

# **Embodying Skill and Stigma: An Exploratory Study of Professional Cleaners and Salon Workers in the Gig Economy**

Aanchal Dhull



**Gender  
Perspectives  
on the Digital  
Economy**

Editors: Khawla Zainab, Sakhi Shah, Anuradha Ganapathy

Program Conceptualization and Guidance

Anita Gurumurthy, Khawla Zainab, Nandini Chami

These research studies were produced as part of the National Gender Fellowships Program of IT for Change under the 'Re-wiring India's Digitalising Economy for Women's Rights and Well-being: an Action-oriented Knowledge Intervention', supported by the European Commission and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.



The opinions in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IT for Change.

All content (except where explicitly stated) is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License for widescale, free reproduction and translation.

# **Embodying Skill and Stigma: An Exploratory Study of Professional Cleaners and Salon Workers in the Gig Economy**

Aanchal Dhull\*

---

\* Aanchal Dhull holds a PhD in Gender Studies from Ambedkar University, Delhi and the CWDS, Delhi. Her research interests include gender, labour and domestic work.

## **Abstract**

The paper sheds light on the platform economy and occupational hierarchies vis-à-vis cleaning and beauty work. The discourse around platform economy has highlighted the precarious work conditions and the various mechanisms of control that undermine the agency of gig workers. However, the nitty-gritty of day-to-day functioning, the composition of the workforce, and hierarchies within different professions is an aspect that has been overlooked in the platform economy. Often the gig workers are constructed as ‘professionals’ but the status of a skill is determined by factors like the identity of the worker and the meaning attributed to it in its social context. Based on the narratives of salon workers and cleaners, the paper asks whether platforms challenge the stigma attached to historically marginalized professions or do they further reinforce it? Drawing on a comparative analysis, I ask how caste and gender manifest against the larger attempt by platforms to homogenize the workforce.

## **Introduction**

The rise of platform economy has been a subject of much debate globally and in the Indian context as well. The interface with digital technologies has not only transformed the how labour is transacted but also the nature of labor itself. For instance, some of the recent studies have shown how ‘soft’ skills are at the core of labor performance, besides the technical or craft-related knowledge (Illouz, 2008; Gooptu & Chakravarty, 2018). However, even before soft skills were mainstreamed as a part of the corporate discourse, Hochschild (1983) illustrated how emotional management is embedded in care-related labor. The managerial aspect has however acquired newer meanings in the digital economy. As the urban middle-class has become the primary consumer of these services, the workers are trained to adapt their worldview and understand the aspirations of the clientele they serve (Raval & Pal, 2019).

When services offered by such platforms are constructed as ‘professional’, there is also a shift in how labour is viewed. The services come with the promise of efficiency, convenience, and trained professionals that set them apart from ‘regular’ services. The paper examines how historically stigmatized jobs of cleaning and beauty work are rebranded in a digital context. Based on the narratives of beauty and cleaning professionals- starting from their training, and experiences at work, the paper sheds light on how social location comes into play. Although cleaning and grooming services are projected as skilled work, often the meanings attached to skilled are specific to their social contexts and the identity of a worker (Gooptu & Chakravarty, 2018). The

study is set against the discourse around professionalization which emphasizes skill over the social location. I ask in what manner does social location, in particular, caste mediate the work experience of beauty and cleaning professionals. From what appears to be a 'neutral' space regulated by AI, evidence on the contrary suggests how these platforms reproduce social hierarchies. For instance, studies have brought attention to racial discrimination on various platforms like Uber and Airbnb (Teng et al, 2017; Doorn, 2017; Hunt & Machingura, 2016). However, most of these perspectives are limited and the study seeks to address this gap in the Indian context.

The perception of AI-regulated platforms is usually that they are neutral and 'fair' in how workers receive their gigs. The workers are given a uniform salary and seem to be competing in a highly competitive environment of rating, where caste or any other identity marker do not seem to be critical. This is unlike regular domestic work which is much regulated by the caste of domestic workers. There exists a clear hierarchy between cleaning and cooking, the latter is better paid and dominated by Brahmin women. The workforce is divided by caste, so much so that online platforms provide the surname, eating preferences, religion and region of the worker (Rathi & Tandon, 2021). Thus, online platforms reinforce the same hierarchies that exist in non-platformised domestic work. In this paper, I examine how social location structures cleaning and beauty work. While a large data-based study could help examine the composition of the workforce, it was not within the scope of this study to examine it. The study examines this discourse of 'neutrality' by focusing on work narratives of professionals. In the subsequent sections, I discuss how the rationale behind choosing beauty and cleaning workers, the platform and subsequently the narratives of professionals.

## **Methodology**

The study focuses on cleaning and beauty workers to explore this subject. The rationale behind choosing these professions is that both services are relatively new to platformisation. Although the beauty industry has existed in a non-platform setting for a while, the category of housekeeping or 'professional' cleaning is a relatively new arena. In fact, professional cleaning in domestic settings was launched by platforms like Urban Company, which are now in much demand among the middle-classes. Professional cleaning provides a sharp contrast with regular domestic cleaning which is highly feminised and poorly paid. The dominance of men in housekeeping is usually attributed to the use of the equipment and historically it has been observed that women are excluded from technological advancements. Some of the professional cleaners interviewed

believed that women did not enter the profession because of the ‘heavy equipment’ needed in deep cleaning. Similar patterns were reported in a study on corporate cleaners by Mirchandani et al (2021). However, one of respondents shared that he takes his wife along for help with kitchen cleaning services as they take considerably longer. In fact, another respondent suggested that kitchen cleaning is more suitable for women as they are “familiar” with the space. Women’s absence of professional cleaning is thus justified in terms of equipment and even security, while the domestic sector continues to be feminised. This gendered division not only exacerbates the wage gap but also creates a hierarchy between regular and professional cleaning (Tandon & Rathi, 2021).

