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The Future of Work(ers) Research Project
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With and against platformisation: men in care professions and the gendered dynamics of the future of work(ers)

Sai Amulya Komarraju | *August 2022*

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The Future of Work(ers) Research Project explores how digital technologies are reshaping the world of work and the impact of these changes on inequality. It conceives of the development and application of digital technologies as a contested terrain. It is particularly interested in how collectives of workers are shaping which digital technologies are developed, how and to what end; and the economic and social policies that have been leveraged in response.

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Abstract:

While several studies examine platformisation and the future of work from a gendered perspective, much of the media coverage and academic scholarship on the platform economy is divided in terms of their focus – (migrant) men involved in the supposedly "masculine" and visible work of construction, driving, and delivery, and the invisible care work performed by women workers and the challenges involved in both. Undoubtedly, the over-representation of women in different kinds of care work prompts such research. However, in India, both men and women from marginalised castes and classes have historically performed care work, such as domestic work and salon work. Based on patchwork ethnography and interviews with male workers in two feminised care professions (cleaning and salon work), this working paper first makes a case for feminisation of platform work beyond the mere presence of women, and then proceeds to explore the material contexts within which male workers enter (platformised and not-platformised) feminised care work, their views on platformisation, their resistance to and co-optation of platform work, and, related to these, the strategies they use to affirm their masculinity.

Key words: Platform work, care work, caste, masculinities

Introduction

> A proper understanding of the field of power in which women have lived their lives demands that we look at men as gendered beings too (O'Hanlon, 1997: 1)

The informal sector is crucial for the Indian economy since most new jobs are generated in this sector. In a bid to improve the unemployment rate (which touched a record high of 20.9% in June 2020 – 21.2% among women and 20.8% for men[1]), the Indian government has largely been encouraging the platformisation of the informal sector. Indeed, "Digital India" is centred around technology-driven start-ups and encourages people to develop the skills necessary to become micro-entrepreneurs or independent contractors on platforms. Start-ups such as JustRojgar and Spayee, and platform aggregators such as Urban Company and Housejoy, have helped the scattered workforce in the sector to find self-employment opportunities by playing digital matchmaker between service providers and customers.

Among the many kinds of work that are now being platformised are those in the informal sector, such as domestic and salon services, that ensure "social reproduction" (Flanagan, 2019). According to Fairwork (2021), approximately three million people in medium to low-skilled work or blue-collar work such as driving, delivering, cleaning and personal grooming have found work through the seven most popular platforms in India. Statistically, more men are engaged in "public and visible" services such as ride-hailing and delivery, and more women in home-based services. However, taking into cognisance the histories of male servants and men engaged in hair and body care in India (and South Asia broadly), care work is performed by both men and women and is at the intersection of caste, class, and gender (Ray & Qayum, 2009). For instance, platformised salon and domestic services are performed by both men and women, even though more women than men are involved in such care work.

While several studies examine platformisation and the future of work from a gendered perspective, much of the media coverage and academic scholarship on the platform economy is divided in terms of focus: (migrant) men involved in supposedly "masculine" and visible work of construction, driving, and delivery, and the invisible care work performed by women workers and the challenges involved in both. Undoubtedly, the over-representation of women in different kinds of care work prompts such research. Whilst such scholarship has merit, especially in the context of the ravages caused by the pandemic, it resurrects the much-critiqued dichotomy of public/masculine/visible work and private/feminine/invisible care (Komarraju et al., 2021) and completely

[1] Sharma, Y. 2022. 'Unemployment rate in urban Indi in the January-March quarter of 2021-22 fell to 8.2%'. *Economic Times,* 16 June 2022, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/urban-unemployment-rate-in-april-june-2020-rose-to-20-9-government/articleshow/81433200.cms?from=mdr (Accessed 11 September 2022).

dismisses the particularities of the South Asian context where both men and women from marginalised castes and classes have historically performed care work.

Ongoing research (Femlab, n.d) that examines the standpoint of women workers in the platformised salon sector and the challenges they face led me to question why there is so little empirical work on the experiences of men who have been or are now being forced to be a part of the invisibilised, feminised care economy and why no work examines the experiences of men in the platformised, home-based care economy. This gap needs to be bridged and contextualised against 1) the broader histories of men in different kinds of care work on the sub-continent; 2) the feminisation of work and the stigma men face on account of engaging in women-dominated professions which are understood to be women's work; 3) the demonisation of working-class men as aggressive; and 4) the glass escalator effect, or the evidence that masculinisation of work results in improved dignity of work and better pay, as in the case of the nursing profession (Arndt & Bigelow, 2005).

Based on patchwork ethnography and in-depth interviews with male workers in domestic and hair and body care work, both on and outside the platform, this study fills an important lacuna in the existing literature. Drawing on an intersectional feminist approach to the study of masculinities, this work asks: 1) What are the material contexts within which male workers enter (platformised and non-platformised) care work? 2) What are their views on platformisation, and, related, do they resist or co-opt platformisation, and why? And 3) what are the strategies these men in feminised professions use to affirm their masculinity?

In doing so, the study throws light on how workers perform identities that are simultaneously gendered and classed and how these might be informed by their caste identity. It also explores how masculinities performed by marginalised male workers are different from the dominant, hegemonic masculinity of the upper caste and upper-class men that is characterised by the neo-liberal "I can do" attitude, fierce competition and aggressive individualism.

Feminist scholarship and activism recognise the powerlessness and structural marginalisation of identities at certain intersections of class, caste, race and gender. Therefore this effort to study the experiences of male workers should not be understood as an extension of a "men too" approach to research, but as an attempt to fully appreciate that men are also gendered beings. In addition, the study disrupts two popular notions: 1) that occupational segregation has followed the platform economy, and 2) following the infamous Delhi gang rape case of 2012[2], the labelling of working-class men as performing aggressive masculinities.

[2] A medical student was gang raped by four men on a moving bus in December 2012, which sparked debates about a crisis in masculinity and how migrant, working class men are violent and aggressive

Background: marginalised populations and the informal sector

The potential of digital technologies to both generate jobs and formalise the informal sector through platformisation has been noted by many research reports in India. The informal economy, also referred to as the unorganised or the shadow economy[3], (which are used interchangeably), is a rather complex category to define. For instance, the same factory that employs formal workers could also employ workers on contract. Therefore it is crucial to define what constitutes the informal economy.

The informal sector has been variously described in terms of the size of the establishment (for instance, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) includes any enterprise comprising five to ten employees), the legal status of the worker, social protection associated with the occupation, the nature of the work and the potential for collective bargaining. While the most agreed-upon characteristic of the informal sector is the absence of an employer-employee relationship, work in the informal economy is characterised by small or undefined unsafe workplaces (such as one's home), lack of decent working conditions (unsafe or high-risk environments) and long hours of work coupled with low compensation.

