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**Producing the aesthetic self: An analysis of aesthetic labour in the organised retail industries in Kolkata**

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**Abstract:** Drawing on the concept of aesthetic labour, this article examines how skill training programmes in the organised retail industries in Kolkata, India, modulate underclass female service worker-bodies, in order to align them with the corporeal ideals of a globally fetishised consumer-citizenship aesthetics. Applicants for the entry-level jobs in retail are usually young women from economically underprivileged backgrounds, who are routinely viewed as being ‘deficient’ in basic social, communicational, and cultural norms. This necessitates a re-fashioning of the workers’ personhood by changing their bodily deportments, hygiene standards, communicational skills, and social etiquettes. Yet, there is little sustained examination of the impact of such skill training on the everyday lives of young female employees, who are caught between aspirations for corporate social mobility on one hand and the vagaries of their personal lives marked by poverty, low wages, and socio-economic precariousness on the other. Based on a two-year ethnography in shopping malls in Kolkata, this study proposes that while female service workers may learn to inhabit consumerist spaces, such as shopping malls, through a learnt performance of embodied consumer cosmopolitanism under aesthetic labour regimes, their class backgrounds continue to produce frictions, restrictions, and moral surveillance<sup>3</sup>.

Keywords: aesthetic labour, skill, gender, class, service sector, India

**Introduction**

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With the global trend in new work processes requiring constant flexibility and adaptability on the part of the workers, countries around the world have increasingly focused on skill acquisition and training to enhance labour productivity and human resource development. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for example, has promoted skill development as essential for both young people entering the labour market, as well as for adults who wish to maintain employability in a rapidly changing and inter-dependent world<sup>i</sup>.

In line with this ongoing global concern for skill development, the Government of India devised a National Skill Development Policy in 2009 that envisaged the creation of 500 million skilled workers by 2022<sup>ii</sup>. More recently, in 2015, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) launched the Skill India mission, with the target of training over 400 million people by 2022<sup>iii</sup>. Promoting the tagline, ‘Kaushal Bharat, Kusal Bharat’ (skilling Indians will result in a happy and prosperous nation), this demand-driven skill training initiative aims to impart skill training to young people who lack formal certification, including those from weaker and disadvantaged sections of the society (Government of India, 2015; IBEF, 2017). It is estimated that only 2.3% of the workforce in India has undergone formal skill training, as compared to 68% in the UK, 75% in Germany, 52% in USA, 80% in Japan and 96% in South Korea (Government of India, 2015). Large sections of the educated workforce have little or no job skills, making them largely unemployable. According to the Government of India statistics (2015), 104.62 million workers will enter the workforce over the next seven years (by 2022) who need to be skilled. In addition, 298.25 million of the existing farm and nonfarm sector workforce will need to be skilled, reskilled and upskilled.

Therefore, India's skill mission has primarily focused on scaling up skill training efforts to meet the demands of employers and drive economic growth (Government of India, 2015).

Apart from the policy initiatives, several academic scholars have also highlighted skill development as crucial for the socio-economic growth of the country (Agrawal, 2014). Many of them thus highlight the need for an efficient and comprehensive skill training program that can build the human capital pool of the Indian economy (Mehrotra, 2016). Additionally, concern has been raised over the low participation of women within skill training programmes in India (Sandhya Rani, 2016). Arguing that only 2% of women in the formal workforce are trained, these scholars contend that an effective ecosystem of skill training should be developed to prepare women for employment and improve their performance (Sandhya Rani, 2016). Skill training is thus promoted as instrumental to enable workers, both male and female, and particularly from lower economic backgrounds, to remain employed and access sustainable livelihood pathways.<sup>iv</sup>

Much of the above policy initiatives and skill development rhetoric, however, approach skill from a human capital perspective, viewing skill training as a solution to un/under-employment and essential to earning higher wages. Such an approach fails to acknowledge that not all workers experience skill training in the same way. Rather, social disparities (such as gender, class, ethnicity, and/or culture) can create diverse experiences among workers undertaking skill training in hopes of entering the labour market. In the context of India, a limited literature has demonstrated how skill training in the IT-ITES industries, for example, remains suffused with gendered and cultural values that mold worker-subjectivities to meet new workplace demands (Upadhyay & Vasavi, 2008). Explaining these modalities of skill training, Bates (1984) points out that most training curricula and programmes try to inculcate a form of 'anticipatory

socialization' in workers. Under 'anticipatory socialization,' workers must simply adjust to employers' demands for a 'disciplined workforce, or to the limited range of opportunities on offer to them,' rather than laying claims to equal distribution of work and better quality of life (Colley, James, Diment & Tedder, 2003, p.474; Cruikshank, 2008).

Yet, within this limited critical literature on skill training, some blind spots still exist. For instance, most research examining the social, cultural, and economic impacts of skill training on workers in India focus on professional, technical workers, who are English educated and middle class. Much less attention has been paid to how women workers from poor, underclass backgrounds negotiate training imperatives. For example, following the emergence of service sector in India, which accounts for 60% of the gross domestic product (GDP) as well as 30% of employment, many women from underclass backgrounds have entered front line jobs in coffee shops, shopping malls, and beauty parlours (Cayla & Bhatnagar, 2017).

