

Muslim Domestics in Hindu Homes: Making Sense of Employer Preferences and Beliefs of ‘Pollution’ in Assam

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Abstract

The employer practices of purity and pollution as embedded in caste and class prejudices, has long been instrumental in defining domestic work relationship in India. Drawing on qualitative, in-depth interviews with middle-class Hindu employers who hires Muslim domestic workers in Guwahati (Assam), this essay attempts to move beyond the caste and class prejudices by focusing on ‘religious’ distinction in understanding the employer beliefs of ‘pollution’ in work relations. The essay draws insights from Mary Douglas’s concept of ‘pollution’, and examines the pollution-induced exclusionary practices of Hindu employers towards Muslim domestic workers in the realm of everyday domestic sphere. Paradoxically, the findings suggest that despite concerns of ‘pollution’, the employers considered Muslim women as a preferred group for domestic work. The essay argues that employer preferences towards these domestic workers, is largely shaped by the social attributes manifested by these workers, and, in part, by employers’ socially constructed needs.

Introduction

Existing scholarships on domestic work in India has extensively dealt on the aspect of ‘pollution’, by emphasising it as a critical area of inquiry in understanding the relationship between employer and her domestic worker. However, these scholars have particularly highlighted the dimensions of caste and class in manoeuvring employer practices of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ (Dickey, 2000; Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Barua, Haukanes & Waldrop, 2017). Significantly, such narratives fail to underline the complexities of a diverse range of aspects which creates the context of ‘pollution’ in domestic work relations. One such aspect is the social distinction of ‘religion’ in the work-place as reflected in this paper. Here, by ‘religion’, the authors do not intend to focus on the broad implications of the term. Rather, the paper emphasises that, much like caste and class, the difference in religious

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faith between an employer and a domestic worker serves as an equally important determinant in (re)producing the inequalities that characterise the relationship.

Drawing insights from the fieldwork with Assamese Hindu employers who hire Muslim domestic workers in Guwahati (located in north-east India), this paper aims to (re)focus on the question of 'pollution' as is rooted in 'religious' distinction. And thereby, attempt to contribute to the nuanced discourse of 'pollution' in domestic work relationship in India. In this context, Mary Douglas's (1984) idea of 'pollution' has been applied to unravel the domestic practices deployed by Hindu employers, with the presence of 'polluted' Muslim domestic workers in their homes. Moreover, in order to fully understand the nuanced perceptions of employers, the authors attempt to further decipher the employers' preferences for Muslim workers, despite their concerns of 'pollution'.

While the focus of this study is on Assamese Hindu employers, it is important to recognise the historical complexity surrounding the question of "who are the Assamese?" and how this category is understood in the context of the present study. Assamese identity under the colonial administration was sparked by a linguistic awakening amongst Assamese elites asserting the distinctiveness of their language, when Bengali was imposed as official language of Assam in 1836 (Guha, 1977). Linguistic assertion shaped Assamese identity in the post-colonial period too, with Assamese being declared as official language of the state under Assam Official Language Act 1960 (Hussain, 1993; Baruah, 2005).

Alongside these linguistic assertions, colonial administrative policies encouraging migration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal to cultivate the barren lands of Assam, significantly transformed the region's demography (Guha, 1977). This generated fear amongst the native population, which further intensified in the post-colonial period with persisting migration from East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, thereby, culminating into the Assam Movement in 1980s (Hussain, 1993). At the core of this movement was the demand to detect and deport illegal migrants in order to safeguard Assamese identity (Hussain, 1993; Baruah, 2005). These historical contestations surrounding migration, identity and belonging have significantly shaped the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within Assamese society, which continue to inform contemporary perceptions of Muslim communities.

At the same time, the question of Assamese identity remained internally contested due to the region's ethnic diversity, particularly amongst tribal communities like Bodos, Rabhas, Mishings, etc. While many of these tribal groups acquired a dual identity of both as tribes and Assamese, strongly supporting the Assam Movement, concerns later emerged regarding the dominance of Assamese speaking identity and the subsequent marginalisation of tribal aspirations (Misra, 1999). These contestations further complicate any singular understanding of Assamese identity.

Significantly, while this raises critical questions about the inclusivity of Assamese identity (Baruah, 2005), in this study, Assamese employers comprised the non-tribal Hindus sharing a common linguistic identity, i.e. Assamese. The study focuses on this category as it tries to understand how the concept of 'pollution' is constructed and negotiated within these households, particularly in relation to religious differences between Hindu employers and Muslim domestic workers.

Discourse on 'Pollution'

In Hindu religious thought, the conceptual ideals of pure and impure or pollution has been integral in governing every aspect of a Hindu man and woman's life for centuries (Dumont, 1980; Shah, 2007). In India, these ideas are specifically important because they determined the structure of Hindu society, in the public as well as the domestic domain. In the public domain, this found expression through ritual ranking of various castes around the dimension of pure and impure, which in turn, is determined by their association with either pure or impure tasks. Based on this, those caste groups which are specialised in impure tasks related to polluting elements like biological or organic waste are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, and are therefore, accorded the status of 'permanent impurity' (Dumont, 1980). On the other hand, in the domestic domain of every Hindu home, the polluted status of an individual is independent of their caste. Everything, from a woman after child birth to a dead body, relatives of a dead person, defecation, or a menstruating woman etc. are considered polluted (Dumont, 1980; Apte, 1988; Shah, 2007). And this creates a consensus for a status of 'temporary impurity', wherein the person is considered to become pure only after observing the rules of purification (Dumont, 1980). Although, in contemporary urban India, the contexts related to 'pollution' are loosening, yet, it continues to persist strongly in relation to tasks like cleaning streets and toilets (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Shah, 2007; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011), and in the field of religion, as seen in the form of worshipping deities, a menstruating woman is prohibited from performing *puja* or fixing marriage dates, till a bath is taken during such times (Shah, 2007).

Mary Douglas's analysis of 'pollution' or 'dirt' covers a wide range of societal contexts, wherein she essentially defines 'dirt' as a 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1984, p. 36). According to her, varying ideas of 'dirt' or 'pollution' and its related behaviour exists universally in all societies, driving its people to conform to certain ritual practices of purity. She opines that, dirt or categories of pure and impure are not absolute, rather it is relationally constituted and is therefore, relative. What is clean or pure in relation to one thing may be unclean or impure in relation to another and vice-versa (Douglas, 1984, p. 8-9).