Workers in the informal sector are involved in low to medium-skilled jobs and are not recognised, registered, regulated or protected under any labour legislation, nor offered social protection. Informal employment, on the other hand, is characterised by the informality of the workplace (for instance someone's home) and the lack of proper work contracts that could potentially ensure social security benefits. The informality of home-based care work emerges from the informal nature of their (social reproductive) work, their workplace, payment, the absence of a work contract and the lack of social security associated with regular work.

The National Classification of Occupations and the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) 2012, on which the national classification is based, distinguish between skilled and elementary work. Elementary work or occupations at Skill Level 1 involve simple, routine, repetitive tasks, such as domestic cleaning. Workers engaged in occupations belonging to the lowest skill category, that does not require any formal education or training, earn low wages and are easily replaceable. "Personal care services", including hairdressers, barbers, and manicurists, are listed as Skill Level 2 jobs by ISCO. These occupations require workers to have completed the second stage of secondary education. Good interpersonal skills and manual dexterity are essential at this level. In 2017/18, domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, construction labourers, waste pickers and

[3] Punia K. 2020. 'Future of unemployment and the informal sector of India' *ORF*, 12 March 2020, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/future-of-unemployment-and-the-informal-sector-of-india-63190/ (accessed 11 September 2022).

personal care services accounted for 36% of total informal employment. Of these, 31% were men and 54% women, with none of them having any sort of social protection or job contracts (Chakrabarty, 2021).

Across the world, low-skilled jobs that involve "3D" – dirty, dull, and demeaning or depraved work – are performed by those who are the most vulnerable. For instance, in the US (Huddle, 1993), Sicily (Cole & Booth, 2007) and Norway (Orupabo and Nadim, 2020), women, working-class men, immigrants and migrants who did not have access to good education, appropriate training or the social status to be upwardly mobile were more likely to be engaged in low-skilled depraved work.

In India as elsewhere, these services are inevitably offered by the most marginalised and vulnerable population – those belonging to the bottom of the caste system. Understood as a "system of birth-ascribed stratification, of socio-cultural pluralism, and of hierarchical interaction" (Berreman, 1967: 70), caste exists in many parts of South Asia. One's work identity is intertwined with and subsumed by their caste identity, which is why these professions are highly intergenerational. While those on the lower rungs of the caste system take up various kinds of semi-skilled work that requires some degree of training (whether formal or informal), jobs described as "elementary", that ostensibly involve no skill or education, such as cleaning, are relegated to those populations who do not figure in the caste system at all.

The outcasts of Hindu society, called by different names (such as Balmiki or Valmiki, Methari, Paki, Madiga) and collectively referred to as "Dalits", are forced to take up occupations that are undesirable to those within the caste system but which need to be performed to ensure cleanliness. These jobs include skinning dead animals, manual scavenging and cleaning toilets and sewers, and are stigmatised as "dirty" work. Since the discourses of cleanliness are inseparable from those of purity and pollution in Hindu caste society, Dalits are also looked at as "dirty" and "untouchable", their mere presence and bodies denounced as "impure" and "polluting". As reports[4] in India suggest, marginalised populations are denied education and therefore caught up in a vicious cycle of working in "dirty" work.

Despite the promises made by platforms such as Urban Company to professionalise workers in 3D work to ensure a modicum of dignity of work, the platform economy is plagued by the same problems as the informal sector: it remains unregulated and is characterised by a lack of social security benefits, exploitation and abuse and low pay (Raval & Pal, 2019).

[4] Casimes S. 2017. 'The effect of the caste system on education in India', *Borgen Magazine,* 6 September 2017, https://www.borgenmagazine.com/effect-of-the-caste-system-on-education-in-india/ (Accessed 11 September 2022).

A brief history of men in care-based professions

In India, there is a long history of both men and women from marginalised classes and castes engaging in care-based professions. In late nineteenth century in India, "all servants except the ayahs (nannies) were men" (Chaudhuri, 1994: 553). They were so popular that "the most often cited and comprehensive glossary of British rule in India, Hobson-Jobson, fails to even mention many of the terms related to female servants" (Sinha, 2021: 165). Gradually, only the native elite classes and colonisers were able to afford their services, since male servants were paid much more highly than their female counterparts. These servants were landless labourers who would live with the family where they were employed, taking care of all the family's needs and in charge of all kinds of menial and semi-skilled tasks such as cleaning, mopping, gardening and protecting the family for their entire lives. However, they were still considered "male losers" for engaging in what was thought to be "women's work", thereby failing in "both the world of home and in the world of work" (Qayum & Ray, 2010: 112).

Even hair and body work has traditionally been performed by male members of a specific caste community – the Nai or Mangali community. Since such work involves handling the body, it is considered to be ritually impure work. On account of engaging in such polluting work, the Nai community is marginalised and discriminated against. These care skills are not learnt formally but are passed down generationally, with young men serving as apprentices to family members (Ahmed, 2006), and, like all caste work, it is intergenerational. Historically, barbers had to go from home to home to take care of the ritual needs of those higher up in the caste hierarchy. Over the years, with efforts from the community, this practice is now almost non-existent and some of the more upwardly mobile barbers have scaled up their operations to establish "salons".

While the primary work of Nais or barbers continues to be shaving, cutting hair and body massages, the barber community traditionally provided a range of ritual-based services, ranging from taking away the umbilical cord soon after the birth of the child and shaving the child's head (the first haircut, also referred to as *mundan* in Hindi) to playing matchmaker. The women from this community would help prepare girls for menarche, women for marriage and mothers for labour, and would assist with childbirth. The oral cultures of Nais also suggest that they were once artists, musicians, skilled surgeons and midwives. Modernisation, constitutionally granted rights for any caste community to take up any work and the diminishing role of Nais in the contemporary Hindu society has meant that this once multi-skilled community, regarded as "ritual specialists" (Ahmed, 2006), are now restricted to hair and body work.

Even amongst Muslims, it is the Salmanis who traditionally and intergenerationally engage in Nai work. While caste is a feature of many religious communities in South Asia, what distinguishes caste in Hindu society is its association with notions of karma, dharma, purity and pollution (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). Although cleaning (whether of places or bodies) is considered to be ritually purifying, ironically, those who perform these services are considered to be polluting. Given the graded (and structural) inequalities amongst different caste groups associated with caste[5] (Thorat, 2002), those who do hair and body work figure higher up in the caste system when compared to Dalits who deal with human "wastes". These types of work, then, are identified more with certain castes rather than with gender, and thus men performing them are also vulnerable to historically sanctioned stigma and discrimination. In addition to this, since "work" is understood to be central to men's lives, and "care" is typically performed by women (Ahmed, 2006), these men are marginalised further and categorised as "male losers" for engaging in work that is considered to be feminine, and moreover in a workplace that is meant for females.

By the time India became independent, concerns about family and working-class motherhood, the home-world dichotomy, maternal and child mortality and supposedly unsafe birthing practices with the help of NaiNai women pushed working-class women from across castes out of work, back into their homes, opening up more work opportunities for men and limiting women to home-based work. After a shocking report on the deplorable status of women in India in the 1970s, the State began to once more focus on falling female labour participation. With modernisation and concerted efforts by the State, women started entering the workforce. Decreasing levels of job creation meant that more men (working class and migrants) were now forced to take up care work that has been dominated by women (Sen, 2008).

