Agency and servitude in platform labour: a feminist analysis of blended cultures

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Abstract
Digital labour platforms have become important sites of negotiation between expressions of micro-entrepreneurship, worker freedom and dignity of work. In the Global South, these negotiations are overlaid on an already fraught relationship mediated by the dynamics of caste and culture, to the usual politics of difference. Urban Company (UC), an app-based, on-demand platform in India that connects service providers offering home-based services to potential customers, lists professionalised services that have hitherto been considered part of a ‘culture of servitude’, performed by historically marginalised groups afforded little dignity of labour. Such platforms offer the possibility of disrupting the entrenched ‘master-servant’ relationship that exists in many traditional cultures in the Global South by their ostensibly professional approach. While service providers now have the opportunity for self-employment and gain ‘respectability’ by being associated with the platform, UC claims to have leveraged AI to automate discipline in everything the providers do. Using interviews with UC women service providers involved in beauty work and software development engineers, this paper explores the agency afforded to service partners in both professional and personal spheres. Further, we propose the term blended cultures to think about the ways in which algorithms and human cultures mutually (re)make each other.

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Introduction
The artificially intelligent machines that mark the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ have become part of the fabric of everyday life and have the potential to transform traditional notions about work, employment and labour (Schwab & Davis, 2018). Against the alarm about job losses as a result of emerging technologies and automation that characterises public/popular discourse around these developments (Hirschi, 2018), app-based, on-demand platform aggregators have been able to leverage digital technologies to create more jobs and are fast becoming popular (Gleim et al., 2019). These digital platforms, part of what is referred to as the gig economy, are thought to have the potential to unlock what is seen as unproductive human capital by giving people an opportunity to become micro-entrepreneurs (Bieber and Moggia, 2020). For instance, in India, Urban Company (UC henceforth) and Housejoy have become viable sources of self-employment for those involved in the informal, unorganised, feminised/gendered work, including beauty work, which this study focuses on.

Despite the claims of being able to generate income and flexible gigs for the self-employed, De Stefano (2016) warns that the quality of work needs to be considered. Researchers argue that algorithmic surveillance – management, and control in the form of reviews, ratings, penalties, the extractive nature of data collection, and the irregular flow of work or gigs – results in often dehumanising forms of informality and precarity (Veen et al., 2020). The notion of blended automation, that is, an automation design that keeps the social structure of the market in tact (Beunza and Millo, 2015) makes supervision a trifold affair – workers’ services are judged by category managers associated with the platform intermediary, machine learning based algorithms collect information about a worker’s services in the past, and customers rate and review the service as well as the provider. These layered systems significantly reduce the autonomy and agency of the worker, far from their classified status as an independent contractor (Schmidt, 2017) or a service partner. Worker autonomy, fair wages, terms and conditions of the contract and privacy issues are concerns that arise in technologically mediated, algorithmic control.

While these issues may relate to gig workers across the world, the socio-economic and cultural dynamics that lie at the intersection of gender, caste, class and religion within the Global South continue to remain largely under-examined and require further attention, as such types of precarious work are often associated with particular communities and social groups (Anwar et al., 2021; Raval and Pal, 2019).

Thereby, this paper seeks to foreground the agency of beauty gig workers beyond the immediate context of their work and draws from the experiences of workers themselves.

Background
Between 80% and 92% of the Indian workforce is part of the unorganised and informal economy, contributing nearly to half of India’s Gross Domestic Product. Despite the
shrinkage of the unorganised sector as a whole from 86% in 2005 to 81% in 2018, contractual and part-time hiring by the organised sector has meant that about 92% of the labour force in India is engaged in work that is marked by informality, precarity and oftentimes exploitation (Punia, 2020). According to the International Labour Organization (2018), more women than men are hired as informal labour in both the organised and unorganised sectors in India.

Women in post-industrialised, late-colonial India worked in flour mills, textile mills and other small and medium industries, benefiting from laws that sought to protect them from potentially harsh working conditions on account of their reproductive capacities. However, the nationalist movement and the refashioning of women as mothers and the gendered notions of public and private spheres in India forced more and more women out of paid work. Ironically, this shift happened at a time when labour laws were starting to become equitable in terms of pay and working hours as a consequence of trade unionisation. The image of the ideal worker came to be that of a male engaged in masculine work. Working women in factories and those that migrated to the cities for work came to be denigrated as promiscuous and immoral. This gradually forced women from the working classes to take up paid informal work in the services sector, with little choice about whether they joined the organised or unorganised sector (Sen, 2008).

