Domestic workers are the most underrepresented occupational identities in the informal sector. As compared with the western evidences, Indian domestic workers have to bear the brunt of being from lower caste. The present article reflects upon these workers' social identity dynamics and positioning their selves in the domestic work context. The intrinsic values attached to any job denotes the attractiveness for that job without any external and tangible reward attached to it. The domestic work market doesn’t symbolize the aspirations and intrinsic motivation but the forced choice to sustain one’s living. There are instances when the concerned workers showed their satisfaction with the job, which may be one form of denial or compensatory behaviour to sustain one’s self-esteem. The stage of
consciousness and self-reflection about self-standing on the societal ladder depends upon on the alterity (other people and group; see Markova, 2003). Here individuals view about one’s group affiliation and social status emerge out in a comparative context and become part of the collective consciousness. For example, generally it may be inferred that the stigmatized occupational identity which domestic workers bear seems to be masked by their social comparison among themselves. The social comparison among the domestic workers provides reciprocal alterity and impels them to accept their current occupational identity. The daily interaction of domestic workers seems to be reactive and largely symbolizes their low status, their everyday social interface with the larger society strengthen the feeling of discrimination with little scope for social mobility. Finding the object which alters one’s perceptions impels these workers to take their position for granted submerging their self as destined and deserved. Under these conditions, there is little scope for self-reflection in terms of their present status in the society where workers in their daily life face the alterity who defines their present position. However, the effort of few labour unions who represent the plight of the domestic workers have made an important change in their self-perception at the group level by conducting regular meetings and awareness programs (see Barua, Haukanes & Waldrop, 2016).

The nature of job these workers are engaged depicts the profound stigmatization on the part of employers and society in general (see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). There are other instances which show that people who are engaged in these non-preferred jobs, sometimes also called as dirty jobs (see Hughes, 1951) derive high occupational esteem and pride (see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; P. 413). However, this derivation of esteem and pride seems to be a management of one’s dehumanized status and its features are quite different from esteem and pride of higher social status group or upper castes. It is important to note that despite the extrinsic quality of the work such as pay enhancement, the intrinsic values such as respect for the work was missing among the domestic workers. However, we don’t have a concrete policy to define the minimum wage and other benefits for the domestic workers[1]. In the Indian context, the domestic workers engage in a number of menial works which fulfills the need of the employer, with no respect and concerns in return.

**Group dominance and Power dynamics**

As per the Goffman (1963) analogy people who find their identity humiliating and stigmatizing, as in the case of domestic workers, they may engage in the management process of self through identity concealment or assertions. Earlier research in the context of domestic workers in India overlooked the critical social psychological viewpoints. Most of the research which highlighted the problems of domestic workers and their collective struggles took a multidisciplinary approach. In that garb, the social psychological viewpoints didn’t get much attention. Since the problem of domestic workers in India is a group level challenge and how worker bear those problems at the individual level were not much emphasized. Also, the group level challenges were taken at the broader level without much emphasis on the nature of inequality and social psychological mechanism. The context of domestic workers in India shows that the domestic workers’ identity and their plights are invisible to dominant upper caste employers. Their presence is actually to the point they are inside the house and doing the house task. This lack of value, respect and dignity in the daily discourses of their employers shows the equality gap and power domination. The duality of inclusion and exclusion at the same time in the domestic work context feed the idea of inequality and it is paradoxical to the extent that it doesn’t help domestic workers to come out of their present psychological burden. From one perspective workers are included and working but when observed closely shows their invisible self from the gazes of higher status employers. At one point we can say they are included physically in the society, engaged in the work and
at another point their humiliations, poverty, daily hassles are quite ignored and don’t activate into the active consciousness of their employers.