Applicants for entry-level positions in the service industries (for example sales associates or security personnel) are usually young men and women from economically underprivileged backgrounds, who are often migrants to urban cities from nearby provincial towns and rural regions (Banerjee, 2016). It is instructive to note here that Kolkata has the highest (60.8%) rural-urban inter-state migration dominated by female workers who come to Kolkata looking for jobs (Banu, 2016).

These workers are routinely viewed as being 'deficient' in the basic social, communicational, and cultural norms that characterise the corporate environments of organised retail workspaces. This necessitates a re-fashioning of the workers' corporeal and emotional attributes by instilling in them qualities of professionalism and self-reliance. Workers' entire personhood is re-scripted by changing their bodily deportments, hygiene standards, (English) language proficiencies, communicational skills, gestural habits and social etiquettes (Gooptu, 2009,

2013; Maitra, 2016; Maitra & Maitra, 2015). To keep these organisations running smoothly, women service workers must overcome any sense of socio-cultural deficiency they might have, as economically marginalised subjects, especially, when attending to affluent, urbane, middle class shoppers with substantial purchasing powers, who frequent these upscale shopping malls and coffee shops (Fernandes, 2000, 2006). Thus, a ‘gentrification of service style’ is currently taking place in these sectors, linked in turn to a ‘broader gentrification of skills’ (Crain, Poster & Cherry, 2016, p.225; see also Brody, 2006).

This paper, based on ethnographic research in two of Kolkata’s largest shopping malls, explores, through the lens of aesthetic skill training, the fashioning of a new labour subjectivity amongst underclass female service workers in the city. The study makes an original and critical contribution in reflecting on how skill training in India not only effects deep changes in the attitudes and perceptions of underclass workers employed in upscale service sectors, but has a profound impact on their personal, familial, and social lives as well. In this context, we make two arguments in this paper.

First, we argue that the female workforce in shopping malls and other service spaces is given aesthetic skill training to conform to a culture of urban middleclassness, imbued with notions of ‘respectable femininity’ (Radhakrishnan, 2009). This enactment of public norms of femininity works to consolidate and naturalise ‘the cultural ethos of “global” corporate environments in India, [by] connecting individual mediations of respectable femininity to a broader national project’ of post-liberalisation urban consumerism amongst urban underclass youth populations (Radhakrishnan, 2009, p. 201). The gendered notions of feminine propriety linked to corporate ideals of public decorum are thus no longer restricted to India’s middle classes but now extended to include an increasingly large urban underclass population.

In analysing the ideological construct of ‘respectable femininity’ as a disciplinary framework for women service workers, it is useful to re-visit its earlier formation in nineteenth century colonial India. As Partha Chatterjee (1989) has famously argued, the ‘woman question’ emerged under the impact of colonial English education. The status of women came under immense scrutiny from the early nineteenth century onwards, standing in for the inferior position of Bengali/Indian society at large. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, a rising current of nationalist thought in the upper echelons of Bengali society re-imagined Bengali/Indian women as essentially signifying the emerging autonomy of an Indian nationalist culture. Under this newer formulation, women came to stand in for the inner, spiritual core of Indian culture, which was imagined as impervious to the colonial influences that affected the outer, material domains of society. The ideal representational unit of this spiritual core was the domestic sphere of the home, maintained by middleclass and upper caste women who were educated, spiritually pure, and morally upright. The learnt idioms of respectable femininity were conveyed through a whole range of outward traits, including dress habits, bodily deportments, speech, and gestures. These markers distinguished ‘respectability’ from other modes of femininity such as the apparent coarseness of lowerclass women or the perceived sexual licentiousness of hyper-westernised elite women. Education would become one of the most powerful discursive sites for the disciplining and production of this middleclass femininity as a marker of respectability.

However, ‘woman’ for Chatterjee is more or less a stable, homogenous entity without much variation in terms of class, religious, ethnic, regional or caste characteristics. Thus, what is applicable in the context of an upper class, upper caste, familial space with its everyday dramas of educating women is taken to be a general condition for all women in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. What happens to the ‘Woman Question’ for those who belong to less

privileged class and caste backgrounds, and are therefore excluded from such pedagogic paths to middleclass respectability?

This question assumes a greater urgency in the post-1990s period with the emergence and pervasive spread of global consumerist norms in most metropolitan Indian cities. As William Mazzarella (2005) reminds us, liberalisation today promises a mode of citizenship grounded not in discursive pedagogy, as in Chatterjee's paradigm, but in the sensuous embodiment of consumerist aspirations. The affective pleasures of the free-market and the commodity cultures it sustains have normalised practices of consumerist citizenship amongst vast sections of the Indian population across class, caste, and gender barriers. This is something that the slow pedagogic route to citizenship under colonial or post-colonial developmentalism never succeeded in achieving. Yet, as we will show through the ethnographic vignettes in this article, markings of class and inadequate purchasing power often defer the promise of inclusive citizenship for female youth populations, dismantling the trappings of respectability they seek to embody.

The specific forms of gendering promoted by consumerist citizenship can be gleaned from the emerging literature on middle class women in professional fields such as Information Technology, finance, and other corporate sectors. The codes of respectable femininity that such professional women perform are captured in what Vijayakumar (2013) has called 'flexible aspirations.' Here, professionalism and ambition in the outer world of corporate sector work must be balanced by the affirmation of familial duties at home, as a concerned wife and mother. The female IT manager may be projected as the contemporary *New Woman* only to the extent that she manages to balance the countervailing demands of the home and the world without much friction. But how do we think of this emergent (consumerist) ideal of the New Woman



once we go down the class hierarchies to the urban underclasses that have neither the economic leverage nor the cultural capital of the urbane IT managers? What forms of friction disrupt the aspirations for social mobilities in young, underclass women service workers in the city, who are forced to negotiate the tendentious links between the home and the world on an everyday basis?

