

SPECIAL FEATURE

Laboring Femininities: Skill, Body, and Class-making Among Beauty Workers in India

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Abstract

Tea plantation workers in India have historically been a part of the feminized workforce, constituting somewhat exceptionally formal labor in a country with high informalization of women's employment. In the past decade, however, a combined fallout of neo-liberalization and globalization contextualized within the local history of varying phases of incorporation, accumulation/dispossession and shifting relations of production brought about a crisis in the tea plantations leading to closures, retrenchment, and casualization. The women workers from tea plantations joined the burgeoning casualized urban labor force. Through ethnography and interviews I traced women workers from tea plantations in West Bengal, India, who migrated to the beauty industry in Hyderabad and Delhi-NCR. The paper focuses on the construction of women's labor in the beauty industry with continuities and contrasts from the tea plantations to understand the makings of gendered labor and skill. The women's frequent invocation of femininity as skill foregrounds the woman's body as central to woman's labor and the workplace but also provides a scope to unsettle understanding of femininity as a specific and naturalized concept. Using the lens of migration from one sector of feminized labor to another, this paper interrogates the production of the feminine worker and the workplace in different but related contexts. Their reflections on their work, skill, and workplace allows us an insight into the ways in which the body as the woman and the worker is deployed as skilled/natural and how they themselves co-construct, negotiate, and subvert the construction of femininity and feminine labor in the workplace.

Keywords: migration; ethnicity; skill; plantations; body

Introduction

Political economy is shaped by not just macro-economic processes but workers' subjectivities. Local cultures are also important in conceptualizations of markets, labor processes, and ideas of skill. Scholarship from across the world shows historically how discourses on labor have been characterized by using social categories such as gender, race, or ethnicity. Gendered labor hierarchies, as we will see in this article, have been characterized by the fluidity of content deployed according to the needs of production and in turn are often reworked by the workers themselves to (re)assert some control on the production of their laboring selves. Tracing the labor discourses

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of migrant women workers from tea plantations in one part of India to beauty parlors in another, this article interrogates the production of gendered labor and laborers. Through the women's reflections on their work, skill, and workplace I map the ways in which laboring bodies are constructed by the market and the workers. More specifically I locate how the women co-construct, negotiate, and subvert the construction of femininity and feminine labor in the workplace. Looking at transition between two work sectors—tea plantations and beauty work—the article traces the transition between two “regimes of femininity” arguing that while similar in various ways, the ideas around the physicality of different work shows, on the one hand, the specificity of meanings of gendered labor in different contexts, and on the other hand their shifts and malleability. Such production of difference provides insights into how forms of gendered labor are both made and contested by women workers. These discursive and material relations are made through “dialectics of globalization/localization, production/consumption and gender/class” and their interlinkages.¹ The article uses the idea of femininity (as perceived by the respondents themselves) to interrogate how such gendered labor practices are produced as a norm, as discursive formations, and embodied practice.

Sexual division of labor is normalized through the construction of labor practices as emanating from certain stereotypical traits of the workers. Unskilled work is, thus, built on and legitimized through constructed stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Qualities of dexterity, patience, etc. are invoked in different work settings, to naturalize these as characteristic to women's work.² By mapping this on to the woman's body or character as opposed to the training itself, these discourses construct the work and workers as automatically unskilled and simultaneously create a binary with “technique” or technical work, which is constructed outside of one's body, and hence learnt. This process of deskilling enable the employer to downgrade certain tasks and cheapen the production process.³ The stereotypes which normalize labor practices are not immutable. As they adapt to changed labor context, new discourses around skill and new forms of gendering emerge. These, however, do not always dislocate the internalized rationale of gendered hierarchies.

The emergent and contested domains of labor discourses studied in the backdrop of migration complicate our understanding of gendered labor. How is the experience of women migrating from one sector of work to another distinct from women with no previous experience of working elsewhere? The narratives of the women here, migrating from tea plantations to beauty work, show that their working lives have been distinctly shaped by previous work experience. Their notions of skill, femininity, and labor practices as such are very much shaped by their own working histories.

James argues that the feminine as a cultural image was essentially a bourgeois category defined by possession of those physical, social, and cultural features that the working-class women were seen to lack.⁴ The very notion of femininity emerged as an embodiment of the upper caste, bourgeoisie norm, which cast lower caste, working-class women as its other. Framed this way, femininity intersected with class to stigmatize the female working class through notions of a lack of respectability, presence of bodies in public worksites, and concepts of hard manual labor.⁵ Given this baggage it was instructive to note how women as beauty workers recast their gendered embodiments as gender capital and/or labor rationality in order to access and survive in the much gendered-classed economy of the beauty parlor. The focus on the

transition and comparison also illustrates the different components through which femininity is contextualized and its differing centrality to the two sectors.

After providing a brief context on both the history of the tea plantations from where the working lives of the women in the article begin as well as the political economy of beauty industry in contemporary India the article moves onto the empirical section. The first part of this section illustrates how gendering of labor in the tea plantations, in its various forms, made use of the notion of femininity both embodied and characteristic. Moving onto the beauty parlors of the Indian cities however necessitated a differential understanding of femininity. In the second part I delve into a detailed analysis of this. The first sub section talks about femininity, embodied and cultivated, as gendered capital. But the narratives of the women show that such value creation is labor too. The following sub-section explores the limits of femininity in relation to skill acquisition. Finally, I explore the concept of emotional labor and how the women workers variously respond to the idea of beauty work as emotional labor.

Methodology

The article draws on long interviews with twelve Nepali women who worked in the tea plantations of Dooars in West Bengal and have since migrated to cities across India to work in beauty parlors. While a bulk of the interviews are from women from a single plantation called Daahlia, where I had long and sustained experience of doing fieldwork since 2010,⁶ these are further informed by interviews and conversations with women from the neighboring plantations who also joined the ranks of urban migrants. Given limited resources and time constraints, I could not follow the women to their destination and carry on my ethnographic research there. Instead I spoke to the women when they returned to the plantations for holidays and/or periodic breaks, as they all had families on the plantations. I followed up by speaking to the women over the telephone. The networks and close relationships formed through my earlier work on tea plantations allowed me to conduct fieldwork in this manner. The bulk of the fieldwork for this article was done in 2016–2018 but I draw on my experiences of working with the women before and also my continued correspondence with them after, to further contextualize the issues. Based solely on interviews with the migrant when they returned home, observations from the work-site remain beyond the scope of analysis. Focusing largely on women's own self-reflection on their work, the article also seeks to locate silences and repressed narratives, stories that the women perhaps hinted at but did not tell, experiences which complicate carefully constructed narratives of success. The women's accounts privilege narratives of agency. Without negating the centrality of these stories, I place these within a larger scholarship of migration experiences of women and try to understand their anxieties, fears, vulnerabilities, and humiliation that may contour these narratives. In other words, the article centers women's articulation of their experience and perception without treating silences and repressed narratives as absent.

As the focus of the article is in understanding the kinds of normative discourses and practices that accompany shifts in women's nature of work, the working lives

of these women form the core of the article and the lens through which aspects of political economy and labor practices are understood. Through mapping lived experiences and perception, I look to understand how femininity is constructed both as a condition and a product of labor. What are the implications for the labor performed in relation to bodies and the ways in which gendered practices are maintained, reconfigured, and challenged within the organization of work?⁷ Migration is not just central to the substantive component of this article, but also its methodology as the frame to examine the contrasting/enduring experiences of labor and the dominant discourses on gender and skill.

Intersectionality is core to the article, mapping how ethnicity and age among other aspects complicate the understanding of labor further. Intersectionality is thus not just a method of analysis but also core to the way in which the research was conducted. The workers of tea plantations of West Bengal were primarily migrants from two ethnic groups, recruited as cheap labor in the nineteenth century during the setting up of the plantations as a colonial enterprise. Majority of workers hailed from the tribal areas of Chotanagpur in Central India and were called *adivasis*.⁸ The other sizeable section of the workers were migrants from neighboring Nepal driven out through debt, poverty, and various forms of oppression.⁹ As migrants to the beauty sector in cities, it is this latter category of workers who are central to this article.

Finally, a word on translation of one of the key concepts used in this article: femininity. Much of the fieldwork was conducted in Hindi with Nepali and Bengali used alongside. In all three languages it was “feminine” rather than femininity which was commonly used.¹⁰ A straightforward translation reveals a close association with (desirable) qualities of being a woman. Femininity also did not show any automatic assumption of beauty. There was no unanimity or singularity of meaning when it came to breaking feminine/femininity into its component traits as it lent itself to various interpretations. In this article I use femininity as a socializing ideology that defines and organizes material ways of life particularly in relation to how gender is performed.¹¹ From this lens the ways the women operationalized femininity seemed to be through appearance (not necessarily in terms of being pretty but rather well turned out and attractive) and character (not loud or crass, but caring, well-mannered, soft).

