

## Chapter V

### Women as Domestic Servants in Urban Areas of Darjeeling Hills

#### 5.1 : Urbanisation, Migration and the Demand for Migrated Labour for Domestic Service

During the last few decades, the process of urbanisation has been very rapid in the district of Darjeeling. This process has been accomplished through a high rate of migration from the rural to urban areas coupled with a relatively high rate of natural population growth.<sup>1</sup> The following table helps understand the comparative growth of rural and urban population in the hills and plains of Darjeeling district during the period 1971-1981.

Table 5.1 : Decadal Change in Distribution of Population : 1971-1981

Subdivision	Percentage Decadal Variation		
	Rural	Urban	Total
Darjeeling	10.58	34.36	14.74
Kalimpong	3.68	38.36	17.98
Kurseong	-1.85	76.84	11.04
Total Hills	8.82	43.93	14.90
Siliguri	51.63	67.30	56.69
Total District	23.36	56.57	31.02

Source : Computed from Annexure I

According to the 1971 census, the district was inhabited by 7,81,777 persons out of which 61.38% constituted the hill people. The proportion of the hill people in the total population has declined at a sharp rate during the next 10-year period. As shown by 1981 census the population of the district increased to

10,24,269 but the percentage of hill people declined considerably to 53.83. This proportion has declined further in 1991 in view of the continued influx of people from Assam, Bangladesh and from other states in and around Siliguri in the plains.

With regard to the urbanisation, during this 10-year period West Bengal, as a whole, experienced an increase in the urban population by 31.73%. The rate of increase in urban population of Darjeeling district (56.57%) was much above the state average. Incidentally, the urbanisation (in terms of population growth) in the hills of this district (43.93%) was although above the state average, it lagged far behind the growth registered by the adjacent siliguri subdivision (67.30%). It should be mentioned here that the moderate increase in urban population in the hill areas can be explained by the fact that there were only three statutory towns viz. Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong in the hills till 1971. But in 1981 besides these three, two non statutory towns were declared urban.<sup>2</sup> These two non statutory towns together added urban population in the hills to the tune of 14,571 persons. At the same time, the three municipal towns of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong registered a growth in their population by 34.36%, 23.28% and 9.64% respectively.

A fact different from the rest of the state is that the urbanisation in the hills had not been due to fast industrialisation or commercialisation but due to rural economic crisis generated from a very high rate of population-growth therein, the resultant overcrowding and unemployment in rural economy. Accordingly, the unemployed people from the rural areas banked on the urban centres in search of employment. The rural to urban migration thus has been inevitable in the hills.

It has been already mentioned in earlier chapters that tea-gardens which have absorbed the highest number of women

labourers in the hills have almost a stagnant labour force over the years. The scope of unskilled women workers to be absorbed having been reduced in tea-industry as well as in agriculture, even women-migration to the urban centres has become common phenomenon in the hills. Here, it ought to be noted that when so many young women come to the urban and semi-urban areas seeking a job it is obvious that there certainly exists a demand for women labour. The demand for women labour as domestic servants comes mainly from the upper and middle classes of the society and demand is met mainly from the supply of migrated labour as they are ready to work at a relatively low wage rate. Hence, labour-force participation rates among migrants in our sample study are higher than native women. This is accentuated by the fact that the urban native women are not willing to work at a very low wage rate. It has been found in all three hill urban centres that migrant women in all age group have higher participation rates than native women.

Further, there is a wide difference in the occupations of migrants and native women as well as between the earlier and recent migrants. Our field study shows that the proportion of manual workers is highest among recent migrants and the lowest among the native women. This inference has been drawn on the basis of following observation of urban women domestic servants. In our sample, we had altogether 200 women working as domestic servants chosen at random from Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik and Mungpo. Of them 83 were native of these places while 117 were migrated from rural hills as well from other districts. Also observed was that out of the 117 migrated domestic servants, the old migrants numbered only 39. We had considered all those workers as old migrants who migrated at least 5 years back. The recently migrated (migrated 1 to 5 years back) domestic servants numbered 78.

