

Studying Platform Work in Mumbai & New Delhi

**A Mapping of
Platform Work in India
& Notes from Four Studies
of Workers Driving Taxis
and Delivering Food for
Platform Companies**

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1

Introduction

With the arrival and rapid spread of gig platforms in India and across the world, scholars across fields – from economics and sociology to digital and new media studies – started to investigate how app-based gig platforms are affecting large and small-scale social and economic transformations. In the ‘first wave’ of gig economy research, scholars questioned the nomenclature itself, debating whether it should be called the ‘sharing economy’, gig economy, or rental economy. The impetus for these debates was, perhaps, that we already had some existing models for the sharing economy that largely drew on the idea of ‘the commons’ – or the general understanding that highly networked environments would offer people the opportunity to share their knowledge and spare resources freely, without charge, thus bypassing established corporate oligopolies as well as national and international laws that restricted free movement and access to knowledge and resources – especially for people from the so-called ‘developing’ world. To that effect, there exists valuable research now that bridges the moment of the sharing economy with the gig economy. For instance, Lampinen and colleagues studied older platforms and communities, like CouchSurfing, which allowed people to host and live on other people’s couches (or in their spare rooms) for no cost. The same set of scholars also studied AirBnb and offered comparative understandings of how norms and expectations around partaking in (someone’s) idle resources change when the ‘gig logic’ enters the frame and platforms become real-time marketplaces for the exchange of goods and services, as against a temporally slower and more altruistic community-based model of sharing.

The ‘second wave’ of gig economy research, mostly originating in and responding to technological, social, and economic developments in North America and Western Europe, has focused on the disruptive effects of gig platforms on employment trends and the future of work. To elaborate, these scholars argue that gig platforms, by offering the promise of flexible work and quick earnings, but not the benefits of full-time, standard employment, are contributing to the ongoing casualisation and precarisation of work at large. As marketplaces powered by algorithmic decision-making, platforms often argue that the resultant prices as well as earnings are not a product of human or organisational decisions but rather a result of algorithmic decisions and data points. Since these algorithmic systems are ‘blackboxed’ or treated as highly confidential intellectual property, there is little scope to audit or ‘peek’ into their workings to understand how or why ‘real-time dynamic surge pricing’ works the way it does. A related host of issues concerns over the employment status of gig platform workers. As critics of

platforms have noted, while platform companies classify workers as ‘independent contractors’ or ‘vendors’, gig workers satisfy all the requirements of the employment test and thus deserve to be recognised and compensated as full-time employees. In a landmark case brought forth by gig worker representatives in the UK, the court did recognise platform workers as employees and called for companies to reclassify them as such. Underlying debates around employment classification, compensation, and job security are united by a centralised theme that resonates with labour scholars globally – the (in)formalisation of work.

Reclassifying gig workers as full-time employees would further make them eligible for paid sick leave, maternity leave, and other health benefits, and would possibly make them eligible for minimum wage as well, thus leading to the formalisation and increased regulation of gig work. As scholars of platform work (including crowdwork) outside of industrialised countries have noted, even reclassification or simply recognising these jobs as a part of the formal sector may not necessarily translate to similar benefits or increased salaries in the longer term. Juxtaposed against a landscape of ubiquitous informality, as in the case of India, gig work does offer some features and affordances of formal work, such as financialisation, formal contracts, and the ability to at least appeal unfair practices, albeit to a limited degree. However, formalisation for its own sake in traditional legal and economic terms may neither be possible nor entirely in response to the unique moment of precarity in the global South, where youth unemployment and skill and job misalignment, among other structural issues, inform the horizon of what kinds of futures are possible and how to attain them.