Significantly, in the context of domestic work performed within intimate spaces of one's home, the idea of 'pollution' or 'dirt' is dynamic. According to Chakrabarty (1992), on the one hand, everyday cleaning and removal of 'dirt' from one's home is a way of marking symbolic boundaries of the home, thereby, delineating it as a space devoid of 'pollution'. On the other hand, it serves as a crucial marker for middle-class women to

reproduce their ideal gendered identities in the realm of everyday lives (Chakrabarty, 1992). Interestingly, in this light, middle-class women have traditionally been considered instrumental in upholding the dichotomy between *ghar* and *bahir* i.e., home and all that represents the outside world (Chatterjee, 1989). They are entrusted with crucial roles in conserving the purity of their home, which includes the spiritual, cultural and physical elements (Dickey, 2000). In the light of these claims, middle-class women, as protectors of their home are actively engaged in practices which separate the 'polluted' from the 'pure'. In the context of paid domestic work, it is such practices of separation of pure and impure or polluted by middle-class employers, which have been central in defining their relationship with domestic workers.

More recently, there is a growing scholarship on domestic work in India, which extensively highlights on employer's practices of exclusion, as embedded in caste and class induced beliefs of 'pollution'. For instance, in the context of Kanpur, Froystad (2003) reflects on the idea of 'pollution' within the discourse of caste, by emphasising on the gradation of domestic tasks and its relative assignment to domestic workers based on their caste identities. Mattila's (2011) study in Jaipur, highlights similar exclusionary practices of employers based on workers' caste identities. In Kolkata, Ray and Qayum mark (2010) highlight the subtle practices through which caste structures the labour relationship between employer and domestic worker. By going beyond the caste, Dickey (2000) emphasises class as the foreground for employer's perception of 'pollution'. She noted that, in Madurai, employers commonly perceived servants as embodiment of 'dirtiness', who acted as a vehicle to transport dirt and infection into their middle-class homes. According to her, middle-class employers are more concerned about the worker's lower class positions than their caste, as even the high caste domestic workers are considered as 'hosts of dirt' (ibid, p. 476). On a similar note, Barua, Haukenes and Waldrop (2017) in their study with middle-class employers in Mumbai and Chennai, underscores the employer's perception of exclusion as subjected to class induced notions of pollution, wherein their main concern remains in maintaining distance from the 'unclean and unfit servant body' (p. 491).

Notably, while the contours of caste and class in domestic work are integral in highlighting the exclusionary practices of employers, there is little discussion on how the religion of a domestic worker shape everyday labour relations. However, interestingly in the context of Guwahati, this very aspect happens to be an underlining theme, as Hindu employers overtly discuss their beliefs of 'pollution', emanating particularly from the cultural practice of beef consumption by the Muslim domestic workers.

Cattle or cows have been traditionally considered as sacred by the Hindus. As per Hindu culture, it is seen as a representative of God, and worshipped across India. Moreover, being extolled in Vedism as a cosmic symbol, the universal mother and source of food, even the involuntary killing of a cow is perceived as a serious offence amongst the Hindus (Dumont, 1980). In Assam, this can further be associated with the political turn of events in the recent times. With the passing of 'The Assam Cattle Preservation (Amendment) Bill' by the Assam Assembly in August, 2021, the state adopted a

stricter measure by replacing the 'Cattle Preservation Act' of 1950. According to the provisions of the new Bill, regulations are mandated in the slaughter, transportation and consumption of cattle in the state³. In this light, the consumption of cows by Muslims, makes them inherently polluted, thereby, creating a context which indicate the 'unhygienic and ritually impure state' (Sharma, 2016, p. 54) of their beings. As noted by Mary Douglas, 'our polluted behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea, likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications' (Douglas, 1984, p. 37).

In the light of these perceptions, this essay is framed within Mary Douglas's (1984) idea of 'pollution'. It is an attempt to understand the practices of purity or pollution in middle-class Hindu households who recruit Muslim domestic workers. The Muslim domestic workers in this context are East-Bengal origin Muslims, i.e. the Miya or Miya Muslims, who comprises one of the significant categories of part-time domestic workers in Guwahati. The Miya Muslims are the descendants of the Muslims from East Bengal (now Bangladesh), who migrated to Assam in large numbers mainly during the early twentieth century, that continued after the post-partition years, until the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. They are distinguished from the Assamese Muslims called as *tholua* or *khilonjia* meaning original inhabitant (Baruah, 2020). They are pejoratively called as 'Miya', a term that has been traditionally used by Assamese people while referring to the particular community (ibid.). In Assam, the term signifies a slur implying 'Bangladeshi' or 'illegal immigrant'. However, in 2016 in Assam, with the rise of a radical Miya poetry movement comprising of young poets, the word 'Miya' used as slur against the community was re-appropriated by these young activists (ibid.). They use the term 'Miya' 'because of its assimilative assumptions, and to *Bengali-origin Muslims* because that designation fails to take into account that, newer generations of the community- or even their parents- are not immigrants, but were born in Assam' (ibid., p. 53). In this light, Baruah (2020) uses the term 'Miya' or 'Miya Muslim' while referring to the community, in his latest book. Drawing from him, we have referred to the East-Bengal origin Muslim domestic workers in this essay as Miya domestic workers or Miya Muslim domestic workers. Moreover, this in part is also influenced by the self-identification of the East Bengal-origin Muslim domestic workers in the study as Miya *Musolman*. Nevertheless, the study recognises that such identification is not uniform across the community, and that, the term continues to carry stigmatised connotations (Baruah, 2020), particularly in the contemporary political context of Assam, where narratives of illegal immigration and demographic threat have gained renewed prominence⁴. Furthermore, the study also acknowledges that, the term being embedded within broader relations of power and identity, appears as a contested social signifier whose meanings are continuously negotiated within specific historical and political contexts of Assam.

³<https://prcindia.org/theprsblog/assam%E2%80%99s-new-cattle-preservation-law> Retrieved on 15.04.2025. Moreover, with the amendment of the Act in the state, any violation of the cited provisions would invite imprisonment of the perpetrator for at least 3 years, and a fine varying from 3 to 5 lakhs <https://www.tehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-assembly-passes-cow-protection-bill/article35905184.ece>. Retrieved on 15.04.2025

⁴<https://www.newsggram.com/assam/2026/01/26/assam-cm-threatens-muslims-eviction-demographic>. Retrieved on 27.01.2026.