Research Context

This section lays out the context of the women’s immediate migration history from the tea plantations to beauty parlors and positions their migrations in relation to macroeconomic processes. I map the trajectory of gendered labor by tracing the contrasts and continuities in the way women’s labor was naturalized and even normalized. We see how, through modes of gendering, two labor sectors with many contrasts still essentialized ideas of women’s laboring bodies. At the same time the different work contexts also allowed for differential understandings of gendered class making.

Making and unmaking a formal sector workforce

The political economy of tea plantations in India illustrates the shifts that capitalism has made from its genesis in mercantilism to its growth and expansion through

colonialism followed by changes through neoliberalism and globalization. Set up through the recruitment of labor from tribal societies of Central India and later Nepali migrants from the hills, the history of the tea plantations in Dooars, West Bengal, is well documented.¹² The logic of labor recruitment from its very inception was embedded in racial and gendered frames through which the tribal workers were embodied as the idealized labor force.¹³

In keeping with the new country's mandate of prioritizing organized labor, tea plantations became one of the very first sectors to be brought under legal protection in postcolonial India.

The Industrial Disputes Act (1947), Minimum Wages Act (1948), and Plantation Labor Act (1951) gave recognition to the legal rights of workers and made the state a party to their protection. A key in this reformulation was the change from a master-servant relationship that had so far characterized labor relations to an employer-employee relationship though patronage politics often endured informally.¹⁴ Labor historians have often defined precariousness against a former period of marked stability, but viewing precariousness from the perspective of the Global South where insecurity has been a feature of the labor market destabilizes such prescriptions.¹⁵ Even through the continuance of low wages, failure of the employers to provide non-wage benefits on time, and almost no evidence of intergenerational social mobility there was remarkable continuity of workers through generations in the plantations of India. Further, the workforce in the tea plantations have been historically feminized, constituting somewhat unusually high employment of women in the formal sector in a country with high informalization of women's employment.¹⁶

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, combined fallout of neo-liberalization and globalization, contextualized within the local history of varying phases of incorporation, accumulation/dispossession, and shifting relations of production culminated in a crisis in the tea plantations. The value chain of tea was determined heavily by marketing and retailing controlled by a few conglomerates. There was also corruption and siphoning off of returns in the tea plantation by local capitalists to invest in business elsewhere resulting in a shortage of working capital.¹⁷ This could be mapped to the specific nature of postcolonial capitalism, which precipitated such crisis in the tea plantations.¹⁸ Tea garden employment as a stable formal sector employment with social security benefits for the worker was costly to both the capitalist and the state, and a drive toward casualization, especially under the garb of expanding employment, was a strategy to counter that. As the crisis continued over a decade, many plantations closed down and others retrenched workers.¹⁹ Starvation, death, and malnutrition were reported from several of the closed gardens.²⁰

With limited livelihood opportunity in the region and in the state of West Bengal, workers migrated to urban informal sectors in other states, most commonly Delhi, Haryana, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. In the initial phase in early 2000, the migrants were overwhelmingly male, but with a deepening of the crisis women also started migrating. Both married and (more recently) single women migrated in groups with other women. The migrant women found jobs of primarily three types—in factories (sea-food processing units) in Kerala, as domestic workers, and in beauty parlors in the Delhi-National Capital Region, Mumbai, and Hyderabad. India has in the last couple of decades witnessed the gradual dilapidation of formal

sector or workplace-based opportunities for women and the rise in demand for urban informal-service based casual labor, a market which accelerated women's migration to far off cities. For example, commercialized beauty services are closely tied to the development of an increasingly global neoliberal consumer economy fueled in India by the feminization of the expanding urban sector.²¹ Further, this signaled a shift from a collective workforce of the plantation setting to a more individualized neoliberal feminine subject. In this changed context women too are increasingly understood and understand themselves as autonomous subjects of interest competing freely for available economic opportunities.²² The experience of women in the beauty sector shows that in spite of the freeing of normative opposition between femininity and economic goals, the ties of subservience, selflessness, tolerance, demureness, etc. continue to endure.

Political economy of beauty work

After economic liberalization in 1991, India was seen as a promising market for consumer goods with the beauty industry being no exception. In spite of its potential, the per capita consumption of beauty products has remained among the lowest in the world due to restricted consumer choice, high taxation on such items considered nonessential, and high levels of poverty.²³ The recent decade has, however, seen an exponential increase in consumption of beauty services in India, some of which can be tied to middle-class aspirations where to be “beautiful” emerged as a space of social mobility, of incorporation into a leisure class.²⁴ At a growth rate of 25 percent the beauty industry is now one of the fastest growing industries in India.²⁵ The scholarship, however, suggests that there are some specificities in the growth of the beauty industry in India where middle-class subjectivities related to physical appearance are geared toward balancing “fashionable femininity” with “respectable gender performance.”²⁶ This is important in illustrating how global practices around beauty work are contextualized within specific local norms whereby appearing “presentable,” i.e. showing regular grooming rather than heavy makeup, determined (middle-class) women's standards of everyday beauty. This suggests then the preponderance of the beauty parlor and routine grooming even as individual ownership and use of beauty products continues to be low. Though I did not speak to the clients accessing the beauty parlors, in the later part of the article I map the perceptions of the workers in the beauty parlor to understand how local beauty cultures affect aesthetics of beauty practice, which are in turn channeled into consumer behavior.

Already from the 1990s, there was an expansion of beauty parlors in India catering to different strata of the population, and they became prevalent in non-metropolitan spaces as well. Standard services of waxing, threading, facials, clean-ups, hair-cut, hair styling, and henna are provided in most of these parlors while high-end, luxury brand parlors catering to the upper middle class and the rich provide additional specialized treatment services. Black classifies beauty work into four categories—pampering, regular grooming, health treatment, and corrective treatment.²⁷ While the categories in the workplace of my respondents did not correspond exactly as there were intervening skill categories between helpers and beauticians, there existed a comparable hierarchy of work.

The beauty workers I speak of in this article were located quite low in the parlor hierarchy mostly engaged in routine grooming. All these women were employed in what would be considered high middle-end, local, women-only parlors rather than in the top-end parlors of branded chains. Pampering work such as facials, hair-spas, and the like were done in some of these places. From the conversation with the women, there did not emerge any ownership pattern. In Hyderabad, two of the parlors where the women worked were owned by Muslim families as mentioned by my participants. In Delhi too the parlors seemed to be owned by local entrepreneurs but the women did not provide much information beyond that. None of the parlors were owned by Nepalis, though they often were managed by Nepali women settled in the region.

Once newly recruited, most of the women started with cleaning jobs in the parlor, which included sweeping the floor, cleaning out the sinks, and such other tasks. Since none of these women had prior experience working here, they were expected to learn not just the tasks but the decorum of the place and how to talk to the clients. Slowly they could graduate to assisting a senior person by holding the threads while they plucked eyebrows or holding the scissors while they gave a haircut. Most of my respondents said that the first job they were allowed to do fell in the category of regular grooming such as eyebrow shaping, manicures, pedicures, and later, waxing. For all of the women I interviewed, apart from one, routine grooming was the highest in the hierarchy that they had reached so far. Only Jyotsna did hair styling, thus falling into the category of pampering.

The women I spoke to in the parlors in Delhi and Hyderabad were quite distinct from the other migrant groups from the tea plantations. Unlike women who worked as paid domestic workers or factory workers, the women in the beauty industry viewed their migration more in terms of a permanent shift in location and employment from the tea plantations. While they spoke of homesickness, and difficulty adjusting to the food habits, language, and people of an alien land, they looked at their jobs through the lens of potential for social mobility. Most of these women were young, ranging between eighteen and thirty (self-reported age), and were often unmarried, which also made them relatively less embedded in kinship ties. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore this in depth but perhaps their aspiration could be mapped alongside how they perceived their labor as a beauty worker.

The women drew a monthly wage ranging from Rs. 6000–7500, lower than what women migrating as domestic workers and childcare providers reported to draw. Eight of them had been employed in the beauty industry from 2016, i.e., in the immediate aftermath of the crisis in the plantations. Much like accessing other jobs, local social networks played an important role in their recruitment. Some of these women worked briefly in other occupations before shifting to beauty work. Others made use of contacts by previous migrants to seek work in this sector. Their reflection on their work as beauty workers threw up a number of competing discourses on the gendered employment practices and its embodied nature.