The Indian female labour force participation continues to be one of the lowest in the world. Cultural norms around women in public spaces, the wage gap between men and women, lack of flexibility in working hours, amongst other factors, contribute to this decline. In recent years, the government of India has tried to boost women’s participation through several schemes such as the Skill India mission, including partnering with gig platforms to provide skill training and self-employment opportunities (Chaudhary, 2020).

**Gig economy: UC, an on-demand, app-based platform**

The term gig economy was coined during the great recession when people were forced to juggle two or three gigs as against formal employment to stay afloat financially (Kuhn and Galloway, 2019). However, the concomitant growth of ICTs and digital platforms, and developments in artificial narrow intelligence (ANI), combined with the demand for part-time services among an upwardly mobile growing middle class (Chaudhary, 2020), have made it possible for a new work arrangement to emerge – app-based, on-demand platforms. These intermediaries leverage machine learning based algorithms to match a person, variously referred to as independent contractors, service partners (SP), or professionals or pros (Raval and Pal, 2019), willing to perform a ‘gig’ for a customer in need of it. Typically, gigs could be classified as high, medium or low skilled. It is estimated that 15 million ‘white-collar’ gig workers in India are engaged in IT, HR and design and another 3 million gig workers are engaged in medium to low skilled or blue-collar work such as driving, delivering, cleaning and beauty work (Krishna, 2019).

Researchers contributing to the burgeoning literature on home-based platform work, especially from the Global South, note that home-based work does not receive as much attention as ride-hailing and delivery services (Anwar et al., 2021; Raval and Pal, 2019). Since work done in the private spaces of the home has for long not been considered
‘work’ (worth paying for), it is possible to argue that this lacuna reifies the private-public distinction in academic literature, alerting us to the need for a feminist approach in thinking about these issues. In addition, most of the research based in the Global North context does not examine how algorithmic management and surveillance, while controlling the movements of its workers through tracking, also make it possible for women workers to negotiate cultural, familial and customer expectations and control.

Our interest in the beauty-based segment comes from three angles: (1) women’s voices in the gig economy have only just begun to be explored, (2) beauty work is by and large gendered work dominated by women (Raval and Pal, 2019) and (3) applying the intersectionality approach to examine the ways in which ‘social categories are produced and reproduced through and with gig work’ (Webster and Zhang, 2020: 114). As sparse research from the Global South shows, the Indian context is marked by gender, class and caste inequalities and an entrenched culture of servitude. Recent work (such as the aforementioned) does look at women’s experiences of platformisation at the intersection of class and gender but they do not argue for an explicitly intersectional approach.

To do this, we chose to speak with service partners engaged in beauty gig work and engineers from Urban Company, formerly Urban Clap that was launched in India in 2014. Currently, it has more than thirty thousand registered service partners and has expanded its operations overseas as well. This app-based, on-demand platform is primarily focused on the home-based (domestic) segment including personal grooming (beauty work and spa treatments), health (yoga/exercise trainers) and domestic cleaning and repairs (AC, fridge, heater). Service partners across these segments connect with customers through an automated matchmaking process referred to as ‘leads’. The platform charges a commission or UC credits to do this.

**Methodology**

This study looks at algorithms as culture instead of in culture (Seaver, 2017). In this view, algorithmic culture needs to be understood in terms of what it does and not as what is. Inherent to such a performative understanding of algorithmic culture is the ‘idea of culture as marked by the algorithmic... as something deeply rooted in reality, agency and performativity’ (Roberge and Seyfert, 2016: 4). Just as there is no single, monolithic culture, algorithmic culture is not one thing, and therefore a more appropriate usage would be its plural – algorithmic cultures.

As an interdisciplinary study that lies at the intersections of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and critical algorithmic studies, this paper draws from a combination of actor-network theory, which is best described as a sensibility rather than a theory that has immensely benefitted from its conversation with feminist theory (Law and Singleton, 2013) and feminist new materialist theory. We proceed from the assumption that any techno-cultural artefact must be examined alongside the material cultures within which it operates. Neither giving into the tendency of classical AI theorists to regard technologies and algorithms as isolated, cut off from the human and material cultures nor becoming totally anthropocentric we propose that it is essential to understand the plan and situated action (Suchman, 1987) that goes into designing the platform app, its features and their imagined affordances. In order to understand agency afforded to the different
actants within these algorithmic cultures, it is important to gather the views of all actants within the web of relations of the UC ecosystem.

