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FEMALE EMPLOYERS AND THEIR MAIDS IN NEW DELHI: ‘THIS IS OUR CULTURE’

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ABSTRACT The domestic labour market in India reflects how various classes of women manage their daily lives, whether as employers of domestic workers or as employees. The cultural underpinnings of various intersecting relationships implicated in this scenario have remained underresearched in India. Based on a qualitative study in a specific neighbourhood of New Delhi, this article shows that certain cultural strategies pursued by female employers explain their differential behaviour towards specific groups of maids. Observing that these female employers in Delhi prefer Nepali maids over native Indians, even if the latter are willing to work for lower wages, we set out to analyse why and how these employers evaluate immigrant Nepali maids as sharing ‘our’ culture, while native Indians are classified as the cultural ‘other’.

KEYWORDS: *caste, domestic workers, India, labour market, maids, Muslims, Nepal, women, COVID-19*

Introduction

This study contributes to the growing literature on the cultural underpinnings of the labour market in India (Harriss-White, 2005; Jodhka & Newman, 2012; Thorat & Newman, 2012). It adds a surprising new element to knowledge by documenting how female Hindu middle-class employers of domestic helpers in Delhi engage in what we call ‘cultural work’, as we find them engaged in distinguishing their maids, and in the process discriminating between them, in terms of whether or not they are deemed to belong to ‘our’ culture. This activity reflects, we argue, choices embedded in plural South Asian imaginations of the self and the other, as these Hindu women as employers use a particular cognitive frame of reference to rationalise their choice of domestic servants from the current locally available pool of women willing to work in the employer’s home. In screening potential female domestic workers, what becomes crucial, as we observed and discuss, is the dominant concern whether domestic helpers will match the socio-cultural preferences of the employing woman and her family. As culture is neither secular nor neutral, we find evidence here that 'religion' seems to have become the new 'race' when it comes to acts of discrimination.

The notable element identified and discussed here is that immigrant Nepali maids in Delhi are deemed to be preferable because, from the perspective of the middle-class Hindu employers, they belong to 'our' culture, whereas Indian low-caste Hindu and Muslim women are dismissed and treated as 'others', decidedly less desirable as domestic workers. Our article first provides an overview of the complex field of domestic labour worldwide and in India, and then turns to a contextualised assessment of the evidence from our field study. We conclude with some thoughts about what this specific kind of 'cultural work' on the part of female employers means for future studies on the intersectionalities of a family's culture and home environment, interspousal relations and the potential for seeking effective domestic help.

Approaching Domestic Labour as a Gendered Landscape

Elite and well-to-do families in India, and elsewhere, have used domestic labour throughout history. Such domestic helpers could be men, women or children, but worldwide, women have been preferred as domestic servants (Devasahayam, 2005; Dutta, 2006; Lan, 2003; Yeoh et al., 1999). Widespread patriarchal perceptions, institutions and practices mean that women are thought of as having 'natural' nurturing skills and qualities (Kandiyoti, 1988). The middle-class employers involved in our study emphasised this 'naturalness' of women for domestic work but also employed certain additional socio-cultural criteria to assess the suitability and desirability of maids. The patriarchal logic of 'women's work' is reproduced and passed on to maids, as they become the labour substitutes of their female employers. Even when men are positively evaluated as suitable domestic servants, Indian domestic employers highlight their infantilised demeanour, innocence and/or effeminate characteristics such as submissiveness and 'caring nature' (Chopra, 2006; Qayum & Ray, 2010) as desirable traits. This caricature of the ideal maid is constructed in relation to the position of the female employer, signifying the process in which middle-class female employers become 'Ma'am' (Huang & Yeoh, 1998) or 'Madam' (Lan, 2003), a form of address bearing the colonial legacy of the master–servant relationship (Ngqakayi, 1991; Whisson & Weil, 1971).

