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Case Study

Between the Screen and Everyday lives: Daily Soaps, Migrant Domestic Workers and Cultural Appropriation in Assam, India

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Abstract: With migration and mobilities of people, their identities and lived-in worlds also turn mobile, complex enough to intersect with the dominant social, cultural and economic structures of destination spots. Today, this is visible across the translation of visual idioms and practices, represented through the everyday(ness) of soap operas in Indian homes. Daily soaps in a South Asian country like India, often socialize us to the norms of ideal femininity, caste and class hierarchies, which also lurk in the complexities of making migration as a (mis)representation, involving socio-economically marginalized rural population. The expansion of the labour market and the growing demands of domestic work sector often locates the reception of rural women as a potential resource of labour, where the question of their inclusion moves between the glorification of their bodies, marginality vis-à-vis their social othering. But, underlyingly, soap operas and the discussion of its contents immunize women domestic workers belonging to rural areas with agencies, enhancing their sphere of productive aspirations. Soap operas largely transact real-life roles of commuting domestic workers. The televised content channels the interactions between the domestic workers and their employers, entrapped within the 'modern' upper-class cultural reception of life-chances, humor, leisure-watching and market-oriented consumption. Stretching across this, the article analyses the influence of Assamese, Bengali and Hindi daily soaps on the domestic workers, their socio-emotive practices and migration in a metropolitan Northeast Indian city like Guwahati. This article, based on case studies of migrant domestic workers in Assam, uncovers communicative facets of daily soaps across the women domestic workers' lives, families and workplaces. Lastly, the article explores how the politics of cultural appropriation across soap opera discourses reproduce notions of power relations on one hand and engenders interactions of various caste/class groups on the other.

Keywords: Migration; Soap operas; Domestic workers; Cultural appropriation

1. Introduction

Of all the modernising processes circulating across contemporary social changes, migration forms a critical reality of human life. From transitioning family structures to cosmopolitanism, migration in different spaces and times has routed intrinsic interest in living between tradition and modernity, local and the global. This can be stated that even if one migrates from a specific town or a village to a metropolitan city, one's lived experiences revolve around the ambivalent adoption of metro-culture and contesting its residues through his or her regional identity and representation. This too makes rural to urban migration and urban metropolitan culture a product of individual subjectivity and multi-sited socialization – experiences from rural to urban development. These can be further encountered in the visual

replicas of Indian soap operas, consisting of national and regional broadcasts of daily television serials like Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, etc., respectively. While soap opera culture in India started around the period of 1984 with the iconic Hindi show named *Hum Log*, that revolved around the aspirations, experiences and needs of an Indian middle-class family, the evolution of soap opera content happened around the 2000s with the remarkable entry of a production house named Balaji Telefilms [1,2,3]. It exercised the formation of a discourse that followed typical style of portraying elite families, foreclosing the hardships of lower-income families and the 'ordinary' lived actions of Indian citizens

Popular soap operas started transitioning the content of masses to screening of desirable female actors as housewives [4] within the discursive Indian patriarchal structures. For instance, the primary female protagonist *Parvati*, in the longest and successfully running Hindi TV serial named *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (The Story of Every Home), moves between various imageries of Parvati as an ideal *bahu* (daughter-in-law), a mother, a wife, a home-manager, a protector of family honour and sister-in-law. Though she represented the chief role of the show, her presence evoked meanings of gendered performativity in consecutive scenes of the serial's title song. Similarly, this has been observed in other daily soaps of the time, like the popular *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Because a mother-in-law was once a daughter-in-law, too)*, Kasautii Zindagi Ki* (The Trials of Life)*, Ghar Ki Lakshmi Betiyaan* (The Wealth of the House – Daughters), etc. While they revolved around urban upper-class women marrying into upper-class families as being conscious of the status quo and cultural-economic continuity, the trends after the year 2012 moved in reversal – where rural women, tribal women or women from the urban lower-income families strategising 'love' marriages into the upper-class families of the reputed urban industrialists, remained a profitable genre. In recent times, popular shows like *Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai (Sister-in-law is in the house)* are also breaking the boundaries of ideal housewives to luscious ladies being desirable to men, outside their sanctified marriage life. So, to put it, though scholarships on the complex nuances of femininity, womanhood, fertility and domestic behaviour in soap operas exist across the disciplines like sociology, anthropology and media studies; the narratives of migration, commercialisation, cultural appropriation and the experiences of domestic workers watching the soap operas, have been scarcely explored in the context of Assam where multi-cultural viewership makes for a pivotal orientation of memory and social reality in the making.