Gendered Labor Practices—From “Nimble Fingers” to “Femininity”

Women’s labor has been constructed across sites through the deployment of what are considered to be stereotypical traits, such as physical and temperamental qualities

seen as inherent to men or women, respectively. The discourses governing labor practices map onto locally embedded gender norms to construct a certain naturalization of gendered labor with its resultant hierarchies. In most cases we see women's work to be low paid, monotonous, and less prestigious. Freeman points out that there is in fact nothing inherently natural either about women's labor being classified as cheaper or women as being "naturally" docile, nimble fingered, etc. relative to men.²⁸ These normalizing and naturalizing discourses are created, contested, and refashioned in culturally specific ways. Labor regimes bear their own cultural ground marks. Therefore, unpacking labor and skill requires us to not just look at the sexual division of labor but also at the ideologies that underlie their logic of production. To set the context of how gendered labor is variously constructed in beauty work by the market, employers, and workers themselves, the next section provides an overview of labor practices in tea plantations, which were central to how women understood/reinterpreted their labor in later employments. Tea work and beauty work are differently feminized both in their production and consumption. Yet it is feminized habits of labor that create the signifiers of femininity in both work and product in both cases. The women beauty workers came from a labor context where femininity, while invoked frequently, did not seem to play a central role in creating new conditions of labor opportunity and were now located within a context where (at least they perceived) femininity to be an important currency for employability and future growth. It is this transition that is the focus of the article. By sketching the two ethnographic contexts of the same women, I locate through their narratives the content of change of femininity as understood by them and how they themselves respond to these changed definitions. Implied in this transition is not just the changing construction of femininity but also how the relative importance of such notions differed across the work sectors. In a changed context, the global/local conjuncture at which beauty work is located, these women's identities as "feminine" members of the working class become refashioned not just through new sets of gendered practices of production but also that of consumption.

Essentializing "nimble fingers" in tea plantations

Chatterjee argues that globally and historically the feminization of labor has been central to the commodity fetishization of tea as is evident in its packaging, its consumption culture of feminized ideologies of leisure (tea parlors), and domesticity.²⁹ Gendered division of labor was foundational to the labor practices in the plantations. The women workers, who formed the bulk of the workforce on the plantations, were primarily employed in unskilled, low-paid, low-prestige tasks like plucking, pruning, and various other maintenance tasks. While nonfactory garden work was classified as unskilled, the tasks which enjoyed the label of being skilled such as work of preparing saplings in the nursery, was done by men as were the higher paid jobs of pesticide spraying. The men primarily worked in the factories where they enjoyed a slightly higher wage than plucking work in the gardens paid.

Gender discourse not only shaped the process of labor but also its meanings as experienced by the workers. Plantation work was feminized not just in that it was primarily women who worked in this sector, but also through the ways in which labor

discourses were framed and internalized. Women drew upon qualities that they labeled as quintessentially feminine to understand and explain the gendering of their labor. While the idea of the feminine self was important in the way in which the women projected themselves as workers, the contradictions in their perception should not be read as false consciousness. Women rationalized their labor as ways to add value to devalued work. At the same time, the women were aware of how gendering the work lent itself to their exploitation and devaluation. By internalizing features like dexterity, patience, and care used to naturalize women's labor of plucking, the workers often did not acknowledge the skill involved in their work in the plantations and labeled these as natural physiological features, centering their gender identities as core to their labor practices.³⁰ In the formation and perpetuation of these labor practices, the gendered body of the worker was central. In fact, the embedding of feminized labor as core to plucking has been frequently fetishized. Chinese legends suggest that the very worth of the commodity was premised on disciplining of women's bodies; pluckers were scrutinized for cleanliness and hygiene as it was believed that body oils, perspiration, and heat would contaminate the quality of leaves.³¹ The workers on the plantation, men and women alike, invoked aspects of the body or of behavior casting plantation jobs of plucking and pruning as necessarily gendered.

Tea is a delicate plant. The softness of fingers combined with its swiftness not only ensures you pluck quickly but also that you do not linger for too long. All over the world we see that women are chosen for this job, they can do it quickly and also take care of the bushes. (Alka, early forties, Nepali).

Alka, a worker with many years of experience at the plantations, equates the softness of the hand (a reference we also see later) and speed both as natural feminine tendencies. These were labors of the gendered body, not learned but naturally possessed. Femininity then becomes intrinsic to the labor in ways that the very separateness between the two is blurred in an almost hegemonic construction of labor. That speed is not naturally embodied but acquired over long years of work becomes evident from the different speeds at which the women were able to work within the same work section. But another younger woman Prerna (late twenties, Adivasi) explains how speed for work is constructed/understood by the workers as a feminine trait. Invoking women's need to multitask she says,

Speed is developed by those who need it most desperately, and who needs it more than us, poor women—we have to look after our household, cook, clean, feed the kids, earn a living—how will you accomplish all this in twenty-four hours if you don't do them quickly. But it is also important to be careful in performing the chores or else things will be spoilt and will have to be redone. While men sit in the courtyard and play cards, look at how much we do in the kitchen, rolling dough, cutting vegetables, washing dishes and chatting at the same time. So plucking with speed yet carefully comes naturally to us.

Prerna recognizes the value of pace in their labor—both paid and unpaid, and makes a favorable comparison vis-à-vis men. What remains unrecognized here, however, is generations of unpaid labor and socialization, which are the basis of women's need to multitask. Prerna does not just gender the notion of speed of work but by invoking its centrality in domesticity, nurturing, and care emphasizes it as core to the femininity of working-class women. Contrasting to middle-class notions of femininity in leisure and unhurriedness, Prerna creates a working-class idea of the feminine.

In fact, it was not just plucking but the entire gamut of work in the tea gardens that was feminized in labor discourses invoked variously by management and/or the workers. The rationale was situated firmly in the gendering of the body or the feminine qualities of the worker. Elsewhere I have discussed how women workers distinguished between different forms of pruning based on the centrality of the gendered body—"deep skip" needing "sheer brute strength" was abjured by the women.³² The kind of pruning women did was called "light skip," which consisted of removing the top congested foliage and renewing the shoot system to ensure growth of the plant. Women connected this work with nurturing—both embodied (drawing strength from the womb) and characteristic. Naturalization of the work rendered invisible the considerable level of skill that was required to do this work with precision and care. This is evident in the ways in which more experienced workers trained the younger ones while at the job, an element of the task that too became subsumed under the logic of female kinship.

The idea of feminized labor was, however, not based on the notion of a universal feminine. We have already seen how the idea of a working class played out in the ways in which women understood their labor. Workers also deployed their ethnicity to construct themselves as better workers vis-à-vis the other. The Adivasi workers spoke of their sincerity and hard work making them a better quality of workers.

This is hard work no doubt, but we *Adivasi* women manage it better than most. The reason is our bodies *have been built for labor*. You will notice that we generally have straighter and stronger backs than most which comes from generations of laboring out in the sun. (Sushma, early thirties, Adivasi)

In contrast, the Nepali workers spoke of their thrift and presence of mind as distinctive traits in making them efficient and reliable workers. The workers framing their labor was often at variance with managerial stereotyping as is evident in the negative, ethnic stereotypes drawn by the supervisory and managerial staff to characterize the workers. Adivasis were portrayed as alcoholic and slow while Nepalis were seen as lazy and dishonest.³³

Age or generational perspective too shaped workers' notions of themselves. Agility of hands and keenness of fingers of the younger workers were contrasted with the care and experience of elder workers. These distinctions were less fundamental in the ways in which the workers projected themselves but rather expressed itself in conflicts in specific work contexts. While the older workers scolded the younger ones for "carelessness" and "lack of rhythm," the younger ones ridiculed their elder counterparts for being slow and clumsy. It must be emphasized, however, that age was not a fundamental element in

defining workers' construction of themselves and each other. There were many instances in which women, in fact, worked in groups of varying age range.

There are then many ways in which femininity is embedded in labor practices as natural and embodied. Femininity does not emerge here as a currency for employability as we will see in the case of beauty work. It is a given, governing labor practices as legitimate and rational. Femininity is extended to naturalization such that it becomes then a tool of deskilling and a consequent cheapening of the production process. But as we will see below, the embodiment of gendered labor was varied and even the same laboring body could be gendered to construct women's work in contrasting ways.