Statistics fail to show the actual numbers of Indian domestic workers since informal employment is largely invisible and the actors involved manage to escape any quantitative scrutiny (Mahanta & Gupta, 2019). Scholars agree that India's maids' market has rapidly expanded in recent years (Naidu, 2016). Since this field is highly gendered, male domestic worker involvement in India is presumed to have remained stagnant at less than half a million between 1983 and 1999, while the number of female domestic workers almost doubled from about one to two million women in the same period (Soumi, 2014). More recent developments reflect significant economic growth and social change. Palriwala and Neetha (2009) estimate that the share of domestic workers in the total female labour force in India increased from 11.8 per cent in 1999–2000 to 27.1 per cent in 2004–2005, adding about 2.25 million domestic workers within just five years.

As is also widely discussed in newly industrialised countries and North America (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Yeoh et al., 1999), the growing maids' market in India is closely related to structural transformations of the country's economy and society. Key factors include the rise of 'middle-class' households, proliferation of nuclear families, the entry of many educated women in the formal labour market and lack of affordable alternatives for supporting children, the sick and the elderly. In decisions to employ a domestic servant, feudal 'big house' imaginations still grip the minds of ordinary middle-class householders, modern corporate managers and even feminist activists (Ray & Qayum, 2009). Employing domestic helpers is implicated in reproducing middle-class perceptions of status and identity (Devasahayam, 2005; Dickey, 2000).

More recently, as India's rural economy has come under stress with the breakdown of traditional patronage, while job opportunities arise in the informal economy of urban centres, more women from traditional low-caste and marginal groups, such as ex-untouchables and Muslims, have been drawn into cities and towards employment as domestic helpers. They often live in semi-stable houses in slum pockets right next to desirable neighbourhoods (Singh, 2016). Domestic work normally does not require legal documents, nor is fluency in the local language an essential qualification, as women's domestic work has historically been devalued as 'unskilled' (Fishman, 1978). What counts are readiness to obey orders, reliability and flexibility in terms of timing, and 'nimble fingers' (Elson & Pearson, 1981). Contrary to many educated Third World women who work as domestic helpers in the North and experience or risk loss of status (Gurung & Purkayastha, 2013), these women feel 'empowered' as they are able to contribute to their household's cash income, often for the first time in their lives, however meagre the amount might be. Since such women often work complex part-time schedules in several households, this increases, as we show below, the risk that they just leave an employer if they are not treated well.

Scholars have long argued that neoclassical economic theories that describe the labour market as atomistic and perfectly competitive do not depict the reality of existing markets (Harriss-White, 2005). They have shown that the labour market is enmeshed in ethnic, national, religious and patriarchal practices and ideologies, which are used to classify, recruit, reward and discipline workers (Mills, 2003). These ideologies and practices are not mere aberrations in an otherwise 'perfect' market. Harriss-White (2005) argues that they are integral to the functioning of the market economy. In fact, workers themselves actively construct these identities and ideologies, as they scramble to safeguard their precarious livelihoods (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). Such processes have been observed in diverse cultures and geographical locations such as Singapore (Huang & Yeoh, 1998; Yeoh & Huang, 1998; Yeoh et al., 1999), Malaysia (Devasahayam, 2005), Canada (Bakan & Stasiulis, 2003; Bauder, 2005), the USA (Gurung & Purkayastha, 2013) and the Middle East (Frantz, 2008; Graner & Gurung, 2003).

In developed countries and newly industrialised nations of Southeast Asia and the Gulf region, states and private recruitment firms often play important roles in maid recruitment. Studies show that private employment agencies and state officials, supposed to match supply and demand rationally, resort to cultural criteria in recruitment, based on stereotypes and racial ideologies (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Bauder, 2001, 2005; Frantz, 2008). In the absence of intermediate agencies, locally driven recruitment in India often takes place through social networks, so that the 'reputation' of the worker in the given network plays a significant role in his/her hiring (Chopra, 2006), apart from cultural and social affiliations. In turn, this generates conduits of specific cultural understandings about 'our' and 'their' culture. Such understandings are volatile and depend as much on socio-political changes as on the availability of specific groups of potential maids in a locality. Recently, a handful of apps-based recruitment firms, such as Book My Bai, Babajob and Urban Clap, which have a wider spatial range, have emerged in India. These apps promise employers to offer details of religious and linguistic backgrounds of potential maids. They also provide evidence of verified identity cards to address employers' safety concerns. However, none of the employers involved in this study had ever used these apps, relying instead on information networks involving neighbouring employers regarding the reputation of worker(s) for their hiring and firing practices.