However, investigating questions of work, futures, and digital participation are not merely about finding answers to challenges in structural economic development and long- and short-term policy-making. The present, so to speak, is far from being determined by, or lived out in, the service of state or corporate visions; it is not the result of what happens between people as they participate on digital platforms. What happens to urban spaces; notions of kinship, publicity, social relationships, and hierarchies; and quotidian understandings of money, desire, aspirations, respect, morals, and justice is equally rich and important when understanding social transformation and the contribution of digital media to social change. Further, rather than approach economic, social, and cultural encounters as separate, we find it valuable to unpack platform encounters and exchanges, as we describe them in

this report, as socio-technical and digital-cultural texts that hold within them the working out of macro and micro phenomena. Why and how rural, urban, migrant, and local workers take up gig work and invest in certain kinds of smartphones, cars, scooters, friendships, relationships, and uniforms cannot be attributed only to economic rationality or macro-sociological factors. But, simultaneously, in addition to these material cues, the conversations between gig workers, the norms they hold, and the norms that are in the process of being worked out as they go through their daily motions and emotions, their changing fashioning of the self, the perplexity resulting from daily work within an environment where they get very little information beforehand – all these are important forms of evidence to understand the human-machine encounter within a global South context and the resultant transformation of the self and society. Class, gender, and caste power in urban India are constantly being asserted, challenged, and reworked, not just through visible, large-scale social movements, but also through habits of consumption, intimate conversation, and encounters with the ‘other’. In the field reports that follow, researchers have tried to mine and attend to these daily intimate platform encounters to produce traces of what is ongoing and still being worked out: the process of platformisation and its social, cultural, and digital effects.

When we imagined this project, we were responding to some of the gaps as well as the disciplinary orthodoxy of scholarship that dictates platform studies and digital labour scholarship. We deliberately wanted to follow and replicate more generative approaches to the study of capitalisms and platform capitalism in this case. To that effect, we wanted to focus on the lifeworlds and labouring practices of gig workers, looking beyond the money they make through apps, how they are treated by platform companies, and how they resist their algorithmic management. As we succeeded in some measure through each field report, our aim was to recentre gig platform scholarship around *who* these workers are as urban dwellers, as gendered, caste, and class-ed bodies navigating Indian city spaces, and how their aspirations, constraints, and understandings of success, money, safety, and respect inform their encounters with the platform company, customers, police personnel, and the app itself.

We, the team at the Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore, as well as co-principal investigator (PI), Noopur Raval, and field researchers, Anushree Gupta, Rajendra Jadhav, Sarah Zia, and Simiran Lalvani, are grateful to the Azim Premji University Research Grants Programme for their generous sponsorship and support for the project. This

project contributes to thinking about the Future(s) of Work theme that is an active area of inquiry within the university and beyond. To reiterate, digital labour and platform studies scholarship in India and the global South is still at a nascent stage. Since the time we conceptualised, conducted, and analysed this gig work research, more studies have emerged (including studies by other researchers at CIS), and our report adds to this growing field of inquiry. The insights we present far from foreclose the questions or even the lines of inquiry that we open here. The report is structured as follows: we begin by reflecting on the changes in the gig work landscape after the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in terms of how the pandemic has affected working-class communities, and, by extension, those who work in the platform economy. Subsequently, we present individual field reports by three field researchers, Sarah Zia, Simiran Lalvani, and Anushree Gupta, who reflect on their studies of gig work in Mumbai and Delhi, respectively. The report ends with a short conclusion and some methodological reflections that we gathered during the project.

2

Mapping Platform Work in India

Gig economy platforms in India provide a variety of urban services – mobility, domestic work, food delivery, beauty, and wellness – through smartphone apps. It is estimated that digital labour platforms earn at least USD 50 billion per year (Graham et al., 2019). These platforms include ride hailing, food delivery, personal services, and digital content creation. There are approximately 40 million platform workers in the global South alone: they constitute some 1.5 per cent of the total global workforce (Heeks, 2018). Some estimates suggest that approximately three million people are employed in gig work in India (Banik and Padalkar, 2021), with that number predicted to rise to over six million by the end of 2021. Two important global trends have shaped the story of platforms, especially of platform work. In different ways, unemployment and under-employment are global problems (Heeks, Eskelund, Gomez-Morantes, Malik, and Nicholson, 2020). India is expected to add about 350 million new people to its workforce by 2022 (Saini, 2015). Given that countries in South and Southeast Asia also form the world’s largest migrant labour hubs, such a shift in workforce demographics will have massive implications for domestic, regional, and international labour markets. The second important trend points to increased connectivity, which has made technologically mediated real-time matching of demand and supply possible globally. As the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports, within a decade, overall internet connectivity in all forms has gone up from 15 per cent to over 40 per cent of the world’s population.¹ In India, the emergence of platforms also coincided with the ‘Jio explosion’. Reliance Jio, the telecom network launched by its parent company, Reliance, in 2015, with an initial investment of about USD 42 billion, distributes its services through a network of more than 150,000 small electronic retailers (Mukherjee, 2019).