Against this socio-political backdrop, the presence of Miya Muslim domestic workers within Assamese Hindu households assumes a particular significance. Intriguingly, it is interesting to note that, while all the Hindu employers perceived Muslims as ‘ritually impure’ (Mattila, 2011), concomitantly they recruit Muslim women for reproducing their gendered identities. This essentially raises questions like, on what basis are the preferences of Hindu employers shaped in recruiting a Muslim domestic worker? How do employers negotiate the general perception of ‘pollution’ in everyday lives in context of a Muslim domestic worker?

In addressing some of these questions, this essay extends the discourse on the existing scholarship on domestic work in India, by arguing that the hierarchies of caste and class are not the overarching aspects in influencing employers’ practices of ‘pollution’. Furthermore, in context of the Miya Muslim women, their social locations as domestic workers are influenced by a complex interplay of class, religion and ethnicity in Assam.

The Field and Methodology

The fieldwork is conducted in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. Popularly known as ‘gateway to North-East India’, Guwahati came to prominence, as a city in 1972, with reorganisation of the state capital from Shillong. It was only after attainment of the status of state capital, the city witnessed urban development which led to an exponential growth of population, primarily comprising of migrants (Mahadevi, Desai & Mishra, 2014).

In contemporary times, the city is accredited as one of the fastest-growing urban centers of India. And in North-East India, it is recognised as the largest metropolis and a major regional hub for economic activities. Such developments further contributed towards massive inward migration in the city. While, the poor migrated from rural areas of Assam in order to escape the shackles of poverty and hardship, the middle-class migrated for better employment opportunities and standards of living, and the affluent classes migrated to reap the benefits of living in the city (Mahadevi, Desai & Mishra, 2014). Additionally, people from the other states of India also migrated in search of better economic opportunities. All this together, accorded to a heterogeneous demographic profile in the city. This heterogeneity, therefore, makes Guwahati an interesting area of investigation in the context of paid domestic work, as it entails a nuanced understanding of the personalised interactions amongst people from different backgrounds such as class, ethnic, religious, and caste in the realm of everyday lives.

The data has been collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with twenty-five Assamese Hindu women who have recruited Miya Muslim domestic workers. In addition, information has also been gathered through observation of domestic practices in several other households in the city. All the women are interviewed in their respective homes, with each interview lasting about one-to-two hours. These women represented a wide spectrum of middle-class. Unlike the colonial period, where middle-class as a social group was recognised more or

less as homogeneous through their engagement in reform movement and institutions like school, legal system, state-run offices and urban infrastructure (Donner & Neve, 2011), in contemporary times, the middle-class as a social category cannot be reduced to a single entity. This study locates the middle-class women in Guwahati through classificatory practices of: educational and occupational aspects, symbolic aspects like their practices of consumption and lifestyles, embodied cultural practices of traditional values of domesticity and morality (Talukdar & Kikhi, 2023).

The middle-class women in this study are between the age group of thirty-four to seventy-five. While, most of them are college graduates, ten are employed in various sectors like school, college, and in government jobs; nine are home-makers; five are retired professionals; and one has her own business on clothing line (*mekhela sador*)⁵. Most of them lived in single-pattern houses; while eight of them lived in apartment buildings owning a flat of two-to-three BHK, and two of them are tenants renting a floor in large houses. They are all married and have been employing domestic workers for more than five years, wherein, the most common form of recruitment is part-time domestic workers⁶.

Initial contact with a few of these women (interviewed) was established through a network of known families of the first researcher. This facilitated entry into the otherwise private spaces of home, where trust serves as a central condition for acceptance. Subsequently, these initial respondents further helped in establishing contact within their circle of friends, thus facilitating an expansion of the respondents. All the respondents in this study are residents of Uzanbazar locality, which is one of the oldest residential areas of Guwahati. In order to maintain anonymity of the respondents, pseudonyms have been used throughout the essay. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that, although, this essay is primarily built on narratives of Assamese Hindu employers, it also engages, in part, with accounts of the Miya Muslim domestic workers which corroborate the discriminatory practices of employer.

Besides, the fieldwork being conducted by the first researcher, it is shaped by the researcher's positionality as a female, middle-class, Assamese Hindu living in Guwahati. This significantly helped in shaping accessibility and rapport building with the women respondents, and in interpretation of the data collected. While the personal networks of the researcher helped in facilitating entry into the intimate domestic spaces, the shared gendered location of the researcher and respondents enabled a conversational comfort surrounding discussions of domestic work and everyday practices, which are largely mediated through women within households. Further, being similarly positioned as a middle-class Assamese Hindu living in Guwahati created a sense of familiarity, allowing the respondents to overtly share their domestic practices involving the Miya domestic workers, including their notions of religious differences and ideas of purity and pollution. However, this also necessitated reflexivity, as it posed the risk of over-

⁵ An ethnic Assamese outfit.

⁶ These workers typically comprise of those who live in their own houses and perform specific tasks for multiple employers either once or twice a day (Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2009).

looking certain assumptions, thus, limiting critical engagement in the interpretation of respondents' responses. To address this, conscious effort was taken to move beyond the taken-for-granted responses by asking follow-up questions, thereby, avoiding presumption of a shared understanding emerging from similarities in social location. Moreover, revisiting field notes during data analysis also enabled an examination of how shared social location might influence the interpretation of data.

Discussions

This section of the essay delineates the findings as per (sub) themes, which have been established after interacting with the employers. While, the narratives of the employers are primarily a reflection of concerns of 'pollution' with the presence of Miya Muslim women in their homes, this does not culminate into their non-recruitment. Rather interestingly, the employers are seen deeming these women as a preferred group for paid domestic work, whereby, the 'polluted status' of these beings are negotiated by deploying certain overt practices of distinction. It is from the vantage of the employer's perspective; we are presenting the findings in two sections. The first section discusses employer's practices in relation to the 'polluted other' in their homes. And, the second section elucidates their preferences for a Miya Muslim domestic worker, despite perceiving them as polluted.

Pollution Induced Domestic Practices

Practice of Segregation

Earlier scholars have shown domestic workers as people living in the margins of society and are widely stereotyped as 'polluted' or 'dirty' beings by the middle-class employers (Dickey, 2000; Mattila, 2011; Barua, Haukenes & Waldrop, 2017). This resembles Mary Douglas' observation that, 'all margins are dangerous' (Douglas, 1984, p. 122). Similar perception is seen in the field, whereby, the employers are engaged in common practices of segregation with their domestic workers in the form of separate sitting arrangements and assigning separate set of utensils. Notably, while such practices perpetuate untouchability on a daily basis, and are manifestations of traditional caste based notions of pollution; these scholars have shown that domestic workers are subjected to such distinction primarily on grounds of employer's class prejudices. As also observed by Ray and Qayum, '...domestic servitude is a class relation rooted in extreme inequality and expressed through class distinctions that have been carefully nurtured and maintained over time' (Ray & Qayum, 2010, p. 145).

