Indian domestic workers lose their jobs to Covid fears

The job paid a pittance, with two days off a month, and sometimes the mistress of the house would call out as part-time cleaner Noor Jahan was almost out of the door "just massage my feet before you leave" – an extra service for which there was no pay.

Yet Jahan, 56, wants the job back, despite a monthly salary of only 3,000 rupees (£30) and the fact that "cleaning" served as a catch-all for cooking, ironing, watering the plants, and childcare.

In last year's lockdown, her employer told her to stay at home, fearing that Jahan, as a slum resident, would infect her with the virus. Since then, like most of India's estimated 4 million domestic workers, Jahan has found no work. If her employer called her, she would go back like a shot.

Middle class India has pulled up the drawbridge. In a monumental lifestyle shift, the part-time cleaners, cooks and childminders who used to troop through their homes every day for generations are no longer welcome.

For the first time in their lives, richer Indians had to do their own housework. And even when lockdowns have been lifted, they have not reverted to the old ways, their dependence on domestic workers reduced. At their front doors now are delivery men bringing vacuum cleaners, robotic cleaners and washing machines.

One company alone, LG Electronics, reported a 400-500% increase in dishwasher sales in 2020-21 compared with the previous year. Demand was so high there were waiting lists.

Sales of vacuum cleaners have tripled this year. "My monthly sales have gone up four times," said Dyson salesman Ishaan Kapoor in New Delhi.

Shops selling robotic cleaners in Ahmedabad are selling 10-15 pieces a month as opposed to five in 2019. According to a study by Payback-Unomer Shopper in December 2020, sales of cleaning appliances rose by 55%.

Even the humble pocha or floor wipe, which required a person to squat and move in a crab-like fashion, has been replaced by the spin mop now that families need to use them themselves.

Kitchens used to be the most neglected room in middle class homes in terms of appearance and gadgets. Since domestic staff, not the family, spent time there, no one bothered to do them up or buy smart appliances.

Kanta Devi, 48, worked for the same family in Janakpuri for 15 years. After the first lockdown, her employers asked her to come back for only one day a week. After the second lockdown was lifted in May, they told her to find another job.

"They had already had a washing machine but they said they had bought a microwave, a rice cooker and a dishwasher and could manage without me," said Devi,

Her friend Kamunisha, 52, has been laid off for the same reason. "They said I was old and it was time for me to rest. My question is how do I feed myself without work," she said.

This descent from poverty into extreme poverty troubles Ramendra Kumar, president of Delhi Shramik Sangathan, lobbying for India's informal domestic workers.

There are now laws to fix minimum wages, hours or holidays. Jahan has never had a pay rise in 12 years. "I used to ask her for an increase and she would wave me aside saying next year … next year," she said.

Some families have continued to pay salaries even though their own incomes were hit by the pandemic, or they send food. But others shut the door on their former workers. Even if some households asked their help to come back, neighbourhood associations would see and protest and guards manning the gates of gated communities would stop people from entering.

Kumar said the pain is on many levels. "It's the pain of losing income when their husbands have also lost jobs, it's the anxiety about plunging into a poverty they thought they had escaped, and it's also the emotional pain of caring for a family for years and then told to go."

Jahan's employers, a doctor and businessman, gave her nothing to tide her over during lockdown. So Jahan asked for some pulses, sugar or milk. The reply was, she says: why are you asking me? Go ask the government.

Domestic workers, overwhelmingly women, are desperate. Family incomes have been decimated. Buying food and paying the rent is difficult. Most manage from the meagre income the man of the house earns from doing occasional odd jobs.

In Devi's case, as a widow with a widowed daughter-in-law who lost her job as a cleaner in a school when they closed, even this is not possible.

The lifestyle shift is likely to be long-lasting. The pre-pandemic obsession among some Hindus with caste purity and "pollution" – so someone coming in to clean the bathroom cannot be allowed into the kitchen – has turned into outright paranoia in the context of the virus.

Pre-Covid, they tolerated domestic workers inside their homes but fear of the virus has made them intent on limiting contact with the outside world.

Social commentator Santosh Desai points out that even before the pandemic, housing complexes had separate lifts and entrances for domestic staff.

"If not directly related to caste, there is definitely a generalised sense that the household help who lives in unhygienic surroundings is the primary carrier of the virus, that the source of the infection is likely to be the 'other' and with the 'other', caste and class combine to become a reason for keeping the poor out," said Desai.