The picture that we can draw about the women domestic servants in the hills of Darjeeling is that domestic service is numerically important occupation for women in urban and semi urban areas. This occupation is predominantly filled in by the migrants to the concerned areas and especially by the recent migrants.

Job opportunities in the domestic service offer rural women the chance of moving to the urban area with a subsistence job at least and thus the young women gain the autonomy away from their families of their origin. It is mainly the economic pressure and hardship in the rural areas that encourage the migration and employment in domestic service. It was encountered in course of the empirical work in this field that many rural families allowed their daughters to move to the towns just because there were jobs in the domestic service in which the basic minimum needs of the young woman i.e. food and shelter would be covered.

One of the guardians happened to meet this researcher in his place of work in Darjeeling with a request to employ his eldest daughter aged about 14 as maid as she was spoiling herself moving around with some of her bad companies. Thus, sometimes poor parents would like their daughters/sisters in towns to keep them away from the bad elements of their localities. In these cases, it is not the economic compulsion but the protection they expect to get from the upper middle class and the middle class families of the urban centres encourage their movement from rural to urban areas. This, however, is not the general practice. It has also been observed that parents felt that their young daughter more secured and morally and psychologically more sheltered if they lived with families in towns instead of having to fight the cold and poverty in villages.

As a matter of fact, most make the move willingly and on

their own initiative, some only because they are brought or sent, and a few mostly from outside the district, the child and adolescent servants are brought to the urban centres very much against their wishes.

Besides the seemingly aspect as thought of by many parents for the migration of the women to work as domestic servants, their own aspiration about the career is also important. With luck, a few during their tenure as servants met young men and in some stray cases even the masters themselves married them and permitted them to drop out of the servant world to become upper, lower-class house wives. Studies of domestic servants abroad have taken into consideration the perception and orientation that women have towards this particular job. Margo Smith's study of female domestic servants in Lima, Peru is a pioneer work in this direction. Her idea about the servitude providing a channel of upward mobility for the female servant is continued in the following lines.

"Domestic service provides one of the few opportunities available to lower class migrant women for upward socio-economic mobility within the broad spectrum of the lower classes".<sup>3</sup>

## **5.2 : Nature of their Work and the Determination of Wages**

The employers of the female domestic servants are mainly in the middle and upper middle class people such as businessmen, teachers, doctors and other govt. employees. The female domestic servants on the basis of their contract with their employers can be classified as i) thika workers, ii) full time workers, iii) residential workers and iv) part-time workers. The thika workers serve a number of houses for a duration of 2-3 hours a day in each of the houses. Thika workers are found to serve a maximum of four houses. The full time workers are attached with a single household for the whole day only; they are given one time food by

the employers. The residential workers live in the families as family members doing all type of household works. Most of the migrated women employed as domestic servants prefer to work as residential servants. If employed as residential maids they ought to serve for a longer duration but the shelter remains no more a problem for them. The part-time domestic servants, on the other hand, are generally indigenous workers who make themselves available for household works for a short duration everyday. This classification of maids is mainly done on the basis of the hours of work and the provision of their stay with the employees.

The job assigned to them, however, in all the places and for all types of maids are almost the same. They are required to do as a whole lot of sundry jobs as cleaning utensils, washing clothes, sweeping and cleaning the houses, fetching water etc.. Cooking is generally assigned only to a selected number of experienced workers. The cooks do not always hail from the lower castes. This is because many of the higher class employers do not allow scheduled caste women in cooking. But for all household jobs caste is not considered. Besides the manual jobs some of them are employed for minding the minor children, escorting the children to their schools and looking after the kitchen gardens. The wages paid to these serving women are determined by the nature of the jobs (whether manual or non-manual), family size of the employers, status of the employers and the duration of their works. The wages given for non-manual works like that of minding the children or escorting them to schools and back are higher than that offered for manual household services. This difference seems to be attributed by the fact that the non-manual domestic services require the women to be well dressed and relatively smart. Also the residential workers get lower wages in cash than that earned by the non-residentials. In addition to the monthly wages the residential maids are provided shelter and food by the

employers. The adolescent residential maids had told that the quality of food was not always the same as what their employers ate. They were seldom given the delicious items; sometimes they were given the leftovers to eat and usually they ate after everybody of the family had taken the food.