Madams and Maids in R. K. Puram

Our research was conducted in 2015–2016 in R. K. Puram Sectors 1 and 4, one of the central zones of South Delhi, where government offices and residential quarters dot the locality. The employers residing here are largely central government servants of Grades II and III (lower division clerks and stenographers). Most of these quarters are allotted to male household members, with only a handful allotted to women. However, women, not men, deal with recruitment of domestic help, indicating an empowering aspect of female agency through maid selection. The employers we interviewed come from all over India, are at least bilingual, and they call themselves middle class. More significantly, they were all Hindus from medium to upper *jatis* (castes). This was, however, not a conscious selection strategy. The guiding selection criterion for sampling households was their experience in recruitment of domestic servants from more than one group of maids. It just so happened that all employers in the sample turned out to be Hindus from privileged caste backgrounds.

Several slums (*jhuggis*) in the same area sit uncomfortably beside these otherwise sanitised government quarters and are not a visual or olfactory pleasure for employers and local residents. These 'camps' also generate a sense of fear among residents, reflected in demarcations of space through barbed wires around *jhuggis* and/or the middle-class quarters. However, these slums cater to the locality's domestic helper market. In the research site, there are primarily two *jhuggis*, a Muslim segment and a Nepali one, also known as 'the *parvatia* camp', referring to 'people from the hills'. All Nepali migrants we spoke to were first-generation migrants from the hilly regions of Nepal, such as Rolpa and Gulmi, migrated to Delhi through kin and village networks and hail from agricultural backgrounds (Basnet & Sandhya, 2019). A handful of Nepalis live in the Muslim *jhuggi*, occupied primarily by Bengali-speaking Muslim families from Kolkata. Some Muslims and Christians, who are not necessarily Nepali, reside in the nearby Nepali *jhuggi*. Both slums also house many low-caste Hindu migrants from the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, competing with the Muslims and Nepalis in various local labour markets. Historically, low-caste women have served wealthy high-caste households in various capacities in India (Grover, 2017).

In recent years, many low-caste men and women as well as Muslims have begun to work for the public sector as *jamadaars* or cleaning staff (Harriss-White, 2005; Ravichandran, 2011; Tripathi, 2012). Some of them work informally for the local post offices and through small contracts. The employers we spoke to identify the maids from this group as *bhangis*, a popular term, often used pejoratively, which signifies a historically oppressed low-caste group. *Bhangi* is also a popular name for scavengers in North India, with different names in other parts of India (Gupta, 2016). Since independence, various government efforts have tried to reform the scavenging profession, particularly regarding manual cleaning of human excreta. While these reforms appear to have largely failed (Kumar, 2014; Ravichandran, 2011; Tripathi, 2012), *bhangis* remain disproportionally represented in various cleaning occupations. Employers of maids hardly made any distinction between low-caste *bhangis* and Muslims in their narratives, perhaps because both groups have historically been associated with polluting occupations, such as cleaning, meat procurement and the skin and hide trade.

The major actors in the local maids' market, therefore, include Bengali-speaking Muslim maids, low-caste Hindi-speaking Hindu women from UP and Bihar, Nepali immigrant women and the female Hindu employers. Local middle-class households had an earlier history of employing Muslim and *bhangi* maids, who normally work part-time in multiple households. But once the 'trailing wives' of Nepali immigrant men arrived in this locality in significant numbers after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal during 1996–2006, the local employers began to develop a preference for Nepali helpers. This initial observation sparked our interest in the present research project, given that the second author was born and brought up in the area, which also helped in locating interview participants.