¹ I.T.U. (n.d.). Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2019. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/Facts/FactsFigures2019.Pdf>. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>

Within digital labour scholarship, platforms and platformisation have been placed along the continuum of post-Fordist reorganisation of labour practices. Platform labour has been studied for its impact on otherwise declining or stagnant national wages, long hours, and physically laborious and mentally taxing ‘menial’ work (Aloisi, 2019; De Groen, Kilhoffer, Lenaerts, and Mandl, 2018). Many critics of platform work have emphasised the lack of minimum wage enforcement (Collier, Dubal, and Carter, 2017; Jarrahi, Sutherland, Nelson, and Sawyer, 2020; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018). They argue that platforms have resorted to deliberate misclassification of platform workers as ‘not employees’ to avoid giving them employment benefits or paying them minimum wages. Critics, activists, and digital labour scholars have focused predominantly on gig work, arguing that it is not really as flexible as platform companies portray. Some have shown how the algorithmic management through which platforms match workers and consumers is opaque or ‘blackboxed’ (Moore and Joyce, 2020; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016) and thus impossible to challenge or reason with. Arbitrary and profit-driven algorithmic logics compel gig workers to work long hours and perform extensive emotional and communicative labour to maintain their ratings so that they can continue working on gig platforms. The lack of sick leave or other job benefits induces further precarity when workers meet with an accident or fall sick on the job. Although this varies across countries, many scholars have also shown how gig work is not just a part-time or casual gig on the side; rather, to do it profitably, most gig workers end up doing the work full-time.² In the global North, as ‘independent contractors’, gig workers also have to absorb the material costs associated with their work (maintaining their cars, getting permits, arranging for uniforms, and meeting fuel and mobile data costs) (Raval and Dourish, 2016).

Although not as sizable, there now exists an excellent, growing body of scholarship on gig work as digital labour in the global South, including India. In a series of studies of crowdwork on platforms such as Amazon’s Mechanical Turk as well as other app-based platforms (Anwar and Graham, 2021; Graham and Anwar, 2019), researchers have reported on the state of digital labour in sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia, and South Africa. One of the key insights that these researchers provide is the creation and availability of a ‘global labour market’ (2019) and how it impacts social and economic mobility in the global South. Graham and colleagues have also noted that the proliferation of crowdwork

and app-based work has resulted in a loosening up of local labour markets, something that we also observed in Bengaluru and other parts of India. Since prior to the availability of digital platforms, aspects of work such as job-seeking, job discovery, communication about work, and managing expectations of work and payments were all intricately tied to demonstrating one’s familiarity with the local linguistic, ethnic, and regional dynamics, gaining work as an outsider or a newcomer was relatively hard. It meant that newcomers had to rely on personal networks and endure a fair bit of exploitation, since they would have no leverage and be vulnerable to hostility from local workers. In another study of Indian Uber drivers, Prabhat et al (2019) argue that in a country like India, with an ‘exploding demography’, widespread unemployment, and a systemic lack of contract enforcement mechanisms, Uber and ride-hailing platforms in general are driving micro-entrepreneurship by offering migrants from smaller towns the opportunity to become small business owners in the city.

In their paper, Ahmed et al (2016) studied app-based auto-rickshaw drivers in Bengaluru and highlighted concerns about driver welfare, arguing that the Ola app has not changed the inherent conditions of vulnerability that characterises rickshaw driving as work within the city. Kameswaran et al (2019) studied how app-based mobility aided visually impaired users by providing them with contextual and social configuration of space. Kasera et al (2016), who studied ride-hailing in Namibia, argued that the ‘tempo’ and ‘pace’ of mobility platforms designed in the global North did not align with the established work practices of local cab drivers. Beyond mobility, Surie and Koduganti (2016) have shown how app-based work allowed new rural migrants to accumulate short-term wealth in Bengaluru. In another paper, Surie et al (2019) also explored how app-based work, including ride-hailing and food delivery, provided immediate and accessible work to rural youth in Karnataka, who, in the face of prolonged drought and agrarian distress, began migrating to Bengaluru, the closest urban centre. In a paper on app-based beauty and wellness workers in Bengaluru, Raval and Pal (2019) studied how workers used the formal features, design, and infrastructure of the app to carve a professional identity and establish themselves as dignified professionals.