The demand for women domestic servants, however, is not uniform all throughout the years. In the hills, the demand for part time domestic servants goes up during the period of acute water-crisis (generally first three months and last two months of a calendar year). The water crisis has remained as an everlasting problem. No effective step so far has been undertaken by the state govt. and the newly formed DGHC to solve this problem in the hills. Excepting the monsoon, for the rest of the year, quite a large number of women get employment for carrying water from the nearby natural streams. This is a common practice in Darjeeling town since water is scarce there and people mostly have to depend on the natural streams and springs for water-supply. A recent phenomenon that has developed in Darjeeling is the formation of a group of women who along with the help of a few male workers divide the areas among themselves and thus take the right over a particular area to supply water from these sources. They work as piece rate workers. As they are engaged in supplying a vital commodity like water, the employers virtually have no role in determining their wages. The rate of a tin<sup>4</sup> of water is fixed by the women carrier themselves. The rate varies from Rs. 2.00 to Rs. 5.00 a tin depending upon the distance of the households from the water sources. As all the people of a particular locality depend heavily on this natural streams (the municipality supply of water being restricted to twice or thrice a week or so for a short duration of 10 to 15 minutes only), the rush in the springs is so heavy at times that these water carriers are compelled to work in the chilly cold even at midnights.

### 5.3 : The Employers' Attitude towards the Servants

There appears to be some awareness on the part of a minority of employers that the employment situation of their servants should be changed. This is, in fact, a global phenomenon. The change in the attitude has been noticed by many researchers in this line.<sup>5</sup> In Darjeeling hills, increasing number of employers are permitting, and in some cases insisting, that their servants attend school. Apart from their wages, the female domestic servants these days receive new clothes or sometimes festival grant in cash or Christmas gifts from their employers. Some affluent employers are seen to extend this generosity even to other members especially the children of the servant's family. Annual increment of wages are also granted to the thika and full time domestic servants. Such incentives had led the domestic servants to serve a particular household for years. Another positive outlook of a few employers can be understood from their initiative to convince the women servants to go for saving. The outcome of this encouragement is quite promising. To give an example, in 1992, out of 2000 + savings bank account in Uco-Bank extension counter of Singamari, Darjeeling, it was found that 24 belonged to the female domestic servants serving in that locality. According to the then officer-in-charge, these servants deposit a certain amount of their earning everymonth.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of such positive outlooks of a number of employers, the domestic employees have some genuine grievances against the housewives. A few of the housewives in the upper strata of the society when contacted considered themselves enlightened on the subject of good treatment for servants and insisted that they treated their maidservants just like members of their families. Yet upon questioning, the same women consistently referred to their servants as *naukarni*<sup>7</sup>, acknowledged that the servants ate by themselves in the kitchen

off old dishes especially set aside for themselves after the rest of the family had finished eating. Few are the employers who want to see changes in their servitude complex and support their talk of change with action.

There are numerous employers who speak of servants as half-savage, who consider them invisible objects generally to be ignored or do not see any need for changes to occur. They hold the view that servants should not be allowed to move freely inside the house; they should be under strict vigilance all the time; there is no need for servants to be educated (certainly not beyond the barriers of reading and writing) ; education only would give the servants ideas about changing status quo; and so on. In spite of these, Darjeeling hills have a tradition that it has no record of any severe atrocity on the domestic servants.. Neither the domestic servants so far have lodged any complaint to the police station against the employers' behaviour. Of course, the servants often have shown their dissatisfaction, but it never has taken the extreme turn. This shows a somewhat mutual recognition of both the employers and employees for their respective status.