1.2. Soap Operas and the Visual Culture

Soap operas form the largest cultural stream in the age of modern cable television era, which are being gradually overtaken by OTT platforms in recent times. In a developing South Asian country like India, the soap operas function as the accessible and reasonable option for the masses to participate in, with women specifically situating themselves as primary audiences. Since plots and sub-plots in most of the soap operas resonate with the reproduction of femininity that quite resembles their lives – their duties in the kitchen, being an ideal wife serving the husband, their household work of bearing perfection irrespective of the presence of domestic workers, etc. But this emerged as a stark venture of commercialising the minds of the Indian audience. This can also be analysed in relation to a wide transition in the type of audience and their demands. With post-independence nationalistic debates in the 1950s, television media was used for disbursing information on the Indian educational system and farmers' struggles; within a limited reach of urban educated elite groups owning a television

set. This sequenced led to the development of INSAT-1A satellite and later the liberalization of Indian economy, globalization and the de-regulation of media for private partners, who came up with T.V. channels like Zee Tv, Sony TV, Star Plus, etc. [5, 6].

The commercial channels like Zee Tv or Sony TV ensured that the technological (re)production system and content value changed to 'all-inclusive family drama' where the rural masses can increasingly join, watch, talk about and garner 'citizenship' of a globalized India. This has been a turning point in celebrating the culture of the masses, both literate/illiterate. Anthropologists like Veena Das (1995) analysed the soap opera culture as projecting an intricate relationship between images, objects and subject positions, where the images are consumed within the intimacies of domestic life. She later argues that films produce a community of viewers than that of the television media, different from scholars who focused on cultural proximities, aesthetics and media imperialism operating in the soap operas of the developing countries [8]. However, this assertion of visuality in television media is encoded within social texts, coupled with the spread of religious debates and majoritarianism, given the fact that a majority of serials portray Hinduism, its traditions, rituals and styles of living. The central force holding families and social relationships together is the Hindu women-wives of 'honorable' urban upper-class groups. These married women who manage/produce households contribute to its social harmony, cultural socialization of younger generations, promotion of literacy among the male members of the household and performance of sacred duties. For instance, popular long-running daily soaps like *Piya Ka Ghar* (Husband's Home)*, Dulhan* (Bride), etc., weave many such expressions of domestic India. But, with certain social changes like improvement in women's education, stringent legal actions on female infanticide, lower fertility rates and the increasing participation of women in the labour market, certain daily soaps are gradually transitioning its contents (such as, web series released in Netflix, catering to middle-class/elite 'youth'). Furthermore, apart from the normative representation of urban upper and middle-class 'women', today, the lives of domestic servants or women who were the markers of invisibility within the 'urban' domestic homes, are portrayed as central characters, even if not without social stereotypes like racial difference, sexual promiscuity or unhygienic appearances. Their commuting lives, bargaining tactics, agency and even social differentiation are visibly and subtly portrayed. On television screens, the female protagonists turn and live up to the character of domestic servants, fighting for their rights and upliftment. But a trickier assertion is their quintessential expeditious marriages into the upper-class families and the wealthy handsome male protagonists falling for them. While this negates blunt class-caste hierarchisation, the purity-pollution divide and infantilisation of domestic workers turned wives as instruments for upholding the sacrality of homes, are often made detectable.

Constant rebukes of their social community, status, culture and caste from the other members (characters) of the family are visible. Dalits are not referred to as 'Dalits', commonly due to the abolishment of derogatory social practices like untouchability, but words like '*koum*', '*nich*', and '*aukaad*' are concretized within every discussion. The awkwardness is often revealed when the mother-in-law or other women of the household and the domestic worker who has just been married off to the man of the family, occupy same physical space but not socially dignified space. But, this too reverses the culture of regulation with the urban upper-class women trying fashionable and trendy clothes, and being constructed as 'vamps'; always plotting conspiracies against the domestic workers turned daughters-in-law (*bahu*). This iterates the controlling of minds, reproducing barriers between classes or what Taylor

(1948) refers to as depiction of 'unobservable and non-material' culture (p. 100). This generalisability of cultures not akin to one's own often induces enough risks of cultural enmeshment and appropriation; such as for women belonging to rural and tribal communities and their prospects of out-migration, at regional and national levels.