**Methods**

This study draws on data from eight semi-structured in-depth, telephonic interviews with women beauty gig workers and software development engineers (four each) associated with UC. The four beauty gig workers interviewed (Table 1) work in the city of Hyderabad, a large metropolis in southern India. The first author, a regular user of the platform, has been a client of SP1 for more than one and a half years and has built a relationship of trust. She reached out to SP1 to ask if she would be interested in talking about her journey, assuring her that refusal to do so would not affect their professional relationship.

SP1 also helped her get in touch with SP2 and SP4. SP3 was recruited to the study through the app. The first author booked a service on the app, after the services were provided and rating given, the first author asked SP2 if she could speak about her experiences with UC. Following this, the author gave the service partner her number and requested her to contact her if she was comfortable going ahead with the interview.

All four women beauty gig workers had tried to set up their own beauty parlours at some point. Lack of customers and rising costs of good quality products resulted in them discontinuing this line of business. More than one partner expressed gratitude towards UC for having given them a chance to prove themselves. Although none of them disclosed their income bracket, they spoke at length about how their standard of living had improved after joining UC. SP 1 and 3 had heard about UC through their advertisements on television and YouTube; SP 2 came to know about UC through a beautician friend, and SP 4 was told about UC by her husband who himself works part-time as a Rapido driver. Service professionals referred to themselves as partners.

The software development engineers (SDE) were recruited in a different manner. The first author identified four profiles of those who worked for UC on LinkedIn, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service partner</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Registered with UC</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment history as a beautician</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SP1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>7 years – learnt at a local beauty parlour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>15 years – attended a 3 months basic beautician course at a government institute. After a gap of 4 years, attended a 3-month advanced course at a private institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>5 years – learnt on the job at a local beauty parlour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>5 years – attended a course at a local institute before marriage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
connected with them. Of the four contacted via direct messages, three responded to the requests but only one (SDE 1, M, 24) was willing to talk to her. Following her interview with SDE 1, a small snowball was initiated. SDE 2 (F, 24), SDE 3 (M, 26), SDE 4 (F, 25). Of these SDEs, two work in supply inventory and two in matchmaking teams. All four agreed that UC was the only platform that really cared about their partners because, as SDE 3 puts it, UC considers partners as a ‘critical resource’.

Given the first author’s familiarity with Hindi, Telugu and English, the interviews with both service professionals and SDEs were conducted in all three languages, based on the participants’ comfort. The duration of the interviews ranged between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were first transliterated and then translated into English. The interviews with both groups examined their situated experiences within the platform work. Where the service partners spoke about their familial and professional lives, a higher standard of living because of platform work, dignity of labour and respectability, penalties and rating, the SDEs spoke about what their work entailed, how new features are launched, whether service partners’ insights are important for designing of these features, and how they think the company treats service partners.

Drawing on findings from a larger ongoing project funded by the IDRC, this study explores how algorithmic mechanisations remake culture by placing them within the wider histories of postcolonial cultures of servitude, problems with dignity of labour, awareness about the instability of gig work. In doing so, it is concerned with the ways in which algorithmic cultures are involved in social reproduction of class and gender relations, and labour and employment (Flanagan, 2018). It asks questions about the sort of cultural work these algorithm-based platforms perform and how they can be located in the socio-historical context of India, thereby serving to establish how the material cultures of the past and present collide in (re)making culture. Following Punathambekar and Mohan (2019), it foregrounds the Indian context not as an exception to the dominant Western theorising but as part of the global transformation of the future of work.

Data analysis

The analysis was both inductive and deductive in approach. Open coding helped identify emergent themes and recurrence and redundancy helped identify parallels between what the partners and engineers were saying. The intersectional lens helped consider the multiplicity of identities and experiences of women gig workers, as working-class women, wives and mothers. Drawing on feminist theory, which urges researchers to move beyond dichotomies and dualities of body and mind, agency and structure, online and offline, the effort was made to acknowledge the layered nature of women’s experiences (Raman and Komarraju, 2017). It has been argued that agency as expressed by those who are marginalised in multiple ways cannot be easily understood by those who occupy privileged positions, therefore the voices of women workers’ themselves have been foregrounded in order to understand how they negotiate family, work and algorithmic supervision.