Producing femininity as gendered capital

Beauty parlors operate at the intersection of several discourses of health, work, body and gender.³⁴ Located somewhere between skilled white-collar and unskilled blue-collar workers, it is possible to draw some parallel between beauty workers and informatics workers who Freeman called "pink collar workers." Such work is intrinsically feminized in its almost exclusive recruitment of women.³⁵ The worksite of the parlor as an all-woman space (and a shift from the mixed-gender labor context of tea plantations) in an obvious sense was a feminized space. The pictures and stories that the women shared with me of their worksites (as I had not visited the parlors) showed a certain type of branding replete with pictures of female celebrities ranging from popular stars of the Indian film industry as well as international celebrities. Some of the high-end parlors did not use such posters; instead they had wallpapers in pastel shades with designs of flowers and birds. *Femina* and other variants of fashion magazines completed the repertoire of feminized place-making. The very process of labor is imbued with notions of appropriate femininity (therefore requiring image-making, as we will see) as well as the interlinkages between production and consumption.³⁶ Appearance was central to women's labor as well as to their emergent identities both as workers and as consumers.

The importance of physical appearance was emphasized by most of my respondents working in this industry.³⁷ They did not cite it as a reason for their occupational choice, but rather as a means through which their recruitment materialized, an aspect then of their suitability for the role.

Sheena had been working for over a year in a beauty parlor in Hyderabad. On being asked how she got the job, she said that it was suggested to her by a cousin who lives in Hyderabad. "She said that you have such a good figure, you are so stylish, you will easily get work in the beauty industry." She introduced me to her friend who worked in a parlor and through her I got the job. Madam liked the way I looked and she recruited me. (early twenties)

Femininity as appearance is not worked upon in Sheena's projection but is embodied. "Good figure" and "style" were the currencies through which Sheena felt she was recruited were natural to her.

This binary between natural and cultivated, however, could not be stretched too far as it became apparent from other narratives. While speaking of embodiment through

slimness and skin color, the women also made continuous references to stylishness, a cultivated form of femininity. This becomes more evident in Naina's (late twenties) reflections.

You will see that most of the girls who work in the parlors are Nepalis. It is because we are **stylish**, even those who don't work in the (beauty) industry are also stylish. If you go to a parlor you will want to see such people, isn't it? Who will go to a parlor with unkept bumpkins (*jungli* people—a reference to Adivasi tribal workers)? That's why the *adivasi* girls don't get jobs in the parlor...I think there is a greater demand for Nepali girls in Hyderabad because of our complexion. The locals are so dark, that's why they prefer to have people like us working in their parlors. (Naina, emphasis mine)

Much like Sheena, Naina emphasizes the physical appearance and sense of style as intrinsic to the job while at the same time creating an "Other" with the same currency. She uses fairness as an index of her suitability, through which she constructs an ethnicized femininity, casting the allegedly darker complexioned Adivasi or the local Hyderabad woman as unsuitable or not "naturally" suitable for such forms of labor. These qualities that the Nepali migrants project as values also become the source of their stigmatization in the cities, as we will see later. The changed context of constructing or understanding femininity becomes immediately obvious when we consider how on the plantation women gendered their work as feminine in relation to men, whereas in this context it is the *adivasi* or the local as the ethnic Other. It becomes evident that construction of femininity requires an Other, the nonfeminine or inappropriate feminine against whom one constructs their or their community's feminine traits. The gendered processes of physical and emotional labor in beauty work are seeped with racial and class meanings that reinforce inequalities and hierarchies.³⁸

The intersection of gender with ethnic conceptions and consequent hierarchies is peppered in the women's articulation of their labor. Naina's cultivated femininity intersects with her natural femininity (embodied in this instance by her fair complexion) constructing a desirable femininity firmly rooted in her ethnicity. In India, the normative idea of beauty has been closely linked to the fairness of the skin, which as Kulrich³⁹ argues, needs to be understood in precolonial non-Western perspectives and as distinct to the Western ideas of "whiteness."⁴⁰ Such norms around fair skin in India are in turn related to class and caste identities, as well as being influenced by colonial and global capitalist hierarchies.

Naina's reflections also show an emphasis on cultivated femininity evident in "maintaining" a good figure. In this process of naturalizing femininity through emphasis on a sense of style what lies unacknowledged is the socialization process. Style is acquired through multiple forms of socialization. These women had picked up their styles from their mothers, friends, and through exposure to television among other things, thus showing how both the global production of "style" and more local experiences of it are instrumental in shaping women's sense of femininity. But the acquisition process is rendered invisible and style is mapped on as natural to the ethnic body.

In an industry in which femininity and feminine bodies are highly valued, women like Sheena and Naina actively produce femininity as a gender capital⁴¹ to capitalize on the highly gendered labor market of the beauty industry. Using assets available to them they reproduce femininity to create a currency for employment in the labor market. Such racialized perceptions of beauty workers are not uncommon. Perceptions of Asian women as skilled in detailed handiwork have been a commonplace understanding along with their increased number in the industry and customers' greater reliance on them.⁴² The perception of these Nepali women was similar, a recognition which in some ways legitimizes their work in this industry as drawing from an embodied skill set. It is difficult to determine how much of this perception is shared by those recruiting the women but it is quite clear that this understanding was common among the Nepali women in Daahlia.⁴³

The ethnic characteristics that make the women valuable employees are also the ones which make them vulnerable in Indian cities like Delhi. Regular news reports show how Nepali and Northeastern women have been at the receiving end of racial and sexual abuse in the cities of India for a very long time.⁴⁴ The attractive appearance that the women talk of here can often become subjects of the male gaze outside the workplace. Nepali women's "tip-top" appearance emerges as a convenient excuse for their sexual objectification or even appropriation. Scholarship shows that gender and regionality intersect in complex ways to produce a unique form of stereotyping and a gaze on Nepali and Northeastern women, based on their appearance and demeanor.⁴⁵ The objectification of women's bodies and aesthetics takes place both at the site of the workplace and presumably the city. In the former it is currency of value whereas the latter makes them targets of attack, what Bardalai calls "matrix of value and vulnerability."⁴⁶ Interestingly, though, migrant women's narratives hardly touched upon this aspect of their lives. There are subtle hints in their stories of a life of uncertainty and a lack of safety, evident in women's fleeting references to banding together to travel to work, staying together with other Nepali women, or hardly venturing out to explore the city unless visiting a relative. These hints, repressed references, and an unwillingness to straightforwardly answer questions around these issues are important in what they tell us and what they choose not to. We do not learn of their everyday work negotiating hostile cities, or the anxieties and vulnerabilities that complicate their projections of themselves. The next section gives us some clues as to why these narratives might be repressed.

Producing femininity as labor

While centralizing femininity as a currency of beauty work, there are multiple (often contradictory) ways in which its production is understood by the workers. Workers who continued to live on the plantations or migrated to other sectors denigrated beauty work as less laborious compared to their own. There was frequent reference to idle chatting in the comfort of an air-conditioned parlor and lack of hard labor as central to devaluing their work. It is quite possible then that the beauty workers somewhat sanitized their representation of their work and life in the city, as an attempt to ward off such devaluation. The beauty workers themselves hardly ever characterized their work as easy, rather they spoke of the physical labor involved in

their work. In many cases, maintaining appearance too featured as a part of the work routine that the women talked about.

Yes, many say that this is easy work, but let them first do it themselves. It is not like a singular work of plucking or how it is done in the factory. You have to clean, trim eyebrows, paint nails... Sometimes my back aches from scrubbing people's feet. Also, it is not just the work, we also have to "maintain" our appearance. It is not like we can go to work wearing our night clothes or looking dirty (*ganda*). It's also a part of the work, you have to look "professional." (Nisha, early twenties)

Nisha's concern about appearance as part of professionalism is important in regards to how beauty workers can be demarcated from other types of informal labor (much in line with Freeman's demarcation of pink-collar workers in informatics). Appearance may seem to be apparently peripheral or "superstructural" to the study of women workers in the global assembly line,⁴⁷ but it is evident that in this case of feminized labor, dress and appearance become embodiments of their labor and intrinsic to their identities as working women. The physical labor (e.g., scrubbing of feet) and multiplicity of tasks (cleaning, trimming, etc.) could be comparable to other forms of informal labor that women perform but the imperative to not be seen in "ganda" clothes as part of a work ethic becomes a specific element of their labor, which sets them apart in some ways from their compatriots (and also becomes a key point in warding off criticism). In tacit ways they seek to club their work together with jobs prescribing a dress code. This claim of producing femininity as labor is also a critique of the invisibility rendered to feminine image-making in beauty work.

