

Visible Invisibles

Trial By Error : The Aarushi Files

India's urban domestic workforce is struggling for an identity in a changing society.

When I was around ten, and my sister Alissa was five, we played after school in the park opposite home with a gang of kids from our South Delhi neighbourhood. My regular playmate was a girl called Anu. She was smart, funny, a topper at the local Hindi medium elementary school. She was neat and fastidious about her appearance – while we all sweated through tag and ball games, Anu's hair was almost never out of place even though she could outrun most of us. She lived a few minutes away in a small back alley room with her parents and younger brother. Anu's Dad was the official driver for the family down the street. He was a polite, smiling man, always in crisp uniform, and very particular about Anu's education and the extra time she gave to learning English.

One day, the nosy, bored housewife that lived next door asked my cheerful, bohemian, multi-tasking Mum why she let her kids play with “the kids of servants.” To say my Mum was shocked and outraged by this comment would be an understatement. She liked Anu and her family, and true to form, after this incident, she encouraged us to play together even more.

(A note on my Mum. As a European raised in post-war Germany by a single, working mother, she could not understand the concept of anyone being a “servant.” When she married an Indian and came to live in Delhi, she was grateful for the house help when it came to cooking and cleaning but expected my sister and I to do our personal chores independently. No demanding the help for a glass of water – we kids went and got it for

ourselves. And we had to make our beds and tidy our rooms before leaving for school, always, every day, and on Sundays of course, when anyone employed at home had the day and night off. So, no, Mum wasn't having spoiled, bratty snobs as her daughters).

Anyway. Back to Anu. Eventually, Anu's Dad changed jobs and the family moved to another city. For me, life went on with school and sports and daily doses of self-absorbed teen drama.

Today, decades later, I'm suddenly thinking of Anu. It's a muggy April afternoon and I'm at the nearby Café Coffee Day, meeting Shyama. She works as a maid cum nanny for a family in Gurgaon that also employs a cook and driver and random part-time help. Shyama is a soft-spoken woman in her twenties, wearing skinny jeans and bright red nail polish. She smiles a lot and jokes about my cheap, beaded Goan flea market slingbag. I offer to get her one but Shyama proudly and shyly pushes forward her own purse – a flashy pink Prada copy, brought from Sarojini market – which she says suits her much better, thanks.

Shyama carries a cell phone, and every ten minutes, it buzzes. That's Madam, she says, exhausted. Her smiles stop; she starts to look anxious and irritated.

Shyama finished high school but circumstances brought her from Nainital to Delhi, to find work as a domestic. Her parents were domestics too and wanted Shyama to go to college and get a proper job, but Shyama had to earn some money first as her mother was ill. She got the job in Gurgaon through a friend, and is paid a monthly wage of Rs.5,500. She gets no days off (she has managed to meet me today by lying and saying a relative has had an accident), and has to live in a room off the main apartment

she works in (in any case, she can't afford to live anywhere else on her salary). There are strict rules. She can be woken up any time of the night for chores, and cannot use her cell phone for personal calls. No men, no dating, no evenings out. Shyama tells me she has a "sort-of" boyfriend, a clerk with a xerox company. They meet rarely. Today, they have a chance to spend some time together and the plan is to see Fan, with Shyama's favourite star, Shah Rukh Khan. But Shyama won't be able to make it now, as Madam wants her back in Gurgaon within the next hour to babysit.

As Shyama quickly finishes her cold coffee, she says she will quit this job as soon as she can save some money. She wants to study, but the truth is, she wouldn't mind domestic work if only she had a contract, fixed hours, a day off once a week. Indian families don't understand this, Shyama says ruefully, they think they own us. We are not even called help, we are called "servants". This didn't bother Shyama's parents when they worked as help, but it upsets Shyama. She is nobody's servant, she says, her voice still soft but now with an edge of determination.

Indian society has a tradition of feudalism, a deeply entrenched master vs slave mentality that creates a Pacific-sized gulf between the elite middle class and the blue-collar, largely unskilled, domestic and menial workforce. It is not just income which separates (as in all capitalist societies), but a deeper divide brought on by education, class privilege, insecurity, indifference, mistrust, arrogance and sometimes, even something as innocuous as language.