Given this history, there is a need for a nuanced understanding of men's involvement in (platformised) care work and what this means for the future of work. An intersectional feminist approach to masculinities takes into account the embodied performances of masculinities by working-class men in feminised professions and care work, as well as the material contexts within which these performances take place. To achieve this, this study combines the gender performativity theories of Butler (1993) and Connell (1987). Butler contends that gender is constructed through a series of repetitive, performative acts. When people in positions of power do gender, their performance of gender comes to be accepted as normative and dominant. Connell elaborates that gender relations are nothing if

[5] For instance, the Balmiki community or Dalits were denied entry into local salons run by Muslim Nais who belong to the BC community of the Salmani caste. For more, please read Sharma S. 2019. 'Untouchability in UP village: Balmiki community denied haircut by Salmani Muslims, *NewsClick*, 24 July 2019, https://www.newsclick.in/Untouchability-UP-Village-Balmiki-Community-Denied-Haircut-Salmani-Muslims (Accessed 11 Septmember 2022).

not hierarchical where masculinity is defined in such a way that it renders non-dominant masculinities and femininities inferior.

Taking into account another significant dimension – that of class – in power relations, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) coined the term hegemonic masculinity to describe how men in positions of power legitimise a particular kind of masculinity to maintain their dominance in the social order. Further, what is considered "hegemonic" is neither uniform (it changes across contexts), nor singular; that is, there can be more than one kind of hegemonic masculinity in any given society. This dominance is not just over women but also over other men who may not be in positions of power and who practice different kinds of non-hegemonic masculinities. In engaging with working-class male workers from marginalised castes who are engaged in feminised care work, the study attempts to deepen the understanding of subaltern masculinities in a way that goes beyond the popular discourses of "aggressive masculinities" of marginalised men after the infamous Delhi gang rape case of 2012[6] (Govinda, 2020).

Methodology

The Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns imposed across the world propelled social scientists, especially those employing ethnographic methods, to reimagine what fieldwork might look like and what it would entail. The forced seclusion and uneven distribution of labour at home that became glaringly obvious during the pandemic, the growing toxicity within the neoliberal academia and its insistence on productivity and the steadily growing discontent with masculinist assumptions (insider-outsider; home and field; always being available to be fully immersed in fieldwork) underpinning anthropology prompted Gunel et.al. (2020) to propose patchwork ethnography as an alternative to classic ethnography. They contend that novel ethnographic practices such as online ethnography, multi-sited ethnography and auto-ethnography emerge from the needs of the research subjects. They propose patchwork ethnography to acknowledge how researchers' own lives and multiple identities could (re)shape what is understood as valid ethnographic work. Noting how "family obligations, precarity, other hidden, stigmatised, or unspoken factors – and now Covid-19 – have made long term, in-person fieldwork difficult", they propose "a new way to acknowledge and accommodate how researchers' lives in their full complexity shape knowledge" (Gunel et al., 2020: n.p.). Given the inter-subjective nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the feminist value of interdependencies, I extend the scope of patchwork ethnography to acknowledge the identities

[6] *Hindustan Times*. 2020. '2012 Delhi gang rape case: what happened on December 16', 20 March 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/delhi-2012-gang-rape-case-what-happened-on-december-16/story-GboszJckGgslhWHpRcci4K.html (Accessed 11 September 2022).

and commitments of both the researcher and the researched. For instance, the short, fragmented but intensive engagement with participants endorsed by the authors to account for the researcher's personal and professional commitments also reflects the nature of jobs the workers are involved in – piecemeal work or gigs that are short but involve intensive labour.

The fieldwork was conducted in the metropolitan city of Hyderabad, which is located in the South of India. As someone who grew up in the city of Hyderabad, referred to as the second silicon valley of India, I was aware of the history of the city and can speak both the local languages, Hindi and Telugu. This helped establish my status as a *mulki* (insider) with the participants and was my entry point into their life worlds. Given my interest in workers (both on and off the platform) in two kinds of work, the participants were recruited in different ways. Table 1 gives detailed information about the participants in this study.

Table 1: Details of the participants

Category and organisation	Name, age, caste, education	Marital status	Data collection	Total interview time
Housecleaning			Life-history, semi-structured, in-depth interviews Participant observation when possible	
Urban Company	1.Sri, 30, Dalit, tenth pass	Married with child		1.5 hours
	2. Naga, 19, Dalit, twelfth pass, migrant	Unmarried		1.5 hours
	3. Bala, 28, Dalit, tenth pass	Married		1.5 hours
Self-employed	4. Anji, 22, Dalit, pursing open degree and also training to be a lab technician	Unmarried		2 hours
Salon			Life-history, semi-structured, in-depth interviews Participant observation when possible	
Urban Company	1.Bangaru, 31, Nai, eighth pass; learnt this skill from grandfather; migrant	Married with child		2 hours
	2. Kesar, 36, Nai, twelfth pass; learnt this skill from a relative	Married with children		1.5 hours
Brick and mortar salons	3. Avee, 24, Nai, 10th pass; learnt this skill from his brother	Unmarried		1.40 hours
	4. Santosh, 29, Gangaputra, twelfth pass; learnt on the job; migrant	Inter-religious, inter-caste marriage		1.5 hours
	5. Jacob, 31, Christian migrant from Shillong, Meghalaya; learnt from his aunt	Unmarried		2.3 hours
	6. Nawaz, 18, Salmani caste, tenth pass, Muslim migrant from Delhi; learnt from his uncle	Unmarried		1 hour
Experts			Semi-structured interviews	
Salon-owners	1.Kritika, 28, professional designer and brand strategist	Unmarried		1.5 hours
	2. Yaseem, 28, Engineer and businessman	Married with children		1 hour
Leaders of the Nai Brahmana Yuva Sangham	3. Yugandhar, president	Married with children		3 hours
	4. Naresh, social media manager	Married with child		2 hours

For workers or service providers, as they are called in platformed care work, I booked both salon and house cleaning services through Urban Company (UC), an on-demand platform aggregator that connects service providers to customers. They offer a range of home-based services with beauty and wellness verticals[7] being considered the most successful so far in terms of the scale of business and revenue. While salon services are performed by a single worker, house cleaning services are typically performed by a group of workers depending on the size of the home or apartment. Depending on the number of rooms in a flat or a house, the team can consist of four to five members. Although there are all-male and all-female teams, mixed teams consisting of more men than women are more common. At least one woman is assigned to each team specifically to clean the kitchen.

After the services were rendered and ratings given in each case, the workers were asked if they could spare some time to speak with me. The workers were informed that they had every right to decline the request and that neither their rating nor their tip would be affected if they chose not to speak with me. Keeping in mind the importance of time in the life of gig workers, each worker was offered a compensation of ₹500[8] for taking the time to speak to me.