Typically, the present work resembles the existing scholarships, wherein, domestic workers in general are considered as an embodiment of 'dirt, disease and danger' (Dickey, 2000). Apart from the normative arrangements related to sitting which are common for all domestic workers, the findings from the field reveals that the norms related to maintaining separate utensils appeared to be starker for the Muslim domestic workers. This can be best illustrated from a first-hand experience in an employer's home, where two part-time domestic workers are employed- a Miya Muslim and a

Bihari⁷ Hindu woman, employed separately for cleaning and cooking respectively. While, it is usual like in any other households for both the workers to have a separate set of utensils, strangely the set used by the Bihari woman was kept inside the kitchen, but, the utensils of the Miya woman failed to find a place inside the kitchen. It was kept outside the kitchen, in a rack which stood alone in a separate corner. This can be understood through Guru's (2012) notion of spatial (re)structuring, where social hierarchies are reproduced through everyday practices. Here, the kitchen appears as a space of ritual purity, the access to which is carefully structured by placing the Miya Muslim worker's set of utensils outside, thus, signifying her exclusion from the pure space. Such arrangements suggest of a symbolic power that strengthens social distance and hierarchy within a given household space.

Moreover, the difference in deliberate discrimination towards both the workers can be inferred from their relative unequal positions in terms of their nature of work i.e., cleaning and cooking. Nevertheless, this also bears testament to the deeper inequalities shaped by their religious identities.

Although, Muslims in general are considered polluted as per the traditional Hindu perception because of beef consumption (Dumont, 1980; Butalia, 1998), it is pertinent to observe that in relation to Muslim domestic workers, the employer's perception of pollution appeared to be shaped by twin factors of beef consumption and their social class. As an employer remarks: 'the Muslims of the lower classes consume beef on a regular basis, as it is cheaper in price'. From this, it could be argued that, the practices of characteristic 'difference' in a domestic work relationship are an embodiment of a complex interplay of class and religion. Intriguingly, this can further be accentuated from Bhumi's testimony when she narrated about the discriminatory practice towards a Muslim labourer of the past by her mother-in-law. Considering his lower-class position and religious background, he was served food in a banana leaf in a space near the bathroom. But, with his son attaining higher education, and a better socio-economic position, there was visible change towards his treatment, as she states: 'now, whenever, he visits us occasionally, he is given a seat on the chair, and is served food like all. It will be disrespectful to treat him like earlier times'. This suggests that the stigma of pollution can be mitigated through an upward mobility of class. However, situations of similar mobility was a rare possibility for Miya Muslim women engaged as domestic workers, whose continued association with 'dirty' or 'unclean' tasks in their employer's house, supplemented by their cultural consumption of beef, sustains their positions as 'polluting' within the household.

Division of Household Tasks

Division of household tasks forms another manifestation of employer's practices of distinction towards their Muslim domestic workers, i.e. the Miya women. In India, food preparation has traditionally been considered as ritually pure, which should be cooked with pure hands. Douglas observes that in the context of India, ritual purity to the process

⁷A person hailing from the state of Bihar is referred to as a 'Bihari' here.

of cooking is significant, 'for food is produced by the combined efforts of several castes of varying degrees of purity... before being admitted to the body, some clear symbolic break is needed to express food's separation from necessary but impure contacts. The cooking process entrusted to pure hands, provides this ritual break' (Douglas, 1984, p. 128). Drawing from this, it can be inferred that, considering the perceived impure status of the Miya women, they are not hired as cooks in Hindu households, thus, limiting them to tasks only associated with cleaning.

However, considering the active participation of middle-class families towards the fast growing culture of new spaces of consumption, in the form of food courts in malls (Donner, 2011), in addition to dine-in fancy restaurants, takeaway services and booming of online food delivery chains (Swiggy, Zomato), one might naturally argue that such division in household tasks stands to be self-contradictory. While, this could be partly true, as the identity of the cook in such spaces of consumption is not known to the consumers. But, it at the same time reflects the traditional beliefs of middle-class domesticity where the boundaries between (*bahir*) public and (*ghar*) private are clearly pronounced. In this sense, there is a distinction between foods prepared in one's own home from those in restaurants. And this therefore, makes concerns related to identity and 'pollution' beliefs, a potent factor while hiring a cook amongst middle-class households in the present study.

Nevertheless, in most Hindu households, the Miya Muslims are assigned the labourious tasks related to cooking like cleaning of rice, grains, lentils, fish, chopping of vegetables and so forth, thereby, reiterating the traditional perception of 'pollution' not being transmitted through uncooked food. Arguably, this mirrors the idea of 'pollution' which is testament to the ideology of caste pollution, as reflected in other Indian cities, wherein lower caste Dalits are prohibited from handling cooked food, but, not uncooked food (Froystad, 2003; Mattila, 2011). Besides, moving beyond the dichotomy of cooked and uncooked food, these practices show space as sites of inequality, yielding hierarchical access (Guru, 2009; 2012). Here, the kitchen acts as a pure space, it's accessibility is carefully regulated. While the Miya Muslim domestic workers are not entirely excluded, but their inclusion is strategically reduced to the periphery through the assignment of labour-induced preparatory tasks related to cooking.

The findings further bring light to the spatial differentiation through employer concerns of 'pollution' in relation to the domestic task of washing used utensils. For instance, there are employers who restrained the Miya domestic worker from washing utensils like *karahi* (a large round metal pot) and pressure cooker where main meals for the family are prepared, while allowing them to wash all other daily utensils used by the family. From the perspective of these employers, such practice of separation is considered essential for maintaining purity of the food to be cooked in these utensils. Drawing from Guru (2009, 2012), this reflects how everyday domestic practices reproduce spatialised forms of inequality, where concerns of pollution is not merely symbolic, but actively maintained through spatial regulation by reducing the Miya domestic workers further into marginality.