The platform chosen for the study was Urban Company (henceforth UC), as it is a platform that offers both cleaning and grooming services and is widely popular in metropolis cities. Since UC is also one of the first few platforms to offer professional cleaning, the platform has workers who have been associated with them for longer periods, thus becoming suitable to study the growth of the sector and how it impacts the work conditions. The study undertakes a comparative analysis of ten cleaners and five beauty professionals in the Delhi NCR region. The services were for cleaning were booked in three different regions in Delhi, in the south, north, and central Delhi to draw a heterogeneous pool of respondents.

The respondents were connected via booking services from UC and then requested for interviews. After a few services, contacts were established through a snowballing method. The respondents contacted via services were requested to introduce their colleagues, friends, or batchmates. The reason for switching to the snowballing method was to bring more diversity to the sample. It was observed that after booking a few services, the platform tends to send the same professional based on their ratings. To avoid such instances, a snowballing method was more appropriate and also offered the possibility of a diverse sample.

In some studies, the snowballing technique has not worked because most workers are disconnected from each other as they don’t have a shared workspace (Rathi & Tandon, 2021), however, the workers who were connected from services were in touch with their batchmates. Usually, workers are trained in batches at a training centre, a batch typically consists of 6 to 10 trainees. Gig workers therefore, are not entirely disconnected from each other most workers interviewed, and the job at UC is usually recommended by either a friend or family member. The

recent agitations by UC salon workers<sup>1</sup>, in fact, suggest unionisation is possible even in a context where workers are not organised or connected with each other (Selvi et al, 2021).

The interviews usually lasted for 45 minutes, of which some of the contacts received from snowballing were done telephonically considering the Covid protocols. As the study focuses on stigma, the subject was a sensitive matter to raise with the respondents, especially with regard to caste location. The general perception however around caste is that caste is no longer a significant factor in joining the workforce or for receiving gigs. The participants were asked if their caste had a role to play and most participants viewed it differently. The general understanding of caste in the Indian context is limited to untouchability, however, caste today is more diffused and manifests in different forms. Besides occupational choices, which also does not seem to be caste specific as the participants suggested, caste is more subtle in digital platforms, almost giving a narrative 'casteless-ness'. The conversation that followed was not necessarily on caste but rather the working of the platform and their work conditions. It is through these conversations, their perception about their work, how the family perceives it, and the training process, that identity of the worker comes up.

The respondents came from varying caste locations, including SC, OBC, and the General category (see Appendix). While some workers had prior experience in housekeeping, some were new to the field, which suggests that the profession is not limited to any caste group. Within professional cleaning, there are various categories like bathroom cleaning, kitchen cleaning, and vacuum cleaning. All three have different wages, of these three, the bathroom is the most basic level of work, whereas the kitchen is paid marginally better. The category of sofa cleaning is however the most profitable as it's not labor-exhaustive and paid much more than bathrooms and kitchens. Though one can't assess the composition of the workforce and hierarchy between these three tasks, to be able to move towards vacuum cleaning, one needs to purchase the equipment from UC. Apart from ratings, this navigation is dependent on a number of factors like monetary assets, family support, marital status, etc. But besides class as a factor in accessing the cleaning hierarchy, the paper will discuss how ratings also play a role in job promotions. In the following section, I illuminate the training process and how cleaning professionals access digital platforms.

## **The training process**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://thewire.in/rights/urban-company-sues-workers-for-protesting-against-unfair-labour-practices-protest-called-off>

In this section, I will specifically focus on the training process of professional cleaning, as most salon workers hired by UC have minimum two to three years of experience. On the other hand, many professionals are first-time entrants in the cleaning business. The training processes are aimed to standardize the quality of services besides familiarising the workers with the digital setup and soft skills. The three-day training project includes theory and practical classes as shared by the respondents. The respondents shared that the theoretical part included learning about different chemicals to treat bathrooms. This means assessing the condition of the bathroom, identifying the type of floor and the chemicals it would need. The respondents shared that marble floors and tiled floors are treated differently and water stains need different equipment and products.

Followed by theory, workers are imparted practical training, wherein the workers are required to clean bathrooms and kitchens located at the training centre. This process which is aimed to standardize professional cleaning by imparting the technical knowledge of the products, training the workers to learn the “right ratio” of the chemicals, also challenges the notion of cleaning labour being unskilled. However, ultimately the number of gigs that comes to a professional depends on his ratings, which are controlled by clients. The process of rating is highly subjective, while the outcome of the work performed is an important factor, clients also base their ratings on the personality of the worker. Apart from cleaning, the workers are trained in operating the app and managing their ratings, etc. Hemant, a professional with UC shared:

We were trained to operate the app, how to talk to client. Wish them good morning, ask them if they can come for the service once they have booked it. We are also instructed to not interact with the clients and silently do the job and leave.

