DOMESTIC WORKER A SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY

1.1 Introduction

Over the last few years, studies on domestic work in India have noted the increase in the numbers of migrant female domestic workers in the cities. They have also observed that domestic work is highly informal in its organisation and highlighted the vulnerabilities of domestic workers who belong to the poorer and uneducated sections of society. These studies also note that women from marginalised castes form a substantive group of domestic workers (Kaur 2006; Neetha 2004 and 2008).

This increase in the number of domestic workers is linked to a shift from agrarian-based economy to a manufacture and service-based economy. It is also associated with the growth of the urban middle class, especially the increase in the number of women working outside their homes and the availability of cheap domestic labour. The migration from the tribal belt is ascribed to “ecological degradation, landlessness and land alienation, unemployment and poverty” (Kujur and Jha 2008). Migration of girls is also attributed to the transition in the tribal societies as educated tribal girls do not want to work in the agriculture sector.
Domestic work has a long history in India with both men and women working in others’ homes as ‘servants’. The affluent had servants, mostly men, with loyalty, obligation and patronage being the salient aspects of this relationship. Caste defined the hierarchy-- lower castes performed the ‘dirty’ work of cleaning while higher caste men cooked. Though domestic work is not a new phenomenon in India, it cannot simply be viewed as an extension of historical feudal culture where the affluent employed ‘servants’. Both in the urban and rural contexts, the nature of work and workers has been rapidly changing. The sector now primarily comprises women domestic workers who are not recognised as ‘workers’ while their work is ‘undervalued’. This is primarily due to the gendered notion of housework--value is not ascribed to women’s work in their homes, and by extension, even paid work in others’ homes is not given any value or regarded as work. It is also undervalued because it is often performed by poor, migrant women from lower castes. All these contribute to the inferior status of their work, both in their own minds and in society.

Domestic work includes mental, manual and emotional aspects, including care work that is necessary to maintain people and communities (Anderson 2000). Domestic work is thus viewed as reproductive work that creates not only labour units but also people and social relations. Anderson further draws attention to domestic work being rooted in the community: by ‘the doing of domestic work we literally reproduce our communities and our place within them”.

In this context, it is important to note who does the domestic work as this reflects the relation between genders, race and class. Apart from the ‘wife’ or the ‘mother’, it is often paid domestic workers who reproduce social relationships and social beings. Yet, the status of the domestic worker is lower than the woman employer who can be considered as her manager. The worker is a labourer or ‘the hands’. Since social reproduction is not recognised as work, domestic workers too receive no recognition as workers and are hence paid low wages.

The employer-employee relationship is a complex one and is viewed as one of domination, dependency and inequality. Also, this is an area of work where the employer and the employee are mostly females. As a home is the site of work, relations between employer and employee are often not limited to work but spill over as larger support systems. This “confuses and complicates the conceptual clarity between family and work, custom and contract, affection and duty…because the hierarchical arrangements and emotional registers of home must coexist with those of workplace and contract in a capitalist world” (Ray and Qayum, 2009).

In the Indian context, domestic work is generally defined in terms of types of work performed and the time spent at work, i.e., in the employer’s home. Live out and live-in are two distinct categories of domestic work. Live-out work is primarily of two types: first, those who work in one house for the whole day and go back to their homes in the evening and; secondly,
those who work in different houses, moving from one to the other, performing one or more tasks in each household. They may clean in one house, chop vegetables in another and wash clothes in the third, while some others may only perform a task, such as cooking. They often visit these households twice a day though the requirements in some families may be limited to only once a day. Another form of part-time live-out work is in terms of piece-rate. It is often applied to washing clothes and wages are calculated on the basis of buckets of clothes.

Women who work as live-out part-timers are primarily migrants who move to the city with their families or are female construction workers who enter domestic labour when no construction work is available. Some of them are also landless labourers who are displaced when rural areas are absorbed by cities. On moving to the city, they mainly reside in the difficult conditions of slum clusters. They begin work at one or two houses and gradually take up more, depending on their individual capacities, the money needed and their specific stage of life cycle (for example, women with very young children prefer to work in fewer households than older women). Besides learning work, they have to adapt to urban ways of living and a culture different from their own.

The full-timers live with the employer’s family. Studies have reported that the often have no specified work hours with some working for eighteen hours a day. Some do not get any rest during the day while others
may not be given proper food or living space. Non-payment of wages, no weekly leaves or holidays, verbal and sexual abuse is also reported. They have no recourse to any form of assistance when they face harassment – verbal, physical or sexual. A large number of full time workers are hired through recruiting agents who also collect their wages, often withholding a substantial part. Private work agents often recruit girls in villages and bring them to cities. Some agents provide basic training for a couple of days and then send them to homes as domestic workers. Agents also send them untrained. There is no state mechanism to check these agents or their functioning. These agencies are difficult to trace as they frequently change their identities, location and phone numbers. They also charge a large amount from employers for providing domestic helpers. Sexual exploitation by recruiting agents has also been reported. It is important to point out that most agencies are commercial in nature and do not focus on the welfare of workers. The condition of domestic workers has not improved with the growth of placement agencies (Neetha, 2004 and 2009). The present study discusses the domestic worker sociological conditions in the study area.

Sex is an important factor that determines the role of a worker in domestic life. Usually female workers in this sector are employed mainly as unskilled workers or helpers. These female workers will remain as a ‘helper’ in this sector till their retirement or death. There is no practice of employing women workers in this sector as skilled or main workers at any time.