In the emphasis the women give to the labor that goes into producing their appearance, we see a shift from the claims of ritualized grooming as an everyday practice for these workers to an acknowledgement of the labor that goes into fashioning their bodies and appearances into commodified femininity. In speaking of body shape, complexion, and an inherent stylishness the women build on a gender capital to facilitate their entry into this labor market. But the continuity of these as essential to being seen in the beauty parlor embeds them as part of the labor practice required of the job. The core to understanding femininity as labor then lies in the relationship between a concern with appearance and its role in establishing a category of worker of a particular look and demeanor. The labor produces both a highly aestheticized body of the worker and also that of the client.

Beauty work in such women-only parlors is feminized at multiple levels. The aim for many female clients is to maintain or produce a feminine aesthetic, which is also embodied by the workers through their dress, make-up, and hairstyles.⁴⁸ Beauty workers constantly work on their own as well as their clients' bodies to meet the expectation of this gendered market to reproduce as near as possible an idealized image of hegemonic femininity.⁴⁹

It is of utmost importance to maintain your appearance. Clean clothes, well cut and polished nails, hair in place that was our uniform. It does not matter if you

are the lowest or the highest, the owner insists that we must all give attention to this. It is not like any other work where no one gives attention to these things. (Gayatri, early thirties)

Gayatri and others like her were expected to continuously produce, through physical manifestation, a certain normative femininity even when they were not working on clients. The workers are mandated to be feminine, operationalized through being well groomed, appearing pretty, and applying make-up. The feminized worker thus produced is now more ready and more “naturally” suited to remake the customer as a more feminized self in line with the dominant concepts of feminine beauty that the parlor subscribes to. Lindsay argues that hairdressers, in adopting their own versions of gender, simultaneously create (legitimate) versions of gender for their clients.⁵⁰ Their imperative to maintain appearances is not just a function to capitalize on individual labor but to together create enough gender capital to acquire and maintain clients both as individual beauty workers and as a parlor. Appearance therefore acts as capital in this industry and is traded for economic capital. In particular, it seems that, because salons are feminized spaces, female bodies, especially those that embody or perform high-fashion femininity, are a valuable currency.⁵¹ The feminized laboring body as an embodiment of beauty and fashion that the parlor endorses is in itself a product and a means of capital for the parlor in particular and the beauty industry in general, which is then capitalized on for economic gain.

The women viewed the labor practices around beauty work to be more consciously rooted in the body than in the case of labor discourses governing their work on the plantation. It was almost as if in the former case of plantation embodied femininity lies the rationale behind existing labor practices—already existing and thus no longer needing to be produced—while for beauty work femininity shapes labor practices and its discipline. In the centrality accorded to appearance and particular types of behavior, femininity becomes a marketing tool.⁵² The body that was at the center of the labor was essentially gendered. In the case of plantations, the binary of skilled and unskilled was rooted in the devaluing of women’s labor as natural and based on certain bodily suitability. In this case, however, by pitting their bodies against others, the women saw their bodies as adding value to their labor. The question of skill and training while mentioned were embedded in their production of the self and the client. The individualization of their bodies juxtaposed to a collective category of women’s work can be linked to neoliberal subjectification. The women’s narratives show how they rationalize their participation in the normative habits of femininity through economic interests and ambitions of mobility, and not so much in reference to community and/or class interest.

Producing femininity as a skill

The women’s articulation of their work contains an intrinsic acceptance of the gendered nature of their laboring body and the labor produced. I was also interested to understand how notions of skill and learning operate in conjunction with or in opposition to the gender capital of femininity. Research around beauty work recognizes the contentious location of skill in this profession. While being regarded as

professionalized work requiring training and skill development, the corresponding understanding that these skills are not a result of extensive training but are intrinsic and natural to the workers' personhood foregrounds this contradiction.⁵³ The evidence here and elsewhere therefore suggests that the frames through which understanding femininity as skilled and/or embodied labor are constantly shifting and sometimes contradictory.

You must have noticed how Nepali women always take care of their physical appearance, they are always "tip-top" (stylish). So, tasks like shaping eyebrows, painting nails come easily to us. From birth we have seen our mothers do it and they taught us. We also taught our sisters to do it. It happens like this. Nowadays everyone is careful about their looks, but for us it is like a ritual. You will hardly find a Nepali woman or even girl, with badly done eyebrows or hairy upper lips. (Puja, late twenties)

The valorization of the beauty regime or "ritual," as Puja calls it, resonates with the earlier responses. Her reflections further bring out the role of teaching, training, and technique. Grooming emerges as a community culture that is learnt, passed on from mothers to their daughters and perfected through constant practice. Puja emphasizes not just doing tasks such as plucking eyebrows but doing them well. The word ritual has a special significance in iterating a sacred importance in the lives of the women and in hinting toward how practice here is combined with transformation. While the ethnicization of labor practice is foregrounded, Puja hints at skill and technique too. At the same time this also locates such "beauty regimes" as indigenous to her local culture rather than an imitation of Western or global ideas, reiterating how norms around gender are not produced at the macrolevel only but constantly shaped and reshaped by local cultural contexts.

The necessity of skill and techniques becomes even more apparent when women describe their work in the beauty parlor.

The work of haircutting is much specialized. You require training for it. The ones who did this work had degrees, they had passed exams. So it is a highly skilled job. If you do it wrong once then it's difficult to get it right... This is not the same with the work we do. For eyebrow shaping or upper lips trimming we already have training. We have done this for a very long time, much before we even thought of this as "work." (Poonam, early thirties)

Poonam introduces further complexity in the conceptualization of beauty work as labor and its claim on skill. Mapping on to the modes in which hierarchies are designed in beauty parlors she makes a distinction between hairstyling and routine grooming work based on the skill required. The division is not just of the level of manual skill required but hairstyling is distinguished by the prerequisite of examination and degrees. The normative femininity produced through routine grooming work of plucking eyebrows and shaping upper-lips therefore cannot include such tasks too. By placing hairstyling in a skill category distinct from routine grooming, Poonam also defines the limits of naturalized community-learned femininity and

places such high-skilled (higher paid) tasks as something beyond the reach of poor, illiterate working-class woman as herself. In some ways the outlining of their tasks of routine grooming as naturalized in their everyday lived experience was akin to the way that the women framed their work on the tea plantations. The labor practices in the plantations revolved around an accepted understanding that one usually did such work to which they were naturally suited. This naturalness was highlighted through physiology and did not recognize the role of training or practice. The training and practice in both cases were rendered invisible, thus legitimizing their lower position in the labor hierarchy even to the women themselves.⁵⁴

My interview with Jyotsna, who worked as a hairdresser revealed some questioning of this assumption. Jyotsna worked in a parlor in Delhi for over five years. Before that she had worked as a caretaker in a girl's hostel in the city having migrated from Daahlia in 2013.

I was always interested in being in the beauty industry so when I got this job, I took it up. Initially I was allowed only to do menial things like hold the scissors while someone was giving a haircut. But I kept learning by watching how the work was done. Once during the festival time most of the women had taken leave and there was a huge rush. To manage all of it, I was assigned the task of shampooing the clients.... From then on this became a regular part of my work. I think the clients often preferred me because of my soft hands...you know how Nepali women have such soft and delicate hands. Later I asked Madame if I could learn how to cut hair. She relented and, in the beginning, I assisted one of the senior hairdressers. She lets me do the basic cut and then she styled it. It took me one year before I could handle clients on my own. Madam and all others were impressed with my ability to pick this up so quickly. Actually while I had to learn the techniques, some of the work was really similar to plucking. Plucking since childhood, had given our hands a special flexibility especially if you did foot plucking where measuring while cutting was important.⁵⁵

Jyotsna's interview complicates the frames through which beauty work as feminized labor and its specific skill as gender capital can be understood. She reiterates the ethnic strain evident in all the previous interviews by speaking of the softness of her hand. This softness is a gender-ethnic capital through which she feels she became favored among her clients. But the naturalization inherent in this discourse foregrounding the body is not sufficient for the mobility she desires. It is here that learning becomes important. Jyotsna like Poonam is also constrained by her resources to take examinations, which could aid her moving up in the hierarchy. Instead, she is provided a scope through the relationships that she built up at work and probably a reputation for being hard working. Jyotsna went through a period of apprenticeship and we can see how the focus shifts from an embedded femininity naturalizing labor (routine grooming) to an emphasis now on learning and technique (hairstyling). Much like the other women Jyotsna did not categorize her work of plucking as a skilled work while she worked at the plantation. She had migrated to Delhi at a time when plantations were quite prosperous. It was the poor pay which made her

aspire to do some alternative work. But here is a post hoc acknowledgment of plucking as not just training her fingers but in fact as a transferable skill that allows her now to excel in her new task.⁵⁶ Both the forms of labor continue to foreground the laboring body through, in this case, the dexterity of the fingers.