We conducted qualitative interviews and observations in 15 households, speaking to female employers and their maids, as men rarely dealt with recruitment of domestic servants. All employers we interviewed had been living in this locality for the past two to three decades and had experiences with Nepali, Muslim and *bhangi* maids. The interviews took place at the employers' households and were conducted in Nepali and Hindi. All names used in the article are pseudonyms. Though we spoke to both employers and employees, this article focuses only on employers' accounts and actions, while the perspectives of Nepali maids are covered elsewhere (Basnet & Sandhya, 2019).

These Nepali women, who followed their men as secondary migrants and are technically foreigners, are found not only in India (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). The Indo-Nepal international border is open, and citizens of these two countries can cross the border without visas. Nepalis are engaged as restaurant workers, street vendors, construction workers and security guards in New Delhi and most other major Indian cities. Nepalis and Indians have interacted for hundreds of years, and there are several useful studies on the history of Nepalis in India (Bhattrai, 2007; Gurung, 2009; Nath, 2006; Subba et al., 2009).

We found clear evidence that female employers in the R. K. Puram neighbourhood of New Delhi prefer immigrant Nepali maids over native Indians, even if the latter were willing to work for lower wages. Furthermore, compared to native Indian maids, Nepalis also command higher levels of respect from their employers. Our analysis of the findings in a later section shows that Indian employers' labour market preferences are deeply entwined with cultural politics and strategies. The female local employers, engaging in a specific form of cultural work, consistently evaluated immigrant Nepali maids as sharing 'our' culture, while native Indians were treated as 'the cultural other'. Cultural work here acts as a cognitive apparatus or screening mechanism used by these employers to distinguish between potential maids and rationalise their recruitment behaviour that in practice translates into discrimination against, and reproduction of stereotypes about, certain groups of female domestic workers. Though the employers disavowed traditional Hindu caste rules in their interview narratives, we argue not only that patriarchal values but also specific 'Hindu' norms inform the employers' labour market strategies. Additionally, employers also drew on anecdotal experiences and caste-based popular stereotypes to form their cognitive maps.

'Our' and 'Their' Culture: Nativising and Othering of Maids

Studies in different geographical and cultural contexts have shown that employers engage in cultural construction of an 'ideal maid' by deploying racial, ethnic, religious and national ideologies (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Huang & Yeoh, 1998; Mills, 2003). The local Delhi employers we interviewed narrate their maid preferences in terms of those who share 'our' culture and those who do not. Identifying 'our culture' with the Hindu culture that Nepali maids supposedly possess and practise, 'our culture' seems informed by a secularised version of Hindu 'clean' caste ideals, in which low-caste *bhangi* and Muslim maids constitute the cultural other. We see this specific form of discourse as secular, since caste is increasingly decoupled from Hindu religion under the influence of secular and modern ideologies (Beteille, 1996). These middle-class employers do not directly speak of untouchability and ritual purity in religious idioms, but emphasise ‘our’ and ‘their’ culture in abstract terms or linked to behavioural traits concerning honesty and hygiene.

How do Nepali immigrant maids form part of ‘our culture’ in the eyes of Delhi’s local employers while local Indians are othered? Predominantly a Hindu country, Nepal constitutionally remained a Hindu state until 2006, when it adopted a secular Constitution. The monarchy was abolished in Nepal in 2008. Since 1960, Nepali monarchs had styled themselves as Hindu ‘emperors’, extending their networks and reach to neighbouring India (Gellner et al., 2008 [1997]). Many Indians see Nepali Hinduism as somehow pure and pristine, unsullied by Islam and Christianity, and Nepal is an important pilgrim destination for Indian Hindus. Nepalis thus appear as pure Hindus to many potential employers, who consider the caste background of Indian maids even if they reject traditional notions of caste hierarchy in interview narratives and yet seem uninterested in their Nepali maids’ caste background, on which Bista (1991) and Basnet (2015) provide details. Nepali maids we interviewed confirmed that employers hardly inquired about their caste background. Employers seem to take it for granted that Nepalis come from ‘clean’ caste family backgrounds. What strengthens this assumption is that maids often use well-known Nepali high-caste family names such as Thapa when introducing themselves to prospective employers. Stereotypical views of Nepalis as pure Hindus help them, but their generally fairer complexion gives them further credence regarding clean caste status. In India, darker skin is often associated with low-caste untouchable groups (Beteille, 1996). The social premium on fair complexion, the employers’ ignorance of Nepali society and demography and the association of fair skin with high caste in the common Indian mindset help Nepali maids to project a ‘clean’ caste status.