While the platform attempts to standardize the services, the ratings remain subjective. Although there is a follow-up with clients to review the services, the clients may not engage with it or may not objectively engage with the questions. This brings into question whether skill training can challenge the stigma attached to the job. The mandate for minimal interaction not only makes the worker invisible but also the process of cleaning. However, despite the attempts to remove the caste and class markers of the workforce, they often come into play in the recruitment and as well as the training process. The first step towards recruitment is filling a form through the app, which besides work experience and identity cards also asks about the caste of the applicant. While it is not certain if that is the norm but some of the respondents were asked about their caste location too.



Mandeep hails from Nepal and came to Delhi in search of better earnings. His kin members were working as assistants and chefs at various small chains when he arrived. With no opportunity to assist in the kitchen, he took up cleaning work in the same lodge as his family members were working. He then worked at various farmhouses or 'kothi' as he called it, before joining UC. Mandeep said that both works required hard work but it was better to be associated with a platform there is job security "In kothis, not only does one put in hard labour but there no guarantee that the employer will keep you". When I asked Mandeep about his surname, he said he did not have any but said that he came from the Vishwakarma community. However, according to him, the caste did not matter, and nor was he asked to fill it in the form. His caste identity did not matter but it was ratings that decided the frequency of gigs and promotions towards better-paying works like kitchen cleaning.

Mandeep further shared that in the first few months workers are mostly allotted bathroom cleaning work and only after getting a minimum rating, one is eligible to claim kitchen gigs. Though it is better paid but kitchen work is more labour extensive as kitchen floors and cabinets are greasy. While the average time allocated to bathroom cleaning ranges from 45 minutes to an hour, the minimum that kitchen cleaning takes is up to four hours. The time duration of a kitchen means one can only take up one or two gigs in a day, whereas bathroom cleaning can be done about five times, thus making it more profitable.

Vijay, another respondent had a similar experience who had recently joined the platform. He shared that progress is subject to one's work. Prior to joining as a professional cleaner, Vijay was pursuing graduation in hotel management but had to drop out due to financial problems in the family. He then started a cyber café in his town near Meerut but ran into losses. We briefly worked with a contractor but after various such stints, he joined on his friend's recommendation. Vijay had an enterprising spirit and felt that each job had been a learning experience for him. In this job too, he did not think of this work to be "small". The respondent is a Gujjar (OBC) and had some agricultural land in his village. He is the first from his family to engage in cleaning work, as generations of his family had served in the army. Although, he has not informed his family that he is not cleaning business, as they would perhaps look down upon this work. However, he sees himself as a 'professional' who is earning a livelihood for his family:

I don't believe in caste or religion, any person in need of money will take up work. And I don't see that my caste matters, we are all professionals once we trained

Vijay's emphasis on the term professional suggests how he does not view this work as 'lowly', although he chooses to not tell his family. Neither does he call it a 'job' but sees it as a platform to gain technical knowledge around cleaning. Thus, in his view caste is not a factor to limit his work choice but emphasized that skill acquisition was the way to succeed in a job market. His ratings were consistently high and said that was because of his work and he knew how to interact with his clients. Able to maintain the rating "threshold" as Vijay called it, he soon started getting leads for kitchen cleaning:

In starting, they see your work, they see how you interact with clients but the company works for customer satisfaction, that is the most important. Once you prove yourself, one gets more work apart from basic bathroom cleaning.

For respondents Vijay and Mandeep, caste did not seem to decide their work choices, and neither did they view it as a factor in getting more leads. Both spoke of hard work and ratings as the way to earn more leads. While these are important factors, they overlook structural factors that control the ratings, which are discussed in the next section. In contrast to the narratives discussed earlier, Sampat was acutely aware of his caste location and of his batchmates and how it shaped their work experiences. Before joining the platform, Sampat had worked as a supervisor in housekeeping at Delhi airport. He was referred for the job by his family members who were working at the airport. After working for three and a half years at the airport, he joined UC for its flexible working hours and the weekly payment system. According to him, the cleaning services are no longer limited to any caste group, as he shared:

It's not our people now, these days Jats, Gujjar, Sardar, everyone is doing this work. In government jobs they are apply, but they get better jobs like driving the truck, whereas our people do the cleaning...in UC there is nothing like that, everyone knows who comes from where, we get to know anyway and we are friends also, there is nothing like that, no tasks is big or small, we are here to do hard work.

Sampat's narrative suggests that cleaning work is no longer limited to any caste group, which has historically been carried out by marginalized groups. Although, there are occupational hierarchies in the government sector but platforms like UC do not appear to have any hierarchies as everyone is doing the same kind of work. Like the respondents, Sampat also emphasizes that it is handwork that matters over caste identity to survive in a highly competitive environment. Contrary to the narratives discussed so far, which argue against caste as an organizational factor, Manas Tyagi who is from an upper-caste background shared that in the recruitment form, he was not only

asked to fill his caste but also asked in the training why he wants to do “this” work. While the overall objective of a training process is to invisibilize the identity, in this particular narrative it was evoked to question if the respondent had made the ‘right’ choice, emphasizing the low social status accorded to cleaning.