Division of Household Space

In any Hindu households, the kitchen and *puja ghor* (prayer house) are the most sacred spaces. While, kitchen is considered as the abode of Goddess Lakshmi, the *puja ghor* consists of numerous idols and images of Hindu gods and goddesses (Das, 2008). Both the spaces are considered as an embodiment of purity and holiness, strongly guarded from any forms of polluted contacts. In the context of the present study, the Miya domestic workers, who are perceived as 'ritually impure beings', are best kept away from the sacred spaces. The rules regarding inaccessibility of *puja ghor* are upheld by all the Hindu families, but the rules pertaining to accessibility of kitchen area, varied for different families. While, several employers referred about their acquaintances, who strictly kept their Miya domestic workers out of the kitchen, Abha reported about the rule/s in practice at her house. Married to a Brahmin family, she explicitly discussed about the age-old practices of purity/pollution being followed by her mother-in-law. Recalling her days as a young bride, she said about her initial difficulties in adjusting to purity rules in her in-law's house. But, with time, she spoke of incorporating certain changes into the family rules, with minor resistances from her mother-in-law. In this, the most recent change is the induction of a Miya domestic worker into their house, which led to the construction of two separate kitchens under a roof. Abha explains,

It was quite a task to convince her (mother-in-law), initially to hire a maid of different faith. But, thankfully, my husband intervened and things worked out. She loves her son a lot, and can never imagine of side-lining his words (laughs). That is how it worked out, and we hired Morjina (her domestic worker). She has been working since the past one year in our house, but, my mother-in-law does not allow her to clean her bedroom. She does it by herself. At first, she also imposed restrictions on the maid from entering the kitchen. This made things very difficult for me. So, recently, when we renovated our house, we carved out a separate kitchen for her, adjacent to our kitchen. Now, the rule related to entry of kitchen is strictly limited to her kitchen.

Her narrative exemplifies how structures of exclusion are rearranged within changing domestic spheres. Located within a Brahmin household, while the initial resistance of her mother-in-law from hiring a Muslim domestic reflects persistence of the notions of pollution on grounds of religion, her eventual acceptance is mediated through patriarchal authority – specifically, the son's intervention. This indicates that transformation in household practices are not necessarily driven by a change in ideology, but are more an effect of intra-family power hierarchies, where the son's authority determined the nature of adaptation.

However, it is noteworthy that, such adaptation does not necessarily challenge the existing hierarchies; instead it modifies them while maintaining the underlining structures of exclusion. While a Muslim domestic is allowed entry into the household, her spatial integration is carefully regulated (Guru, 2009). The continued restriction on accessing the mother-in-law's bedroom and initial exclusion from the kitchen indicates a form of her conditional acceptance within the household. The subsequent creation of

a separate kitchen is particularly significant, wherein the binaries of purity and pollution get institutionalised within the everyday domestic space (Guru, 2012). Arguably, such an arrangement reflects a form of inclusion, where the worker's acceptance is strategically negotiated without challenging the symbolic order that constructs her as ritually impure. In this, Abha's role is illustrative of the tensions of middle-class modernity, where her negotiation with the ideology of purity is reorganised in light of fulfilling her daily domestic needs.

Furthermore, such spatial segregation gets reinforced through everyday practices that reproduce symbolic boundaries at an embodied level, when Abha later adds in reference to her mother-in-law:

At times, I find it so funny when she asks the maid to wash her clothes. It is a sight to watch, after the maid finishes washing her clothes, she rinses the washed clothes again by herself in clean water, before hanging it to dry.

Such practices reflect that notions of purity are not rigid. Instead, her mother-in-law's behaviour is indicative of exercising symbolic control over pollution in situations where dependence on the domestic worker's labour becomes necessary. Here, the act of rinsing the washed clothes is less about cleanliness, and more about restoring the ritual superiority which momentarily gets diluted through contact with the Muslim maid. It can, thus, be inferred that the induction of a Muslim domestic worker in this Brahmin household is negotiated primarily at the level of labour, while the spatial and ritual strategies continued to reproduce the caste-like hierarchies within the household.

Such sentiments of inter-generational differences in hiring a Muslim for domestic work are also reflected in several other employers' narratives in this study. What is particularly intriguing about these narratives are, how it echoed a linear pattern in describing the discriminating domestic practices of their older generations. For instance, the most common being the prohibition from hiring a Muslim for domestic tasks inside the house. And in situations when they happened to enter the house, every corner which came in contact with these 'impure beings' are sprinkled with *tulsi pani* (holy basil water), as a ritual of purification. Notably, while such practices formed an integral part of the earlier generations of these families, the employers exonerated themselves from similar discriminatory practices. Indeed, it is found that by recounting such practices of the past, these employers particularly affirmed their liberal and flexible approach towards their Muslim domestic worker in the present times. Nevertheless, as the preceding narrative reflects, although, these employers sought to emphasise on their flexibility in hiring a Muslim domestic worker at the rhetoric level, this does not necessarily challenge the underlying rationale of purity and pollution of their earlier generations. Rather, it persists in subtle forms, whereby, they are seen reproducing certain symbolic distinction bearing resemblances to the practices of their earlier generations. In this, the most common distinction found reflection through their recruitment choices, when they expressed their disinclination in hiring a Muslim woman as cook in their kitchen. Moreover, in certain cases, in order to maintain the 'purity' of their homes in the public

eye, employers are seen administering fictive Hindu names to their Muslim domestic workers, which is discussed in the next section.

Administering Fictive Hindu Names

Giving a fictive Hindu name to a Muslim domestic worker is a further manifestation of the employer negotiating 'pollution'. In the context of Kolkata, Ray and Qayum (2010) in their study emphasises a similar enactment of fiction in middle-class Hindu families residing adjacent to the areas of Muslim slums. Here, the Hindu employer and the Muslim worker create a fiction, wherein, despite the awareness of employer, the Muslim maid presents herself with a Hindu name, while seeking work. And, the employer in turn, chooses not to respond (Ray & Qayum, 2010). However, in the context of the present study, i.e. Guwahati city, it is different in the sense that, the employer's accessibility of domestic workers is not limited to Muslims, as Hindu domestic workers –both Assamese and Bihari women- has also been employed as domestic workers for the last several decades. It is a social fact as the study reveals, that the Hindu employers deliberately hired Miya Muslim domestic workers, and gave fictive Hindu names to their worker, in order to avoid unwarranted ordeal from friends and extended family members. One such employer is Dipa, who explained,

In my mother's place, we have never hired any Muslim maid to work in our homes till date. We either had Bengali Hindu or Assamese Hindu working at our place. It was only here, in my in-law's place where I had experience with Muslim maids for the first time. Frankly speaking, when I was new to the house, I had problems with a Muslim working in the house, entering the kitchen. I was shocked to see a Muslim maid washing utensils of the temple (she says that with a raised eyebrow). But, when I came into this family, I did not allow them to wash the utensils of the temple; I used to do it myself.

