



BEHIND POLISHED
KITCHEN COUNTERS;
THE NARRATIVES OF
DOMESTIC WORKERS
IN TRANSITION
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B.DES HCD

IST YEAR



*"We can't deter people fleeing for their lives.
They will come. The choice we have is how well
we manage their arrival, and how humanely."*



In the intricate tapestry of our global society, domestic workers weave the threads of everyday life, often unnoticed and underappreciated. I had the opportunity to explore the intricacies of the lives of those who labor behind closed doors, capture their daily lives, try to understand their struggles, delve into their living arrangements, stories and experiences and try to empathize with their reality which might seem very foreign to us. This experience aims to provide a more thorough understanding of the individuals who significantly contribute to home operations, shedding light on the intersections of labor, gender, and socioeconomic dynamics in this often overlooked area.



While I was back home this past weekend, I was able to observe the domestic workers that lived in my locality. More specifically, female domestic workers who are from the North East and have migrated over time due to marital reasons. It is a common phenomenon that , now that I look back, I've witnessed it happening in many situations and regions. Usually people who lived in the North Eastern states have moved to big cities in search of jobs. This leads to the men working as security guards while their wives usually take up small jobs as cooks, cleaners, domestic laborers etc.



Is the migration forced? Do the women feel like they have no say in decisions as such?

Even if their final choice is an unanimous decision, what guarantee do they have that they will end up with a good financial income and decent living situation?

2024 • 1 • 27 (SAT) - 2024 • 1 • 28 (SUN)

MAHADEVAPURA
at
BANGALORE

- DAILY ROUTINE -



PHOTOGRAPHED ON
IPHONE XR

Sheela Thapoor, a 38 year old cheerful young woman from Meghalaya works at ours and a couple more houses in the locality. She has been doing so for over 6 years now and when I asked her if i could talk to her and / or observe her while she does her work, she smiled and was quite excited to do so.



While doing the chores, she remains quite focused. After observing her over time, (even before this project) i've realized that she doesn't really talk much. Often times she would point out a few things or make small conversation but other than that she stays to herself.

She and Meena amma, our cook, often converse in the kitchen. While Meena amma cooks, Sheela aunty does the dishes.

When I asked if the work gets tiring since she does the same physical labor everyday, she simply said that it has gotten very monotonous for her now. Her mind works on autopilot. She is used to the work and it is second nature to her now.

Her

LIVING SITUATION

is something I focused on more extensively. How does her living space look like after almost 6 years of working in a big city? Had she expected for more? Or was she warned about the unfortunate side beforehand by her family members and previous migrants?

Sheela lives with her husband and two kids in a one bedroom space below our apartment complex in the parking lot. Sheela's husband, Pradeep is our security guard and also helps out with odd mechanical chores from time to time. Sheelas' kids , Kanchan who is 5 and Kevin who is barely 5 months old also stay and play around in the locality. Their living space consists of a small area which houses a small bed, kitchen space, cupboards and a study table. They also have bathrooms and an extra space at the back of the parking lot. “ We expanded the space a bit last year,” Sheela said when I went to have a look around their house. “ We also got this new almarih a couple months ago.” Ab humare ‘Bahar jane ke kapde’ (clothes meant to be worn when you're going out on special occasions) aur Kanchan ka school uniform saaf rehta hai.”



Sheela’s kitchen and bedroom. Vessels are all washed and kept neatly, bed is made and the kitchen is clean and dusted



She does the same chores for over 4-5 houses as her job and still has the time, energy and will to do the same for her home.

Here sits Sheela's husband, Pradeep, who is a security guard. Often times when he is not doing odd jobs, he likes to relax here and watch videos on his phone, doze off during warm, lazy afternoons or just people watch.

Pradeep has similarly been working at our apartment complex for 6 years. After so many years, he is like a friend to everyone here. He likes to play with the little kids from the 4th floor and Kanchan joins them too. We call him to our home on Ganesh Chaturthi, Rajo and Diwali for puja and prasad.



He always pulls late night shifts. Often times when we come back home late, we see him either walking around the parking lot, resting on the chair or lying down on the cot which is placed outside. He always opens the gate for us when we have to park the car.

While I spoke to him, he kept fiddling with his earphones. He is, similar to Sheela, quite shy and reserved. He always listens to Hindi songs from the 90s and plays Bhajans early in the morning. He says its a habit he picked up from his mother back home.

- SURROUNDING DETAILS -

Clothes hung out to dry. Nearby is Kanchans old crib that they no longer use.

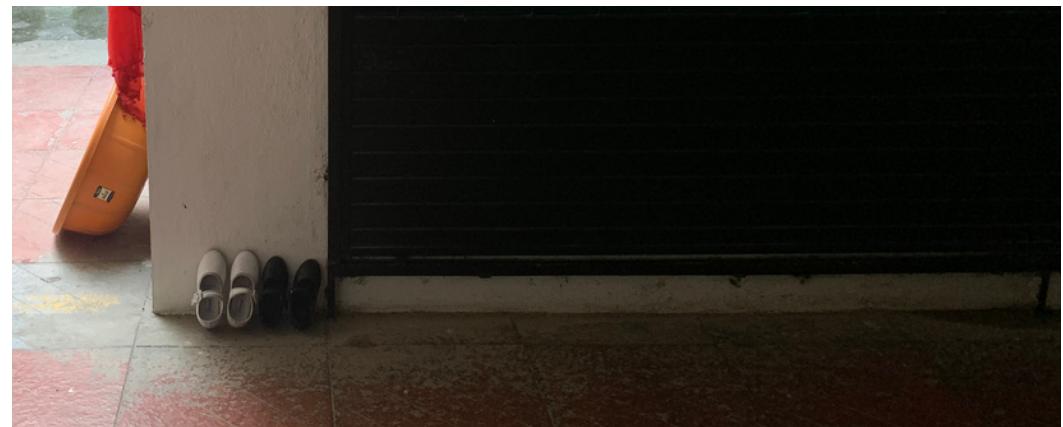


Pradeep's scooter rests right outside their home. The small space is usually occupied by Sheela and Pradeeps friends who come by every now and then in the evening. They talk, share laughs and even eat dinner on the floor after spreading mats and newspapers.



Brooms and mops kept outside near the outdoor tap. Pradeep uses these to clean the area. He sweeps the parking lot everyday and on Sundays he washes the entire area using a bucket and a mug. He also dusts and cleans the cars every two days or so

Kanchan's school shoes kept out to dry.





The narratives of female domestic workers who migrated in search of jobs, leaving behind their homes, reveal a complex and often challenging reality. These women embark on journeys of economic necessity, seeking opportunities to support their families and secure a better future.

However, the price they pay transcends the financial gains, encompassing emotional sacrifices and an intricate interplay of cultural and social dynamics.

Sheela might have been dreaming of a better life when she travelled to Bangalore. Her dreams could have involved a tidy 1 or 2 bedroom apartment with a cosy kitchen and clean bathrooms. While that might not be the ideal life for us, it is the highest form of luxury for many.

The same hands that get dirty from cleaning plates, the same hands that clean our floors and polish the countertops are the same hands that belong to a mother, a daughter and a wife. It belongs to a hopeful woman whose life changed completely one day when she had to move to an entirely new surrounding. The all encompassing excitement, faith and fear that many of these women like Sheela feel are more common than we realise.