Our second argument in this article suggests that in the case of lower class female employees in the upscale service sector, the embodied cosmopolitan femininity learnt through skill trainings does not easily translate into the actual possession of the capitalist 'good life.' As we explain in this paper, a gap persists between the dream worlds of commodities that saturate their everyday lives and the persistent realities of low wages and poverty at home. The lives of young female workers thus alternate between the extremes of desire and frustration, exuberance and precariousness. The exposure of this underclass female workforce to the habitus of consumer citizenship in metropolitan India today is thus giving rise to new idioms of gendered aspirations and practices of inhabiting the city that force us to radically reimagine the nineteenth century 'Woman Question' for the contemporary times. The very norms of respectable, middleclass consumerist femininity to which women workers are trained to adhere in the context of service work, make them vulnerable to moral censures outside of the work environments (Freeman, 2007). Thus, not only do these aspiring 'new women' stand outside the economic privileges of middleclassness, but their very embodiment of such privileges during work make them precarious bodies subjected to heightened moral policing, surveillance and disciplining outside the spheres of work. The female service workers' bodies become, then, the contested sites of gendered performances of 'tradition' and 'modernity' under consumer capitalism in urban India today.

Therefore, through our analysis, we draw attention to how the corporate upskilling of contemporary underclass, female workers hardly incorporates any long term social reformist vision. The point to bear in mind is that the form of skill training emphasised in these shopping malls are strategies to refashion what are presumed as ‘deficient’ worker bodies into productive ones in the shortest possible time and in the most cost-effective manner possible. Unlike late nineteenth or early twentieth century pedagogic reformation of (middleclass) women as suggested by Chatterjee and others (Kumar, 2007; Sunder Rajan, 1993), skill training programmes today bear no responsibility for any transformation in women’s lives through long term socialisation. Neither do they envision any strategies to address inequalities or poverty circumscribing the lives of these women (Gupta, 2016).

### **Theorising Aesthetic Labour**

The analysis in this paper is informed by ‘aesthetic labour,’ which has been an important theoretical framework in analysing skill training for interactive service work. Initially theorised by Nickson and his colleagues (2005) in their study of retail and hospitality work in post-industrial Glasgow, aesthetic labour is defined as ‘a supply of “embodied capacities and attributes” possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment’ (Warhurst, Nickson, Witz & Cullen, 2000, p.4). Dress code, bodily deportments, personality traits, speech/accents, voice modulations are some of the critical attributes of aesthetic labour skills. Complementing the importance attached to feelings and attitudes in emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003), aesthetic labour attaches significance to the employee’s physical appearance. Articulating the body as a ‘physical capital’ to be harnessed through training, aesthetic labour refers to ‘durable ways of standing, speaking, walking and so of feeling and thinking’ in order to generate value (Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen & Watt, 2003, p.188). For scholars conceptualising aesthetic

labour, the physical body along with its affective and interactive potentials are converted into economic capital and performed for ‘organisational reproduction’ (Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen & Watt, 2003, p. 188; Witz, Warhurst & Nickson, 2003).

While the discussion of personal aesthetics has long focused on middleclass occupations such as management (Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen & Watt, 2003), over the years, aesthetic labour has become critical even for workers in dead end, low wage, service sector jobs with very little possibilities for social mobility. With the global restructuring of the labour market, there has been an increase in precarious entry-level jobs in the service sector (Clement, Mathieu, Prus & Uckardester, 2010). Since most of these jobs require workers, especially those at the frontline, to possess good interpersonal skills and appearances, the demand for labour market skills has expanded to include personal characteristics, including both emotional traits as well as corporeal appearances. Potential employees are thus expected to ensure their employability by assessing their own human capital attributes and acquiring not only ‘thinking skills’ but interpersonal and corporeal management skills as well, to suit the shifting patterns of work in the post-manufacturing era (Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen & Watt, 2003, p.187; see also Gooptu, 2013). Moreover, when workers do not share the class or cultural dispositions of the customers, they are encouraged to adapt body and feeling norms that ‘reflect the sensibilities of customers. These norms and rules are inculcated systematically through training and employment practices’ (Otis, 2016, p.913). Consequently, employers mobilise, develop, and commodify these bodily capacities and attributes through training to produce a particular style of service that would be appealing to the customer (Otis, 2016).

It is important to note how the demand for aesthetic labour reproduces and naturalises social, cultural, racial, and gendered inequalities due to the way employers determine who is

aesthetically acceptable during recruitment and selection processes (Warhurst, 2013). Such exclusionary hiring practices serve two purposes for employers. First, in the current neoliberal economy, most employers are willing to invest very little in employee training. They therefore, seek to hire workers who already embody the particular styles of their clientele. With minimal training, such employees can be regulated to engage in continuous self-management and self-improvement ‘to mobilise untapped inner resources [in order to] overcome limitations in the pursuit of ever more “excellence” within the workplace (Costea, Crump & Amiridis, 2007, p.5; Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006). Second, by sorting employees whose habitus matches the organisational brand image and its clientele, employers successfully engage workers who are ‘class privileged and consumer driven’ (William & Connell, 2010), rather than those who look or sound like low wage workers, struggling to make a living (William & Connell, 2010).