2. Materials and Methods

The migration of domestic workers from the rural areas to cities and metropolian areas. boosts informal economy today. As per data records on the e-Shram portal, around 8.56 crore of workers in the informal sector, fall in the category of domestic workers [10]. Another such data-set related to the International Labour Organization (ILO) claims that India officially employs around 4.75 million domestic workers [11]. While this reveals a huge share, it segmentalizes less about commuting domestic workers. Migration is often treated as similar for the other segments of workers in the informal economy, such as construction workers, brick-kiln workers, etc. Each year lakhs and lakhs of domestic workers migrate from rural, semi-urban, towns or peri-urban areas to work in the cities. Their monetary expenses on rented accommodations, transportation, health issues, and livelihood, etc., speak about a disjuncture between – the urban middle-class home in-making and their own changing ways of life. With this, the study draws on a case study approach followed by conversations and observation methods, that uncovers the nuances of work-life-family spectrum and the experiences of the migrated domestic workers across the embodied interactions on soap operas.

With a qualitative design, this study utilises the illustrative case study approach. The illustrative case study is used to describe a particular situation or phenomenon, in relation to every element such as location, actors, goals, work patterns, etc [12]. In this study, while 15 migrant women domestic workers and 10 women employees have been drawn as samples based on snowball sampling technique from the locations such as Barsapara, Lalganesh, Uzanbazar and Bormotoria areas of Guwahati, three 'representative cases' [13] have been used for the purpose of the study - a migrant woman domestic worker and a local domestic worker who is a resident of Guwahati. This has further been complemented with some interactive testimonies from a woman employer, a resident of Guwahati. Representative cases, as Gordon and Shontz [13] reflect to the chosen cases one at a time to understand how each person seeks to manage events and situations of life. While the male residents from Guwahati were also sought as prospective participants for of the study, the women employers have been found to be the majority of the household managers, regulating the behaviour, narratives, work identity and activities of the domestic workers.

The first case study illustrates the work and life continuum of Ms. Rekha Das, a migrant domestic worker, who has mostly engaged herself with Hindi and Assamese daily soaps that influenced her ideas on women's migration. The second case study presents the detailed narratives of Ms. Aisha Khatun, a local resident and a domestic worker, whose habit of watching Hindi and Bengali daily soaps made her question and conform to numerous ties of familial-kinship relationships, employee reciprocity and the nature of her work. For these case studies, an interview method with unstructured or loosely structured questions has been used. These questions ranged from intimate aspects of their homes, their choice of domestic work, their relationship with their employers, to daily soaps they would liked to watch, their favorite characters in the show, scenes which resonated with them and everyday meaning-making processes. To compliment this, observation method has been used with a note-taking technique

to analyze their gestures, their tones, frequency of narration, their discussions with their employers (with their employers also being interviewed in some cases), etc.

The domestic workers and their employers were interviewed in Guwahati, as they were based. As the largest city in Assam, the North-Eastern state of India, Guwahati incorporates enormous share of domestic workers every year. It is well-connected to several transportation routes and commercial centres. It is a circuit city that houses the state capital of Assam, i.e., Dispur. But, no such data-set on domestic workers exists in Guwahati, barring a few exceptions. The North-East chapter of an international NGO named ActionAid, states 'in Guwahati, the corresponding figure [*for domestic workers*] is likely to be between 40,000-45,000' [14]. But, this number of domestic workers often find no space in public forums and state reports while lying at the lower socio-economic strata of the Indian social hierarchy. Their struggle for livelihood makes them fall prey to several vulnerabilities of life and in here soap operas play a substantial role in their adaptation, resilient capacities, gendered identities, agencies, their mutual trust in their work as well as their location, movement and spaces of labour.