The salon worker assigned through the app helped initiate snowballing, that led to interviews with both platformised salon workers and leaders of the caste-based group Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena, a subsidiary of the larger Nai Brahmin Rashtra Sangham. Given the entrenched caste system in India, people from non-dominant castes organise themselves into caste groups or associations to agitate and collectivise against socio-political, cultural and economic discrimination. Some of these groups are attached to mainstream political parties, youth wings of political parties and student unions at college and university level, and others, such as the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, promote entrepreneurship amongst Dalits.

To speak with non-platformised salon workers at brick-and-mortar salons, I made multiple visits to two local unisex shops and one high-end salon. Frequenting an all-Muslim local salon (owned by a Muslim who only hires Muslim migrants as workers) gave me access to Muslim migrant workers. These workers also gave me an insight into the caste system amongst Muslims. Just as Nais traditionally perform bodywork, it is those belonging to the Salmani[9] caste who were engaged in this work at the salon.

With reference to housecleaning work, I took note of workers' body language, intra-group dynamics and instructions given by the team leader, Bala. Given the physically intense work they had to perform and the time

[7] "Vertical", in the platform economy, refers to a service category – for example, the salon vertical, wellness vertical and so on.
[8] ₹ = rupees; ₹500 was about $6.3 at the time of publication.
[9] Salmanis, considered to be a "backward class", are also referred to as Hajam, Nai Muslim and Navid. See: The Telangana Reservation in Favour of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes of Mulsims Act (No. 26 of 2007).

constraints (they had to return the equipment within the stipulated time), they could only speak to me briefly about their experiences. Having exchanged phone numbers with them, I requested that they get in touch with me if they were interested in speaking to me about their experiences. Of the four male members in the group, three chose to speak to me at length about their lives, aspirations, dreams and difficulties. With immense difficulty, a young, non-platform male worker in the house cleaning business (Anj), was identified. This interview, in particular, yielded rich insights into the relationship between age, aspirations, work, gender, class and caste.

Life history-based semi-structured interviews, combined with participant observation whenever possible (at their workplaces – for instance, at local salons), with workers from the two verticals (salon and house cleaning) yielded ethnographic insights into workers' lives. The method of oral and process consent (Ellis, 2007) was adopted, with participants being informed that they had every right to decline to answer any question at any point during the interview, to retract statements and to re-phrase whatever they said to protect themselves if needed. Apart from workers, I also spoke with salon owners, leaders of the Nai Brahmin Yuva Sangham[10] and customers to understand how male workers in care work are perceived by the middle classes as well. Please refer to Table 1 for details. Complete anonymity was offered to all the participants.

Patchwork methodology (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) honours individual life history-based interviews and allowed me to stitch together individual stories and particularities of experiences to identify patterns of exploitation, resistance and collectivisation at the familial and community level. It is also important to state at the very outset that this is not a quantitative study; while numbers may be absent, this report draws on the anecdotes and experiences of the workers and secondary literature to support the arguments made.

Findings and discussion

Theme 1: Marginalised populations, stigma and graded inequalities: workers' views on unskilled, semiskilled and "dirty" work

Anji was a 22-year-old Dalit man who had to discontinue his education after his mother passed away. Forced to take up work to make ends meet, he was pursuing an open degree and training to be a lab technician. Until such time, he had no other option but to accompany his aunt for housecleaning services. His work included cleaning the toilet, a job he found to be disgusting but had to do. Not having registered with any platform, he and his aunt found work through word of mouth.

[10] A caste-based organisation that looks after the welfare of the Nai community.

> Dressed in jeans a T-shirt and sweating from the physical exertion, he sits down to speak with me. One of the first things he asks rhetorically is why people cannot clean up after themselves and spare him from doing this dirty work. (Field notes, 4 December 2021)

Naga, a 19-year-old platform worker in the housecleaning vertical, had a similar story to share. Forced to discontinue his education after graduating from higher secondary school due to severe financial distress, he migrated to Hyderabad from a small village in Mahbubnagar district, in search of work:

> I worked as a driver … I had some work in the village, so I thought I will go and come back but by that time lockdown happened, so I did not come. Then I came here in January. I worked as a driver. After that got over, I did painting work also ... Then that work was also not there. Staying here and paying rent was a huge issue, I couldn't even go back to the village. That is when I got in touch with Bala. (Naga interview, 2021)[11]

Neither of them could tell their families that they did this for a living:

> I have only told them that I do normal cleaning, I have not told them about washrooms. I have told them I clean fans, ACs, fridge, etc. But as we are facing some financial problems, I have to do this [washroom cleaning work]. (Anji interview, 2021)[12]

> My parents do not know that I do this work, I haven't told them that I clean people's homes and toilets for a living. (Naga interview, 2021)[13]

Workers in the house cleaning services (on and off the platform) – like Safai Karamacharis in the sanitation sector[14] – also state that they are forced into this work and life of no dignity. At different points in the interviews, workers confessed that they did not consider this work to be something they would like to do on a long-term basis. Naga, at the end of his interview, asked me if I could refer him to anyone in need of a driver. This speaks to the stigma attached to this work.

As mentioned before, graded inequalities associated with caste also mean that, while toilet cleaning is the dirtiest work, apparently involving no skill and performed by outcasts, hair and body work is dirty but semi-skilled.

Workers in this study also created hierarchies of skilled and unskilled work. While those in the house cleaning work lamented that they were in this "unskilled" work because they lacked other work opportunities, most salon workers believed that their work required skills. Even so, there are people from the Nai community who refuse to pursue this profession:

> Now my younger brother is there. He says, "I will not do this barber (*mangali*) work, I will study", but his father and grandfather did the same work to pay for his education. He [brother] said, "I will not do this work", but after a few years, when he crosses twenty years, he will feel "I should have done *mangal* (barber) work…". They will get that feeling then, "I should have learnt that work, why didn't I learn" … he will realise. (Bangaru interview, 2021)[15]

[11] Interview with Naga, housecleaning worker (30 November 2021).
[12] Interview with Anji, self-employed housecleaning worker (4 December 2021).
[13] Interview with Naga, housecleaning worker (30 November 2021).
[14] Sanitation workers who also belong to the broad category of Dalits (Gatade, 2015).
[15] Interview with Bangaru, UC barber (20 October 2021).

As one goes up the caste hierarchy, people can choose whether they want to pursue their caste profession or not. Educated youth from the caste community, Bangaru said, consider hair and body work to be stigmatised.