² Rosenblat, A. (n.d.). What Motivates Gig Economy Workers ^ H03A10. HBR Store. Retrieved June 9, 2021, from <https://store.hbr.org/product/what-motivates-gig-economy-workers/H03A10>

It is important to note that debates on flexibility and flexibilisation, precarity, and platform capitalism cannot be mapped in a straightforward manner to the majority of the labouring world located in the proverbial global South, just as they do not apply to migrants, undocumented peoples, single mothers, and many others in the West who have already been non-standard (freelance, part-time, independent contractors, or illegally employed) workers for a long time. Some global North scholars are now beginning to reorganise their inquiries of gig work along other axes such as migration (Van Doorn, Ferrari, and Graham, 2020), gender, race, and so on, and have already begun offering a remarkably different and heterogenous picture of who participates in platform work and their motivations for it, thus offering new ways to make sense of the new phenomenon that is app-mediated work.

Another emergent subgroup of studies that is relevant to this report is the literature on mutual aid networks that sustain platform work. Responding to the limits of the binary framing (exploitation/empowerment) of platforms and their social and economic impact, reporting from the Philippines, Sorriano and Cabanes (2019; 2020) offer 'entrepreneurial solidarities' as a framework to attend to the solidarities forged by gig workers. These solidarities, they explain, are 'characterized by competing discourses of ambiguity, precarity, opportunity, and adaptation... articulated and visualized through ambient socialities'. Far from a simple, passive acceptance of neoliberal discourses around digital labour (as flexible, empowering, and 'the future of work'), the authors show how Filipino gig workers' communing both contributes to their ability to push for structural changes but also at times undermines their resistive potential as a group. Qadri (2021b) and Qadri and Raval (2021) have also written about mutual aid networks in Jakarta and Bengaluru, respectively, calling for a re-examination of how we think, locate, and identify, and what we, as scholars, recognise as strategies to build worker power. Both Qadri (2021a) and Raval (2021) have also pointed to a range of subversive techno-social tactics and pedagogies that gig workers have developed along the way, such as doing math or producing personal calculations to counter algorithmic accounts of work and compensation.

3

Audioscapes of the Platform Economy

TENTATIVE BRIEF ABOUT THE AUDIOSCAPE

Across four locations, we find that workers' experience in the platform economy is based on what they have heard. They preface responses by saying '*Maine suna hai...*' ('I've heard...'). Workers say they hear that there might be a new platform, that they know how orders/rides are allotted, and how much they pay. Although this hearsay is fleeting, it shapes several decisions, work trajectories, and plans for the future. This is an attempt to make memes speak to the field and capture the aural aspects of work, trials, reflections, and promises floating in the everyday.

Sound editing credit: Gaurav Kapadia

4

Mehnat vs Nasha: Unpacking the Motivations of a Cab Driver

The platform economy is composed of a set of stakeholders and how they interact with each other is crucial for its operations. The three key stakeholders are a) the customers, b) the service provider company, and c) a layer of mediator-workers (often referred to as partners) who do the final on-site delivery of the service. Technology is what binds the three stakeholders, as the app becomes the site where the service is ordered and marks the first point where the relationship between the three is created.

The global discourse on platform work is increasingly focusing on understanding the new-age gig worker. Debates on whether gig work is liberating or exploitative have plagued both popular media and academia. While there is a general consensus that all is not rosy for the modern-day gig worker (as some of these companies would like us to believe), there is a greater need to better understand qualitatively the motivations, aspirations, and ambitions of a gig worker.