Relatively, in analyzing the narratives used in the case studies, the Codes and Coding technique [15,16] has been used. This technique projects 'the quick identification of the segments relating to the research questions and any potential themes' [15-16] (p. 2). The research questions here include; why do soap operas form a pivotal object of cultural diffusion, adaptation and appropriation among women domestic workers from rural areas? And secondly, how soap operas create spaces of social interaction, communication and agency for domestic workers and their employers? So, expanding it, the Code and Coding technique has been used to represent two themes with illustrations that complement the study. Further, the processes involving the arrival of themes are broken down into three – Initial Codes that emerge with the finding of similar patterns in the data, such as assertive words used by the participants, Expanded Codes involving the analysis of assertive words in relation to research questions and forming phrases to represent it and lastly, Rationalised Codes as a meaningful analysis of phrases that explore the micro/macro consequences of the phenomenon under study. With this, the structuring of the themes in this study has been replicated in the present form:

Case 1

−> Television routine (Initial code),
Soap operas as a relief (Expanded code),
Migration and the influences of watching daily soaps (Rationalised code),
Soap operas, Culture of Migration and Domestic Work (Theme 1, Case 1)

Case 2

−> Learning off Cultures (Initial code),
Debates on rural and urban cultures (Expanded code),
The visual portrayal of rural culture (Rationalised code),
Cultural Appropriation, Intermixing and Familial Relations (Theme 2, Case 2)

Lastly, for ethical reasons, real names of the domestic workers and their employers have been replaced with pseudonyms upon their consent.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Case 1: Soap operas, Employment and Migration

'After a day's work, when I open my T.V., I get a sigh of relief. I feel emotionally connected to all the characters who bear the brunt of struggles, endless migrations and hardships'

This statement narrated by Ms. Rekha Das, reflects the joys and sorrows of existence. Being a domestic worker involved in a tedious job, holidays have been a distant dream for her as well as doing something for herself. Here, soap operas work as the only medium of embodied appeal and leisure for her. In fact, daily soaps inspired her to migrate to Guwahati and look for a better source of livelihood. Originally from Amguri, a village in the Morigaon district of Assam, she migrated to Guwahati around 11 years ago. She states, 'It is the Hindi serial *Balika Vadhu* [The Child Bride] which influenced me to migrate to a big city. Earlier, I was sceptical about big cities and always harbored the anxiety of getting lost. But when I watched … hmmm… Anandi in the show, I got some courage that I can also do it. *Nijor jegatt ei asu nohoi!* (I am in my place [Assam] only!)'. This indicates the pivotal roles soap operas play in registering to the sensorial essences, subjective interpretations, agencies and meaning-making of migration for one. Ms. Rekha's migration to a big urban city like Guwahati was not merely a matter of earning something for her family but also mobilizing herself beyond constrictive gendered roles, workplaces and structures. Today, she is training herself in embroidery work along with saving some money in a post office, through her job as a domestic worker. Her case also reflects such transgressive potentials soap operas have in revolutionising the life processes of one, yet locating their social identities at the intersections of material and socio-visual significations.

Soap operas are a cultural object, an experience, a structure and an ontological representation of lived reality. This resonates with what Iqbal & Abdar analyse as the effect of soap operas at two levels:

> "The first level is that of generating a thinking role of women. The meanings derived from the knowledge of soaps challenge the dominant discourses about the role of women in the family, on the silencing of women's voice, on the social expectations of women's behavior and about the power of women's relationship with other members of society… second level is that despite its public negative evaluation, women find time and space for these soaps in their lives" [17] (p. 11)

The dual interactions of these two levels also induce communications between the 'self' and the 'society'; through the dynamic capture of cultural practices, counter-cultures, and networks of power connecting different social roles. As with Ms. Rekha, while she migrated as the first single woman from her family, she resisted the gendered patriarchal norms of 'migration' for women as a wifely-caring duty to support their husbands in their ambitious endeavours. This can be a general articulation across cultures, be it rural or urban. While in some cases, traditional and economic production of families shapes their sustainability and conjugal

authority , such as farming; where women of joint households often stay back to farm while men migrate for other occupations. Today, with the processes of globalisation,

modernization and the spread of soap operas from centralized commercial spaces to the rural and peri-urban peripheries, women from small peasant and farm Labourers' families are migrating to cities to opt for domestic work.