He sounded confident when he said that those who moved from the trade would be forced to return to this work when they learned the hard truth that there were no jobs in the formal sector:

> Ten to twelve years ago, educated people would feel, "I am educated, you are not educated" … But now the educated are not getting jobs in many places. There are no jobs, no government jobs as well, they are managing with what they have. Rather than sitting idle, we have to do something, isn't it? They used to think they are greater than us because we are just doing our caste occupation. But now they feel if you have a shop, you can provide a job to four people. (Bangaru interview, 2021)[16]

Job volatility, entrepreneurship, and the apprenticeship model that "skill-based" caste occupations follow make this attractive to workers:

> Even if we get jobs or not in the future, we can depend on this. We are trained in this skill from tenth class onwards. So we don't have to depend on anybody for a job but rely on our skills to do this. (Yugandhar interview, 2021)[17]

Further, the progress the Nai community has made – from going to customers' homes a few decades ago to running their shops – makes this a respectable profession. Yugandhar elaborated:

> Twenty-five to thirty years ago, our life was the life of slavery. We had to go to Patel, Reddy, *saukari's* homes if they called on us. *Saukari* means those who are financially well off. Leaders – *saukarlu*, *doralu* – called on us and we would have to go to their homes. They would say "go call that *Mangalodu*"[18]. Tone was disrespectful … They would kick us out as soon as the service was rendered because we are dirty … Eventually, we thought, why do we have to go to someone's home and suffer? Then, our elders decided, we would hang a mirror near *rachabanda*[19] and do our work. Anyone in need of our services would have to come to that place for services. From there we moved on to *madigelu* – shops without shutters. As we progressed, we started having shutter shops. Not just in cities, even in villages and hamlets, there are no *madigelu* … From those days we progressed and we have started to set up our shops… all the customers come to shops. (Yugandhar interview, 2021)[20]

During the first and second waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, these Nais suffered huge financial losses. Not only did people refuse to go to salons, preferring for these services to be performed in the comfort and safety of their own homes, the products Nais bought, the EMI (equated monthly instalments) they had to pay for the loans they had taken to set up salons and soaring commodity prices meant that some of the community were forced to take up platform work. For these workers, platform work is a stopgap measure until such time that they can go back to their salons.

It bodes well for Nais that, despite the stigma attached to the profession, it is still considered to be semi-skilled work where progress is possible and that they work for no one but themselves or their family, but all the

[16] Interview with Bangaru, UC barber (20 October 2021).
[17] Interview with Yugandhar, president of Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena (13 December 2021).
[18] Pejorative.
[19] A raised platform typically built under the shade of a tree.
[20] Interview with Yugandhar, president of Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena (13 December 2021).

workers in the salon services I spoke with also had bare minimum education, with Nazeem having completed only the tenth grade at school.

Workers from both verticals stated that people now engage in work that is not ascribed to them by caste, and yet there is a historical continuity in terms of who does the actual work. Given that the share of marginalised groups with higher educational qualifications (secondary and above) is still significantly lower than for non-marginalised groups (Mehta et al., 2022), it is no surprise that a significant percentage of workers in these two occupations also belong to non-dominant castes, religions and classes. Male workers in both the salon and house cleaning verticals, whether on or off the platform, typically belong to non-dominant castes and are poorly educated.

Theme 2: Caste and dignity of work: with and against platformisation

It is important to acknowledge the graded discrimination amongst different caste groups, what this means for the dignity of (caste-based) work and what platformisation offers according to the workers themselves.

As mentioned before, despite the discrimination that Nais face, their work is still perceived as involving considerable skill. This is not the case with Dalits and the work they do:

> To be frank, people who do cleaning are seen as very inferior. There is no respect for this. They are using us like some labour … we are like use and throw … You might feel that I have become emotional and I am saying that people should do their work themselves but not everyone suffers like me … People come to this work only when they have problems. (Anji interview, 2021)[21]

Given that this study took place in 2021, during the second wave of the pandemic, workers from both the verticals associated with UC admit that they took up platform work after having lost jobs elsewhere. However, the history of particular caste groups and graded discrimination have a bearing on what workers think platform work offers them. To illustrate this point better, the opportunities and challenges that come with platformised house cleaning and platformised salon services will be discussed separately.

Opportunities: professionalisation and dignity of work

Since housecleaning work is mostly performed by Dalits and is treated as elementary work requiring minimal formal education and training, the workers themselves say that there is no respect for such work. However, platformisation, with its promise of professionalization, offers both tangible and intangible affective benefits to the workers involved in this vertical. As noted elsewhere (Komarraju et al., 2021), professionalisation is achieved

[21] Interview with Anji, self-employed housecleaning worker (4 December 2021).

through the establishment of a standard operating procedure, soft skills training, and the UC uniform. The dress code is perceived to be a protective shield against exploitative customers:

> When we go in uniform, the customer does not ask us to do too much work by saying, "do this, do that", which will not make us feel suffocated. If we are in a civil[ian] dress, they will start asking "boy, have you wiped this, you have not wiped it, wipe it". Even if we have wiped it, he will make us wipe it again. If we are in dress code they will feel "he is a worker, he has come from a good company, he knows everything" … If you are wearing a dress, then they will not even touch you. He will not come near you, ask anything … Once we complete the job and tell them, please check it once, as we are in the dress he will see it for namesake and even if the customers see a mistake he will feel, oh! They might have forgotten that one thing. (Sri interview, 2021)[22]

Male workers, like women beauty gig workers associated with UC (Komarraju et al., 2021), say that uniforms with the UC logo cushion them from being dismissed as "just a housecleaner" with no skills:

> It is about the name of the company, we are not the brand, the company is. This value is for the brand, not the workers. "Urban company means they are workers, whatever it is, they will do it perfectly and go", customers will say so. (Sri interview, 2021)[23]

Anji admits that this is indeed true, but platformisation makes this job even more challenging for non-platform workers like himself:

> If workers come from the [Urban] Company, customers give them respect because they will have some rules, so they speak according to the rules… The thing is they will bring many things and charge more money to the people who get it done … we will not have so many machines with us ... They will say, "you don't do it neatly [like UC workers] ... you don't have machines, you should get it, how can we give it?", they will say all that. (Anji interview, 2021)[24]

Notwithstanding the benefits, he doesn't want to register as a service provider with UC or any other platform:

> Those people who have decided "this work is permanent for me" get into the same line and start the same work. They will continue doing this ... it would be their livelihood. That is their mind set and they will get into it completely ... I will stop this work in the next year. Next, I am planning to do work related to my studies. (Anji interview, 2021)[25]

Where non-platform workers have to depend on customers' benevolence entirely for (fair) pay, platform workers are keenly aware of the huge gap between what UC charges and what the workers who do the actual work get paid for their services.

Challenges: outsourcing, low pay and co-option of platform work

While UC prefers to directly associate with salon workers with at least "four or five years of experience" (Bangaru interview, 2021)[26], the housecleaning vertical is outsourced to local agencies. Even though the service providers in this vertical wear the UC uniform and carry identification cards that state as much, it is the local agencies that hire and train, provide the equipment needed for cleaning, and issue ID cards. In case of any issues with the

[22] Interview with Sri, UC housecleaning worker (26 December 2021).
[23] Interview with Sri, UC housecleaning worker (26 December 2021).
[24] Interview with Anji, self-employed housecleaning worker (4 December 2021).
[25] Interview with Anji, self-employed housecleaning worker (4 December 2021).
[26] Interview with Bangaru, UC barber (20 October 2021).

customer, the team leader contacts the agency representative. Even the customer support team at UC route their calls to workers through the local agency representative, in case of a dispute or requests from the customer.