However, while, for Abha, the Brahmin origins and rigid domestic practices appeared as a struggle, which in turn led to set-up of two separate kitchens under a roof, Dipa's upbringing in a household that never employed Muslim domestics shaped her perceptions of religious boundaries as non-negotiable. This in turn led her to reassert internalised perceptions of purity and exclusion in her marital home by regulating the domestic space, thus, maintaining a ritual hierarchy. However, with passing time, in light of contemporary domestic needs and her dependence on outsourced domestic labour, she says about negotiating her inherited ideologies of purity and exclusion:

It was only from the past few years, I allowed my maid to wash it. In a way you can say, I have adjusted to it, more so because of the liberal attitude of my in-laws. You can say I have learned from them. But, I used to hide it from my mother and sisters back then that the maid serving us is a Muslim. They would have never come to my house and eat, if I told them. Even now, a Miya woman works for me, but, I have never let my mother's family know about it. Whenever, they are around during her work hours, I address Nazia (her Miya domestic) with a Hindu name, and she has

no issues with it. In fact, the best thing about Nazia is that she does not look like a Miya. She has this dark complexion and wears a nose pin. She looks more like a South Indian. So, that really works, and if anyone from my mother's family inquires if she is of a different ethnic group, I simply nod my head. I do not go for any further explanation.

While her narrative exemplifies a shift from initial reluctance to the gradual inclusion of a Muslim domestic worker to perform tasks previously considered as polluting, this inclusion appears to be conditional. This gets reflected through her practice of concealment and assigning a fictive Hindu name to her Muslim domestic in presence of her natal family. Such acts are indicative of symbolic domination, where the employer exercises power to erase and reassign an identity in light of dominant Hindu norms, thereby, preserving the perceived 'purity' of her home. According to the beliefs of her mother's family, the very presence of a Muslim domestic worker created the context of 'pollution' impelling Dipa to 'distort the uncomfortable fact' (Douglas, 1984) of the worker's identity. The fictive story, thus, weaved in support of her domestic worker entailed Dipa to protect her home from being stereotyped as 'polluted', in her family's eyes. As Douglas observes, 'so long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous' (Douglas, 1984, p. 161). Moreover, at the same time, the worker's consent in being part of Dipa's fictive story is indicative of her constrained agency within an unequal labour relationship. While her labour is functionally essential for the household, her social identity is rendered invisible. This reveals the strategic negotiation of the boundaries of purity and pollution, where on one hand, it accommodates the practical needs of middle-class domesticity, on the other, it preserves the moral order of a Hindu home in public eye.

Significantly, as this essay reflects on the employer's perspectives, the account of domestic workers is not highlighted. However, it is relevant to note that, similar stories of attributing fictive Hindu names to their acquaintances as well as to themselves are also echoed by several Miya domestic workers. While, they are aware that such practices are influenced by the 'pollution' concerns of their Hindu employers, they at the same time are seen being part of these fictions without any resistance, as seen in the case of Dipa's domestic worker.

Arguably, on the surface, such domestic practices might appear as a representation of beliefs surrounding 'pollution' concerns. However, concomitantly it can be linked to 'religious othering' in the context of paid domestic work, wherein prejudices against certain religious groups are re-established in society.

Understanding Employer's Preferences

Having found about the employer perception of 'pollution' and their subsequent practices of 'othering' towards Muslim domestic workers i.e., the Miya women, how do we decipher their preferences for the particular group of domestic workers? We would like to argue that the employer preferences towards these domestic workers,

albeit their concerns of 'pollution', is shaped by the social attributes manifested by these workers, and, in part, by employers socially constructed needs. As observed by Rollins, 'the personality of the worker and the kinds of relationships employers were able to establish with them, were as or more important considerations' (Rollins, 1985, p. 156).

'Miya Women are Docile': Subservience at Workplace

Domestic workers, as subordinate 'others' in their employer's household space are expected to possess qualities of subservience. Significantly, in a domestic work relationship, subservient behaviour forms the basic fundamental requirement because, 'it confirms the inequality and each party's position in relationship to the other' (Rollins, 1985, p. 157). In this sense, the domestic workers are expected to convey a certain attitude towards the work, wherein, she displays willingness to undertake any assigned tasks, and express pleasure in serving (Rollins, 1985). Undermining such acts of subservience by domestic workers appeared as a deterrent to employers. This, in a way, directly contributed in buttressing employer stereotypes towards those groups of domestic workers who were short of such expectations. In the present study, while it was particularly the Assamese⁸ Hindu domestic workers who failed to meet such employer expectations of subservience, the Bihari Hindu women, on the other hand, were perceived as 'too clever' for domestic work by some employers. It is in this light; the Miya women are perceived as attractive for domestic work as they displayed outward signs of subservience at work. Such statements are manifested from the various comments of the employers like, 'Miya women are docile', 'A Miya maid does not argue with you face to face', 'The Miyas are clever, they will never do anything which offends you as an employer', 'Miyas are hard-working'.

Interestingly, scholars on domestic work has shown that outward displaying of subservient behaviour is also used as a strategy by many domestic workers in satisfying the employer's desire (Rollins, 1985; Cock, 1989; Constable, 2007; Barua, Haukenes & Waldrop, 2016). On a similar note, in conversations with several Miya women, who expressed consciousness in their acts of subservience commonly remarked, 'we need the money and they need our labour. So, mostly we avoid unnecessary arguments, and abide by what is asked, otherwise the loss is ours'. Arguably, their act of subservience appears as a 'protective disguise' (Cock, 1989, p. 102), which entailed them in creating a positive outlook in the minds of the employers towards them, without jeopardising the work relationship.

In the case of few other Miya women, it is significant that the display of subservience is more than monetary. These women particularly consisted of those, who mainly migrated to the city as labour migrants to earn a living. They mostly started off with odd jobs in public spaces of the city, mostly as construction site workers or as cleaners in roadside hotels. But, such jobs were perceived as insecure by these women, wherein

⁸ Here, by Assamese domestic workers, the employers are mainly referring to the Hindu non-tribal people speaking Assamese as their mother tongue.

they said of facing unwarranted sexual advances from male counterparts. In this regard, finding work in private space of employer's home as a domestic worker acted as a source of security for them, as they worked under women employers. Henceforth, in order to sustain their work as a paid domestic worker, it can be inferred that, they had fewer difficulties in outwardly expressing their subservience at work. Several of them are also seen undertaking any tasks assigned to them, even toilet-cleaning, which they essentially considered as a lowly task. Significantly, in various micro-level studies in India, scholars have highlighted that, workers who clean toilets are always from the lowest castes (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; Shah, 2007; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). Moreover, historically, non-Dalit workers have always resisted assignment of tasks that are considered lower in caste hierarchy and hence polluting (Sharma, 2016). As Srinivas (1995) stated about the colonial period, wherein due to such resistances, 'the British were forced to learn from the confusing array of castes and religion whom they could hire for what job' (p. 7).