In the serial *Balika Vadhu*, the female protagonist Anandi Singh was a married woman and travelled alone from a small village of Rajasthan to a city like Mumbai to request her husband to return home (who had left her). Ms. Rekha could connect herself to the vagaries of Anandi's life and the cultural domination of urbanised elites and urban spaces today. This rural-urban hierarchization and the paradoxes of cultural dissemination, constructs rural socio-economic marginalized women as consumers of the soap market, apart from their role as producers of lucrative labour. Such consumption of urbanised migration and the psycho-social transitioning of one's cultural origins, makes for a case where soap operas reproduce the legitimization of smart cities like Guwahati as a nation-making project. For instance, while several popular Hindi shows like *Pandya Store,* reflect the dominance of middle-class patrilocal families in the sub-urban areas or small towns, the discursive trends also encourage migration to metropolitan urban cities or *seher* (known in Hindi) on the sequences of receiving health treatment recovering debts or marrying off 'small-town' girls to big urban upper-class families.

Ms. Rekha's motivation also draws around the character Boroxa from the popular Assamese serial titled *Boroxa Jetia Naame* (When Rain Falls). Here, the female protagonist Boroxa belongs to a lower middle-class family and looks after her parents and sister while falling in love with a wealthy man named *Rudra*. Ms. Rekha states, 'I watch this serial since the content and title track is really soulful. Boroxa financially helps her family out, works in an office, and takes good care of her family's needs. Isn't it encouraging? What one should do if there are no male members in the house? A girl needs to work. She should assert her place in the society'. Ms. Rekha's life partially resembles the hardships of Boroxa. Her father has two daughters, with Ms. Rekha being the eldest one. Even if her parents aspired to have a son, they never had one. So, Ms. Rekha looked after her family and was their backbone in all of their troubles. As she states, '*Moi lorar nisena kaam korii asu. Muru jibon asile, kintu poriyal orr karone sob korim. Moi lora e hoi mur deutar karone!*'. This translates to - 'I am working like a boy. I also had a life, but I will do everything for my family. I am a son for my father!'

This statement reveals two complex positions. On one hand, this unfolds the transformative processes and changing ideologies surrounding the indices of gender. On the other, it also attunes to the confirmations of gendered behaviour and collective norms. As Ms. Rekha narrated the absence of a potent brother, she still harbors the socializing dynamics of demoting women as a 'weaker sex', less capable of protecting and standing for their family. This has been instilled more by the South Indian dubbed movies which she watches, where protagonists in most films are male protagonists with all the superhero qualities while woman characters are assigned minor roles and are often saved by male heroes. Recapitulating this, the character Boroxa in the Assamese daily soap had to transform her social personality, choices and lifestyle after marriage. She left her job and turned into a homemaker, dutifully performing her marital life as well as idealizing the Indian notions of womanhood and femininity, such as procreation and reproduction. With this, Ms. Rekha's making of a sense of her own world, social relationships, beliefs and traditional practices, all come to the fore to shape the relational spaces of power. She earns but often dreams of whether she could have married. Her work as a domestic worker might have been more of a feminised job, germane to women's socio-

cultural role as a perennial caregivers but her work in the public space (outside her village home) makes her experience not fall within the traditional sites of femininity, in turn being asexual with age and act less as a female. Her body and selfhood that nourish her decision-making and economic autonomy contest with the thoughtfulness of marrying someday, even if she is apprehensive about it. This resonates with what Sarah Lamb (2000) states, "…the body is seen instead as the vehicle of the human making and remaking of the world, constantly shifting location, capable of revealing endlessly new 'points of view' on things" [18] (p. 10). So, soap opera culture works through the embodied experiences and body-self movements of consumers who watch soaps, relate to their favorite characters and blur the asymmetry between the reel and the real. This also shapes the everyday working relationships and adaptations with their employers.

The relationships between the employee and employer are often portrayed across daily soaps. Domestic workers are often seen as the confidant of the battered women-wives of the households or team up with the 'vamps' or antagonists of the show to trouble the protagonist. Referring to this, Ms. Rekha states, 'I am not like this. I consider *Baideu* [the employer] as my big sister. But vamps do exist. *Baideu*'s sister-in-law is like this … cunning'. Ms. Rekha, over these years, has grown closer to Ms. Sutapa Kar (*Baideu*), so it is not difficult for her to contest the boundaries of caste, occupational authority and kinship. As observing her discussions with her employer, she started narrating to her *Baideu*:

> Ms. Rekha: You know what, in *Udariyaan* [1](Flight of Dreams), Fateh entered into an extra-marital affair with Jasmine, Tejo's sister. Are men like this? Jasmine is also such a disgraceful woman!
> Ms. Rekha then started telling me,
> Ms. Rekha: I don't know what is happening nowadays. Some women don't even hesitate to enter into a relationship with a married man.
> With this, the employer rhymed her:
> Ms. Kar: Yes, shameless people! Even village girls are shown to be marrying off rich husbands. This is not right. *Enekua jug* (The era is of this!).
> The employer later discussed with me after Ms. Rekha left:
> Ms. Kar: These serials are so disturbing and toxic. How can a rich boy marry an uneducated village girl. Is there any match? This will ruin our society as nowadays it is difficult to discipline boys.

So, the characters of Tejo, Jasmine and Fateh came alive through mundane discussions in domestic households, classified across social relationships, resistance to upward mobility and languages of power as well as objects of labor. On one hand, there exists a degree of respect or compassion for the kind of tasks Ms. Rekha performs in her employer's eyes (professional labor production for running the middle-class households) while on the other hand, the master-servant relationship reproduces the surreal asymmetry of controlling, disciplining and re-socializing. Consequently, in circulation are the soap opera culture and the issues of public opinion and private moralities.

[1] A popular Hindi daily soap that is aired in Colors TV. The show revolves around two sisters and their love for the same man.

3.2. Case 2: Cultural Appropriation and Family Relations

Domestic workers are symbolic of mass cultural representations in India today. In every urban household, domestic workers are tracked and rendered enigmatic for the typical features of their work, embedded in personal relations, unfixed wages and absence of contracts. Such diversity of work they perform apart from the household chores, such as, fetching groceries from nearby stores, cooking in emergencies, chopping vegetables/fruits, etc., positions them as a socio-cultural source for sustainability of the middle and upper-middle class homes. This also involves the everyday routine of Ms. Aisha Khatun, a resident of Guwahati and a domestic worker with an experience of over six years. Ms. Aisha, who is of 30 years old, lives with her husband and two sons, and faces enough hurdles to pay for their school fees. Her husband had a fruit shop and ran it successfully until he became completely paralysed due to a nerve disease. To save her husband, she sold the shop and her wedding jewellery. However, she attributes that a part of her life crisis also emerged from her habit of watching daily soaps all the time. When she was only 14, she eloped with her the then boyfriend, now her husband, while curtailing all opportunities for living a dignified life. She narrates, '*Ami bhulei Korsi* (I did a mistake). Now I understand it very well. My father was a farmer and we were from a well-to-do family. We had enough to eat and live. But by watching daily serials, I romanticized everything. I was too young to understand the grave consequences of marrying a man who had nothing, except a fruit shop. Now, it is lost too'.

While daily soaps in the era of the 2000s encompassed elopement scenes, today it is far less common, given the primary characters revolving around rich-wealthy families, continually evoking the meanings of discipline, *maan-maryada* (moral limits) and family's generational status . These contents also portray a counteracting visual-social dissemination of poor families as often bereft of values and desires of honor, ready for elopement and depicted as sexually promiscuous. This does not merely form an aesthetic product of consumption but also reproduces power structures and politics of cultural appropriation.

Although workers are made invisible, muted without any dialogues and shadowed in daily soaps, scenes in Bengali serials like *Nabab Nandini* (The King and his Queen) depict domestic workers as trouble-maker/ mischievous persons, eavesdropping on powerless people of the household and complaining to the matriarch. So, the subtle forms of overturning power relations can also be observed in the work of domestic workers where the loyalty and function of patronage of the workers are often drawn towards the person who draws and control their monthly salaries.

Today, with the processes of globalisation and digitalisation, permeability of different cultures has increased, with no boundaries of separation. One adopts and intermixes the culture of others through manifestations of symbols like colors, styles of clothing, forms of speech etc. But such cultural exchanges turn into an unequal play of power if the phenomenon of exploitation of any culture does exists and is inadvertently perpetuated within the circumference of identity politics. An observable point is where Aisha points to serials as often showing Muslim women characters with necessary *hijabs* (head covering worn by Muslim women) and nose rings. Conceptualizing and locating cultural appropriation, Ashley & Plesch state it 'to make one's own' [19] (p. 2) others' cultures while Scafidi stresses it as the unauthorized taking in of specific objects, ideas, artifacts, knowledge and historical expressions from the other cultures [20]. It might also involve extreme valorization and ethnocentrism of a cultural group or underplaying of any culture's moral essences to turn it into an assimilable

form. This has however, been a common practice, forming discourse of media, its material dynamics, its commerce as well as socio-political imaginaries.