While on the one hand, professionalizing cleaning and association with digital platforms seek to counter the stigmatisation of cleaning, however, stigma is also embodied, wherein the identity of the workers becomes critical (Gopal, 2013). Besides, Manas, other respondents also recall sharing their caste identity during the recruitment process, despite the attempts to invisibilize the class and caste markers during the training process. However, despite these attempts, as Sampat shared “we anyway know who comes from where, you get know”. Manas further shared that during the training process the trainer emphasise the importance of cleaning:

He [trainer] said that everyone with a background of hotel management does cleaning, even I started by cleaning bathroom. That’s where everyone starts and then you climb the ladder...now whether that is true or not, we don’t know but they such things

The emphasis that this work is done by “everyone” but also where the journey begins suggests that the ‘ideal’ job is elsewhere but cleaning is a necessary step to navigate the job hierarchy. Although, the respondent is aware that the trainer is merely creating a narrative, by putting cleaning at the bottom or as a mere step in the career contradicts the platform’s approach to view cleaning as a ‘regular’ respectable job. In the next section, I discuss how respondents engage with their clients, perform their work, which ultimately controls their ratings. The impression so far is that the success of a worker is incumbent upon hard work, which puts the burden on the workers alone. This process of self-responsibilization is so embedded in the platform, that structural barriers often gone unnoticed. However, it is in moments when the ratings fall despite ‘hard work’, that workers recognize the structural imbalances in the platform.

## **Navigating work and ratings**

The rating system is at the core of app-based work to ensure quality services or ‘customer satisfaction has respondents emphasized upon. However, the term satisfaction is subjective and so is the outcome of any service. The nature of work that bathroom cleaning requires is subject to its condition and also the package booked for the service, which includes classic, deep cleaning, and moving-in cleaning (the most rigorous). Often the customers book the basic pack for a bathroom that would need deep cleaning. The difference in these packages lies not only in the

style of cleaning, the chemicals, and the tools used but also time devoted. Typically, for a classic deep cleaning package, a professional spends about fifty minutes for the service. This time is closely monitored by the platform through the app provided, the professional is required to fill in the start time and end time. In cases where work is finished earlier than the stipulated time, the professionals choose not to leave as it may impact their ratings. Thus, besides the quality of service, professionals are also monitored on the time devoted to each service. Though, professionals are paid based on the number of gigs or what is called the piece rate, but they have to carefully manoeuvre the time as well.

This arbitrariness in the rating system contradicts the narrative of 'hard work' that professional had been trained to embody. For instance, Sampat shared

In the training process, we are told that we will face all kind of customers, not all customers are fair, its upto you how you handle it

The process of individualization of risk and the burden on the professional abdicates the platform from developing a fair rating system. Even as platforms strive to professionalize cleaning, however, a customer may not have a professional outlook. As Ray and Qayum (2009) have illustrated in their work, domestic services are deeply embedded in cultures of 'servitude', thus employers may not view this service as a professional transaction. Dhananjay, a professional who has been working on the platform for about two years shared:

Company gives us work, I have no complaints against it, it is the customers who demand more work when they have payed less, they always ask for extra work

Similarly, Sampat also shared:

A lot of customers ask for extra work, sometimes I have been asked to clean fans, which is not a part of their package but request you to. Sometimes I comply to keep their heart, but it is not possible to do it always. Sometimes the ratings comes down because of this, the company calls to enquire about the situation, they say "It's okay, there are all kind of customers

This suggests that while the platform has rebranded cleaning and to some extent even destigmatized the job, it fails to guard its workers against the larger fabric of society that still extracts labour out of professionals based on a relationship of servitude and the tendency to outsource manual labour. Singha (2019) makes a distinction between 'clock time' and 'social time' in the case of domestic workers, which can be deployed in the context of platform workers too. It

is expected that professionals report on time, or what is termed as clock time, which is verified by the customer. However, customers expect workers to leave on social time, as Vijay shared that “sometimes customers get angry that we leave on time, even if we finished the job”. Thus, workers are often caught between the platform's mandate to be professional on the one hand, the customers' expectations which are embedded in a feudal structure, and fail to see cleaning as a transactional service. What are some of the consequences when professionals don't comply with the demands of customers? What leads to a 'bad' rating and how do professionals view it.

Dhananjay shared that he has never had a bad rating for the longest period

In my first job itself, I got a five-star rating and I was able to maintain my rating over 4, which is the minimum that a professional has to maintain. However, during Diwali time, my rating went down and ultimately my profile got locked...during festivals there is more working and even got greedy, I booked more than I could deliver, this brought down my rating

Unable to maintain a rating of four-plus, the platform blocks the account of professionals. The work can be resumed often after paying a penalty fee to recharge the account and start after a week or so with a new profile. When Dhananjay's ratings came down, he blamed it on the extra gigs he accepted but could not deliver due to time shortage. Similarly, Vijay's ratings came down during Diwali due to the work pressure. During festivals like Diwali, the platform gives the incentives to work to take up extra gigs without paying a commission fee to the platform. What is promised as an opportunity to earn more however becomes an obstacle for some workers, as it is incumbent upon the professional to balance quality and as well as time. However, apart from Diwali, there are also instances where the rating is brought down without a legitimate reason, as Haroon shared his experience:

I do the job by heart, but yet you don't get the ratings, even the customer says that I have done a good and they assure to give a good rating, yet the rating does not go up...I don't know if it is happening to others too but there seems to some kind of *ghautala* [Scam] in ratings. I know it has happened to some people, that ratings go down, sometimes you don't reach on time, but sometimes you don't know the reason

Haroon further shared that sometimes the customers also discriminate, for instance, once he was not allowed to bring in equipment inside. Despite this, he carried out the work with “wafadaari” (honestly). However, this is not rewarded despite embodying a professional attitude towards the customer. The isolated nature of this work further leaves the workers in a dilemma, if the rating

system is a structural problem or an outcome of their performance. Though at times they question it, but attribute it to the customer more than the platform, as most respondents shared that they will face all kinds of customers. To boost their performances, the platform also shares the ratings of workers who have maintained their ratings. Interestingly, Dhananjay noticed, most of these profiles were from his community:

I am a Mahto and I see that profiles uploaded by the company of professionals who are doing well are also people from my community

A similar observation has been made by Manas Tyagi:

I am a Tyagi and it has so happened that I have at least gone to ten Tyagi households for services

Although Manas was unaware of the other workers were allotted work based on their caste but it questions the neutrality of AI-based platforms. While the workers believe that caste does not factor in the gigs they get but yet in the recruitment form they were asked about their caste. This data is used for various purposes, Gooptu (2013), for instance in the case of training security personnel shared how success stories are cited of people who come from a similar background and succeeded in their field. The purpose of the training, as suggested in the narratives is that no job is too low to aim for or undesirable, on the contrary, they help set a foothold in the job market (ibid). However, this is at the condition of hard work, a narrative that is constantly pushed to underplay the market structures. The narratives of professionals suggest that professionalization does necessarily counter the stigma as caste identities invariably come up during the training process and as well as at work. A recent study by Mirchandani and Mukherjee (2021) also suggests that caste equity cannot be limited to immediate caste identity or the opening up of the profession to upper castes, innated the meaning of cleaning is embedded in a culture that where work is divided along the purity-impurity axis.

The process of career progression again suggests that they are not subject to ratings or sincerity alone. In the initial few months, most workers are allotted kitchen and bathroom work, after which they are given the option to upgrade their skills to dry-cleaning sofas and deep cleaning of a house. This switch needs an investment of at least twenty-five thousand rupees, which is financially unviable for most workers. Many of the respondents interviewed have not been able to make this switch, even though dry-cleaning services pay better and need lesser labor and time. Class, therefore, is an obvious factor in climbing up the professional ladder but the division between bathroom cleaners and dry cleaners may also reveal caste-based divisions.

Even as cleaning as a profession is opening up to diverse social groups, those who are at the upper end of the profession are limited not only in numbers but also come from dominant caste groups. Mahskar (2015) argues that the cleaning sector which is an overwhelming presence of Dalits is now changing as the profession is opening to non-Dalits. With this the nature of jobs has also changed with the use of equipment, however, it is the change in nomenclature of these jobs that has led to the entry of other caste groups. The use of the term 'housekeeping' instead of '*safai kaam*' has broadened the nature of services. The use of housekeeping has been a critical factor that has led to professionalization and countering the stigma attached to this job. However, the hierarchies within the rubric of housekeeping are not within the scope of this paper to address. In the next section, I discuss how platformisation affects the beauty industry and how does caste identity shape the experiences of beauty professionals.

### **Professionalising beauty work**

The beauty industry has seen a steady growth since the 1990s, however the sector has seen a dramatic rise with the expansion of urban middle-class. Mondal et al (2018) find that beauticians and hairdressers have increased almost fivefold since the year 1993-94. From a mere 10:7 female-male ratio in the beauty industry for the year 1993-94, it increased to 47:3 in 2011-12. The transition towards platformisation has further paved women's entry in the beauty industry. Though traditionally beauty services were performed by specific caste groups such as Nhavi<sup>2</sup> but the composition of the workforce today is much more heterogenous (Zende, 2016). Tracing the history of beauty parlors in Pune City, Zende (2016) finds that some of the early parlours set in the 1980s and 1980s were set up by Maharashtrian Brahmin and Parsi women who not only had the capital to set up this business but did not carry the burden of stigma attached to this work. The dominance of upper caste women is challenged only in the 1990s when women from Nhavi and other castes join the industry. However, within the industry, the division of labour is strongly marked by caste and class location, as women from marginal castes mostly remain service providers (ibid).

Against this backdrop, how do platforms respond to occupational hierarchies? Though it is not in the scope of the paper to address the larger composition of the beauty industry, however based on the narratives of beauty professionals, I explore how beauty workers and platforms construct a narrative of professionalism around beauty services and undermine social location as

---

<sup>2</sup> Nhavi or Nai caste in Maharashtra and Northern states is listed in the OBC category (Zende, 2016)

factor shaping work experiences. Compared to professional cleaners, the manifestation of stigma in beauty work is not limited to the nature services alone but also gendered in the form of controlling women's sexuality (Gopal, 2013). The 'safety' of beauty concerns was strongly voiced by one of the cleaning professional as he said " every beauty worker should be given a body guard or she accompanied by a family member". The respondent shared that while men in the gig economy truly have freedom to work in different areas, women on the other hand work within the vicinity of their homes, thus limiting their work. However, beyond the narrative of safety, in this section I discuss how beauty professionals enter the platform and it shapes their client interactions.