In the shift from women understanding their naturally cultivated femininity as gender capital as a means to enter the feminized labor market to the ways in which they drew on their socialization and training to actually perform their tasks illustrates how femininity is both embodied but also produced by the laboring body to construct themselves as suitable beauty workers.

Resisting beauty work as emotional labor

The idea of femininity as described by the women in various occasions is not just physical but also expressed through temperament of care, patience, and intimacy. Parlors are not just seen as spaces of beautification but also social spaces where the clients surrender their emotional needs to the workers demanding emotional labor on part of the beauty workers. Sharma and Black argue that beauty workers often conceive of their work as a form of therapy for their clients. The parlors of this article, similar to Brosius's work, serve as social centers, where women interact in a space unencumbered by family ties and often interact in what they view to be the relative safety of the woman-only, nonkinship site that the parlors offer.

While beauty work seems to be then framed through a combination of body work and emotional labor, the migrant women workers from Daahlia did not seem to specifically identify emotional labor as a component of their work, and some even actively resisted it.

While it looks glamorous on the outside, this is actually hard work. Imagine having to continuously service clients from 11 in the morning to 9 at night. There are shifts for the seniors but for us it is six straight working days. By the end of the day my back aches, fingers hurt. The work in the plantation seems like a luxury, we had breaks and lunch time. And in spite of all this you have to keep a smiling face, not a hair can be out of place. There are days when it is physically exhausting. (Sheena, late twenties)

Sheena identifies the physicality of the labor, the drudgery of the day's work that takes a toll on her body. The beauty parlor as a feminized space is also conceived to be a space where women create bonds and relationships that emerge out of women's talk and touch, both implicated in the emotional labor of the woman beauty worker.⁵⁷ From the physical manifestation that the grooming work has on her body to even the fatigue of smiling at clients, Sheena frames her labor entirely in physical terms making no reference to emotional labor. In spite of creating affective wellbeing for the customers, in reality the relationship remained socially distant. Like Sheena and Lachmi, below Liebelt too points out then that intimate labor that the beauty workers perform exacerbate existing hierarchies and ideologies rather than create mutuality of relationships.⁵⁸ Some of the women make a distinction between emotional quotient inherent to their femininity while not necessarily seeing this as being part of their labor.

As pluckers in the tea plantations we were nurturers, tending and caring for the plants as we worked. It is our love and care which kept the plants alive during the crisis when the management ran away. This is about the healing touch of a woman, we are natural nurturers. Even in the parlor when someone comes after a long day for a shampoo or a scrub, it is up to us to make them relax, to wash the dirt, the grime and the tiredness. A good worker can rejuvenate by touch whether a plant or a human being. (Poonam, early thirties)

In contrast to Sheena, Poonam once again relocates emotional labor as embodied within a woman's body. The notion of nurturance was commonly deployed in addition to dexterity and patience to normalize plucking as women's labor on the tea plantations. In both describing her work in the plantations and in the beauty parlor, it is the sensorium of touch which is used as the medium of nurturance and labor. It is not clear if Poonam like Sheena considered this additional work but it is evident that she located this as intrinsic to her laboring body, which then not only does the physical work of cleaning the client but also the emotional work of rejuvenating her.

Lachmi's (late twenties) articulation of her labor, however, resists this very expectation of emotional labor implicit in beauty work.

While there are days when you are sitting around with no work, other days there is such rush, you barely get time to gobble down your lunch. It is so tiring. What makes it worse is that some days you get all chatty clients. You have to continuously talk to them. Working and listening to them and having to answer in Hindi, it's too much. Sometimes my face aches by speaking too much Hindi and smiling. When it gets too much I pretend I don't understand Hindi, then I can get away with just smiling. But have to be careful. If someone else sees me then I can get into trouble.

Black and Sharma argue that in order to work on the relationship with the client, the beauty worker must work on her emotions such that she can gauge what her customers' expectations are from her at any particular point.⁵⁹ Lachmi's often picks up the expectations of her clients for conversation and caring but chooses not to respond to this through subversion. Many speak of exhaustion that beauty workers feel, emanating from emotional distress at listening to difficult stories of the clients or the toll that it takes on them to always be emotionally available.⁶⁰ Lachmi and others like her do not seem to create a further feminine capital from forming emotional bonds. Without any interaction with the clients, it is beyond the scope of this article to speculate why this is so. The act of talking and smiling at her clients much like in case of Sheena is bodily labor expressed through physical exhaustion. By reiterating the words "it's too much" Lachmi places this expectation of emotional labor outside what she perceives to be her job.

Kang disaggregates emotional labor into its class components.⁶¹ She holds high service body labor involving both physical pampering and emotional attentiveness as mostly aimed at upper-class, highly privileged customers whereas routinized body labor involving efficient physical labor and courteous, minimal emotional

labor is meant to service clients from a lesser privileged, lower-economic background. The migrant women, generally employed in middle- to low-end parlors therefore did not frame emotional work as core to beauty work. But Poonam and Lachmi highlight that even this binary classification is not that straightforward—physical and emotional labor are not always well demarcated. While the client's claim was on the emotional labor of Lachmi, her reaction to it can be understood on two levels: of rejection of emotional engagement and then a physical manifestation of the stress arising from it. The product of labor the beauty worker creates is not generic but subjective.

Beauty Work as Production and Consumption: Class-making and *Naukri*

Women around the world are mobilized in multiple complex ways to further expand capitalism and the integral relation between production and consumption in the process.⁶² Capitalist patriarchy is envisaged as an international divide with the women of developing countries as proletarianized producers and women of first world country as consumers.⁶³ The spread of globalization has, however, further complicated this picture where the producers and consumers are not necessarily two distinct class categories. Beauty workers, for example, produce both middle-classness of the clients as well as a class/consumerist aspiration among themselves, illustrating how class is often experienced/produced through gendered subjects. While it is debatable if actual class mobility is possible, work status bound up with symbolic elements such as the appearance of workplace (air-conditioned parlors) and workers and the routine of the workday (with opening and closing hours) allowed women to strive for new work and class identities. The importance of dress and appearance as part of work-ethics allow beauty workers to claim a separateness from other women of the working class, as we saw above, and also to frame their labor in terms of “job” or “*naukri*” almost breaching the limitations of the informal sector work discursively.⁶⁴ The aspiration of casting their work in the category of white-collar work is curtailed by the various ways their labor is challenged by the plantation society, be it in conceptualizing it as easy work or in stigmatizing their labor on caste-religious terms as we will see below. The beauty workers' suppression of narratives of humiliation and hardship they might face in their everyday lives could be tied to an effort to give a glorified, portrayal of their life and work in the city sans any humiliation, one which successfully counters the various aspersions put forward by the others and constructs their work as respectable and them as valuable employees.

As studies across the globe shows, these claims are not uncontested or without contradictions. The imagery of poor working-class women scrubbing clean the feet of rich women has been seen as one of the most enduring images of class inequality at the heart of beauty work. Kang notes how the white woman who frequents the Korean nail salon in United States often treats manicures and pedicures as opportunities to exercise privilege and embody entitlement—in a way, their perfectly groomed nails speak of career success that does not take place at the cost of feminine beauty.

Parlor work is dirty work. Do you know whose feet you are cleaning? I may be poor but I have my dignity. All my life I have done hard but respectable labor (*mazdoori*) and now I am not going to end it by cleaning the feet of rich Muslims. (Damayanti)

Damayanti works in a fish factory in Kerala and her skepticism finds echo among many of the other women from the tea plantations. It is beyond the scope of this article to reflect on the categories of labor that these women construct based on not just income and production but also recognition accorded by the workers themselves.⁶⁵ It is, however, quite clear that through characterizing beauty work as a labor that involves touching “inferior” bodies as operationalized here in the figure of the Muslim woman, some construct this as stigmatized labor.

Indian social life is marked by caste and religious cleavages, which map on to almost every aspect of daily living. The notion of production of middle-class, gendered subjectivities of the client are contradicted by the aspersions Damayanti and others cast on the “inferior bodies.” That caste and religious identities of workers intersect to construct the kinds of labor available and the returns one can get from it. Data across several large-scale surveys illustrate systematic wage differentials between upper caste Hindus and lower caste and Muslim workers.⁶⁶ In a paradox here it is the unmarked body of the customer rather than the worker that draws out anxieties around caste-religious impurities. And it is not in the identity of the worker per se but in her labor on an “inferior” body of a Muslim or lower caste woman that the stigmatization of her labor lies. Malik argues that the politics of obscurement is engaged in by both dominant and nondominant castes though for different purpose.⁶⁷ In the case of beauty workers we see both workers and the others in the plantation engage in it to variously construct this as stigmatized vis-à-vis valued labor.