While the above scholarship is critical in explicating how aesthetic labour is premised on social inequalities and regulation of employee bodies and appearances, the analysis is based primarily on the experiences of employees who share class and racial affinities with their clients. Less has been written about the experiences of those employees who do not share affinities with their clients in terms of race, gender, and class characteristics; yet, are nonetheless required to perform aesthetic labour in their workplaces. For example, in recent years there is growing evidence that migrants of colour, especially women residing in western countries, are hired in front line service sector jobs because they constitute a cheap labour pool for retail and service corporations (Hudson et al., 2017; Premji et al., 2014). These are workers who often lack the normative aesthetic skills along with the desirable racial and class markers that many retail industries look for. Once hired, the message for them is very clear: they either have to modify their appearances or become invisible in the labour market (Maitra, 2018; Maitra & Maitra, 2015).

In the Asian context, few studies explore aesthetic skill training as a mechanism for transforming workers who do not necessarily share the class, gender, or racial profiles of their clientele. In her ethnography of service labour in a global luxury hotel in Beijing, Otis (2016) points out how female Chinese workers were seen as lacking in class capital- social, economic, cultural and symbolic, when compared with their white male, western clientele. Female Chinese workers were thus required to acquire the body and feeling norms of western customers and appear as both subordinate and feminine (Otis, 2016). In order to manage racial, gendered, and class differences with their clientele, these women workers performed ‘bridgework,’ consciously adjusting their feelings and bodies at the individual level to ‘generate a sense of security for the western male business elite’ (Otis, 2016, p. 917). While studies such as the one conducted by Otis offer a critical analysis of aesthetic skill training for underclass female employees, they do not fully capture the effects of such training on the everyday performances of workers’ bodies, particularly outside the workplace.

In relation to India, while studies suggest the deep cultural, class, and linguistic divide that separates customers from floor level service workers in the retail industry (Cayla & Bhatnagar, 2016), comparatively less attention is paid to the effects of aesthetic skill training on underclass employees and their everyday life-worlds. Cayla and Bhatnagar (2016) for example, through their research on service workers in coffee shops and modern gyms, explore how communicational training impacts the lives of the lowerclass workers. These workers start identifying themselves with the aspirational life worlds of branded stores and economically more privileged clients and take pleasures in their personal transformations through work. Another interesting perspective is presented by McGuire (2011) who explores how personality development and enhancement (PDE) training in shopping malls and entertainment complexes

in New Delhi, teaches workers ‘how to inhabit- how to *move*’ (p. 118) so that they are able to cater to the urban, upwardly mobile and entrepreneurial middleclass clientele. Acknowledging that ‘middleclass’ in India is a broad and complex term, the author explains that spaces like shopping malls ‘demand certain kinds of bodily practices - and that, conversely, the bodily practices attendant on inhabiting new middle class spaces work to constitute the new middle class itself’ (p.133).

This paper adds to the above analysis by examining the production of aesthetic skills in a context where workers may not possess the requisite social and corporeal dispositions at the time of recruitment. Consequently, they are seen as necessarily deficient subjects who have to ‘unlearn’ the social skills and bodily habits they bring to the shop-floor and be re-trained to display the right kind of attributes. Our intention here is not simply to focus on the mechanisms and processes of aesthetic skill training but to provide a sustained examination of the impact of such training on the everyday lives of young female employees who are caught between aspirations for corporate social mobility and the vagaries of their own personal lives marked by poverty, low wage, and socio-economic precariousness. We suggest that under aesthetic labour regimes, female service workers might very successfully adapt to working in spaces, such as shopping malls, through a learnt performance of embodied consumer cosmopolitanism. Aesthetic skilling/upskilling thus makes new uses of these women’s bodies for profit accumulation. Yet, these are bodies that are also vulnerable, where vulnerability is associated with shame, fear and failure to control and discipline the body according to the idealised norms.

### **Research Methodology**

The current paper is based on a two-year ethnographic study of workplace training experiences of employees working as floor level service workers in upscale shopping malls in the city of Kolkata. As part of the project, one of the researchers conducted extensive participant observation in one of the most reputed shopping malls in Kolkata in order to familiarise with the work processes and the skills necessary at the workplace. Access to the interviewees was largely facilitated by this prior familiarisation with the women workers in the course of participant observation. We conducted interviews with 40 (30 women and 10 men) floor level employees or Customer Service Attendants (CSAs), as they are called within retail organisations, and five corporate trainers -two men and three women. We also participated in four employee-training sessions that usually extended for about eight hours per day for three days in the back offices or corporate training centres of the retail organisations. This paper is based primarily on the experiences of the 30 female workers interviewed for the project as well as our observation of the training sessions and secondary data analysis of training curriculum utilised in the retail sector.

