key to the making of a service village. The three settlements in Gurgaon: Katarpuri village, Palam Vihar, Hanuman Mandir Pahari Basti, and Samjha Basti in Sikandarpur according to volunteers of an organisation are dominated by people from West Bengal, Rajasthan and Bihar.

The gendered division of labour is evident in the women's participation in domestic work vis a vis participation of male members as contract labourers, construction workers. The proximity of these villages to the residential high-rises have led to the gendered nature of division of labour where women have entered domestic work and the male members have either joined factories as contract workers, security guards etc. . While on one hand it remains to be seen how women have reconfigured their role as domestic workers through intervention by organisations and unions in organising them, at the same time, it is important to understand how gendered notions of work shape women in the construction industry as well. Drawing upon interviews with members of Shahri Mahila Kamgar Union's unit in Gaddakhod, Faridabad I try and examine the nature of work available to women as construction sites.

Conclusion

The making of a service village is a complex network of 'familiarity' based on gender, caste and religious ties. In this proposed work, I plan to unravel the ways in which urbanisation is a production of informality of labour in 'service villages' which are deeply gendered. Through a reading of 'transitory forms of labour' in the lives of these migrant workers I propose to look at the ways in which urban spatiality are configured along caste and gender ties.

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