For Devi, what hurts the most is not lack of financial help but her employer's indifference, after years of participating in the family's daily lives and comforting the two children during illnesses.

"I cared for them for 15 years but not once did my employer, despite all the deaths, call to ask, are you all right, are you safe, are your grandchildren OK?" said Devi.

theguardian

Nepal's Cabinet expansion likely by Monday

KATHMANDU: Nepal's newly-appointed Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and CPN-Maoist Centre chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' have agreed to expand the Cabinet by Monday, a media report said on Sunday.

"The ruling parties are doing the homework to appoint leaders from their own party in the government. The extension will take place on Sunday or by Monday," My Republica newspaper reported, citing its sources.

It said a meeting was held at the prime minister's residence in Baluwatar where the two leaders agreed to expand the government to include CPN-UML leader Madhav Kumar Nepal's side "as much as possible".

At present, besides Deuba, there are four Cabinet ministers and one minister of state in the Cabinet.

CPN-UML leader Madhav Nepal, however, is reluctant to join the government right now in the wake of struggle within the party.

In such a case, the Nepali Congress will have eight ministers, the Maoist Centre and the Janata Samajbadi Party seven each after the Cabinet expansion, the paper said.

Citing its sources, it said that in the remaining three places, the leaders close to Madhav Nepal, but with independent status will be made ministers.

Nepal's Constitution allows only 25 Cabinet ministers.

Sri Lanka lifts inter-provincial travel ban as Covid-19 vaccination accelerates

The Sri Lankan government lifted the three-month-long inter-provincial travel ban across the country on Sunday as the vaccination drive against the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) picked up pace, news agency PTI reported. However, the inter-provincial travel at present is only given to government employees on official duty, senior health official Asela Gunawardena said.

The government also allowed the resumption of public bus services from Sunday while train services would resume from Monday. Officials told PTI that crowding in these transport services is not allowed. "We will allow buses to take passengers strictly limited to their seating capacity," state public transport minister Dilum Amunugama.

This will be the first time that public transport will be operational across Sri Lanka since late April when the government imposed tough travel curbs due to a massive spike in Covid-19 cases following the Sinhalese New Year.

The lifting of the travel bans and resumption of public transport in the country comes days after the government said on July 30 that it was ending work-from-home for all government employees despite no improvement in the ongoing pandemic situation. PB Jayasundera, the current secretary to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, said there was no need for government employees to work from home as the majority of them had been vaccinated.

Sri Lanka is reaching the 10 million milestone for its ongoing vaccination drive against the coronavirus disease and more than 84 per cent of the population above 30 years has been given at least one dose of the vaccine, according to a report by the Lankaxpress. The country has received over 13.8 million vaccines, the report added. And on Saturday, Sri Lanka received 728,460 doses of AstraZeneca from the COVAX programme.

Meanwhile, a total of 308,812 people were infected with Covid-19, while 277,118 patients have recovered and 4,436 died so far. The daily cases in Sri Lanka have been over the 2,000-mark daily during the last week.

Pakistan: Islamabad imposes smart lockdown in various sectors amid Covid surge

According to a notification issued by the Islamabad district magistrate, the movement of residents will be restricted in 27 streets in different sectors with a high Covid-19 positivity ratio, reported Dawn.

Pakistan on Sunday imposed a smart lockdown in various sectors of the capital due to a surge in the number of Covid-19 cases.

According to a notification issued by the Islamabad district magistrate, the movement of residents will be restricted in 27 streets in different sectors with a high Covid-19 positivity ratio, reported Dawn.

Exemptions to the order include essential services and supplies like pharmacy and medicine shops, grocery store and bakeries, patients for medical aid/medical consultation, rationing, drinking water supplies, utilities and emergencies.

"The citizens are requested to make prior arrangements for their convenience including ration, medicines and reschedule their engagements/office work before the onset of lockdown/sealing date and time," read the notification.

This comes after Sindh province imposed a partial lockdown from Saturday till August 8 as the Covid-19 cases are surging.

Meanwhile, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Sunday slammed the partial Covid-19 lockdown imposed by the provincial government in Sindh as it went against the wishes of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government.

Afghanistan president Ghanis comments came as Afghan forces fought and bombed Taliban fighters and positions on Sunday.