The process of psychological internalization of the existing stereotypes and prejudices based on class, caste and gender among these workers were missing in the literature. Also, the process of self-categorization as domestic workers because of caste affiliation is much prominent in an Indian context. Also, the workers’ identity in itself becomes prototypical emphasizing the similarity among ingroup members and accentuate differences between the ingroup and specific outgroup (Dovido et al., 2016). For example, the identity binaries of these workers have situational moderators such as workers who are from the Dalit background and the workers who are above them in the social hierarchy. The workers who are from Dalit background faces more identity-based humiliations and insults both among these workers and from upper caste or middle-class employers. Since caste is the backbone of Indian social system, every caste has a cultural complexity with its practices, rituals and assumptions. The intermingling of different caste is possible, as per the social contact theory, which explains conflict resolution through the active intergroup relations and social contact, but the rigid social boundaries led to the sustenance of the stereotypes and prejudices in a subtle way. It was observed that caste reproduce itself through different mediators such as marriage and occupations which had a remarkable effect on the social and emotional life of these workers also. The domestic workers from the lower caste background, though seems to be in social contact with their employers and other domestic workers, the subtle biases cannot be denied. Though this was supposedly created hope for the intermingling of boundaries and the creation of common ingroup identity. However, it was also observed that social contact was not like utopian fixation or emergence of intergroup harmony eradicating the intergroup biases (Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005).

These workers going for work was the matter of migration, loss of land and/or severe poverty leading to the search for menial jobs as per the growing demands of emerging middle classes. Few theorists were of the idea that social contact may reduce the prejudice and group boundaries may become permeable (e.g. Brewer & Brown, 1998). They expressed their hope that these social contacts may lead to the re-categorization and more socially equal behaviour, but the consequences were observed to be different and oppressive. This is one form of exploitation and domination in the garb of social contact. The automatic evaluation and psychological distances among these workers of different castes and between the workers and their employers seem to sustain the caste-based divide prominent in the domestic labour market. The automatic activation of identities in the context of domestic work cripple the idea of social contact leading to social exclusion and de-categorization of the worker at the individual level. This de-categorization of worker and emergence of social isolation may have played a counterproductive role in the emergence of the collective movement specifically pertaining to their plights. Some of the workers expressed their anger by highlighting that their labour is needed by the upper caste employers and in return, they receive low pay, insensitive attitudes, insults and humiliations. Mutual exchange of respect is the right of these workers which is missing in the domestic labour market.

The domestic workers in India from lower caste may be connected to their social group through the social interventions because of their social and occupational categories and are vulnerable to the discriminations at different levels any the domestic tasks. In the larger Indian situation, the tasks like utensil cleaning and sweeping, as stated above, is also connected to the concept of purity and impurity which is avoided by the upper caste people having middle to higher social status. This situation was also seen in the other context where “societies equate cleanliness with goodness and dirtiness with badness, such that cleanliness and dirtiness assume moral overtones” (see Douglas, 1966; as cited in
Thus, the domestic workers who are engaged in the cleaning business bear the tangible, social and the moral taints connected to their work. There are possibility of pervasive stigmatization impelling them to accept their present position and justify in order to survive. However, this is not always the case as it was observed that there were instances of protest at the individual levels and also intactness of the bonding among the workers showing the instances of both system justification and social identification. At the structural level, the domestic workers are victims of the situations which may overpower their individuality as a human being having the right to self-respect and equality. Since domestic workers in India do work on very low labour cost due to their social situations, their demand is increasing among middle and upper class. There is also a discrepancy in any fixed labour cost of doing the domestic job and it is not defined. Most of the time it is based on the consensus among the workers who are connected to different localities. Thus, the low and unstructured income of these domestic workers, who are most of the time women, face the wrath of humiliations based on their gender, social class and caste.

The heightened form of humiliations on the part of their employer who appears to be disengaged with these workers’ everyday experiences may lead to the contestations and resistance. The upper caste employers provide an alterity which impels these workers to negotiate the meaning of their job identity in varieties of ways. The emergence of narratives which symbolizes the self-respect and dignity of these workers is one of the important stances of identity management which was internalized as being dehumanized. The construction of new identity through identity management tactics give impetus to the working class stature of the domestic worker to some extent. According to the social identity theory, the influence of one’s group membership is on defining the self-concept and emotional association with the in-group and out-group members (Hogg, 2003, Tajfel& Turner, 1986). The domestic workers bear the brunt of identity-based humiliations at different levels of social categorizations that led them to the process of re-categorization of their self by giving them a special meaning to survive in this job.

References


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[1] Ministry of Labour and employment in India has proposed a plan for minimum wage and other benefits to the domestic workers in India. This is not yet implemented as concrete policy.

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