#### **5.4 : Paid Domestic Service and its Social Consequences**

Domestic service performed by the paid women is not a job like others. The women are hired to provide some personal services but not at a profit - the employers are not doing business hiring domestic servants. The labour expended during this job does not provide any goal or service that will enter the money circulation process in the society. It is rather the work performed for self-consumption and in that sense the work is more comparable to house work performed by the members of the family without pay than to the work performed by a wage-worker. Although it is work for self-consumption, the self involved is not the worker herself but her employer, with whom only monetary links

exist. It may be arranged so that in this respect the work is not that different from the housework performed by the housewife; but the other links between the housewife and the members of the household are lacking for the domestic servant.<sup>8</sup>

For the economy and employment structure, the performance of domestic tasks by means of paid domestic services from women has many consequences. First, the availability of relatively cheap domestic service in our study area affects the quality of life of the middle and the upper middle strata enjoying such service. If domestic service were not available, personal services would then have to be purchased from established enterprises (such as restaurants, laundry and dry cleaning etc.) at considerably higher prices. Thus, the use of domestic servants implies some savings for those who can afford them. However, as a source for productive investment, the aggregate effects of domestic service seems negligible since the saving is probably diverted more often to other consumption and luxury items than to investment.

Secondly, the availability of domestic service has some indirect consequences for the women in the households that can afford them. It is needless to say that there is no end to housework but the employment of domestic maid help frees the housewife from many of her domestic obligations. In some cases as found in Darjeeling hills, the domestic servants are so trained that they can take over the management and organisation of the household ; the housewives only occasionally supervise their work. This implies that it may be easier for middle-strata women to enter the labour force or remain in it after marriage and during child rearing without having to carry the full burden of the employment and the household hazards. The availability and employment of the domestic servants thus might encourage woman to take full-time jobs in the formal or even in the informal sector.

Further more, such availability of domestic servants may also encourage them to lead a life of leisure and comfort unknown to women at comparable income levels in other places where domestic service is considerably more expensive.

#### 5.5 : Findings of the Survey of the Woman Domestic Servants in Darjeeling Hills

The field survey on 200 women domestic servants picked up randomly from 200 households of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong towns in the hills gave the following results.

Age composition of female domestic servants -The majority of women servants were older adolescents and young adults. This is illustrated in the following table. 61% of the domestic servants ranged in the age from 11 to 30.

Table 5.2 : Age Composition of Women Domestic Servants

Age	Number of Servants	Percentage
Below 10	2	1.0
11 - 20	52	26.0
21 - 30	71	35.5
31 - 40	43	21.5
41 - 50	23	12.5
Above 50	09	4.5

The number of female domestic servants declined with increase in age. Only 17 % of them belonged to the age group of 41 and above. This is so because the employers normally do not employ very old ones as their capacity for labour is limited and they cannot perform their duty in a normal way.

Nature of employment - It has been already mentioned that the nature of employment of all domestic servants is not the same. Majority of the aged workers preferred to work as 'thika'

servants while the adolescent and young ones mostly migrated from the rural areas and the neighbouring districts preferred to be employed as residential maids. The following table shows the contactwise breakup of the maid servants interviewed.

Table 5.3 : Nature of Employment of Female Domestic Servants

Pattern of employment	Number of workers	Percentage
Thika or piece rate	80	40.0
Full time	61	30.5
Residential	43	21.5
Part time	16	08.0

It was surprising to note that out of 43 residential domestic servants in the towns of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong 29 were from the far distant places like Naxalbari, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar and Mathabhanga. Majority of the plains to hill migration had occurred among the children and adolescents. A section of the employers preferred such child and adolescent maids because they were found to be loyal and in no time could mix with the family. They sometimes got homesick but were motivated for the household jobs in no time. The chance of leaving the job was also minimum for the migrated adolescent maids.