While speaking during a question-and-answer session, Khan addressed the Sindh's decision to impose a partial lockdown to curb rising Covid-19 cases, saying it hadn't taken into consideration the hardships of the poor, Dawn newspaper reported.

"We had a small problem between the federal government and Sindh," Khan said. "Sindh government wanted to impose a lockdown, which is the correct decision and will curb the spread of virus."

Pakistan continues to record a spike in Covid-19 cases as the country total number of confirmed cases has risen to 1,029,811, while the positivity rate of the virus was recorded at 8.46 per cent, according to the National Command and Operation Center (NCOC).

Meanwhile, the number of active coronavirus cases in the country surpassed the 60,000 mark. On Friday, the Covid-19 positivity rate in the country was recorded at 7.79 per cent.

Kazakhstan: Dismissal of president's security detail linked to Pegasus?

Resignations and dismissals among the president of Kazakhstan's security detail in recent days are sparking speculation that the personnel reshuffle may have come in response to revelations about snooping conducted by Israeli surveillance firm NSO Group on several senior Kazakh officials.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's office on July 30 announced the dismissal of Kalmukhanbet Kasymov as chief of the presidential security service. No reason was provided for the firing.

Kasymov, 64, had been in the job since January 2020. He did a nearly two-year stint as secretary of the national security council before that, a post he took up after eight years in charge of the Interior Ministry.

At the start of this week, Kasymov's deputy, Talgat Mukhtarov, announced that he was resigning "in connection with a transfer to another job."

Kasymov's long tenure as interior minister is not generally well-regarded.

He had been in the job for only a few months by December 2011, when police officers opened fire on unarmed protesters in the oil town of Zhanaozen, killing at least 16 of them. He took personal charge of the investigations, which culminated in multiple protestors being charged and a handful of police officers receiving light sentences.

The end of his tenure was no less troubled.

The random murder in Almaty of star ice skater Denis Ten sparked a wave of outrage over the failure of police in Kazakhstan's largest city to deal with petty street crime and brought about calls for Kasymov's ouster.

Kasymov eventually left his Interior Ministry perch in January 2019, but his perceived loyalty to former President Nursultan Nazarbayev appears to have served him well and ensured his promotion to more prominent security posts.

His removal from his job as head of the presidential security detail might have gone largely unnoticed had it not come so close on the heels of reports alleging that Tokayev had before coming to office been targeted for eavesdropping by the NSO Group. Other officials targeted for similar treatment were Askar Mamin and Bakytzhan Sagintayev, the current and a former prime minister, respectively.

The NSO Group's so-called Pegasus snooping software works by installing itself on the telephones of unsuspecting targets and gives snoopers access to all data on the device, including exchanges on messaging apps protected by encryption.

The software is reportedly even able to turn the phone into a bug as it can turn on the microphone and camera to capture conversations, enabling a deeper level of surveillance than even the most invasive security services normally have at their disposal.

The mystery in Kazakhstan is who might have ordered the snooping, and why?

In an article published on July 30, independent journalist Gulnara Bazhkenova offered her theory.

The spying, she claimed, although without providing evidence, was done at the behest of Karim Massimov, the head of the Committee for National Security, or KNB, the successor agency to the KGB. The removal of Kasymov and his deputy are directly related to the Pegasus affair, she argued.

The period of alleged surveillance on Tokayev, however, covered a period prior to his becoming president – or Kasymov taking up the security detail job for that matter. The snooping on Mamin and Sagintayev too happened before they assumed their most important jobs, suggesting that the probing might have been part of a vetting procedure.

There has been barely any official response to the Pegasus revelations, other than dismissive remarks from Dauren Abayev, the first deputy head of the presidential administration, a figure known for his closeness and loyalty to former president Nazarbayev. In an interview to state television on July 22, he described the reports on the surveillance program as "intriguing," but derided them as being unsubstantiated by any evidence.

The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which is spearheading the reporting on the Pegasus program, is slowly revealing more Kazakh figures caught up in the listening campaign. One notable new figure is the Europe-based opposition figure and disgraced banker Mukhtar Ablyazov.

Others are businesspeople known to be loyal to the government, however.

This latter fact has prompted Bazhkenova to argue that the security services, on whom she pins the snooping campaign, is interested more in monitoring the activities of allies than that of the opposition.

"The more power and money you have, the more vulnerable you are in Kazakhstan," she concluded.