It is crucial to note that the findings in relation with gig workers echo those from the works of Raval and Pal (2019) and Anwar et al. (2021), since they also remain alert to expressions of caste, class and gender. However, while these studies were conducted in Bangalore and Before Corona (BC), this study was conducted in 2021, during the
Findings and discussion

To be clear, the kind of work that this study talks about precedes the platform revolution. For instance, food delivery can be seen as a particular manifestation of employment as a consequence of the rise of app-based digital technological platforms (Surie, 2020). Beauty work, that is at the intersection of class, caste and gender, has a much longer history but <5% of this sector is organised (Saha, 2018). Efforts have been made to professionalise this work with various initiatives providing training, certificates and placement opportunities for those interested in pursuing beauty work. Culturally, beauty work is seen as part of a wider type of ritually impure work in India performed on bodies by those who belong to ‘lower castes’ (Ahmed, 2006). In addition, work that involves intimate body contact and care is considered both low-skilled and stigmatised as immoral by being conflated with sex work. Salon owners and chains have been known to exploit their workers by underpaying them and often forcing them to perform sexual services (Rajagopalan, 2017). UC targets underpaid parlour ‘didis’ in the salon sector, and promises them a better compensation, more control over their lives by facilitating the creation of their own microbusinesses, and making professionals out of them.

Respectability through association: platformisation and professionalisation of beauty work

A significant amount of time is invested in training these partners to prepare them as professionals for platform work that takes place in private spaces of the customer’s home. Those who apply for these positions undergo a rigorous process of vetting based on proper documentation for identification purposes submitted through the app, and experience and skill is determined by a personal interview. Those who are chosen thereafter undergo a 10-day training programme.

The service partners in the study are aware of how their work is perceived and draw from their own experiences to explain how associating with UC has improved their status within the family and in society. UC’s rigorous vetting and training process and strong brand has helped shift the perceptions of their work, giving it added legitimacy and higher status:

The moment you say beautician, to be honest, the mindset is they look at you differently, not with good perspective or good intention. Of course, this does not mean that everybody is like that. But UC is a brand, so in the starting, during the training itself all of this is clarified. If you are working in UC, then people should automatically differentiate between you and whatever
preconceived notions they have about beauticians, they must perceive us as thorough professionals. There is clarity about this now for sure. (SP2)

Since beauty work is often stigmatised as immoral, gig workers see professionalisation and standardisation as an absolutely necessity, particularly since they need to go to the client’s home, instead of salons:

Everybody is given training compulsorily because going to somebody else’s home and working is different from having our own parlour, the system is different, the authority is different. . . Clients see everything, greeting, dressing, hygiene, personality (SP4)

This anecdotal evidence speaks to the efforts put in by the working-class women to speak, behave and act in a certain manner in order to become palatable to the tastes of clients who more often than not belong to the middle classes (Raval and Pal, 2019).

The ten-day training programme instituted by UC also involves committing to memory the standard operating procedure. Standardisation of services that forms the basis of such training helps in the performance of professionalism:

The standard operating procedure— we also tell them how we are going to greet, each and everything, we create their muscle memory, how to set their products on the table neatly, cleaning after service is rendered, everything. . . (SDE 1)

SP 3 agrees that during the training the focus is to make sure that all UC workers behave in a similar manner. Apart from the uniform one is required to wear; this standardised behaviour cements their image as a professional who has undergone necessary training. Where participants in Raval and Pal’s (2019) work reported being harassed by auto drivers and security guards because of the platform uniform and infrastructure (folding table and backpack) requiring them to verbally assert their identity as professionals, the service partners in this study reported that UC is a brand now, popular with the general public who understand that they are professionals merely by looking at their uniform that has the company logo. The perks of professionalisation, however, must be balanced with the on-ground realities.

**Blended work and language: not everyone can become a UC partner**

The construction of this professionalisation also happens in discursive terms, where during training, the partners acquire a rudimentary understanding of the technology, and the associated vocabulary. Terms such as power bank, app, leads, credits, rating, reviews, automated, tracking, app store, standard operating procedure come easily to the service partners. In fact, 3 days of the 10-day intensive programme involves service partners familiarising themselves with the discursive ecosystem offered within the service partner app. The UC trainers draw on pre-existing knowledge the professionals might have about digital technologies and smart phones. This is evident in the way they explain what the training entails:
They teach us how to download the app, how many credits should be there, how many credits are needed to start our work—1C is ten rupees. So if I get an order for Rs 600, I always need to maintain a balance of 100 credits or Rs 1000 to accept such orders. It’s like a mobile recharge. . . Now your service is Rs 600, so in order to deliver that job, I have to accept, and when I accept it, I have to give some commission to UC. . . Only after commission is cut can I accept the order. . . All of this [they] tell us during the training. They teach us how to check how much money we are making, how much is going in commission. . . total bit to bit, point to point total they explain (SP 2)

But it is through this ‘insertion of procedure into human knowledge and social experience’ (Gillespie, 2014) of work, through algorithmically determined leads and other automated procedures, such as credit reduction, and money transfers that helps establish this work as ‘work’, and makes it ‘respectable’, despite the inevitable informality involved in it.