Widespread stereotypical images of hill Nepalis as ‘brave’ and ‘honest’ (Caplan, 1991), an image promoted by Nepali elites as part of their national imagination (Onta, 1996), further feeds into the narrative of cultural closeness. Hill Nepalis (*Gurkhas*) serve in the Indian army and related images often appear in Indian media. Nepalis in India are often, at times derogatorily, addressed as ‘the brave’ (*bahadur*). Employers seem to transpose such stereotypical images of Nepali men to Nepali maids and also characterise Nepali maids as ‘stoic’ and ‘honest’. The occasional unruly behaviour of Nepali maids is then interpreted positively as an expression of ‘brave ego’ or a search for self-respect, which becomes an ingredient of ‘our’ culture, which the employers and their Nepali maids supposedly share (Basnet & Sandhya, 2019).

However, Muslims and low-caste maids are stereotypically characterised as lacking self-respect and hence are deemed undeserving of fair treatment from employers and are simply constructed as ‘the other’. The history of antagonistic relationships between Muslims and Hindus adds to this othering of Muslims (Pandey, 1999), while the recent rise of Hindu nationalism and demonisation of Muslim immigrants as ‘illegal occupants’ in popular media and political discourse contributes to further othering. More recently, Bangladeshi Muslim migrants have become a widely contested national issue in India. That the local Muslim maids in R. K. Puram come from Kolkata hardly helps their cause since they are suspected of being 'illegal' Bangladeshi immigrants (Datta, 2004; Kumar, 2010).

Incidents around disputes over domestic helpers, attracting various interest groups, including the press, may be more generally concerned about domestic workers' rights (Mahanta & Gupta, 2019), as reflected in the case of a Muslim maid, Zohra Bibi in Noida near Delhi (Jeelani, 2017). Here again, many political issues intertwine. Our interviewees in Delhi, while speaking about their methods of 'cultural work' and maid classification do not directly refer to such bigger issues. But they certainly overlook and discount the immigrant and 'foreign' status of Nepali maids because of their cultural affinities and discursively distance themselves from the Muslim and *bhangi* maids. These socio-cultural affinities are prioritised by the 'Madams' who evaluate the available pool of domestic servants to suit their idea of an 'ideal' maid, an idea defined in terms of culture. As one employer said:

> Although these Nepalis are poor, they are civilised people. Their economic conditions force them to stay in *jhuggis*…. That *jamadar*-type people who pick up rags and garbage…that Kamlesh [the garbage collector of the area] is also a *bhangi*. They come from UP and Bihar, na? They completely lack culture! They will use all kinds of cheap language.

This employer characterises Nepalis as poor but 'civilised', unlike the uncivilised *bhangis*. Negative stereotypes frequently depict Biharis and UP residents as lazy and unsophisticated, without manners and style (Jodhka & Newman, 2012).

Employers do not just categorise their maids based on the extent of 'shared' culture but also perform 'our' culture in everyday life in various ways. Most important here is the sharing of food and even meals. In this respect, too, Nepali maids are treated as part of 'our culture'. One employer spoke disparagingly about Najma, her former Muslim maid, saying that she never fed her:

> Even if you feed her, she will be the same…. We did give leftover food to her, though, which she unhesitatingly took, as these poor Muslims don't believe much in pure food, na? They would eat only stale food. But we share our fresh breakfast with Sheetal (the current Nepali maid). Hindus prepare food daily, unlike Muslims, right? She won't eat stale food.

For this employer, sharing food and commensality with her Nepali maid is indicative of more or less equal status in the traditional Hindu world view and practice, while she hesitated to do the same with her former Muslim helper. Later in the conversation, the employer mentioned how Muslims are different, and that she would 'just pack leftover food in a cover and give it to her', instead of sharing food with Najma in the same space.