In the context of Guwahati, all the residential apartment buildings, hired sweepers to sweep the yard, where they also cleaned the toilets of a few households. But, interaction with the employers, suggests most of them either preferred cleaning their toilets themselves or asked their part-time domestic worker, particularly Miya women to clean it, for which they paid an extra 30-50 rupees for the day. In one of the interviews, an employer particularly praised her Miya domestic worker because she never hesitated to clean the toilet, a task which she could not ask other domestic workers to perform. On being asked about the reason, she flatly responded, 'cleaning shit in people's houses is associated with low dignity. And not all does such tasks. Even you as an employer will feel embarrassed to ask an Assamese or Bihari or any Hindu in that matter to clean your toilet. What if they get offended?' Further, offering pragmatic reasons for her preferences for Miya domestic worker, she says that they are the best alternatives of *metors* (sweepers), as *metors* are too demanding: 'They are always up to robbing you off, with an unimaginable rate. They will come to your place in the pretext of cleaning your toilets and while leaving, they will damage a part of your toilet, so that it leads to overflowing of shit, and you call them again. This way they get a chance to rob you again'. A Miya woman in this light is mostly perceived as '*chhalak*' (shrewd) by employers, who 'knows to keep their employer happy'. It is significant, however, that the usage of the word '*chhalak*' here is not used in negative sense of the term, but, rather in a way of appreciating their subservient behaviour at workplace.

Negotiation of Social Boundaries

In discussion with the employers, it is found that their preferences in large part are also shaped by the ways in which domestic workers negotiated their social boundaries. Considering the unique nature of domestic work, where employers and workers meet as 'isolated pairs' (Sotelo, 1994) in employers' private space, both the groups build their own mechanisms in dealing with the inequality that characterises the relationship. Lan (2003) in her work in Taiwan, highlights the various strategies resorted by Filipina domestic workers in downplaying inequality with their employers. One such strategy

is 'highlighting status similarity' with their employers. This is mainly resorted to, by those workers who see themselves as equal to their employers. For instance, the highly educated Filipinas defined domestic service as skilled work and underscore its similarity to their previous working experience in Philippines or they used English to communicate with their employers to show that they belong to the middle-class (ibid., p. 545). De Regt (2009) mentions similar trajectories in the Republic of Yemen, where Yemeni and Somali women found difficult to accept their positions as domestic workers based on their social, cultural and religious closeness with Yemeni employers. In a similar vein, employers in the present study, while emphasising their preferences for Miya Muslim domestic workers, are frequently heard recounting Assamese Hindu women as a group of domestic workers, who downplayed inequality in the work. This can be best illustrated from Nami's testimony,

Assamese maids are always ready with a list of their personal problems. They do not know to balance their work and home. They bring their personal problems to work place. I am speaking from my experience. Like my previous Assamese maid, she was always busy with her phone during work hours, and that irritated me a lot. She being unmarried, and the only earning member of her house was always in the thought of her own problems. At times of emergency when I needed her the most, she was never able to turn up. But, with Noori (her current Miya domestic), that is not the case. She is always available, although she too has her own set of familial issues. My point is that she knows to manage things. And, a good thing about her is that she lives alone in Guwahati, while both her kids are in her native village with her mother. So, this equation really works. Moreover, Assamese people belonging to the working class are largely aram bhal pua manuh (leisure loving people). They have a lot of do's and don'ts, and lack the basic respect in the relationship. Probably, they think they are the natives of Assam, so why bother people so much. This is the reason why the Bangladeshi Miyas are entering everywhere. They are better and sincere at work. They do not shy away from hard labour, which clearly makes them a preferred choice.

It is observed, in addition to reinforcing the essential requirement of subservience in a domestic work relationship, Nami's testimony indicates several other reasons in expressing her preference for a Miya woman. She goes beyond the domestic sphere, wherein she constructs prejudices against Assamese domestic workers by emphasising the attributes of working class Assamese people in general as, 'leisure loving people'. Similar sentiments are echoed by almost every employer in this study, where they commonly retorted Assamese domestic workers as 'lazy'. This argument is stated by contrasting them with Miya domestic workers who are believed to be 'hard-working'. However, it is noteworthy that, at surface level such prejudices against Assamese domestic workers is not simply influenced by the efficiency of Miya domestic workers. Rather, it is also closely related to the social and economic vulnerability (Bremman, 1996) of Miya domestics in the city. As in the case of Noori above, her limited familial responsibilities in the city, combined with her dependence on wage labour to sustain her children in her native village, makes her more available to meet the employer's

demands. This underscores a broader pattern within domestic labour markets, where employer preferences are shaped by limited bargaining power of workers, which in turn sustains a relationship of control (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). Arguably, this exemplifies a form of strategic inclusion of Miya workers into Hindu households, precisely because their marginalised social positions ensure compliance to any domestic arrangement.

It also gives account of the power structures that operates within the household space. Drawing on Gopal Guru (2009; 2012) who analyses caste as being organised through the regulation of spatial boundaries, the household space does not merely represent an intimate private sphere, but a space where hierarchy is actively produced. The recruitment of a Miya domestic worker in Hindu household, therefore, is not solely for utilitarian purpose. Rather, it is shaped by unequal power relations that favour those with minimal capacity to negotiate.

Moreover, the study reveals that employer categorisations of 'lazy' Assamese domestics and 'hard-working' Miya domestics are hugely influenced by fading social boundaries with Assamese domestic workers. Even though, class differences are intact in the relationship, the withering boundary in contemporary times is mainly associated in the context of them sharing similar traces of Assamese identity. The main distinction in this issue appears to be between natives and immigrants, wherein, unlike the Miya women, Assamese women enjoy the tag of 'natives' of Assam⁹. Employers perceived this as a primary reason in buttressing the self-conception of a superior status in the minds of Assamese domestic workers in Guwahati. From the employers' stance, this acted as a negative attribution in the relationship, as it provided the grounds for Assamese domestic workers in downplaying the inherent inequality, 'probably, they think they are the natives of Assam, so why bother people so much'.