Service partners admit that some working knowledge about the functionality of smartphones in general and a minimum proficiency in English is necessary. The fact that the work involves English and smartphones (both seen as markers of upward mobility and cultural capital), and work is allocated ‘automatically’ as soon as they have marked their calendars in the app, has meant that extended family members who once looked down upon this line of work now have a newfound respect for their work and for their association with UC. Two of the partners report that people they know now ask them if it is possible for them to sign up as a professional as well. But SP 4 says with a hint of pride:

It is not at all easy to become a UC professional. Many from my batch dropped out because they could not cope up with the training and because English was necessary. Today, the app is available in vernacular languages, but the SOP is longer now.

Service partners also report that their incomes have improved after joining UC, as they are now able to afford better phones and power banks, and two-wheelers, which they see as work necessities. Apart from this, the partners also said that they can afford better homes and better education for their children, and other material goods such as a television. The upward mobility as experienced by service partners has not gone unnoticed by their relatives:

My relatives would talk disrespectfully with us [family], but now they see our success, they see us, our family, how we have improved our standard of living, from one bedroom flat to double bedroom flat. My husband worked 15 years ago also but these things are only happening now, why? There has been tremendous growth because of this. Even if I open a huge beauty parlour tomorrow, I will not leave, I will continue to work for UC. . . there was a time when I could count clients on my fingers and now there are clients who are waiting for my schedule to clear up (SP 2)

It is the combination of upward mobility, improved standards of living, difficulty (and therefore associated prestige) in becoming a service partner, increase in number of clients, popularity of UC as a professional organisation that lead to service partners expressing this sense of pride in the association. This contrasts with the experiences of workers
in Raval and Pal’s (2019) study, where they write, ‘women. . . were enthused about the relative invisibility and quietness of app-based work’. However, for the participants in our study, this becomes a particular advantage as it allows them to resist and reformulate the entrenched cultural constructions of beauty work in India.

Additionally, much of the respect they have gained within the family stems from the fact that they are businesswomen who work for themselves and answer to no one in particular. Indeed, as SP three states, the fact that no one from UC contacts service partners unless something has gone wrong, they firmly believe that they are partners and not employees.

**Blended supervision**

Professionalisation of a certain occupation leads to its visibilisation, which in turn brings in mechanisms of supervision and control. In the gig economy, such supervision is performed both by humans and algorithms. Wiener et al. (2020) refer to the surveillance of workers done by algorithms as technologically mediated control. This ensures control of input and output as well as the task-associated behaviour of the service partners. Input control refers to the processes through which a service partner is deemed to be qualified to work for the platform and their work is consistently satisfactory. Behaviour control refers to the reviewing and rating processes that involve collating customer feedback, while output control refers to the processes that allow platform intermediaries to send specific suggestions to improve the ratings of the service partner. As has already been noted, service partners in UC are vetted thoroughly, thereby achieving perceived input control.

UC achieves output and behaviour control in three ways: (1) the service partners’ work is first assessed by the trainers; (2) a second layer of supervision or surveillance is performed by algorithms; and (3) customer reviews and ratings add another layer of work supervision.

For instance, due to COVID-19, UC has added a new system of ‘hygiene rating’, in addition to the customer-rating system. This is performed by an algorithm trained to detect the presence of masks and gloves, but also needs to be verified by the customers. Service partners are required to don a fresh pair of gloves and mask after reaching the customer’s location, take a selfie from the app’s live camera that includes a time stamp and upload it before commencing the work. Once the job has ended, they are expected to complete the hygiene process, as this service partner describes:

> After all this, we sanitize the area, that is whatever things we made use of such as stool, chair or bed or tap in the washroom which we have used or doorbell, door handle etc.. We have to spray sanitiser on everything we have touched. Whatever we have used, we are supposed to leave nothing. We need to pack all of the things used in a bag and dispose it off later. (SP 2)

In fact, when they leave the client’s home, it must look just as it did prior to their service. It is important that this SOP is followed because:
Now you [the customer] will be questioned, how was the pro who was sent to you, did she behave well, did she sanitize, wear PPE kit, gloves, mask. If you see me doing all of this then you will tick yes, but if I have never used any of these things, you have never seen me use these things you say no (SP 2)