### *Background of Workers*

Most of the female CSAs interviewed were either high school drop outs or were enrolled in degree colleges but with very low record of attendance. Only one woman had completed her undergraduate college programme successfully. The respondents were between the ages of 20-25, primarily unmarried and had been working in the organised retail sector for at least a year. They were mostly from low income backgrounds with family members working as farmers, small shop keepers, domestic helpers, taxi cab drivers and in a few cases, low level clerical workers. Most of them lived in the outer fringes of Kolkata and commuted everyday using public transport to reach their workplaces. Some of the female workers lived in urban slums

located within the city. The training managers interviewed for the project, however, were all university graduates with specialisations in Business or Human Resource Management from reputed management institutions in the country. The managers were fluent in English, Hindi, and Bengali and were working as corporate trainers for the past two to three years at the time of the interview.

*Recruitment, Data Collection and Data Analysis*

Initial contact with the interviewees was made through the researchers' personal networks. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used to identify 'cases of interest' (Patton, 1990, p.182). We conducted at least one hour long, semi-structured (open-ended) face-to-face interviews with each participant. Our interviews with the workers focused on their skill training experiences, adaptation to the workplace, and the impact of their professional experiences on their family and social lives. Trainers were asked to reflect on the typical requirements for training the workers, workers' deficiencies in aesthetic skills as well as the impact of training. Additionally, we closely observed the training sessions and took extensive field notes of the modes of interactions between trainers, workers, as well as customers in the shopping malls. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify patterns or themes within the data set (Braun & Clark, 2006). The themes were then pieced together to prepare a comprehensive picture of the collective experiences of the training by interviewees (Aronson, 1995). We use pseudonyms for all the interviewees and the retail organisations where they are employed.

*Training Workers in Aesthetic Skills*



During the interviews, female workers pointed out that they had to go through compulsory and rigorous training for at least one week after they were hired by the retail companies. During the training sessions, employees were expected to arrive in their training centre by nine in the morning and the training itself often stretched on for eight to nine hours. Most of the time, there were two components to the training. One was related to product knowledge while the other focused on bodily aesthetics, communicational abilities, and soft skills development. Under aesthetic skill training, workers were taught various bodily departments, hygiene, makeup, leadership qualities, body-language, positive attitude and behaviours. A few sessions were mixed where men and women were taught together whereas a few were especially geared towards those women employees who were hired by upscale cosmetic/clothing companies. The training sessions we attended were well planned with videos, PowerPoint presentations, and trainers who explained their training modules in mostly Hindi and Bengali.

### *Workplace Training Modules*

#### Training Structure

- a) Each of the programs typically ran for about three days in a corporate setting.
- b) Two Training Managers took turns to conduct the courses starting in the morning and extending for about eight hours each day.
- c) Training was done in a typical class-room setting with PowerPoint visuals, role playing games, and basic management problem-solving skills.
- d) The number of trainees were between 15 to 30 in the classroom depending on the number of new recruitments or promotions.

Typically, the main emphasis of the training programs was on

- a) Personality development [as the module was called in English], which included communicational habits, personal hygiene standards, and bodily deportment lessons.
- b) This was followed by product knowledge.
- c) In particular, workers were trained in body-language skills in order to manifest certain emotional categories like team spirit, leadership qualities, cheerful personalities, work ethics or self-reliance, to help them achieve more robust sales targets.

At the end of the training a multiple-choice test was administered, followed by a series of short essays where the employees were expected to tackle specific problems related to the everyday functioning of the retail institutions and how the trainee employees will go about solving them. In the following sections, we describe two training sessions that were geared towards disciplining the bodily appearances of the women workers and instilling in them ideals of the prescriptive femininity desired in service workers.

### **Disciplining Appearances**

During the first session of what is known as ‘Grooming Standards’ [titled in English], the training manager Swati gave a detailed presentation with the help of PowerPoint slides about how workers should stand, talk, walk, and take care of their bodies. After showing a short animation clip on the correct deportment, style of walking and bodily postures of a lady, Swati explained, ‘no matter what you are doing, whether standing or walking never slouch...when standing bring your ankles together, open your chest slightly and be graceful while always keeping a smile on your face’.

For training managers like Swati, the correct bodily gestures invoking modesty and poise were associated with the ideals of ‘respectable femininity’ – the corporeal forms of being a ‘lady’

(the word she referred to repeatedly in English) in the context of corporate sector work. Furthermore, Swati explained that many of the employees, especially those in the cosmetic and fashion sections, would have to wear high heels for long hours as part of their job. She therefore instructed the women to start getting used to wearing high heels for long hours,

As part of your uniform you will be provided with shoes that have pointed high-heels. Practice at home how to walk and stand in heels. It will be painful in the beginning but gradually you will get used to it. You will feel yourself how smart you look in your skirts or pants and heels... like a perfect corporate woman...like the ladies who come in as customers.

Through these corrective instructions, what trainers like Swati were trying to achieve was not only to teach the female workers the correct bodily aesthetics of standing and walking, but also to familiarise them with the idioms of both a corporate and a consumer citizenship — hence the reference not only to ladies but also to female customers who frequent the shopping malls. It was, as another training manager Tania explained to us, important for the underprivileged women workers to imagine and reinvent themselves as potential clients and consumers of their own workspaces so that they could aspire to serve the clientele in the requisite manner. The emphasis on repeated practice (for instance getting used to wearing high-heels despite the initial pain) was to make these women seamlessly adapt the new modes of embodiment they were expected to perform. Their enactment of ‘femininity’ would therefore not seem acquired, constrained or out of place in the context of their work environments. As Otis (2016) argues through her ethnography, the idea here is to ‘project a femininity that concealed the tools of its manufacture, thereby naturalising gender divisions and constructing a middleclass incarnation

of womanhood' (p. 922). When asked what 'respectable' would mean in this context, Swati promptly answered,

You have to be soft spoken, gentle, yet affirmative, smiling and comforting. Customers should feel comfortable asking you a question where you can't show your irritation.