Ms. Aisha, who watches daily soaps when free, talks about how the characters belonging to rural backgrounds are portrayed in soap opera culture. She states, 'I don't know why in serials, girls belonging to a *gram* (village) are often shown wearing sarees like a kid, with more accessories and *kajal tikas* (spots) all over the eyes, near the eyes and in chins. We do not do it. We do not even wear saree so high'. In the Bengali daily soap named *Godhuli Alap* (Dusky Affair) Nolok, the female protagonist, is seen wearing cotton yellow sarees in three-quarter styles and in a twist and turn of the events, marries a rich aged Kolkata-based advocate Mr. Arindram Roy. The more complex assertion of the show is the rapid upliftment of the social status of Nolok in her home village where Mr. Arindam is screened as a divine-like masculine figure for saving Nolok's honor (as her fiancé refused to marry her on wedding day).

Besides, in endless serials, the ruralization of India project is submerged within the making of urban cities through urban wealthy males as potential grooms for the rural women to access their agency, autonomy, and ability to assert their rights. The imagery of urban educated English-speaking groom also sport the subtle meanings of cultural heteronormativity of urban 'male' bodies, the marginalization of rural social identities, caste-transitions of the rural Dalit women into upper-caste groups (or a 'sacred' lineage Sanskritization for women), negating endogamy, the profiling of racial differentiation and legitimizing of rural men as unfit or less-than an assertive figures of masculinity. This has also been essentialized as a process of locating men or the 'social' men as the primary economic providers. Similarly, in a Bengali high-TRP (Television Rating Point) show named *Ishti Kutum* (A Miserly and Selfish Person), which Ms. Aisha enjoyed, the character Bahamoni, a young tribal Santhali girl from the village of Palashboni was married off in a turn of events to a rich man Archisman Mukherjee. The sequences in the serial portrayed distortions of tribal culture in the screening of elaborate yet make-believe tribal rituals, Bahamoni's complex mixed spoken language (neither Bengali nor Santhali) and maligning statements on tribal people such as, '*eder shomaje*' (their society), '*chotolok'* (lower human), etc. This scenario can also be explained through the words of Bell Hooks, as she states, 'the tendency to exoticize ethnic cultures … how the commodification of cultural expressions of otherness are deployed to make the majority culture more "exciting"' [21] (p. 21) [22] (p.4).

Contextualizing this in the present, Ms. Aisha states:

> "Marrying a rich man is a distant dream. Serials *shob shopno lakhan bhangya dei* (crushes all our dreams). I get transported to a world of wealth and wake up from my dream where I am working in a person's household. What serials show never happens in reality, we too know. It is just that I like how we are treated better in these sequences. Village poor girls too deserve to be married to well-off households."

These contrasting sites of immobilizing the subjectivities of village women as low-caste bodies and possibilities of blurring their social identities as a resultant of urbanisation, form everyday influences. This in turn is internalised by the domestic workers in urban areas.

The politics of cultural appropriation across daily soaps further dissolves debates on issues of public policies and welfare schemes. None of the shows throw much light on the

pivotal issues of marginality of urban and rural poor. In several serial scenes, issues of marginality are shaped through casual and humorous conformity to discrimination. The portrayal of rural women and specifically domestic workers as passive and threatening to their employers, invoking fun and busy pelting stones at the expensive cars of visitors from cities, blurs dimensions of dominance, class hegemony and power; in this case, power of state (where urban areas are conceived to be centralized zones of national governance) and regional administration. Several celebrities and actors acting in daily soaps are often found joining the national majoritarian party like BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) or any regional state parties like TMC (The All India Trinamool Congress). Even loyalties of the daily soap directors toward specific political parties influence the content of their shows and divide audiences into camps. While Ms. Aisha does not understand such subtle political references, she notes one thing, as she states:

> "None of the serials shows a character who needs something from the government. It seems all are happy. My brother lives in Dubrajpur, a small village in Birbhum district [*West Bengal*] and if you see the conditions there, you will wonder how village people are surviving. There are no hospitals, not even good roads! In serial, everything is about love and marriage, nothing else."

