The Challenge of Anonymity and Digitalisation of Domestic Work
Project Summary

With the rise of the middle-classes post-liberalisation, demand for domestic work in India has grown considerably (Neetha, 2004; Ghosh, 2009). However, the increasing demanded has not translated into better wages or work conditions as it is often seen as an extension of housework and hence 'unskilled'. The outsourcing patterns among the middle-class further reveal a hierarchy within domestic chores, as cleaning remains among the most stigmatised jobs hence commonly outsourced (Singha, 2019). This selective outsourcing pattern reinforces the duality between 'emotional' and 'manual' labor, wherein the manual labor is rendered as unskilled, undervalued, and easily replaceable (Roberts, 1996; Illiah, 1999; Sharma, 2016). Against this backdrop, the study seeks to examine how social hierarchies unfold in the digital economy.

While studies in the West have highlighted racial discrimination on various platforms like Uber and Airbnb (Teng et al, 2017; Doorn, 2017; Hunt & Machingura, 2017), identity-based discrimination manifests itself differently in domestic work and particularly in the Indian context. As domestic work is strongly embedded in the matrix of purity-impurity (Ray & Qayum 2009; John, 2013; Sharma, 2016), it determines who can take what kind of work and thus reproducing the hierarchies between domestic workers. The shift from cleaning to cooking is often difficult to make, as employers closely surveil the profile of workers who enter their homes. Even as caste norms seem to be 'loosening' in metropolitan cities, especially in the context of cooking and Brahmin dominance (Sen & Sengupta, 2016)- caste and religious-based discrimination against domestic workers continue to resurface.

With the shift towards digital platforms, how are these hierarchies reconstituted? Though, a few cases of discrimination against gig workers have been reported but instead of viewing them as isolated events, I argue that social profiling is far more systemic and pervasive. The study will offer a sectoral analysis of domestic work in digital platforms and helps understand how social markers of domestic workers are processed and represented to their clientele. Som (2020) argues that platforms may appear to be 'neutral' intermediaries between employers and job seekers but often profile workers based on employers' perceptions and biases. The study seeks to build on this contradiction- on the one hand, is the attempt to standardize domestic work and discipline the workforce and on the other is the social profiling of workers to cater to clients' social location.