She furthermore pointed out prescriptive ideals like not showing cleavage, wearing sleeveless shirts or uniforms that were too fitted and showed off the female body. The ideal aesthetics of the female body for managers like Swati or Tania lay in a perfect blend of what they called 'modern corporate womanhood and Indian tradition' – signifying a perfect harmony of professional efficiency, courtesy, modesty, and decorum.

Appearance was thus related to a moral, feminine selfhood that was refined, alluring and yet without any sexual overtones. The repeated encouragement to the female workers to act as 'ladies', however, betrayed an underlying assumption that most of the recruited workers lacked rudimentary bodily characteristics like proper hygiene as a result of their underclass backgrounds. This was evident when during the training, managers repeatedly emphasised the need to regularly brush one's teeth to avoid bad breath, to take a shower daily, to always have clean hair cropped short, shampooed, and combed, to have their uniforms as crisp as possible, and to use a deodorant to ward off body odour. The trainees would then be informed by the managers about how they could buy deodorants or perfumed soaps at a discounted rate once these products were close to their expiry dates.

By repeating the need for cleanliness, bodily decorum, correct deportment, and hygiene practices like the use of hand-soaps after each visit to the toilet, the training sort to impress

certain assumed middleclass qualities on the worker's body. The worker would then be expected to present this embodied 'front' of middleclassness before customers. Assumed characteristics of the workers' real underprivileged social lives like body odours, faulty bodily deportment or sweat stains on clothes would then constitute the 'back region' in the interactive service work which must not be revealed before customers (Goffman, 1978). This is because the 'back region' of the untrained female worker body would give away her obvious social and economic marginality. The revelation of this 'back region' will ultimately disrupt the entire performance of the shopping mall as a seamless blending of various consumer bodies sharing the same standards of aesthetics, aspirations and social knowledge about commodities.

A sense of the constant bodily adjustments required, in what Goffman calls the 'front' and 'back' 'regions' of an interactive performance, can also be read in the experiences of Shyama. In her early twenties, she had been working in the high-end lingerie section of an upscale retail establishment for over two years. Shyama lost her father when she was very young and was the sole earning member in a family that included her mother and younger sister. Living in a rented tenement in a south Kolkata slum, Shyama had to drop out of high school and work in a beauty parlour for several years before getting the better paid retail job. Yet, in her retail job, she looked so under-nourished that the department manager supplied her with 2 padded brassiers that were intended to make her body look fuller and more well-nourished. For Shyama, wearing the brassiers gave her new confidence about her body-image and she enjoyed translating that confidence into a better sales performance on the shop floor. She explained:

I know I am very thin and don't have a perfect figure to work in the lingerie section.  
But I am happy with the padded bras that my manager gave me to wear [at work]. I take

good care of them and wash them by hand. These clothes have really added to my self-esteem... I feel confident when talking with clients.

Shyama was quite happy with the brassieres not only because of the way they changed her bodily appearance at work but also because she felt that she could better explain the transformative potentials of lingerie in creating an appealing form for her customers' bodies. So work place trainings and practices perform a dual function for workers like Shyama. These trainings emphasise specific bodily attributes that help the employees blend into the luxurious retail spaces while simultaneously effacing other corporeal characteristics perceived as undesirable in the context of the work-environment. Yet, for Shyama and many of her colleagues, success at work hinges on their ability to distinguish which bodily characteristics are to be displayed in the context of work and non-work places. She pointed out that she wore the padded brassieres only to work and never at home as she could never afford to buy such expensive lingerie on her own. Moreover, the effect of wearing the brassieres in her neighbourhood or at home would be to draw attention to her enlarged bosom, which would be taken as a sign of low feminine modesty.

For women service workers, especially those hired for the cosmetic sections, putting on proper make up for work was repeatedly mentioned in training modules as critical to workplace learning. A polished appearance was said to be directly related to higher sales figures and customer satisfaction. The stakes were high, for surveys suggest that for most customers there is a moment of indecision when they still have to decide which kiosk to visit first, whether Maybelline or Clinique. During this period of brief indecision for the customer, the aesthetic appeal of the workers' bodies, created through a combination of heavy make-up, eyeliner, a nice smile and a well-pressed suit, makes the difference between success and failure in sales.

Through several short videos, women were shown how to put on foundation, eye shadow, nail colour, lipstick, and blusher. They were taught the differences in skin tones, hair types, and the application of various products like hair gel, serum, and hand and body lotions so that the worker bodies can vicariously perform the effects of putting on the cosmetics they wish to sell to customers. The trainer Swati encouraged women to buy and start using some of these products so that they could offer their own experiences to the customers,

You will have to start getting used to some of these. You don't want to expose your dirty nails. Put foundation and eye shadow on as that will enhance your features. You want to look fresh, clean, proper - lady like. It is only then that a customer will approach you. Just remember you have a split second to convince the customer to come and take a look at the Chambor products or you'll lose the customer to The Body Shop girl.