Such constructions of their labor are actively resisted by beauty workers. Unlike Korean immigrants in Kang’s work, who cite severe labor-market barriers and systemic discrimination that pushed them into beauty work rather than working in garment factories or restaurants,⁶⁸ my respondents, however, framed beauty work as active choice, more desirable than working in factories or as paid domestics. These women actively refashioned their labor through a set of new codes of professionalism, workspace, etc.

This is not like in the plantations, that everyone is your uncle, or sister’s relative or something and you work in your secure kinship bubble. This is the service industry and we have a “job” (*naukri*) here. We cannot use our free will and say we will work with this customer or that. Such safety nets do not exist in this kind of “modern” (term used by respondent) work (Shalu, late twenties)

A customer is a customer. There is no Hindu Muslim, upper-caste lower caste here. (Puja, late twenties)

The closely knit kinship system, which maps on to the labor networks, frame tea plantations and their labor in specific ways, ways which contrast fundamentally with how urban labor in general and beauty work in particular is constructed. In the articulation of these women, the professionalization of the workspace renders the body of the customer anonymous, unmarked by identities. The idea of a closed space with familiar ties is contradicted in the requirements of a “modern” job like beauty work, which out of necessity operates outside the constraints and favors of these closed networks. There is also an implicit reference to its location, the very idea of

the city and its anonymity in Puja's response. This particular framing of labor, customer, and the beauty parlor as a worksite is of course fraught with contradictions in the ways in which ethnicity frames the laboring bodies or the difficulties of these women as poor, low-caste migrants in the cities in finding places to live; in facing constraints by the various gatekeeping functions that the parlors itself and their locations perform in ensuring a certain homogeneity in their clientele; and finally by absence of legislations governing labor in this sector. Still, the understanding of beauty work as a professionalized service is important in constructing this as a job or (aspiring) *naukri* as opposed to *mazdoori* or manual labor.

The understanding of beauty work as something akin to *naukri* placing it higher in the hierarchy of categories of labor emanates to a large extent in this case from the site of work rather than nature of labor. While the conditions of labor for beauty work is hardly akin to *naukri* (closer to formal sector, white-collar employment) but there are enough elements such as constant refrain to professionalism (workplace and appearance), contrast with their previous work, and access to consumer culture that keeps the women's aspiration for social mobility as workers alive.

The aspirations of class mobility simultaneously blur their sense of class affiliation with other working-class women of the informal sector. It also produces beauty workers not just as producers of consumers but consumers themselves. In their use of beauty products and Western styles of clothing, the beauty workers fashion themselves as a distinct class of workers and also consumers. Once again, the adoption of consumerism of the global beauty market is imbued with local practices. Many of the women who color/highlight their hair also speak of the need to regularly apply warm coconut oil so that their hair stays luxuriant, a tradition inherited from their mothers and grandmothers. Some speak of how beauty products allow them to quickly alter their appearance while others speak of the harmful effect of the chemicals on the skin. The discussions around product, the awareness (whether by acceptance or rejection) of the latest fashion of the global market through visits to shopping malls, and using economic means to style themselves appropriately according to these themes suggests that the constructions of their femininity is also imbued within the throes of consumerism and are related to the intensified circulation of global ideas and images of beauty.

While being consumers, beauty workers are also producers of class for their client. The creation of "hybrid beauty practices"⁶⁹ through the marketing of local beauty cultures with a global understanding of bodily aesthetics result in the middle-class consumer. Works on Europe or the United States⁷⁰ suggest that beauty regimes centrally involving the use of makeup was experienced as a part of their social skin, often cited to be essential to their confidence. Contrastingly, Pathak and Nichter points out that beauty regimes are hardly experienced by women in India as an embodied experience, but rather as a part of grooming. The relation between appearance and beauty work have also been emphasized in other works on Indian middle-classes where beauty parlors (sharply distinguished from spas and wellness centers) were not necessarily seen to focus on women's souls or senses but on beautifying their physical body. In that sense a large section of the beauty parlors in India while modern and globalized in many aspects, such as use of international luxury brands, also seem to be disconnected from these global ideas of beauty work in their framing of beauty work

through notions of cleanliness⁷¹ in addition to beautification. Pathak and Nichter connect this notion to that of purity and its association with caste-based discourses. So alongside viewing beauty work in the realm of cleanliness and grooming, they argue that middle class-making is therefore intrinsically connected to notions of caste.⁷²

This middle-class (gendered) subjectivity is created in the site of the parlor by the beauty workers. Their labor in creating well-groomed yet non-sexualized client bodies was considered central to reproducing an (gendered) urban, middle class replete with sophistication and appropriate appearance. While feminist scholars have critiqued the beauty industry for promoting consumption through oppressive beauty standards, Lazar notes how beauty practices in the Global South expressed, through product advertisements, have been seen as signs of modernity, individuality, mobility, and even to some extent freedom from patriarchal norms termed as “commodity feminism.”⁷³ Constructed as central to women’s agency in marriage or career, adherence to such standards are then held to be not just acceptable but desirable standards of urban middle-class modernity, which is then produced by the beauty workers through their everyday labor in the parlor.

Conclusion: Laboring Femininity

The article focuses on the changing notions of “femininity” with transition in the work context, which is grounded in the political economy of labor. Looking at contrasting invocations of their gendered labor, the article illustrates how femininity and the laboring self are constituted. While femininity provides the gendered logic of work division in the tea plantations, beauty work sustains itself on the notion of laboring femininity both as a skill and a product. The laboring body embodies femininity as gender capital. At the same time, femininity is cultivated and a learnt practice. Femininity then is fragmented, multiplied, and constructed by gender norms and ideologies. While not embodied in a single profile, the contradictions make it evident that there is nothing inherently natural about “femininity.” Competing ideologies of femininity are determined through the interplay between macroeconomic demands and local cultural context complicated by the workers’ agency. While capitalism makes strategic use of cultural idioms of womanhood and femininity in creating an ideal workforce, the women too are not passive but actively resist, subvert, or utilize such constructions of femininity to define their labor. What is evident is that both discursively and in practice, women challenge singular prescriptive notions of femininity sometimes to reproduce, often to resist, or to adapt to a uniform and ideal profile of a new class of worker. At the same time such notions are often tied to hyper-sexualized and hyper-racialized bodies of women, making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

These narratives framed in the language of the market valorizing certain physical elements of the women seem to be internalized and articulated by the women in both the work settings. But to see these as the only constitutive element of their femininity would be an over-simplification. In the absence of ethnography in the work setting of the migrant women, the article thus tries to complicate the notions of femininity through mapping contradictions and silences. The article provides an insight into the laboring lives of working women who function as productive labor and as consumers in the global urban markets.