Education level - Domestic service, not only in Darjeeling hills, but every where within the country and abroad is the most important occupation absorbing the largest number of illiterates. The education level of the female domestic servants in our study area is summarised in the following table. More than 50% of them did not possess any education at all while 17% of them had gone to school but dropped out before they completed the primary level. Only two domestic servants were found to have passed Madhyamik.

Table 5.4 : Education Level of Female Domestic Servants

Level of education	Number of domestic servants	Percentage
Nil	101	50.5
Upto class IV	35	17.5
V to VIII	45	22.5
Above VIII	19	09.5

Both of them were from Kalimpong serving as the attendants of medical practitioners. Above all, 8 part-time domestic servants in Darjeeling and Kurseong were school goers too.

Marital status : Quite in support of the teenagers dominating the labour market of the domestic servants, maidens outnumbered the married ones.

Table 5.5 : Marital Status of the Female Domestic Servants

Status	Number of servants	Percentage
Maiden	92	46.0
Married	74	37.0
Widow	19	09.5
Separated/Divorced	15	07.5

The presence of widow and separated women in servants' labour market is also significant. These two groups together formed 17% of the total female domestic servants. The labour market of the domestic servants was such that even after marriage, women continued to remain in the labour market unless they were married in distant places. It is a fact that the maidservants get married to persons who are economically weak and hail also from informal labour market working as tailors, hawkers, carpenters drivers or casual workers. The husbands earning being insufficient the women are left with no other

choice than to stick in their pre-marriage occupations to support the families.

Contribution to the family income - To what extent the maids and other domestic servants supported their families by directly contributing to the family income can be understood from the following table.

Table 5.6 : Income Contribution of the Domestic Servants

Monthly Contribution	Number of Workers	Percentage
Nil	5	02.5
Upto Rs. 150	78	39.0
Rs. 151- Rs. 350	93	46.5
Rs. 351- Rs. 500	21	10.5
Above Rs. 500	3	01.5

The table shows that most of the female domestic servants contributed to their families within the range of Rs 150 and Rs 250. 85.5% of the total sampled domestic servants had contributed in that range. 2.5% of them did not contribute at all. Among the adolescents a few were found to spend a part for their personal expenditure and save the rest. Those contributing more than Rs 500 constituted only 1.5% in the labour market.

Perceptions of the work - The domestic service had established itself as one of the principal sources of informal activities absorbing the unskilled, uneducated, indigenous and migrated women. The servants abroad both in the developed and developing countries earn sufficiently. Margo Smith's study in Lima had shown that domestic servitude was considered as the stepping stone for building their careers. They began to focus one of the servant specialities and improved their position within the servant hierarchy as they passed from one job to the next.<sup>9</sup> The perception of the domestic servitude in our study area

differed considerably from that shown by Smith. In Darjeeling hills, 36.5% of the female domestic servants had considered the job as transitional; they hoped to change their occupation but 63.5% thought they had no option than to remain in the servitude occupation. Neither did they find the scope to improve their positions in the servant hierarchy.

Reasons for taking the job of domestic servant - As in the case of other informal occupation like petty trade, construction work, manufacturing work etc., economic compulsion was the main reason behind taking up domestic service as their livelihood. However, there were a small percentage (5.5%) of the workers, mostly the teen aged girls, who entered the job market with a view to passing out the idle-time. Their entry did not seem to be economically necessary but the earnings they received in exchange of their labour working as domestic servants for a part time basis were utilised on fashionable dresses. Barring this particular group, vast majority of the female domestic servants in the hills toiled just for the sake of their children and other family members. The following table exhibits the break-up of the female domestic servants on the basis of the various reasons for being in the servitude job.

Table 5.7: Reasons for Taking the Job as Domestic Servants

Reasons	Number of servants	Percentage
Idle time	11	05.5
Income supplementation	56	28.0
Economic compulsion	133	66.5

Mode of recruitment - Their recruitment as domestic servants had occurred mainly through own effort (54.5%). Only 14% were brought from outside directly by the employers themselves. The residential adolescent maids in most of the cases were recruited by the employers' effort. Labour sardars and employment

agencies had no role at all. In fact the concept of employment agencies as found in other big towns and cities in our country and abroad has not developed at all in Darjeeling hills. Detail discussion about the employment agencies has been done in chapter IX of this thesis. To what extent and how the female domestic servants were recruited has been summarised in table-5.8 below.