The way the trainers imagined the body aesthetics of the workers to enable better customer service can be described after Foucault (1977) as a form of discipline to increase the utility of the body. Training here was geared towards producing a 'docility/utility' for the workers' bodies that are made compliant, and yet at the same time become a more 'productive carrier of aptitudes and capacities' that can potentially be economically exploited (Wolkowitz, 2006). Sangeeta, for example, working for a reputed high-end international cosmetics store was trained to pull off sales by drawing on her appearance. She had an uncommonly nice complexion and great skin tone, a quality that did not go unnoticed by her hiring manager. Every time a customer approached her, she was trained to recount how a bad outbreak of measles had scarred her face, but just 6 months of using her brand's new tea-tree toner made her facial complexion radiant. Thus Sangeeta, by using an assemblage of bodily gestures, a convincing narrative as well as her bodily aesthetics, creates and implants desires for

consumption and pleasures of shopping in customers (Hardt & Negri, 2004). After Berardi, we can think of the worker's 'soul' at work here, plugging into the body's affective capacities and personal appearance to produce affinities, relations of intimacy and intensities of interaction (2009). In this sphere of aesthetic work, producing desire for consumption in the customer is inseparable from the worker's self-production of bodily aesthetics, where 'time for living falls, in its entirety, into the clutches of economic calculations, into the clutches of value' where the domain of work seamlessly incorporates the economic, the cultural and the social (Gorz, 2010, p.22).

Another trainer, Neel, emphasised the need to follow a proper dress code. Most of the workers, especially women hired for the international life-style brands, were required to wear suits or skirts provided by the companies. Being primarily from low, underclass backgrounds, the majority of these women had only worn a sari or salwar kameez prior to their employment. According to Neel, getting workers into suits and trousers is an ordeal for the body, which requires a long period of familiarisation,

you know most of them come from the lower classes, even slums. Women especially are very uneasy about wearing pants or trousers, forget about the tight skirts that cosmetic companies demand. Even when they wear it they don't know how to carry their bodies and keep slouching instead of standing erect.

Workers thus are taught to perform, just like a theatre artist, to physically act out a script to create the 'style of service' distinctive of the upscale retail work-place. It is their responsibility to transcend their deficiencies, manage their identities and take control of their selves. The exposure to these training modules and work practices is increasingly geared to influence the



service workers to reimagine themselves as consumers in order to succeed professionally. They are encouraged to maintain their new image beyond the workplace, often even at home, buying low-cost jeans, watches, cosmetics - maintaining their nails and skin by regularly visiting low-cost beauty salons and observing the requisite hygiene practices at home. As Purnima, one of the employees from the cosmetic section, married with two children mentioned, ‘we are into a respectable job now... it is up to us to maintain ourselves... we may live in a poor area but unless we change our appearances, we cannot keep our jobs’.

Aesthetic skill training in the corporate discourse thus emphasises the transcendence of ‘undesirable’ labouring bodies into professional, entrepreneurial workers whose appearances reflect their professionalisation and the corporate qualities they seek to project in the workplace. Yet, as Mirchandani, Maitra and Sangha (2012) suggest in their analysis of call center training programmes, the discourse of skill training fails to address not only the hierarchies that structure workplace relationships but also the social and economic precariousness of the workers. Their observations are equally true for the organised retail sector, where aesthetic skill training works not only to naturalise inequalities both inside and outside the workplace, but also to expose female workers to often conflicting structures of social morality and censorship between work and nonwork spaces.

### **Navigating Respectability**

Although the training managers emphasised for the women the necessity to wear western clothes and make up to ensure productivity and professionalism at work places, such demands often created contradictory societal pressures for them. Most of the women interviewed reported that, before commuting back to their suburban homes, they changed into a sari or

salwar kameez and scrubbed off their make-up meticulously to avoid attention. 'You don't want prying eyes looking at you ... you know what I mean' said Mridula. Samita, an attractive woman with radiant skin had another interesting experience to share. She lived in a provincial town outside Kolkata where her neighbours are yet to be familiar with the demands of service work in an upscale shopping mall. As was the norm with service jobs, Samita's work hours would often stretch till late in the evening. The long commute home on public transport usually delayed her even more. As a customer attendant in the lifestyle and clothing section, she had to wear a thick layer of make-up every day. Her clothes were also too meticulous for the neighbourhood in which she stayed.

On a couple of occasions, she did not get a chance to remove all the traces of her makeup from work in her rush to catch the train home. Soon afterwards rumours started circulating in her neighbourhood. On the days where she would stay home, she heard pointed innuendos about how women of her age were losing all sense of morality and modesty in their quest for making good money in the big city. Then there were anonymous letters mailed to her father suggesting that he should take drastic steps to discipline her daughter as she was an immoral presence in the locality - coming home late at night with make-up caked on like a prostitute. It was becoming unbearable and Samita's parents started advising her to leave the job. There was also the added fear that it would be impossible to arrange for Samita's wedding later on because all the neighbours would caution the prospective in-laws. Nobody seemed to believe that she actually had a very mundane job as a salesperson in a store and eventually the family forced her to give up the relatively well-paying job.