The failure to comply with the SOP directly results in the fall of their hygiene rating which then reduces the number of leads they will receive. Recognising the way in which the system keeps them in check, the SDE concludes:

So they put us in their grip for sure. When we don’t follow SOP, immediately we get a message. You worked without wearing a face mask or gloves, without wearing a PPE kit, you didn’t give the customer disposable gown for disposable sheet or disposable gloves (SP 4)

The SDEs who were part of this study offered a view into this system of hygiene rating. Since the SDE’s responsibility is to provide technological solutions to various business logics, they often need to trade ‘long term-oriented tech solutions in favour of a quick fix as per what the organisation wants’ (SDE 2). For example, as a consequence of COVID-19, service partners must wear personal protective equipment. Given the scale of the company’s operations and service partners, the software development engineers trained an algorithm to perform the task of recognising the presence of masks and gloves, reducing the dependency on human supervision. But this did not go as planned, as SDE 1 admits, ‘some pros complained that their ranking had gone down despite wearing masks and gloves. . . In their hurry, they could have taken blurry pictures, or the camera quality could have been average. . . ’ prompting a new team specifically working on hygiene rating to intervene.

This speaks to the agency of the algorithms that SDEs did not foresee. To cite another example, SDE 2 from the matchmaking team elaborates on how the ‘algorithm is designed to choose the best’ service provider based on a set of parameters – those who have a customer rating above 4.8, have marked their availability and are nearest to the customer are deemed best:

Essentially making this entire decision is your Machine Language, so these are the parameters set for the system and then it will determine which provider is sent the lead. (SDE 2)

However, the unintended consequence of this algorithmic mechanism is what they term ‘starvation’:

if a pro hasn’t been doing well on the platform [customer ratings], he is sort of going to get churned out. He is not going to get more jobs and the lesser jobs, we also take into account how many jobs a pro had done on the platform right, so now if a pro is not doing well, we are not able to send him jobs, and if we are not sending him jobs, he won’t be able to do jobs, so that is a vicious cycle. You are not getting a job; you were not even doing the job so we are sending you even fewer jobs and so you are sort of churned out of the platform. (SDE 2)

The system of matchmaking is based on the ratio of total requests sent to the total number of requests accepted by the service provider and good customer ratings. In this way the
partners are obligated to accept at least 2 or 3 tasks a day to keep their profile active and make sure that customers give a good rating. SP 1 who was churned out of the system because of such an issue complained of UC not sufficiently respecting its senior beauty workers, but the other three service partners seem to justify this by saying that things would have been the same if they were working for or owned a beauty parlour.

‘We are partners’: the case of the missing boss and algorithmic surveillance

One of the key features of platformisation is the way protocols are built into the user interface, with little room to negotiate on either side – whether as a service provider or customer. The appeal is convenience – for the customer – and efficiency and opportunity – for the provider. Monitoring of customer use allows the platform to understand preferences and better tweak the algorithm to nudge easier and frequent use. Monitoring of service partners ensures tight control on process and adherence to it. Wiener et al. (2020) observe that when platforms are transparent and able to justify various algorithmic mechanisms that are in place to monitor the service partners, they seem to accept it as a risk worth taking for gaining the opportunity to work.

For instance, tracking partners’ real time location, requiring a One-Time Password from the customer before starting a job, access to their phone contacts, and calls. These may be seen as invasive practices, but partners in this study see it as a worthwhile trade off. Since the service partners are told about these practices upfront, it is understood as an act of seeking consent. The company is also able to justify these practices to the partners. The partners agree that tracking and OTP is necessary because some partners had been less than honest in the past about having reached the client’s location and also for safety purposes. The phone calls need to be recorded in case of disputes with customers. And access to contacts ‘after consent’ is necessary because:

they can refer from their contacts and they will get the referral bonus, so that is the system which is for their benefit only and in the beginning it was for our benefit because we wanted to expand our pool of partners (SDE 3)

There is also an attempt to regulate the product’s service partners use with the app. Through the app store, it is easy for service partners to buy products belonging to certain brands that UC has partnered with, such as monosachets (single use products introduced after COVID-19 for hygiene purposes) at subsidised rates. But the service partners claim that only those branded products that they have recommended or endorsed appear in the app store.