To draw a comparative analysis with cleaning services, I interviewed a total of five salon workers associated with UC, who offer different services like make up, nail art and regular grooming. Like cleaning services, salon workers also undergo professional training, wherein they are given grooming and technical training besides enhancing their work skills. None of the workers were freshers as UC opens its market for experienced workers only. All five participants had at least worked for three years before joining UC. The training process helped them enhance their skills, for instance, respondent Wahida shared that she learnt about massage, the right the pressure points etc. Although, the respondents felt that one learns only with experience but a few workshops on skill development is what makes UC distinctive from regular parlour services. The emphasis on hygiene especially during the pandemic made it easier for participants to get work when compared to regular parlours. As Raval and Pal (2019) comment, the training process is aimed to erase the class location of the services providers, as they learn to perform according to the client's habitus. The participants shared how they address their clients by calling them "Ma'am" or phrases like "are you comfortable" etc, which not only helps establish a professional relationship but also obfuscates their social location.

However, how service is transacted is much dependent on client interaction, especially in body labour (Twigg, 2000). Despite the standardisation of services, the process of rating remains subjective as its controlled by clients. This unequal power relation sets the tone of transacting services as ratings have a direct impact on the number of leads that a professional gets. Hence client interaction is a critical aspect in intimate labour forms such as this. This mechanism reinforces the hierarchy between consumers and workers (Gupta, 2020) in most services, whether it is ride hailing or domestic services like cleaning. Although most workers go through similar trainings, especially grooming but the nature of interaction is specific to the service ordered. For instance, professional cleaners discussed how they are not encouraged to keep minimal



interaction with their clients and conduct their job without creating any disturbances in the process.

This way of delivering a job not only makes the worker visible but also the labour process. On the other hand, salon workers have to strike a balance based on their clients' needs. Salon workers, therefore, have to constantly emote besides the tangible parts of their job (Gupta, 2020). Neelu for example shared that she has the habit of using the term "*babu*" (a term of endearment), although most clients are addressed as "ma'am" but mistakenly calls them *babu* at times. This evokes different responses, while some are happy, others prefer a formal interaction, which sets the ground for their ratings. Thus, workers have to constantly vigilant of their interaction with their clients. Veena, another respondent shared that sometimes clients are moody:

While service they will say they are enjoying it and appreciate our work but they give low ratings. One can never know what went wrong

Veena seems to suggest that if a client gives an honest review, there is scope for them to improve their services. Her stance is not entirely against the rating system, however Zahira, who has been with the platform since its launch felt that the rating system was not only unfair but anti-workers as they did not have any support system in case of unfair ratings. Not only was she against the rating system but also against the company policy as she said "What they [company] don't understand is that the company cannot function without us". Most of the respondents met in cleaning and beauty services, had joined the company either due to underemployment or unemployment. Joining the platform has given most workers a sense of security, thus the structural inequalities in the platform such as ratings and other forms of are not actively questioned and sometimes even discouraged.

For instance, respondent Deepa left her husband after constant abuse and picked up parlour work to support her children. Since it was her only source for work, she was against the recent protests staged by salon workers in Gurgaon. Deepa believed that such protests could threaten her only source of livelihood, as these protests impact the entire workforce. Deepa also suspects the recent decline in their leads, was perhaps the company's response to the protests. Although other workers attributed this to the size of the workforce which has led to a decline in gigs but Deepa was certain that it was a deliberate measure taken by the platform to ensure discipline among workers. This form of subservience towards the platform and clients reinforces the culture of servitude, as discussed in the context of cleaning and domestic services.

Taking the discussion forward on how caste intersects with salon work in its platformised form, there was general perception that caste was not pertinent in receiving work. Unlike cleaning work, wherein there were instances of direct reference to respondents' caste and whether it was 'respectable' work, salon workers did not make any reference to their caste. This could be attributed to the sample itself, of which four respondents are upper caste and one OBC. In fact my query about caste came across as odd to some respondents, as some were not aware of their caste or of their other friends. Nitu, for instance shared that "we don't have so much time at hand that we will inquire about others' surnames". Not being aware of one's location is often common among upper-castes as they are not subjected to any discrimination. This is in contrast to Sampat's narrative who acutely aware of not only his caste but of his batchmates too. When asked about their batchmates, the respondents said that everyone was given "equal treatment". Nitu for example shared that "we [batchmates] all ate together, given the same training..in UC you will see all *biradaries* [community] Bihari, Bengali, Nepali". By bringing regions instead of caste, Nitu is hinting at the diversity and a cosmopolitan culture which leads to an 'eraser' of caste. Sara an aspiring makeup artist shared that her religious identity has never been a hinderance in her work, although it became a concern when she had a parlour:

I named my parlour Sara Nail Art but people dissuaded from using this name, as this would not bring Hindu clients. But I went ahead with the name and I had more Hindu clients than Muslims