There were other instances as well of circumscribing female employees' movements under the pretext of 'respectability.' Shelley, a sales associate in the women's clothing section recounted

how initially after joining work she and some of her colleagues (both male and female) used to chat outside the mall. Sometimes, the women workers would wait for a while for their boyfriends to come and pick them up in their motor-cycles. However, the local people living around the mall started objecting. They complained to the mall authorities about women's moral decay and licentious behavior. For the residents, the presence of young women, often wearing trousers and heels and lingering around the mall, seemed to suggest that they were engaging in prostitution as well. They were told by the mall security staff that they should leave the vicinity of the mall immediately after they got off work and wait for their boyfriends at a sufficient distance from the mall so as not to create conflicts between mall authorities and the neighbourhood residents. For women like Samita or Shelley, there is an expectation that as part of their work they would learn to traverse the city even at late hours. Yet, such mobility at night also gets associated with indecency, looseness and questionable moral values and character (Patel, 2010). Thus, despite all the trainings of respectability, 'strict regimes of surveillance and control of their physical and temporal mobility' continue to impact the work and life worlds of these women (Patel, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

In this article we explored how in the process of undertaking aesthetic skill training in the retail sector, underclass women workers had to navigate conflicting paradigms of social feminine respectability and normative injunctions about bodily aesthetics in their work and non-work lives. Primarily hired as a pool of cheap and docile labour, these women workers were considered 'deficient' and lacking in social and cultural skills necessary to serve upscale, shopping mall customers. Hence, they were required to go through an extensive skill training programme that was geared towards developing and commodifying the aesthetic capacities and

departments of these workers, thereby producing a 'style' of service encounter that would appeal to the customers.

Based on our ethnographic research, we argued that while these women were taught to perform a gendered middleclass role during work (confident body, smart uniform, make up) such performance did not in any significant way translate into actual material class mobility or guarantee any degree of social respectability once outside the work-environment. Most ironically, some of these learnt middleclass dispositions outside the immediate workspaces brought associations of an undesirable female sexuality and intemperance for the young service workers. Moreover, the patina of respectability that the performance of proper norms of femininity is supposed to provide for service workers during the course of work hardly protected them from forms of gendered violence that many of the workers struggled with beyond the workplace. The impact of skill training, therefore, was hardly a linear, seamless experience for the women. For some, such training programmes and subsequent employment in upscale malls translated into genuine feelings of pride and achievement. For others, these upskilling also made them vulnerable to heightened forms of surveillance and social censorship.

These struggles are clearly illustrated in the case of a mall worker named Malini. Her father had an accident in which he lost both his arms, and her family was therefore entirely dependent on her service-sector employment in a large shopping mall. She enjoyed dressing up and being part of the 'corporate' culture of feminine gracefulness. She would even encourage her other friends to take up employment in the mall. Yet, one day when she was late for work the security guard barred her from entering the mall. As they started shouting at each other, the guard lost her temper and slapped Malini on the face. Her sense of respectability was completely shattered

by this incident and she did not know what to do. The guard was later rebuked and disciplined by her manager, yet Malini could no longer think of her employment as contributing in any way to her social standing. As Malini reminisced,

What prestige do I have in this job if a security guard can slap me... I was never slapped by my own father... my mother has not endured even as a domestic worker what I went through that day... I still feel shattered...

Her experience renders futile the discourses of poise, elegance, and respectable femininity that trainers emphasise.

Theoretically, our study then makes a significant contribution by proposing the integration of an underclass, gendered perspective into both the 'Woman Question' as well as aesthetic labour theory. It was only through such a perspective that our research was able to foreground how, when low-end female service workers were exposed to severe class and gender inequalities, respectability remained elusive and fragmentary despite their daily performances of the norms of such respectability (Gooptu, 2009; Vijayakumar, 2013). Unlike middleclass women employed in transnational call centres or the IT industry, the intersections between class and gender identities constantly exposed these women workers to accusations of being immoral, licentious or immodest despite their attempts to faithfully reproduce the corporate norms of respectability. Valorised only as a source of cheap and docile labour, the selective performances of 'respectable femininity' through the normative codes of aesthetic labour for these women functioned only to enhance the brand images of the corporate organisations without necessarily translating into actual social or class mobility for the workers. They

continued to be seen as marginal and disposable workers within a highly competitive, liberalised retail industry.

Furthermore, our study also has policy implications as it critically draws attention to how employers and policy makers fail to comprehend how skill training is not simply a benign tool for generating employability or livelihood. This is because skill training has the potential to deeply impact the attitudes, capabilities, and life trajectories of workers, their families and the broader communities. It is imperative then that training policies and curriculum take into consideration that there is a greater need to interrogate the underpinning ideologies of skill training. This interrogation requires that the conversation around skill training be reframed so as to address questions of inclusivity and empowerment of workers in a sustainable manner. A point of departure for rethinking skill training can be the acknowledgment of the real socioeconomic and cultural differences existing between the worker bodies - programmes that would acknowledge socio-cultural and economic differences as well as diversity rather than imposing conformity to the dominant ideologies and values of the workplace and the society. Thus, recognising the power differentials existing between dominant-subordinate bodies within the skill training programmes might provide the basis for a more equitable form of learning.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/els/emp/Skills-anticipation-flyer.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/Skills%20Development%20Pathways%20in%20Asia\\_FINAL%20VERSION.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/Skills%20Development%20Pathways%20in%20Asia_FINAL%20VERSION.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.ibef.org/blogs/skill-india-kaushal-bharat-kushal-bharat>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.ibef.org/news/launch-of-skill-india-campaign-on-15th-july-2015>