Employers' idea of 'our' and 'their' culture is intertwined with their constructs of behavioural traits of different groups of maids. Not only do maids become privy to the employers' private affairs, they also work in the intimate sphere of a family, making certain types of behaviour crucial in the employers' imagination. Since maids work inside the house, employers take honesty very seriously and show concerns about lying, greed and stealing. Shyamala, a local employer, narrated her experience of switching to her current Nepali maid after her bad experience with a Muslim maid:

> We wanted a maid. So Kantaji's maid introduced me to Gauri. She wasn't bad. But she lied. Kantaji later found out that she is from that Muslim *jhuggi* and was all the time pretending to be a Hindu! Why did she have to do that? I mean if somebody can lie to this extent, they can do anything!

Shyamala's decision to dismiss her Muslim maid with a Hindu name reflects a deep anxiety shared by many employers in this locality. Notably, Shyamala fired Gauri although 'she was not bad'. Shyamala also immediately switches from her account of lying to a general labelling of Muslims as 'they'. Since employees are aware of such discriminatory approaches, it is not uncommon for workers to hide their background and identity. Gauri's alleged behaviour can be interpreted as a reaction to prevailing discriminatory labour market practices that create hurdles in her employability as a domestic help. Since employers presume that Muslim and *bhangi* maids are liars, it is only a very short step to characterise them as 'cunning' or accuse them of stealing, even if employers have no evidence to back up their claims. Employers did not interpret isolated incidents as personal failings, rather they made generalised assumptions about all *bhangi* and Muslim maids in the area. Female employers elsewhere in India have shown similar fears about their maids (Dickey, 2000; Soumi, 2014). In contrast, as we often heard, Nepalis are constructed as 'honest' and 'truthful'.

The negative caricatures of *bhangi* and Muslim maids in the locality not just paint them as 'dishonest' and 'cunning' but also disturbingly extend to and characterise their body and sense of hygiene. The obsession of the middle-class about hygiene, traced back at least to colonial times (Dickey, 2000), manifests in rather blunt and troubling statements about Muslim and *bhangi* women, describing their lack of sense of cleanliness and hygiene. Some of these statements were so unsettling that as authors we decided not to lay them out. What is significant here is that such accounts and conversations show how employers use idioms of health and hygiene to affirm caste and religious stereotypes relating to the body as the site of Hindu ritual concerns. This has implications for how employers negotiate distance and closeness with their maids, as Dickey (2000) observed in middle and upper-class households in South India. In Delhi, it was noteworthy how widespread stereotypes about dirty Muslim restaurants were readily extended to the maids. One employer narrated a different context, telling us how a Muslim maid, who had been working at Lalita and Mahesh's house for four years before they hired a Nepali maid, was removed when she started using their toilet in the house. In what appears as class and purity anxiety from the blurring of symbolic class boundaries (Dickey, 2000), the employer claimed that her daughter would avoid going to the toilet immediately after the maid had used it.

Employers' caricatures of the 'ideal' maid also conflate the idea of desired femininity for domestic labour and caste. One employer commented on how *bhangi* maids treated their husbands:

> She never even respected her husband. She used to call him by his name all the time. If she can't respect her own husband, how can she respect her employers? Women shouldn't be like this. They are supposed to be satisfied with what they have. But we are talking about *bhangis*, remember? You can't change them.

In this employer's imagination, respect for the husband becomes a defining feature of good culture. The Hindu patriarchal norm of wives not calling husbands by their names is taken as the yardstick to evaluate a deviation of 'good' culture and the whole group that supposedly practises it. For this employer, *bhangis* are outside middle-class Hindu ethics and ideals. Stating, again, that 'we cannot change them' attributes an innate cultural essence to all members of that group.

