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DOMESTIC WORKERS IN INDIA

India, like Britain and America until a century ago, has an established culture of live-in servants. Professional urban families often have a “maid”, usually a young migrant woman, who does everything from cleaning to childcare. Wealthier homes have an entourage stretching from sweeper to housekeeper. According to a Delhi maid’s agency, well-to-do families typically have at least one live-in servant.

A stream of unskilled workers has long provided cheap labour. India’s latest employment survey estimated that over ten million people worked in homes as maids, cooks or gardeners. The business is mostly unregulated and the true figure is probably higher. The International Labour Organization says domestic workers account for up to 12% of the working population in developing countries, against less than 1% in rich countries.

Yet the culture may be changing. Economic liberalization in the past two decades has created a wider range of low-skilled urban jobs. Malls need shop assistants. Offices need errand boys. In rural areas a job-creation scheme for poor households is keeping potential migrants at home. Meanwhile, the middle-aged servants invested in their children’s schooling so that their offspring do not follow in their footsteps. One woman began watering plants at a Bollywood actor’s house at the age of seven. Today, her son is a bank manager and her daughter is studying commerce.

Servants, in turn, are more able than before to demand decent working conditions. In the south of India, staff will refuse to work in a house without a washing machine or a food processor. The going monthly rate for a live-in maid or cook, who often works for more than 12 hours a day, six days a week, is still low. But wages appear to be rising, causing grumbles among employers.

Poor treatment is another deterrent. Even progressive families have an unwritten rule that servants should not sit on the same furniture or use the same crockery as their employers. Servants are vulnerable to violence and sexual abuse. Now India’s government is trying to boost servants’ rights. Some laws have been passed in parliament where domestic workers have been included in free health-insurance schemes. And though the national minimum-wage law does not cover domestic workers, twenty-five per cent of India’s states have included servants in local minimum wage laws.

The days of full-time live-in servants are numbered. Increasingly, part-time workers have jobs in several houses for higher rates and fixed hours.

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