Sara's mother Wahida also works with UC however said that her identity has not been an issue with her clients. Wahida also believed that ultimately it is her "work that speaks". She even said that even though grooming classes her important but they have a limit. Wahida who has been in the business for a longer period, almost for a decade strongly felt that it that skill that is the core of this work. Hence, she strongly voiced against the rating system and felt that it should be dismantled altogether. Based on the interaction, one can see that most workers felt that it is the skill that fetches work instead of one's identity. Therefore, they do not perceive the platform to be discriminatory, however the struggle lies with their families, who sometimes looked down upon this work. Deepa's family was against the profession and after she moved out, her neighbours also question her choice:

They think how is getting this money since am not very educated but I have my skills.  
Everyone works to earn money, we are also working women, why do they think less of my work

While Deepa's struggles with her neighbours and families to establish that salon work is skilled, Nitu shared an instance where her client misbehaved and gave her a poor rating:

They [client] think we don't have a status [*aukaat*], I don't understand why question our work? It's like any other work

Although, Nitu did not explain what led her client to misbehave and aggressive but she attributes this behaviour to the client's perception who did not think of this work as respectable. The question of respectability is raised in the context of profession but not immediate caste identity. While increased mobility is often concern in the family, with the clients the struggle was to establish salon work as 'skilled'. One gets conflicting narratives on client interactions, while some say that it is the work that speaks, other felt that the system of rating was arbitrary as clients fail to acknowledge the skill. Thus, workers were caught between balancing the various facets of their work- the skill, presentation and emotional responsiveness.

Black and Sharma (2001) have argued how emotional labour is not reflected in the wages of beauty workers, however with digitisation there is a further undervaluation through ratings. Thus, even though professionals suggest that their caste identity is not critical to their work, it is the larger social structure that has historically devalued occupations like cleaning and grooming. The distinction in the two professions however lies in gendered composition of the workforce. While men in the cleaning profession struggle against invisibilisation of their labour salon workers constantly face the burden of respectability as working women (Radhakrishnan, 2009). What is common among the two professions is the temporal scale or what Sharma (2011) terms as 'temporal professionalism' in the gig economy, where most jobs are time-bound and the pressure to maintain ratings, creates new forms of hierarchies between workers and clients. The narratives suggest that platforms despite professionalisation emulate the existing hierarchies. While the labour of professional labour is invisibilised by the mandate of minimal interaction, salon workers have to be emotionally responsive to their clients. The rating system leaves no scope for the workers to resist against their clients and lack of acknowledgment towards the labour process.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The paper brings together the narratives of beauty and cleaning professionals in the gig economy and how caste manifests in the new digital spaces. The paper raises some important methodological concerns about mapping caste in the gig economy which have fashioned themselves as non-discriminatory platform that prioritise quality services which ensured through

quick hire and fire policies. This volatile workspace does not seem to be governed by caste-based hierarchies as it is largely operated through AI. However, several studies have questioned the neutrality of AI and there is further scope for research in this area. Some of the narratives in fact suggest that leads may be based on similar caste and regional backgrounds of the client and worker.

The study provides an interesting contrast with the domestic help market, where the profiles disclose caste and religion of the worker on the app, which reinforces caste-based hierarchies in the profession. However, with cleaning and beauty work both, the respondents suggest that the platform does not emphasise on caste or class, but rather work experience. This may be due to the fact that Delhi offers the space to be anonymous- instead of caste identity, workers identify themselves based on regions, which came up repeatedly in the narratives. The paper asks then how does one conceptualise caste in digitised form of these historically caste based professions. As discussed, Mhaskar (2015) suggests that the change in nomenclature towards 'housekeeping' has in fact led to entry of upper castes in this occupation. This was although not reflective in the sample of professional cleaners but in the case of salon workers as came from upper class and even upper caste backgrounds. However, despite the homogenisation of the workforce through trainings, caste nevertheless manifests itself in the everyday politics.

The undervaluation of this labour by clients, through asymmetrical power relations continue to reinforce the culture of servitude. Despite the change in nomenclature and mode of services, the labour processes remain undervalued by the platform and as well as consumers. The study however is limited in its scope due to the small sample size, hence these trends cannot be generalised. The study nevertheless paves the possibility for further research in the area. I suggest that to study caste and gender, both macro (workforce composition) and micro research (workers' narratives) need to be deployed to understand social hierarchies in the professions.

## References

- Gooptu, N. (2013). Servile sentinels of the city: Private security guards, organized informality, and labour in interactive services in globalized India. *International Review of Social History*, 58(1), 9-38.
- Gooptu, N., & Chakravarty, R. (2018). Skill, work and gendered identity in contemporary India: The business of delivering home-cooked food for domestic consumption. *Journal of South Asian Development*, 13(3), 293-314.

Gopal, M. (2013). Ruptures and reproduction in caste/gender/labour. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(18), 91-97.

Gupta, S. (2020, June). Gendered Gigs: Understanding the gig economy in New Delhi from a gendered perspective. In *Proceedings of the 2020 International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development* (pp. 1-10).

Hochschild, A. (1983) . *The managed heart: The commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

Hunt, A., & Machingura, F. (2016). A good gig? The rise of on-demand domestic work. *Development Progress Working Paper*, 7.

Illouz, E. (2008). *Saving the modern soul: Therapy, emotions and the culture of self-help*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Mhaskar, S. (2015). Locating Caste in a Globalising Indian City: A Study of Dalit Ex-millworkers' Occupational Choices in Post-industrial Mumbai. In *Dalits in Neoliberal India* (pp. 127-152). Routledge India.