However, notably, the employers' preference for Miya women does not entail us to believe that they held a high status amongst domestic workers in Guwahati. On the contrary, they are required to confront regular prejudices that draw from the broader political discourses of native vs. immigrants in Assam. Within this discourse, the Miya women at work are not solely perceived as a religious category, but, are simultaneously marked as an ethnic category and political 'other' (Hussain, 1993). For instance, the labelling as 'Bangladeshi Miya', while addressing the group by the employer relating to the above narrative is indicative of deep rooted prejudices towards them. Significantly, it bears evidence to the common sentiments of Assamese people¹⁰ in general, wherein they failed to accept the Miya Muslim as legal citizens of Assam, thus, stimulating adverse reactions towards the group. In the past, such adversity against the group culminated in the form of ethnic clashes between Miya Muslims and other ethnic groups

⁹As the discourse on the debate of native vs immigrants is beyond the scope of our study, it has not been further dealt with.

¹⁰Here, by Assamese people, signifies the indigenous tribal population, as well as the indigenous Hindus and Muslims united by the common Assamese dialect.

in Assam¹¹. Moreover, in contemporary times, the political narratives further intensify the perception of Miya Muslims as, a 'threat' to Assamese society, implying both as 'demographic and cultural threat' (Baruah, 2020). The impressions of this 'threat' also permeates through employer's narratives of domestic workers, where the Miya women are perceived as potentially 'dangerous' outsiders in their intimate household space.

Yet, the presence of Miya Muslims in the region draws severe public resistance, the empirical realities of domestic work shows a striking contradiction. The present study reveals several middle-class Assamese employers being heavily dependent on Miya Muslim women for reproduction of their everyday domestic work. The dependence, however, does not dwindle employers' perception of 'threat' against their Miya domestic workers, rather they are seen mitigating their fear by monitoring the movement of these workers when at work. Paradoxically, this gives rise to a form of inclusion, wherein the preference of Miya women as domestic workers comes precisely from their marginality, despite the stereotypes. Their socially, economically and politically precarious position entailed the employers in maintaining a hierarchical control, whereby, these women are seen accepting unequal working conditions with limited bargaining power. Moreover, they mostly accept their inferior position at workplace, in relation to their employers, thereby, maintaining the status quo. Their marked religious and ethnic differences, further sustains their socially distant positions from Assamese employers, thus, providing the employers an easy ground to maintain clear boundaries between themselves and the Miya workers. Hansen (1989) observed that domestic service 'can only operate smoothly when servants and employers are considered different from each other' (p. 7).

It can therefore, be argued that, the discourses surrounding native vs. immigrant is not merely ideological, but also materially productive. While the broader public narrative constructs the Miya Muslims as a threat to the indigenous Assamese, they are at the same time incorporated as an indispensable labour within the private spaces of Assamese households. This dual positioning of the Miya domestic workers underlines a broader paradox, wherein the population being excluded at the level of citizenship in the wider public discourse, is rendered essential to the functioning of middle-class domesticity. The incorporation of Miya women as domestic workers, thus, do not challenge the dominant discourse of exclusion, rather it reproduces the embedding hierarchies of religion, ethnicity and class in the realm of everyday domestic practices.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay elucidates the significance of the social distinction of 'religion' in understanding the discourse of purity-pollution in domestic work relationship, which is framed within Mary Douglas's concept of 'pollution' as a system of symbolic boundary making (Douglas, 1984). However, the study shows that the symbolic distinctions

¹¹ For example, in the past, the most violent ethnic clash was the Nellie Massacre of 1983 in Nagaon district (Assam) between the East-Bengal origin Muslim and the Tiwa tribe of Assam (with the help of Assamese Hindus) and the more recent episodes of violence are in 2012 and 2014 in BTAD areas of Assam with the Bodos (Punathil, 2021).

are not merely based on ideological levels, rather it is actively manifested through the everyday domestic practices in the household space. In this regard, Gopal Guru's (2009; 2012) analysis of spatial regulation of caste provides an extended framework to understand how social hierarchies are organised and reproduced through the realm of everyday domestic space.

By taking the case of Assamese Hindu employers who hires Miya Muslim domestic workers in Guwahati, this essay shows the employer's beliefs of 'pollution' and their subsequent negotiation in their domestic sphere. Much like the aspects of caste and class, which is widely examined in literatures, this study shows how Muslim domestic workers are being subjected to exclusionary practices of 'pollution' by the employers. While, Muslims in general are perceived as 'ritually impure' for their cultural practices of beef consumption, in the case of domestic work, this was further influenced by their social class in creating the context of 'pollution' in Assamese Hindu homes.

Yet, despite such perception, this does not result in the exclusion of Muslim domestic workers. Rather, it produces a condition wherein the employers actively negotiate the polluted status of these beings by restructuring the household space through overt practices of distinction such as maintaining rigid division of domestic tasks, spatial segregation, and by giving them fictive Hindu names. Significantly, these practices do not eliminate impurity or pollution, rather they render it manageable. It is here that, Gopal Guru's notion on caste and spatial exclusion becomes particularly instructive (Guru, 2009; 2012). The division of household space –through entry restrictions into the kitchen, separate utensils, constrained movement – reflects how home operates as a central site of spatial control, similar to caste based segregation in broader social contexts. The management of pollution is, therefore, a simultaneous management of space, whereby, a polluted body is permitted entry only under conditions that keeps the hierarchy intact.

Furthermore, the paradoxical preference for Miya Muslim women as domestic workers reveals that marginality is a significant determinant for employers. The intersecting vulnerabilities of class, religion and ethnicity make these women more receptive to control, thus, accentuating employer preferences to be driven more by consolidation of power, and less by cultural acceptance. Significantly, this reflects a form of inclusion into the Hindu household space, which is influenced by the workers limited negotiation capacity.

Taken together, the paper, therefore, argues that domestic work relations are structured through the intersection of symbolic boundary-making and spatial regulation, divulging how everyday domestic practices sustain and normalise the broader perception of religious othering and social domination. Within this structure, employer preferences for a particular category of domestic workers is not simply for utilitarian purpose, rather it is shaped by perceived social attributes of religion, class, marginality as well as employer's socially constructed needs. This makes the selection of domestic workers a central site for the reproduction of existing hierarchies within the relationship.

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