Further inquiry revealed that such stereotypical images of 'their culture' are constructed through anecdotal observations when employers claim that they actually witnessed those incidents. As Durrenberger (2006) argues, concrete personal experiences become the basis for generalised understanding, which then offer a framework for interpreting concrete experiences. The employers hardly considered the possibility that the supposedly disrespectful behaviour of *bhangi* women might reflect that Dalit and lower-caste women have historically enjoyed greater autonomy than high-caste women (Chakravarti, 1993, 1995). The implication is merely that such women cannot be good maids because good maids are also good wives. In contrast, Nepali maids are positively evaluated on the scale of conformity to 'our culture'. Talking about Meena, their current Nepali maid, Lalita said, emphasising the 'our' in the last sentence:

> You know, Meena has so many problems in her house. Her husband is a drunkard and always tortures her for money. He is useless (*nikkamma*), doesn't earn anything and keeps asking for her savings. But she is so nice, you know. Despite all this, she respects her husband. More importantly, she never cribs about all this when she is working. This is *our* culture.

Lalita employs her own patriarchal ideals of a 'good wife' to judge the behaviour of her Nepali maid. Unquestionable submission to the husband and tolerance towards mental and physical abuse by him are seen as part of 'our culture'. Employers hardly consider different constraints that their Nepali maids might be facing. The illiterate Nepali maids, though they can fluently converse in Hindi cannot take advantage of state agencies, including the police, and would rather tolerate abuse by their husbands than report them to the police. Nor can they normally fall back on kin and friendship networks in Delhi. It therefore is a situational compulsion that makes these women tolerate abuse by their husbands, while the employers construct their behaviour as evidence of good wives and submissive workers.

The cultural work employed by the female employers to screen the available pool of domestic helpers in the locality goes beyond mere world view and also has material consequences for the different groups of maids. As discussed, it actively shapes the recruitment practices for domestic workers and determines their treatment by the employer. Apart from this, there is a real difference in the wages received by the Nepali maids and *bhangi* and Muslim maids. The female employers we spoke to admitted that they do not just prefer hiring Nepali maids, they also pay them more than the other two groups of helpers, treat them better and give them occasional gifts. A 'good' maid is rewarded to show that she is deemed good. Employers continuously made the point, verbally or in other ways, that their maid belongs to 'our culture'. Employers' accounts consistently showed that they pay Nepali maids far higher, at times more than double the amount they would pay to Indian maids, for the same time and labour, since they do not want to give room for 'complaints'. One employer went on to narrate her experience with different groups of maids in this way:

> These Nepalis have big egos. You have to be respectful to them. With Najma, we always shouted and she would never mind. You can't shout at Sheetal. What if she goes away! It's so difficult to find 'good' maids. I always give old clothing items (*shalwars*) to Sheetal… she becomes happy.

It is common practice in R. K. Puram that Nepali maids receive additional rewards in the form of used clothes. More telling in the above-cited employer's narrative is, however, that she does not shout at her Nepali maid and knows that she should be 'respectful' to her. Evidently, this is not because the maid is an honorary member of 'our culture', but she might simply leave, since she probably works part-time in multiple houses and it would not affect her income much if she left one particular household. Another employer similarly indicated that Nepali maids need to be treated properly because, unlike their Indian counterparts, they do not 'beg' for rewards, and they do not hesitate to leave, as she herself had experienced with a previous Nepali maid.

In this way, employers' construction of 'our and their culture' constitutes a process that has been described as the cultural construction of an 'ideal maid' in different locations (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Huang & Yeoh, 1998; Mills, 2003). Unlike many instances in the labour market, where outsiders get paid less than 'native' workers, the case of Nepali maids in R. K. Puram stands out. They are 'outsiders' yet are treated as more 'native' than the Indian maids, who are 'othered' because of their religious and caste background and/or geographical origin. Here the logic of culture triumphs even over economic rationality.

The cultural work of othering that the employers put to use to screen their potential domestic servants points towards the intersectional challenge faced by these female employers, who are negotiating the power dynamics of the household by using a helping hand to manage their domestic chores and paid work. As a result, they are in a somewhat ambivalent position to recruit someone who is to intrude their domestic, intimate space and find themselves responsible for recruiting the domestic helper whom they find least threatening to the private sphere of their households.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated how these female employers utilise the idea of 'our culture' to screen potential candidates from the available pool of workers. They use cultural work, or a socio-cognitive frame of reference, to rationalise their choice of domestic servants and define the 'ideal' maid. These women rely heavily on existing stereotypes about marginalised communities in India to justify their preference for Nepali domestic helpers, the result of which is the stigmatisation and overt discrimination against 'low-caste' Hindu and Muslim women.