Mirchandani, K., & Mukherjee, S. (2021). Gendering the intimate labour of toilet cleaning in India's high-tech sector. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 1-19.

Mondal, B., Ghosh, J., Chakraborty, S., & Mitra, S. (2018). *Women workers in India: Labour force trends, occupational diversification and wage gaps*. (Working Paper No. 3). Centre for Sustainable Employment.

[https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/wpcontent/uploads/2019/01/SWI\\_2018\\_Background\\_Paper\\_Mondal.pdf](https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/wpcontent/uploads/2019/01/SWI_2018_Background_Paper_Mondal.pdf)

Radhakrishnan, S. (2009). Professional women, good families: Respectable femininity and the cultural politics of a "new" India. *Qualitative Sociology*, 32(2), 195-212.

Rathi, A., Tandon, R. (2021). *Platforms, power and politics: perspectives from domestic and care work in India*. The Centre for Internet and Society

Raval, N., & Pal, J. (2019). Making a "Pro": 'professionalism' after platforms in beauty-work. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 3(CSCW), 1-17.

Ray, R., & Qayum, S. (2009). *Cultures of servitude*. Stanford University Press.

Selvi S, K., Maheswari K, U., & Kuriakose, F. (2021). Re-Imagining Labour Rights in the Online Gig Economy after COVID-19. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3921071>

Sharma, S. (2012). It changes space and time! Introducing power chronography. In Packer, J, Crofts, SB (eds.) *Communication Matters: Materialist Approaches to Media, Mobility and Networks* (pp. 66-77). Wiley.

Sharma, U., & Black, P. (2001). Look good, feel better: beauty therapy as emotional labour. *Sociology*, 35(4), 913-931.

Singha, L. (2019). *Work, labour and cleaning: The social contexts of outsourcing housework*. Policy Press.

Twigg, J. (2000). Carework as a form of bodywork. *Ageing & Society*, 20(4), 389-411.

Van Doorn, N. (2017). Platform labor: on the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the 'on-demand' economy. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6), 898-914.

Zende, A. (2016). Nhavi Women in Pune City: Renegotiating New Opportunities for Livelihood. In *Land, Labour and Livelihoods* (pp. 155-174). Palgrave Macmillan.

**Appendix-1 (Professional Cleaners)**

<b>Professional's Name (Anonymised)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Caste</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Previous Work Experience</b>	<b>Time spent with UC</b>	<b>Family and Marital Status</b>
Jaspreet Singh	42	From Delhi	Valmiki (SC)	8 <sup>th</sup> pass	Worked with a private cleaning company, then worked with NIA in cleaning for 10 years. Staff retrenchment after lockdown left him without work	1 ½ years	Married, 2 children, (class 8 <sup>th</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> ). Wife is a homemaker
Mandeep	35	Nepal	Valmiki (SC)	5 <sup>th</sup> pass	Worked in housekeeping, then as domestic help in farm houses. Joined UC for 'security'	2 years	Married, two children. Wife worked as a domestic workers and accompanies for gigs.
Vijay Payal	28	Meerut, UP	Gujjar (OBC)	12 th pass. Dropped out of hotel	Ran a cyber café, then worked as a	3 months	Married. Wife pursuing

				managem ent	contractor (thekedar). Joined UC after lockdown		graduation. 2 year old girl
Sampat Kumar	32	Delhi	SC	8 <sup>th</sup> pass	Worked at airport in housekeepin g. Joined UC for better pay and flexibility	3 years	Unmarried. Lives with his mother.
Manas Tyagi	22	Delhi	General	12 th pass, pursuing BA	Working at a government canteen, joined UC after lockdown	9 month s	Unmarried
Dhananjay Mahto	29	Muzzafa rnagar, Bihar	OBC	12th pass, dropped out of college	Worked in housekeepin g, before joining UC	2 years	Unmarried
Haroon	25	Tripura		12th pass, dropped out of flying course	Worked in housekeepin g, construction work, food and beverage in Goa, before joinig	4 years	Unmarried. Living with roommates



Hemant Das	26	Malda, Bengal	General	Dropout.	Started working at the age of 13, took security work in Goa, last job was AC servicing before joining UC	6 months	Unmarried
Zahir Mia	25	UP		12 <sup>th</sup> pass	Construction work before joining UC	1 year	Unmarried
Kamal	28	Jharkhand	SC	5th pass	Worked in private cleaning sector before joining UC	Recently joined	Unmarried

**Appendix-2 (Salon Workers)**

<b>Professionals' Name (Anonymised)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Caste</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Previous work experience</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>
Wahida Saifi	39	Was unaware of her exact caste		Had worked with a parlour for 10 years before joining UC	Married, three children. Resides in Noida
Sara Saifi	23	OBC	Pursuing graduation	Had worked as a nail artist	Unmarried

Deepa Gyan Chand	34 years	OBC	10 <sup>th</sup> pass	Ran a parlour before joining UC	Divorced, two children.
Nitu Tomar	28 years	General	12th pass	Tried NTT (nursery teacher training), learnt stitching before joining UC	Married, 6 year old daughter
Meenu Devi	32 years	General	12th pass	Parlour and stitching work before UC	Divorced, children with husband.