Notes

1. Carla Freeman, *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work and Pink Collar Identities in the Caribbean* (Durham, NC, 2000): 3.
2. See, for example, D. Diana Elson and Ruth Pearson, "Nimble fingers make cheap workers: an analysis of women's employment in third world export manufacturing," *Feminist Review* 7 (1981): 87–107. Naila Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment," *Development and Change* 30 (1999): 435–64.
3. N. Neetha, "Making of Female Breadwinners: Migration and Social Networking of Women Domestic in Delhi." *Economic and Political Weekly* 39 (2000): 1681–88.
4. D. Daniel James, *Dona Maria's story: Life, history, memory and political identity* (Durham, NC, 2000), 40.
5. See, for example, B. Weinstein, "'They don't even look like women workers': Femininity and class in twentieth century Latin America," *International Labour and Working Class History* 69 (2006): 161–76.
6. Supurna Banerjee, *Agency and activism in India: Nurturing Resistance in Tea plantations* (London, 2017).
7. R. Selberg, *Femininity at Work: Gender, Labour and Changing Relations of Power in a Swedish Hospital* (Lund, 2012), 16.
8. See Ranajit Dasgupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Kolkata, 1994).
9. Kumar Pradhan, *The Gorkha Conquest of Nepal: The Process and Consequences of the Unification of Nepal, with Particular Reference to Eastern Nepal* (Calcutta, 1991).
10. In Bengali, the word used colloquially in the field is *meyeli*, in Hindi and Nepali *ladkinuma* is used. All of these roughly translated mean like women.
11. E.J. Windsor, "Femininities," *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2015).
12. Dasgupta, 1992. *Labour and Working Class*; Pradhan, 1991, *The Gorkha Conquest*. Praveil Griffith *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London: 1967).
13. Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women's Labor and Post-Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (New Delhi, 2001).
14. Bridget Kenny in her work shows how in the colonial context legal regimes can be usefully interlinked. The master-servant law and its classed, gendered, and racialized implications in different contexts is a significant illustration of this. Bridget Kenny "The Regime of Contract in South African Retailing: A History of Race, Gender, and Skill in Precarious Labor," *International Labor and Working Class History* 89 (2016): 20–39.
15. Kenny, "The regimes of Contact," 2.
16. N. Neetha, "Crisis in Female Employment: Analysis across social groups," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47 (2014).
17. Pratim Ghosal, *Changing Political Economy of Tea plantations in North Bengal: Crisis, Workers' Politics and interventions of the state since 1990s*, unpublished MPhil thesis Jawaharlal Nerhu University (New Delhi, 2016).
18. Piya Chatterjee, "Tea's Fortunes and Famines: Global Capital, Women Workers, and Survival in Indian Plantation Country," in *The Wages of Empire: Neoliberal Policies, Repression and Women's Poverty*, eds. Amalia L. Cabezas, Ellen Reese, Marguerite Waller (Milton-Park, England, 2007).
19. Geetisha Dasgupta, "Whither Right to Food? Rights institutions and hungry labour in tea plantations of North Bengal," *Policies and Practices* 24 (2009).
20. N.C. Roy and D. Biswas "Closed Tea Estates: A Case Study of the Dooars Region of West Bengal, India," *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective* 22 (2018): 32c–34.
21. Claudia Liebelt, "Grooming Istanbul: Intimate Encounters and Concerns in Turkish Beauty Salon," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 12 (2016): 182–202.
22. Johanna Oksala, "The Neoliberal Subject of Feminism," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42 (2011): 104–12.
23. Gauri Pathak and Mimi Nichter, "Cleanups, confidence, and cosmetics: Marketing beauty in India," *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2018): 1–21.
24. <https://www.daedal-research.com/consumer-retail/indian-beauty-salon-and-spa-industry-trends-opportunities-2012-2017>.

25. Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Property* (New Delhi, 2010), 308.
26. Pathak and Nichter, *Cleanup, confidence and cosemetics* (2018), 312. Such specificities should not be over emphasized as is evident from Liebelt's study, which illustrates how in Istanbul, too, the development of commercialized beauty services are closely linked to the development of an increasingly global, neo-liberal consumer economy since the 1980s and the related feminization of workforce (Liebelt, 2016), 181.
27. Paula Black, *The Beauty Industry: Gender, Culture, Pleasure* (London, 2004).
28. See, for example, Freeman, *High Tech and High Heels* (Durham, NC, 2010), 105–06.
29. Chatterjee, *Time for Tea*.
30. Banerjee, *Activism and Agency in India* (2017).
31. Lu Yu, "The Origins of Tea," in *Time for Tea*, ed. Chatterjee.
32. Banerjee, *Activism and Agency in India* (2017).
33. For a fuller discussion, see Banerjee, *Activism and Agency in India*, 2017.
34. Black, *The Beauty Industry* (2004).
35. High-end branded beauty parlors of urban India are not unisex and employ both men and women just as they cater to both male and female clients. But the middle- to lower-end beauty parlors of the neighborhood (the category in which the women of this article found employment) tended to be unisex.
36. Freeman, *High Tech and High Heels* (Durham, NC, 2010), 3–4.
37. Kenny, in her work on retail in South Africa, argues how physical features, here premised on lightness of skin, emerged as a factor for racializing recruitment, paving the way for entry first of Indian and colored and then African women illustrating shifting labor markets and their embodied expectations. For more details, see Bridget Kenny, "Reproducing 'racial capitalism' through retailing in South Africa: gender, labor and consumption, 1950s–1970s," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2022).
38. M. Kang, *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work* (Berkeley, CA, 2010), 821.
39. Nina Kullrich, *Skin Colour Politics: Whiteness and Beauty in India* (Berlin, 2019).
40. The ancient Indian Hindu texts emphasize fairness as a mark of beauty and virtue. Thus, already before colonizers' essentializing of all Indians as nonwhites, fairness within communities was a stated virtue possibly also linked with caste and class. See also Kullrich, *Skin Colour Politics: Whiteness and Beauty in India* (Berlin, 2019), 246.
41. K. Huppatz, *Gender capital at work: intersection of femininity, masculinity, class and occupation* (Basingstoke, 2012).
42. M. Kang, "The Managed Hand: The Commercialization of Bodies and Emotions in Korean Immigrant-Owned Nail Salons," *Gender and Society* 17 (2003): 820–39, 824.
43. At the time of my fieldwork, I did not come across any Adivasi migrant woman in the beauty parlors. Most of the women talked of pragmatic concerns like higher wages in other sectors etc. as reasons for this.
44. See, for example, R. Nithya, "Racism on the streets of Delhi," *Newslick*, September 13, 2013; available at <https://www.newslick.in/racism-streets-delhi> (accessed on May 11, 2023); Sukhash Chakma, "Coronavirus Pandemic: India's Mongoloid People Face Upsurge of Racism," *Rights and Risks Analysis Group*, 2020; available at <http://www.rightsrisks.org/by-country/india/coronavirus-pandemic-indias-mongoloid-looking-people-face-upsurge-of-racism/> (accessed on May 11, 2023).
45. Keya Bardalai, "Malls versus Streets: North Eastern Women between Modernity and Marginality," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* (2019): 1–18, 6.
46. Bardalai, "Malls versus Streets."
47. Freeman, *High Tech and High Heel*, 22.
48. Huppatz, *Gender Capital at Work*.
49. Linda McDowell, *Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities* (West Sussex, 2009), 89, 188.
50. J. Lindsay "Gender and Class in the Lives of Young Hairdressers: From Serious to Spectacular," *Journal of Youth Studies* 7 (2012): 259–77, 261.
51. Huppatz, *Gender Capital* (2012), 159.
52. Black (2002), 11.
53. See, for example, Ursual Sharma and Paula Black, "Look good, feel better: beauty therapy as emotional labour," *Sociology* 35 (2001): 913–31.

54. See Kabeer, “Resources, agency, achievement,” 1999; Elson and Pearson, “Nimble Fingers,” 1981, for similar discussion.
55. There were two types of plucking of tea bushes—jungli and foot. The latter was a more specialized form of plucking where the workers were required to only pluck above a foot level. They did not have instruments to measure but had to rely on instructions, their inherent sense, and sharpness of mind to stick to the measurements, a skill that they downplayed as natural.
56. See also Supurna Banerjee, “From Plantation Workers to Naukrani: The Changing Labour Discourses of Migrant Domestic Workers,” *Journal of South Asian Studies* 13 (2018): 164–85.
57. Huppatz, *Gender Capital at Work* (2012), 158.
58. Liebelt, *Grooming Istanbul* (2016), 196.
59. Sharma and Black, *Look Good Feel Better* (2001).
60. See, for example, Huppatz (2012); Black and Sharma (2001)
61. Kang, *The Managed Hand* (2003), 827.
62. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation On a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (United Kingdom, 1998).
63. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation* (1998).
64. See, for example, Bratati Mukherjee, *From domestic work to beauty work: Gender, informality and organization* (Kolkata and Berlin, 2015) 1–31.
65. Banerjee, “From Plantation Workers to Naukrani” (2018).
66. Mondal, Shamim S., Wage Differences by Caste and Religion in India (June 4, 2016); available at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2839695> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2839695> (accessed on May 9, 2023).
67. Lakshita Malik, “‘Everyone Wants to Feel Like a Movie Star’: Aesthetics, Work, Pleasure, and Caste in India,” *Anthropology of Work Review* 43 (2): 95–105, 96.
68. Kang, *The Managed Hand* (2010).
69. Pathak and Nichter (2018), 2.
70. See, for example, L.H. Clarke and A. Bundon, “From ‘The Thing to Do’ to ‘Defying the Ravages of Age’: Older Women Reflect on the Use of Lipstick,” *Journal of Women & Aging* 21: 198–212.
71. Mary Douglas’s idea of “removing matter out of place” in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* ([1966] Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 44.
72. See also Liebelt, *Grooming Istanbul*, 196, on making a middle-class secular femininity among customers.
73. Michelle Lazar, “Discover The Power Of Femininity!” *Feminist Media Studies* 6 (2006): 505–17.