Service partners’ feedback is indeed important, because it is ultimately service partners who are a ‘critical resource’ (SDE 3). For example, as in the case of a failed attempt to automate the ordering system by training an algorithm to order products on behalf of the service partners. This feature was launched for a randomly selected group of partners in one city as a pilot and was rolled back just as soon as it was launched. SDE 1 admits that this new system was launched without proper communication to the partners, who on experiencing automatic deduction of credits, stormed the city office to complain. The
co-founders, SDE 1 says, advised them to roll back the feature and fine-tune it to be launched later.

Similarly, what is deemed as a source of insecurity or irregularity or what might be perceived as precarious is determined by one’s social location. Where the flexibility in work hours can be seen through the lens of privilege (rich, middle class men and women being able to escape the monotony of regular work), this can also be looked at from the intersectional lens of gender and class. Sabelis and Schilling (2013) propose the notion of frayed careers to normalise the rhythmic nature of women’s ‘abnormal careers’ which are marked by periods of productive and reproductive work. This stands in contrast to the more dominant model of linear careers of men, which ultimately leads to both ageism and sexism when determining who is employable. It is entirely possible to extend this to the granular level of day-to-day life of women engaged in blue-collar work, by grounding it in Smith’s (1987) standpoint theory. Smith argues that women’s daily lives are episodic and escape linearity, balancing productive and care work. This contrasts with the androcentric, patriarchal time that is linear and characterises the life of a male, the industrial clock and typical work arrangement. Women, wives and mothers often must balance quotidian work in keeping with gender and social norms and professional lives. While middle class women are able to delegate care-work to domestic workers in India (Qayum and Ray, 2003), women in this study cannot afford to do so and for them, the non-linearity of working hours in the gig economy is seen as a boon.

Although flexibility of working hours is an inherent trait of gig work, these women believe that it is because they are ‘partners’ and not employees that they are able to choose their working hours. Since most of the supervision work is done by the algorithms and not by humans, it gives them the sense that they work for themselves and are not answerable to anyone despite proof to the contrary. For instance, partners report that they need to inform their category managers about any extended absence from the app and could possibly warrant ‘a retraining programme’ (SP 3).

The reason they believe in the company despite the fact that it keeps service partners ‘in their grip’ is that they are not employees, reinforced by the fact that most supervision is delegated to the invisible algorithm and because they perceive UC as wanting them to succeed. This is corroborated by SDE 3 who remarks that the company recognises that service partners work hard, and it is their job as engineers to help them give the best chance to succeed.

A feminist concept of personal agency (Ruiz, 1998) would need one to acknowledge individual agency (to choose platform work, have enthusiasm for it) in the face of structural constraints of particular contexts (in this case, it is the UC ecosystem that can often act as a structural constraint working to discipline the worker). For instance, partners readily admit that money does not come easy and they must work hard and deliver as many services as possible. However, seeing themselves as service ‘partners’ and not employees means that they are willing to put in the work required of them to improve their living conditions. This is a negotiation they consciously enter into.

Drawing on these interviews with SDEs and gig workers, we propose the term blended cultures, in lieu of the term algorithmic cultures to take into account the human within machine cultures. Table 2 provides a detailed explanation of the terms we suggest to reflect the centrality of human agency:
Table 2. A classification of terms to suggest the centrality of humans in algorithmic cultures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Blended automated supervision</td>
<td>Beunza and Millo (2015) use the term blended automation to ‘denote an automation design that preserves the social structure of a market’ in the context of the stock market. We borrow this term and apply to this study to denote how algorithms are integrated in the design of platforms in a way that it preserves and often exacerbates supervision and control associated with traditional workplace arrangement. It indicates both human and non-human supervision.</td>
<td>The way in which UC employs its algorithms to control the behaviour of its workers. For instance, their machine learning based algorithm detects the presence of masks and gloves. This is not all. Customers too are asked to give feedback about the hygiene of the workers. The algorithm collates this information and assigns them a hygiene ranking. Thus, preserving the social structure of a work organisation and adding more layers of supervision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended work</td>
<td>Work that involves automated workflows only partly since the service provided necessarily involves the service partner</td>
<td>Even though workers get leads through their app, ultimately the services need to be provided by the service partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended language</td>
<td>Work that entails acquiring the vocabulary associated with digital technologies and understanding how they work</td>
<td>Service partners need to familiarise themselves with what credits, tracking, leads etc., mean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended cultures</td>
<td>We suggest the term blended cultures as an alternative to the term algorithmic cultures. Even though algorithms have an agency of their own, how it is interpreted is dependent on people and the context. In order to preserve both algorithmic agency and human agency, we suggest the term blended cultures where agency is a result of the practices within the web of relations or ecosystem of a company/platform. Algorithmic cultures and human cultures mutually reshape or recreate each other.</td>
<td>Software development engineers did not foresee the phenomenon of ‘starvation’. This could be read as the agency of the algorithm. However, starvation makes sense only within the context of the app locking service partners out. Similarly, even though algorithms are trained to control the behaviour of service partners, there is evidence that service partners reappropriate these control mechanisms to negotiate familial, societal, and customer control. Individual agency does not mean that structural domination and inequalities between the customers, platforms and the service partners disappear, thereby reproducing social relations and hierarchies associated with it.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Conclusion