This study adds to insights that the labour market is enmeshed in multiple cultural processes and social relationships and shows how female middle-class employers actively construct 'our' and 'their' culture' in relation to 'good' and 'bad' maids. The cultural politics of such informal domestic employment is predicated on clean caste ideals, often couched in the secular language of culture and certain behavioural traits. Stereotyping and cultural politics of the domestic employers in Delhi that we interacted with clearly favoured Nepali immigrant maids and discriminated against Muslim and low-caste Indian maids. This significantly affects the lifeworld of specific groups of maids, from their perceived characterisation to real wage differences, their treatment and general working conditions. This article, and the domestic service labour market landscape presented, thus also points to the discursive and institutional discrimination against specific groups of women, resting on intersections of caste, gender and religion driven by new urban class relations (Grover et al., 2018).

Our findings also illustrate how domestic labour processes fluctuate due to time, space and vagaries of the market. In this sense, given their quite recent availability in the market, the current preference for Hindu Nepali maids in this locality of Delhi has a temporal dimension. This local labour market might change in the future, if either the definition of 'good' maid changes, new contenders enter the maid market or other developments occur. Thus one might wonder about the impacts of the current Covid-19 pandemic in this domain. The history of this particular locality suggests that when in need of labour, employers do accept women from Muslim and low-caste families. Cultural politics take a back seat when there is a shortage of domestic help. Another important implication of this research is that contrary to numerous studies in the Global North showing that citizenship status plays an important role in the well-being of immigrant women as workers, this does not affect the Nepali maids in our Delhi study. At this moment, the surprisingly positive construction of 'our culture' regarding Nepali maids in Delhi by their female employers gives this group of women an advantaged position compared to others.

Our article, focused on the 'cultural work' of female Hindu employers who make specific distinctions between preferred immigrant Nepali maids and less desirable 'others', describes clearly a specific local scenario, in which a particular combination of ethnic and socio-religious factors come together to offer these 'Madams' such choices. The evidence presented, however, contains also pertinent insights into related dimensions that future academic work may examine in more depth, specifically regarding the intersectionalities of cultural work and homework undertaken by Indian middle-class women. The present article does not discuss in depth what physical work these maids are actually doing, and what the various cultural implications of such work may be. Apart from the status issue of being able to show that one employs a maid or several domestic servants, the female household manager will benefit from having some laborious or indeed dirty work done for her by those whom she pays. In other scenarios, an employer may use one woman to cut her vegetables, prepare breakfast and cook meals, while a different woman or several others would wash the dishes and clean the house, with distinctions even of cleaning the house itself and attending to toilets and bathrooms. Subtle socio-cultural distinctions are at play in such scenarios, not unique to India, yet with specific socio-cultural connotations.

There is yet another discussion that the intersectionalities of cultural work and housework will allow future research to explore. We observed tangentially that men play hardly any role in the recruitment of maids and also discussed the example of the maid who used the family toilet. Here, the private/public delimitations of spaces and facilities of and in the home become pertinent. This raises another gender dimension in this article, as one of the anonymous peer reviewers suggested, which has not even been touched. What if Indian men were to become more involved in household work arrangements? While this may risk that 'he walks off with the maid', analysis of different kinds of socio-cultural work in interspousal dynamics of managing the family's living space arise. Decisions need to be made about whether one even allows anyone to share one's private space, whether for a few hours, at certain times, or by arranging a live-in homeworker, who might of course be a relative, or a total stranger at first. In all of these scenarios, concerns about spaces, privacy, facilities, and of 'our' and/or 'their' culture will remain deeply relevant. Selectively and often very strategically buying in help to manage the household, or doing certain tasks oneself in order to preserve the private sphere and keep it free from 'other' influences, appears as options on the horizon, to be explored in future work.

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