Since the work is done in teams, each team is assigned a team leader who represents workers at meetings with the agency and UC. A person's ability to manage teams and their soft skills, ability and willingness to do "any work like washroom cleaning without feeling shy" (Bala interview, 2021)[27] may lead to them being identified as a team leader. It is also the team leader who shoulders the additional responsibility of negotiating tips with customers and sharing them with the rest of the team.

A huge percentage of the money goes to the agency. For instance, ₹7800 is charged by the platform for deep-cleaning services, of which the workers say they are paid a meagre ₹330 each. For a team of four or five, this would amount to a total of ₹1650 to ₹1980. It is unclear how much UC charges for playing the role of the intermediary, but even if it charges 30% as commission (that is, ₹2340), it would mean that the agency collects ₹3480 per booking. The workers are aware of this but justify it by stating that the agency provides equipment and products, and also arranges for local transport to ferry the workers and the equipment to and fro.

One of the collateral benefits of working for the platform is that the customers cannot arbitrarily ask workers to perform any additional service that hasn't been billed as they would with non-platform cleaners.

Despite the low pay and acknowledgement that housecleaning work is a stop-gap measure, workers co-opt platform work because it affords them a modicum of respect and dignity denied to them in non-platformised housecleaning work. Workers seem to weigh both the tangible and intangible benefits of platform work to justify for themselves why they are paid so little for the labour-intensive work they do. Having said this, it is also crucial to remember that the entrenched culture of servitude in India and blended surveillance go a long way in making the worker vulnerable and easy to exploit. Workers are trained to refer to customers as "ma'am" and "sir" and to smile through any physical or emotional discomfort for the sake of ratings, reviews and tips. Such emotional labour is another marker of feminisation of labour.

Nais and historical trauma: resistance to platformisation

As mentioned previously, Nais who sign up to be service providers with UC perceive platform work as a stop-gap measure. The leaders of the Nai community acknowledged that many Nais earned their livelihood through

[27] Interview with Bala, UC team leader (18 October 2021).

platform work after the first and second lockdowns. Nonetheless, for a caste community whose forefathers had to fight for their right to set up shops, platformisation is seen as a move to push them back into "slavery":

> We have worked hard to get out of the slavery that we did twenty, thirty years ago. Now you use the latest technology, give us a bag, before we used to carry a *pette* or *kalapa*[28], now you give us a bag and ask us to do the same, go from home to home. Aren't they obstructing our progress? You are reminding us of our past and sending us from door to door … We have faced these situations and came out of it … just when we are slowly progressing in our lives, and at such a time UC has come and tried to destroy our efforts and the progress of the community. (Yugandhar interview, 2021)[29]

Naresh, another leader, asked why it was that UC wanted to platformise their caste occupation. Drawing on the precedent set by another skilled caste group, the fisherfolk community referred to as Gangaputras[30], Naresh demanded that Nais must have first right to this work.

Echoing this, Yugandhar demanded that the State introduce affirmative action so that a percentage of this business would be reserved for Nais themselves. When asked if he would be open to platform co-operativism, he maintained that it would be a life with no dignity and argued:

> Those who survive on shops have to pay rent. We don't want companies like these to destroy them. If a non-Nai Brahmin is doing this and we cannot tolerate it, then how can we tolerate if a Nai Brahmin himself does such a thing? (Yugandhar interview, 2021)[31]

The leaders also raised the question of women beauty gig workers' safety. They recalled incidents of sexual harassment to question who could ensure women workers' "protection" and called for an end to home-based platform work. Such a view was not shared by women themselves. As noted elsewhere, women gig workers find platform work attractive because of the flexibility it offers (Komarraju et al., 2021). Although these women acknowledge the challenges – women workers face challenges similar to those cited above – they are not as anti-platform as Nai Brahmin leaders are.

Salon chain workers who also resist platformisation cited various reasons for such a stand. They believed that platform work was for those who needed money. Those who had passion for their craft would choose non-platform work because they have the opportunity to attend hairdressing conventions and conferences, and have a chance to upgrade skills – transitioning from male or female hairdresser to unisex hairdresser. This, they said, was not possible with UC (especially since the platform restricts cross-sex services). They also cited several challenges

[28] A supplies bag that barbers used to carry.
[29] Interview with Yugandhar, president of Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena (13 December 2021).
[30] See *The Hindu*. 2018. 'Fisherman oppose fishing rights to Mudirajs', 16 April 2018, https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/fishermen-oppose-fishing-rights-to-mudirajs/article23562993.ece (Accessed 11 September 2022).
[31] Interview with Yugandhar, president of Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena (13 December 2021).

gig workers face, such as travelling in harsh weather and rising petrol costs, as reasons for not choosing platform work.

'Culture of servitude' and platformisation: precarisation and feminisation of labour

In addition to the problems cited above, by making some of these low to medium-skilled services available to customers at the click of a button and from the comfort of their own homes, the highly informal nature of such a workplace, blended surveillance (algorithmic and human supervision), related ratings and reviews by customers and information asymmetries between the platform and the providers compound the problems of these workers (Komarraju et al., 2021). Such deteriorating conditions of work have shifted the direction of academic and popular discourse from the number of jobs being created to "quality of jobs" (De Stafano, 2016), forcing one to think about platformisation and precarisation in the same breath.

As I have argued elsewhere, platform work deepens the culture of servitude that is characteristic of most South Asian societies. Theorised by Qayum and Ray (2003), culture of servitude refers to the institution of domestic servitude that renders workers vulnerable, by creating a specific form of dependency between the employers and 'servants'. Platforms that offer home-based services for profit through digital matchmaking, then, by inserting themselves in a form of employment that pre-dates digital platform economy create "a specific type of temporal and spatial dependency" where the worker needs to toe the line drawn by the platform and also please the customer.

Workers say that irrespective of customer's behaviour and their own state of mind, they need to offer a smile and offer services to get good ratings and reviews:

> However angry the customer is, firstly we have to be cool and then cool them down. No matter whose mistake it is or isn't, we say "Sorry sir, we did a mistake, we will rectify it", then automatically the customer will cool down… If we also raise our temper with such customers then our company will sink. What that Sir (customer) will do is he will tell another person that "I had booked house cleaning from Urban clap, those workers don't know the way of speech, they don't give respect", he will tell like that to them. Doing so will damage our company.. We are trained to deal with such situations and customers…it is there is in our SOP (standard operating procedure). (Bala interview, 2021)[32]

This last statement begs a closer look at the content of professionalization. On being asked what is taught during the training sessions workers say that a major element includes customer management:

> First they will tell the details completely. Once we join the duty and go the customer place, how we have to be, how we have to behave, they will teach all that. We have to speak well in front of the customer, we have speak in a respectable way. We should not speak in arrogant/attitude way. They will teach all that. (Sri interview, 2021)[33]

[32] Interview with Bala, UC team leader (18 October 2021).
[33] Interview with Sri, UC housecleaning worker (26 December 2021).