In the past, the traditional relationship between employer and domestic came with some degree of mutual advantage. Chagan's story is an example. At 18, he arrived from his

village in Gujarat to live with a wealthy, conservative trading family in Mumbai. Chagan learnt to cook Jain food and rose to masterchef status in the kitchen. Over the years, he earned the family's trust along with a bank account, medical insurance, education for his children. His personal life was valuable and Chagan got to spend vacation time with his wife back in his village, where he was able to build his own home for his retirement years. Today Chagan is content and says that although he spent his whole life as a domestic help, he felt that there was a mutual respect between himself and his employers. They were reasonably responsible for their employee's future without claiming ownership of his individuality and rights and freedoms. And Chagan remained loyal.

Chagan's example is rare but never has it been rarer than today.

In urban, suburban, shifting, migrant, skilled and unskilled, educated and illiterate, chaotic and fatalistic India, domestic help has, yes, moved upwards in terms of disposable income. So on the one hand, there is no longer the need for job security or the protection that Chagan enjoyed; yet ironically, neither is there any real autonomy for the hired help. And further, what is completely missing is any kind of insight into the personal lives and aspirations and personalities of those who work in the home, sweep the floors, feed the baby, clean the bathroom. The private world of the Minion is a blur, a kind of faraway Planet of the Unknown Flunky, and to venture there involves far too much effort and unease. Be Visible, but please stay Invisible – seems to be the message.

Time and trust is on a short rope – much domestic labour today is part-time and rotational, their backgrounds unverified. But these seem to be superficial (and at least somewhat acceptable) explanations.

The truth is a sad one. In many cases, age-old prejudices continue. There is a generation of Indians that still insists on separate utensils for family members vs domestics. Then there are those who mistrust outsiders and enforce strictness, to the extent of utterly ignoring the house help unless instructions have to be given. And then there are the progressive, Westernized Indians who are informal with the help, but only up to a point and only if it's convenient (like if food needs to be cooked for an impromptu party – let's wake up Chotu, he's our guy)! Many modern Indians are simply blind to the fact that just as they have a right to demand time off from their jobs and obligations, a right to a chilled beer on a weekend, a right to a social life and sex, a right to a better lifestyle, a right to say NO – so do those who happen to work for them at home, and who are making life easier for them every day.

Visible. Invisible. The hypocrisy of India's relationship with its domestic help burst open briefly in 2013, when Devyani Khobragade, a US-based diplomat, employed a maid from India at a much lower wage than her American counterpart would have earned. She also withheld time off, overtime pay and medical benefits – and to top that, instructed her employee to lie to US authorities about her situation. This brought to light the dangerous mindset in Devyani Khobragade and others like her – when it comes to “servants”, the master is above even international laws, when it comes to “servants”, they are little more than objects under patronage rather than human beings with human rights.

Parallely, the murder of domestic Hemraj Banjade, alongside Aarushi Talwar, revealed the shadowy web of notions the public still has of a domestic help's character and personal life. Drinking in his room with friends on a night off? Must be an alcoholic. Living away from wife and family? Must be a sex-obsessed pervert. Hard-working and loyal? Maybe, maybe not, who can tell with servants, and what goes in their minds!

Hemraj's persona – in life and in death – remains invisible, like the inner lives of most of the 4.5 million national domestic workforce. But what can be seen today, as clearly as Shyama's bold red nail-polish, is a need for change in society, and in the relationships between People Like Us and Those Guys, *The Help*.

Anyway. Shortly after meeting Shyama, I did hear from Anu again, a couple of months ago, when we connected on Facebook. We haven't met yet (she is based in Bangalore) but we've swapped notes on our lives via e-mail. She looks great in the photo she sent – her hair is no longer neatly oiled and plaited, but is cut in a short bob. It suits her. She writes that she graduated from Delhi University, did an MBA on scholarship, works for Wipro customer service, is married to a colleague, has two children. She is part of a growing tribe of adults – one that grew up as children of domestics, and yet overcame inequality and prejudice to become truly successful.

Anu's Dad, now retired from his life as a driver, is very proud. And so is my Mum, who always thought Anu to be a sincere achiever. And our erstwhile nosy housewife neighbour? She's still around. Her grown-up son moved out ages ago, but he can't seem to hold a job in advertising, or in anything else, his mother tells me. I nod

sympathetically, mentioning that Anu – the driver’s little girl from all those years ago – is about to get a major promotion once she leaves Wipro for General Electric.

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