

While Shantana often feels disturbed at being addressed rudely or left in the lurch without an income by the 'memsahibs', she is grateful that she has never been seriously hurt or injured at work. At least she has been spared the fate that befell Rakhi Bhadra, 35, who became a recent victim of abuse that shocked the country. The manic conduct of Bhadra's employer, Jagriti Singh, a dentist and wife of a member of parliament, has once again thrown the spotlight on the lives of this vulnerable workforce and the extreme risks they face as they tirelessly work to make a decent living in the city.

Feudal habits die hard. Jagriti Singh has been charged with having beaten Bhadra to death and her husband, Dhananjay Singh, an MP of the Bahujan Samaj Party, whose professed politics was to uphold the rights of Dalits, is alleged to have been a witness to it. The couple has been arrested and imprisoned. The CCTV footage recovered from the scene of crime shows Singh assailing not just Bhadra but two others with a wooden stick. The sustained abuse included depriving them of food and incessant humiliation.

Bhadra's son Shahzan avers that his mother became incommunicado after she moved to Delhi. Her employers reportedly denied her access to phones. In her defence, Singh has said that this was done at the behest of Bhadra's placement agency. This then also raises questions about the working of such establishments, long under scrutiny by human rights bodies for abetting trafficking in men, women and children from the poverty-stricken hinterland.

A study brought out by Jagori, a women's resource centre based in Delhi, which has been working to secure the rights of this growing workforce for several years now, only affirms what is quite evident from Shantana and Bhadra's experience – that domestic workers "often have no specified work hours with some working for eighteen hours a day. Some do not get any rest during the day while others may not be given proper food or living space. Non-payment of wages, no weekly leaves or holidays, verbal and sexual abuse is also reported. They have no recourse to any form of assistance when they face harassment – verbal, physical or sexual. A large number of full time workers are hired through recruiting agents who also collect their wages, often withholding a substantial part".

Damayanti, who works from morning to evening, seven days a week in the Gurgaon homes of upwardly mobile couples – many of whom would not be able to fulfil their career goals without the support of these informal women workers – claims to have been cheated off her wages several times. She is also disappointed at the poor working conditions of her lot. She rues, "Forget about giving us tea, these rich people don't even allow workers like me to drink a glass of water. And we are simply lucky if we get our wages in full."

Yet, despite case after case of grave misconduct and injustice coming to the fore, there seem to be no specific laws in place to protect domestic workers. According to Jagori and Multiple Action Research Group (MARG), a civil rights body in Delhi, although women domestic workers are covered by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, its scope is limited.

Of course, the Rakhi Bhadra case is more complex as it involves persecution and killing of a Dalit by the wife of a Dalit leader. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 & Rules, 1995 can be invoked against the couple.

Singh is currently lodged in the Capital's Tihar Jail No. 6, where two other women, Vandana Dhir, a senior corporate executive, and Bira Thoibi, an air hostess, are also confined on charges of causing serious injuries to their domestic help. All three are additionally charged with employing minors as help, in violation of Article 39 (f) of the Constitution, which directs that "children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and that childhood and youth are protected against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment". Incidentally, employing minors as domestic help is another critical issue on Jagori's agenda.

India is a signatory to several international conventions/laws against slavery (bonded labour in the Indian context), forced labour and child labour, specifically hazardous work. Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 bans the system whereby a person or kin render service to a creditor to discharge a debt, for little or no wages, for a specified or unspecified period. The arrested MP and his wife allegedly withheld the salaries of their two maids for a year though the minor was paid a lump sum of Rs 5,000 twice. The maids' demands for wages triggered beatings, as per police investigations. The MP claims he had paid the placement agency Rs 1.2 lakh for Bhadra. Another help, Nishad, is reported to have died at their home in 2009.

While this recent case may be an extreme example, exploitation of domestic staff, including denying them healthcare, leave, wages and proper food has become normalised treatment. In fact, over the last four years, as part of its campaign to uphold rights of domestic workers, Jagori has been interceding in cases of violence, helping to initiate legal and police action. Says Madhu, Programme Manager, Jagori, "We have intervened in many incidents. But regarding this case, the crime was executed at the residence of a government official, who has been democratically elected by the citizens . . . it is his political commitment, responsibility to ensure justice. The incident also marks the violation of the rights of a Dalit woman domestic worker to lead a life with respect and dignity."

Bhadra's killing has caused outrage among activists as well as domestic workers. Her death underlines the fact that domestic workers in India have no support structures of any kind. Approaching the police is not an option for many of them because they fear the consequences. But there are ways in which these risks can be minimised. For starters, Jagori recommends registering placement agencies as well as domestic workers with the state Labour Department. It also emphasises that these workers should receive a written contract from employers, detailing the nature of work, timing remuneration and hike, in addition to paid, sick and casual leave and social security benefits.

"Will this ever happen?" wonder Damayanti and Shantana, adding, "Many of us work throughout the freezing winter, reaching some homes as early as five in the morning for those who have early shifts. But do they care?"

Women domestic workers make up the support system of millions of middle class home but there is no guarantee that they themselves will not be left high and dry. The onus for improving their lives rests, of course, with policy-makers but also – let us not forget –with people like us.