Platformisation of home-based care-work deepens certain issues that have riddled these professions on account of overrepresentation of women, the material nature of such work in a site that has historically never been considered a workplace– the home. The platform's attempts to professionalise home-based care-work through insertion of standard operating procedures (Komaraju et al., 2021) involves performing a particular kind of docility that is associated with the feminine. This docility is measured not only through ratings and reviews given by the customer, but if the protests against platforms across the world is anything to go by—the workers' willigness to obey the platform's terms and conditions. It can be argued, then, that platformisation leads to feminisation of labour and work.

This paper combines the works of Haraway (1991) and Morini (2007) to understand feminisation of labour as more than mere presence of women. Home-based care-work in the platform economy, arguably the most recent manifestation of globalised capitalism, favours the kind of feminised model of work that Morini (2007) notes in terms of administration (control and surveillance) and contents (soft skills, emotional intelligence). One can also argue that the presence of male workers and the very content of professionalization – being easy on the eye by wearing uniforms, acquiring soft skills to please people and gentle smiles, not giving in to the "culture of complaint" – in short, performing care and providing emotional labour while being "docile", qualities typically associated with the feminine, leads to both the intensification and erosion of gender. The long-standing "culture of servitude" in India (Komarraju, 2021: 30) also contributes to the feminisation of labour and work, whether such work be performed by men or women. While men performing care work can be understood as an erosion of gender, by participating in activities of social reproduction through quotidian work or border work at customers' homes and training to excel in soft skills, there is a simultaneous intensification of gender.

Theme 3: solidarity amongst workers: supportive masculinities and collectivisation

Following the gang rape in New Delhi in 2012, migrant and working-class men have been demonised as particularly violent and aggressive. Labelling it a crisis in masculinity, scholars argued that globalisation and changing and restructuring of gender roles had led to a spike in the number of crimes committed by "young men" against professional women just "going about their lives". More nuanced perspectives on the subject acknowledged that it is the migrant, urban poor, working-class men from marginalised castes and religions who have historically been pathologised and convicted (Sen et al., 2020).

In researching the lived experiences of marginalised groups, one can see an emergence of supportive masculinity that values care and solidarity. As I have argued elsewhere, worker isolation on platforms weakens

collectivisation of the kind one is most familiar with – unions. Workers find unique ways to collectivise, no matter how small and informal these are (Komarraju, 2020). Like women workers who mobilise themselves using WhatsApp groups, male workers in the Nai sector find themselves participating in larger caste networks. For instance, two platform workers in the beauty vertical were also affiliated with the Nai Sangham. Though strongly anti-platform, the Covid-19 pandemic and financial crisis forced them into taking up such work.

The Sangham recently opened a training centre where their caste's youth from rural areas can learn the craft in a more professional setting at subsidised rates (as opposed to the more informal training the community has been used to, working as an apprentice to family members):

> We opened this academy because the cost of learning is so high. Hair training can cost anywhere from ₹80,000 to 1.20 lakhs[34] ($1000 to $1500). Then there's makeup and skin etc. You can imagine how expensive this is. We started with three students, now there are nine. Both male and female students come to learn. We provide breakfast and lunch … I spend about four hours travelling because I want the Sangham to benefit from this (Naresh interview, 2021)[35]

The Sangham's president strongly believed that UC has been unable to conquer Hyderabad despite their success in Delhi and Mumbai because of the Sangham's collectivised effort:

> UC has agreed that it is running well in Bangalore, Delhi, Bombay, they have good strength in terms of customers and workers there but they are not able to run in Hyderabad because of a roadblock – the Sangham. (Yugandhar interview, 2021)[36]

The Sangham has started to actively bring back memories of forgotten history – the glory of the Nai community and the various kinds of skilled work they were involved in – to dissuade Nais from joining the platform. The president also said that they would help any platform worker in need, irrespective of their caste. He remarked:

> If you are in this trade and earning your bread, no matter what your actual caste, you are a NaiNai. (Yugandhar interview, 2021)[37]

While this can be read as a forceful claim to work based on caste, it can also be read as a politics based on affinity and as their way of trying to be inclusive.

Non-platform salon workers have WhatsApp groups where they share information regarding work opportunities, conferences, skilling programs and cheap housing, and help each other in need.

In the housecleaning sector too, one sees that the team leader sees himself as one amongst the team. However, as the team leader, he also tries to empower his team in covert ways. For instance, the team leader is aware that customers don't like it when workers want to attend to personal calls or take a break; his advice was clear:

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[34] A lahk is one hundred thousand.
[35] Interview with Naresh, social media manager of Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena (8 December 2021).
[36] Interview with Yugandhar, president of Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena (13 December 2021).
[37] Interview with Yugandhar, president of Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena (13 December 2021).

> I am one among four members. Whatever happens, if someone does not work properly, the customer will come and ask me "Boy, what is this, your team member is not doing the work, he is sitting there ..." If he says "I am not able to do it", then I will say "you go and sit outside, get out of the sight of the customer. When you are not doing any work, don't just walk around in front of the customer without doing anything" … Some customers' blood pressure will suddenly increase ... They will say, "Why did you bring that waste person?" … Then what answer should I give? In such situations, I tell them slowly [whisper] "I will not scold you, silently you go out…". (Bala interview, 2021)[38]

Another case in point would be how both Sri and Naga got into platform work. Naga had lost his job as a driver and was looking for work. Even Sri, having lost his job as a member of the housekeeping staff in a gated community, approached Bala for work. Workers stated that they were open to sharing "gigs" or "tasks" with those brothers who needed money. There was a distinct "We can do attitude" amongst the workers, rather than the neoliberal "I can do it alone" attitude.

When asked if they would refer their friends to the platform, the answer was a resounding yes, without any hesitation whatsoever. While dominant masculinity might be highly competitive and individualistic, the masculinities emerging from these workers were more supportive, with workers calling each "anna" or "bhai" (brother) and sharing tips, opportunities and information.

Theme 4: honourable masculinities and intra-household dynamics

Since bodily care and quotidian work are considered to be feminine, this raises the question of how workers reconcile their understanding of what it means to be masculine with the work they do. Even though bodily care can be categorised as "feminine" work, Naibody and hair care has always been done by Nai males:

> In our community, it is only now that girls are also involved in this work. It wasn't the case once but of late girls are also doing this. It wasn't there for girls at all. Now in the name of beauty, girls are also doing this in our community. (Yugandhar interview, 2021)[39]

However, caste groups such as the Nai Sangham have a tendency or desire to regulate women's behaviour. Adopting a paternalistic protectionist attitude, the leaders of the Sangham asked, "Who can guarantee your safety if you go to a customer's home?" The Nai Sangham is also vehemently opposed to platformisation and co-opts women's safety issues to delegitimise platformisation.