Table 5.8: Mode of Recruitment

Recruitment through	Number of domestic servants	Percentage
Own effort	109	54.5
Fellow workers' help	41	20.5
Employers' own effort	28	14.0
Labour sardar	Nil	00.0
Employment agencies	Nil	00.0
Others' help	22	11.0

#### 5.6 : Summary

The demand for women labour as domestic servants in the rich, upper-middle and middle class societies in Darjeeling Hills is generally met from the migrant women. A section of these workers also hails from the same locality where they have been working. The domestic servants in the hill economy do play a very important role in the society by performing the household jobs on wage-payment. The household jobs generally performed by the housewives when are shouldered by the domestic servants, the housewives can participate in other economic activities both in the formal and informal sector. And this has what exactly happened in our study area. Also, the availability of relatively cheap domestic servants has some positive impact on the quality of life of those who can afford to employ them. If domestic services were not available, personal services would then have to be purchased from established enterprises at considerably higher prices. Thus, the use of domestic servants at a relatively low

wages implies some savings for the employers which can be diverted to productive investment.

In spite of their significant contribution, the domestic servants everywhere are subject to various kind of harassment. The employers' attitude have always been a matter of concern for them. Recently domestic servants of Darjeeling hills have witnessed an improving attitude from the employers. A few of the employers are encouraging their education and also have convinced their servants of the need for savings. But, the general feeling still existing is that there is no need for servants to be educated; it would give the servants about changing their status quo. So long, this conservatism prevails in the society, the maid servants may have to suffer a lot.

The main reason for taking up the job of servitude is the economic hardship. In Darjeeling hills the majority of the women servants are adolescents and young adults. The old ladies are not generally employed because they cannot perform the arduous household works of cleaning, sweeping, cooking and nurturing of children in a normal and best way. In the labour market of domestic servants, the maidens have outnumbered the married ones. Most of the maid servants are found to contribute the bulk of whatever they earn from their job to their families. It is only the adolescents who keep a fraction of the earning for their personal expenditures. The wages paid to them, in general, are very low since they do not have the bargaining power. Had they been employed through some agencies, it would not have been the case, as we find in many big cities of our country. However, such cheap availability of domestic servants have encouraged the housewives to lead a life of leisure and comfort unknown to women at comparable income levels at other places where domestic service is considerably more expensive.

## Notes and References :

1. M. Dasgupta, The Project Report on the Women Labourers of Informal Sector, ICSSR, 1992, p.17.
2. Cart-road in Kurseong subdivision and Jaldhaka Hydel Project in Garubathan police-station under Kalimpong subdivision had been declared as urban areas in 1981 census.
3. Margo L. Smith, "Domestic Service as a Channel of Upward Mobility for the Lower Class Women : the Lima Case", Female and Male in Latin America, Ann Pescatello (ed), Pittsburg : University of Pittsburg, 1973
4. A tin is an empty container of mustard oil that contains roughly 15 litres of water. The women water suppliers find it comfortable to carry water in these tins on their back.
5. Margo L. Smith, "The Female Domestic Servant and Social Change : Lima Peru", Women Cross-culturally : Change and Challenge, Ruby Rohrlich-Leavilt (ed), Mouton Publishers, The Hague, Paris, 1975, p.169
6. The author is indebted to Mr. S. Lama, the then officer-in-charge of UCO Bank Extension counter for his kindness to let the researcher know the information about the saving potentials of female domestic servants of Singamari Locality.
7. A derogatory term to mean the maid servants in local language in the hills.
8. Elizabeth Jelin, "Domestic Servants in Latin American cities", Development Digest, Vol XVII, no.1 July 1979. pp.67-74.
9. Margo L. Smith, op.cit.,p.168