Nonetheless, the relatability, evocative and emotive impressions of the daily soaps also flow down to influence real-life familial relations of the audiences. The everydayness of watching daily soaps, the screen time occupied by each familial member and contestations Over watching shows among familial members such as daughter-in-law and mother-in-law or husband and wife, have been most talked about or observed. Ms. Aisha narrates, 'My husband watches action-packed movies while I watch serials. Every day this is a matter of skirmish. I once told him to get a new T.V.'. This too is affecting their marital relationship by increasing tensions while raising questions about autonomy and choices. Sometimes Ms. Aisha discusses the content of Hindi daily soaps like *Parineetii* (Destiny) with her husband to abstain him from thinking about a second marriage (as allowed in Islam). In the serial, the male protagonist Rajeev Bajwa, from a Hindu family marries twice, even if it is not legally allowed under Section 494 of the Indian Penal Code and Hindu Dharma injunctions. Similarly, other popular Hindi soaps like *Ghum Hein Kisiki Pyaar Mein* (Lost in Someone's Love) and *Dil Sein Dil Tak* (From heart to heart) show Hindu male protagonist marrying twice without divorcing his first wife.

This expands the complex understanding of tampering with morality, ethics, conjugality and religiosity, in the context of commercializing culture. The heterogenous deliveries of culture are controlled and reproduced. This also normalizes spaces of gendered binaries, stereotypes of sexism and the constriction of women's bodies to be installed as the 'servers' of familial values. In the daily soap *Parineeti*, when the first wife of the male protagonist discovers her husband's second wife, she leaves the house. But, in turn of events, without any legal action, she accepts the second wife after knowing about her pregnancy. Accordingly, a valorizing reproductive role of women as expanding the kinship lineage of the husband's family is reproduced as the primary content of socialization to conform to the hegemonic ideals of 'womanhood'. This can also be related to the practices of Sanskritization or feminine-Sanskritization where ideas of empowered womanhood are often extolled by the adoption of mainstream religious-cultural value-systems. These contents also generate the high TRPs for

these serials, indicating the flourishing of such ideals among the audiences in a patriarchal society like India. Moreover, adjustments of family relations and social conformity are too contested to re-normalize social taboos. While India's family structure is transitioning into nuclear model , the daily soaps are predominantly invested with broadcasting of the joint patrilocal or widowed matriarch-oriented intergenerational households. However, Ms. Aisha states, 'It is good to see joint families. Now everyone must work and migrate, so joint families are no longer present. However, I do not favor two-wife situations. Is marriage a joke? How come Hindus are also doing it, in serials?' This poses a larger question on the Hinduization of politics in India, culture of appropriation and on the social taboos of Muslim marriages. So, the soap operas spin off the possibilities in inter-mixing of lower and high-caste values with diverse spatial-temporal imageries.

4. Conclusions

This paper reflects and draws attention to the ways in which the Indian soap opera culture influences the worldviews, lived experiences, and the social consciousness of people, especially migrant domestic workers who work in upper and middle-class homes of their employers. These soap operas call into question the cultural patterns of the family, migration practices of domestic workers from rural areas as well as the germination of social and visual discourses of urbanisation through the typical urban upper and upper-middle-caste and class homes. The appointment of domestic workers in urban homes and the screening of possibilities of deep conversations and intimacies between the members of diverse caste and communities, present alternative kinship imageries with daily soap operas as a therapeutic space.

The conflictive ties as observed in the voices and narratives of the domestic workers who discuss themes of popular daily soaps with their employers and resist forms of cultural majoritarianism, delve into the social life of soap operas in Guwahati. Also, in terms of sharing different cultural practices, like the employer taking *nuskas* (home-made remedies) for diseases, owing to the domestic workers' rural background and the presence of traditional knowledge (in serials) or workers taking non-economic benefits from employers, all produce more nuanced understanding of junctures between the tangible and intangible cultural commodities. The way certain characters are presented in the daily soaps also lurks in dangers of commodifying the tribal and rural communities, where tribal women are often seen to be wearing eyeliners or kohl all over different points in their faces. Thus, the soap operas function within the intersections of dominant power relationships, mobile representations of difference and the market strategies of cultural appropriation.

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