For those in the housecleaning sector, the division between men's and women's work is who cleans the kitchen:

> When it comes to the kitchen, we boys will not have an idea as to how to clean but ladies will have an idea about it, they will be doing it regularly in the house ... That is why they will send ladies for kitchen. At times,

[38] Interview with Bala, UC team leader (18 October 2021).
[39] Interview with Yugandhar, president of Nai Brahmin Yuva Sena (13 December 2021).

there is another team, it is full of ladies only, they will go and complete the work and come. (Bala interview, 2021)[40]

Such gendered division pre-empts any feelings of crisis of masculinity. For Anji, involved in non-platform cleaning work, such a distinction was indeed difficult. He relied on axes of gender and age to argue thus:

> Uncles, older men can neither pursue any other line of work nor improve their qualifications, they do this type of work. And girls and women. I don't know any boy my age who does this work. Why should I go like this and work? This is not suitable for men below the age of twenty-five, thirty, not even for thirty year olds. I have only seen people who have crossed thirty years. Those who feel they can't get any other job anymore, such people will do this or those who want to do part-time work also. (Anji interview, 2021)[41]

Anji took refuge in the knowledge that he would soon be able to become a qualified lab technician and leave this work altogether.

Interestingly and perhaps unsurprisingly, the intra-household dynamics also offers workers from both occupations the space required to perform their masculinity through adherence to heteronormative gender roles. Some married workers such as Sri were quite vocal that "I don't like her [wife] working at all", explaining:

> My brother Bala's wife … if she feels that "my co-sister goes to work", I won't feel good about it. I don't want to bend my head down in front of my youngsters. Whether I have it or not [money], I will handle it myself. (Sri interview, 2021)[42]

Even Naga, who was unmarried, shared:

> I have not thought that I want such kind of wife only … my only thought is she has to take good care of my parents when she comes home. I don't have the intention to make her work, if she is good at home and takes good care also, it is sufficient [implying that as a man he can work and take care of her]. (Naga interview, 2021)[43]

Conversations with workers underscore the need for a more layered understanding:

> Naga: If she has so much desire, I will say yes. I will say yes to her desire.
>
> Amulya: If she says I will do house cleaning?
>
> Naga: If she says house cleaning, I will say no.
>
> Amulya: Okay. But if she says she wants to do something else?
>
> Naga: Those things are okay. That will be better than my job. (Naga interview, 2021)[44]

Sri had a similar reaction and was more direct as to why this was so:

> Whatever I do is itself *galeeju* [dirty]. Why should I take her and make her do the same muck work that I am doing? That is my thought. (Sri interview, 2021)[45]

[40] Interview with Bala, UC team leader (18 October 2021).
[41] Interview with Anji, self-employed housecleaning worker (4 December 2021).
[42] Interview with Sri, UC housecleaning worker (26 December 2021).
[43] Interview with Naga, housecleaning worker (30 November 2021).
[44] Interview with Naga, housecleaning worker (30 November 2021).
[45] Interview with Sri, UC housecleaning worker (26 December2021).

Anji (also unmarried like Naga) went on to list micro-entrepreneurial choices that his future wife could take up instead of the dirty work that he does:

> I will not agree if she wants to do housecleaning. I have done it myself and I know how it feels ... Tailoring, boutique, parlour, home foods and pickles. Boys have to work outside but girls can sit at home and earn. (Anji interview, 2021)[46]

As George notes, "contrary to received notions in Indian communities about women's bodies and actions being the primary sites of male honour, women, too, hold men responsible for male honour" (George, 2006: 35). Therefore, although the male as the breadwinner and the woman as the one who takes care of the home is heteronormative, one must also read this through the lens of caste and class, and engage with why male workers in the housecleaning vertical, particularly, wouldn't want their partners to do the same job.

Upwardly mobile populations from backwards castes and classes often depend on women in their families to establish status. One of the ways in which this is done by "outliers" of the caste system is by transforming economically productive women workers into non-economically productive housewives. However, as Still remarks in her work on Dalit women in Andhra Pradesh, "*Madiga* women themselves believe that they are better off; for them, sedentarisation represents progress" (Still, 2008: 293).

Conclusion: professionalisation, respectability, and feminisation of labour

Previous studies on working classes indicate that aggression has become a marker of masculinity. Rising unemployment and the subsequent devaluing of men's social status have led to a crisis in masculinity that then finds itself being expressed through aggression against other men and women (Anandhi & Jeyaranjan 2001; Rogers, 2008). The Government of India's resolve to encourage (micro)entrepreneurs and the interventions made by platform intermediaries in the informal economy could potentially have the effect of neoliberalising working-class and subaltern masculinities. After all, the neoliberal, micro-entrepreneurial spirit encourages productising of selves, shouldering the onus of one's physical, mental and financial well-being, and competing with self and others to work harder each day to improve ratings and reviews and to earn tips. However, the themes emerging from this study indicate softer, more supportive working-class masculinities, the kind that value collectivisation, teamwork and a "We can do" attitude that is contrary to the neoliberal "I can do" attitude, and that value sharing.

Just as women workers find themselves collectivizing in ways that go beyond traditional trade unionisation (Komarraju, 2020; Komarraju, forthcoming), male workers from marginalised groups demonstrate supportive

[46] Interview with Anji, self-employed housecleaning worker (4 December 2021).

networks of solidarity to help each other collectivise against platforms and also to help each other find better work opportunities. In India, non-trade union collectivisation happens through kinship networks of some sort – whether they be caste-based or community-based, or even location-based. In the case of salon workers, the caste-based Nai Sangham has started to collectivise against platforms.

In the case of the housecleaning vertical, there is no evidence of workers collectivizing since 1) platformisation of housecleaning work offers them the dignity they most cherish; 2) workers belong to different housecleaning agencies and seldom do their paths cross; and 3) it is considered to be a stop-gap job, one that they will leave as soon as there is a better opportunity. Even though there is no evidence of collectivizing in the traditional sense, the team leader shoulders the responsibility for making sure the team isn't criticised by customers, asks for tips and then shares them with the team, and acts as a buffer between UC, the agency, and his team.

Male workers' relationships with women are more complicated. It is undeniable that caste groups reinforce social regulations – restrictions on marriage and control over women's sexuality through restrictions on mobility, work and access to digital devices and technologies. In this study, male workers couch these conversations in the paternalistic, patriarchal discourses of safety, protection, and choice.

The mind/body and home/work dualities that are at the heart of feminist arguments are also essential features of the caste system. Those who offer services that keep social reproduction going, those who work with their hands and bodies and those who clean the "dirty" spaces of one's homes are either relegated to the bottom of the caste hierarchy or exist entirely outside of the caste system – outliers of society whose presence is undesirable. By creating a class of workers who are valued for their "soft skills", to cater to the needs and desires of the privileged middle classes at the click of a button, by encouraging a relationship of dependency between the platform and the worker, dehumanising workers through gamification, platformisation has led to a deepening of feminisation of labour.

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