The rise of the on-demand platform economy and the associated transformation of service economy into a service society (Sarukkai, 2020) has meant that most of the gendered work considered mundane, low-skilled and immoral is now being professionalised.
This professionalisation offers a tantalising promise of moving away from a culture of servitude that is characteristic of South Asian societies and gaining respectability through association with platform aggregators such as UC.

Despite the claims of professionalisation and organising a largely unorganised beauty sector, the platform introduces a new degree of informality by making these services available to the customer within the private spaces of their homes. Our work resonates with that of Anwar et al. (2021) on the fact that this creates an additional dimension of customer control to work which is already controlled by algorithms and category managers.

Although none of the service partners we interviewed for this study spoke of being treated like ‘servants’, it is worth asking to what degree has beauty gig work reconstituted the long-standing culture of servitude that has pervaded in India. This master-servant relationship in India is associated with the institution of domestic servitude, characterised by dependency on the employer, relationship of domination-subordination and inequality:

By culture of servitude we mean the “structure of feeling” associated with the institution, produced by the confluence of historical material conditions and prevailing social organization. Different cultures of servitude are shaped by particular historical configurations of economic/gender/spatial and often race/caste structural inequalities that traverse the domestic and public spheres. Thus we would expect the identity of servants, the functions they perform, and their relations with employers to vary across cultures of servitude (Qayum and Ray, 2003: 527)

Qayum and Ray (2003) are careful and broad in their conceptualisation of domestic servitude, treating it as an institution rather than an occupational category. We argue that this lens can be extended to the platform-based work because the services sold through such apps as UC (1) shift the location of work that was once in the public spaces of salons to a customer’s home, (2) introduce the system of customer rating as input to the system, (3) favour algorithmic surveillance and (4) reinforce, through supervision by category managers, a specific type of temporal and spatial dependency of the service partner on both the platform and the customer. This creates new variations of dependencies where service partners are dependent on the platform for work and on customers for rating. With the intermediaries becoming a source of structural domination (Flanagan, 2018), and by making these services available in the private homes of customers, the elements of domination and subordination are amplified. And just as domestic workers are required to remain invisible even as their work has visible impact, service partners are required to leave the client’s homes without leaving any sign of their presence, in some ways reinforcing status/class hierarchies.

It is however crucial that the ways in which gig workers are able to side-step and/or negotiate with a number of cultural and social norms around work be recognised. One must acknowledge how women are able to use their association with UC to create dignified work, pride in their position and improve their lives in both professional and personal spheres. As Raval and Pal (2019) note, instead of deeming the choice to continue to work for UC as a false choice, or a freedom with no content (Flanagan, 2018) one needs to recognise how workers negotiate with blended authority.

Even though the platform is able to establish itself as a successful intermediary precisely because of being able to create a relationship of dominance and dependency with
the partners, they also acknowledge that service partners are a critical resource. A significant amount of time is invested in training them and their feedback is taken into account, for instance, the app is now made available in vernacular languages because a number of service partners across segments have complained to their category managers about the difficulty they face in dealing with English.

The partners also seem to be aware of their importance in the UC ecosystem and choose to work for UC despite the tracking and other mechanisms of control, because they are able to reach out to a broader base of clients, flexible work hours, are identified as respectable professionals, and are able to improve their standard of living.

To conclude, we suggest the term ‘blended cultures’ to think about the ways in which algorithms and human cultures mutually re(make) each other. Through such a framing, we envision a more holistic approach to these platforms that go beyond the binary thinking of master-slave to that which is rooted in social dignities and inclusive design.

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Notes

1. Online bike taxi aggregator in India
2. https://femlab.co/
3. Women workers at beauty salons in India are addressed as ‘didi’ that translates to older sister, contributing further to the informalisation of their profession. They are stereotyped as being loud mouthed, semi-literate – qualities that do not appeal to middle class sensibilities.

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