According to the ILO, not only is it difficult to get an exact estimate of how many people are taking up this work – negotiating a fair and just pay for the same is also a concern.³ Further, the ILO warns that this kind of work can put societies at risk if platform-based employment is the only type of work available, replacing more formal setups that include benefits and some form of social security.⁴ Therefore, just an understanding of the structural relationship between the gig worker and the platform company is insufficient to highlight the precarity of modern-day gig work in a context where several countries are seeing an increase in the number of people ‘opting’ for gig work. Despite the structural similarities of platform work in a globalised world, there are country-specific nuances and caveats that must be highlighted for a holistic understanding. Additionally, there are sector-specific peculiarities that must be noted to move beyond the generic terms of ‘micro-entrepreneurship’ and ‘flexi-work’.

³ International Labour Office – Geneva. (2017). A Reflection on the Future of Work and Society. Geneva: ILO.

⁴ Ibid.

In this section of the report, I describe how cab drivers in New Delhi view their work. While I framed my questions in terms of working hours and earnings, the drivers often employed a singular narrative to describe their motivations, aspirations, and ambitions. The discussion around cab work can be encapsulated in just one word that every cab driver uses – mehnat (toil). When asked what one needed to thrive in this business, they all replied that it was important to do mehnat. The many definitions of mehnat included control over earnings, a sense of guarantee that if you are on the road with your app on, then you will get rides, and importantly, the absence of ghulami or the feeling of slavery which some had experienced in their previous jobs. While consciously mehnat connotes being on the road all the time, it often translates into driving non-stop for hours without any breaks.

ENJOYMENT & ATTACHMENT

Abundant work, idle time, and money-by-the-minute are roughly the three strands that tie together drivers' understanding and perception of their jobs.

In the first wave of ride-hailing in Indian cities, many people quit their white-collar jobs to take advantage of the novel and lucrative opportunities offered by these businesses.⁵ Media reports talked about how those who 'enjoyed' driving took this up to break free from desk jobs.⁶ The first cracks in the ecosystem appeared when drivers in different parts of the country went on strike in 2017⁷ and 2018.⁸ Discussions on declining revenues and driver dissatisfaction showed the ugly side of the business. Amidst these fluctuations emerged a new layer of stakeholders referred to as the taxidars – those who bought cars to be 'attached' to these companies while offering salary-based arrangements to the drivers.⁹

Among the career drivers I interviewed, at least three had first driven for platform companies but under this salary arrangement. It was only later when they could lease a vehicle from a platform company directly, instead of buying a brand new car on loan, that they were able to access car ownership. It is important to recognise this additional layer, as its presence meant that drivers had little control over their earnings or their time – the two key 'benefits' offered by gig work.

As J, 27, who drives a car owned by his uncle – who has multiple cars attached to Ola, all driven by his nephews – explains, 'There is money to be made in this line, no doubt. But you can only make a good amount if the car is yours.'

⁵ Das, S. P. (2015, 9 29). Some executives quit jobs to drive for Uber ... Retrieved from The Times of India: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/Some-executives-quit-jobs-to-drive-for-Uber-Ola/articleshow/49146051.cms>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Balachandran, M. (2017, February 13). Uber and Ola drivers in India are now aggressively demanding better pay and working conditions. Retrieved from Quartz India: <https://qz.com/india/908802/uber-and-ola-drivers-in-india-are-now-aggressively-demanding-better-pay-and-working-conditions/>

⁸ Ghosh, D. (2018, November 6). Ola is taking its hyper discounting model beyond India. But will it work? Retrieved from Quartz India: <https://qz.com/india/1451186/ubers-rival-ola-launches-in-new-zealand-after-australia-uk/>

⁹ Kashyap, R., & Bhatia, A. (2018). Taxi Drivers and Taxidars: A Case Study of Uber and Ola in Delhi. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 34(2), 169–194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X18757144>

But car ownership is not so straightforward a milestone. Reports around early adopters being unable to pay hefty EMIs for newly purchased cars alarmed their peers, who now think it is better to opt for cars that are offered by the company itself. For instance, M, 31, who earlier drove his own car as part of guided tours in Himachal Pradesh, felt that using his own car meant he could look for driving opportunities outside the platform ecosystem too, particularly because he harbours dreams of returning to his hometown and pursuing driving. Yet, ironically, there wasn't too much driving business in the hills in the first place – which is what prompted him to move to Delhi. On the other hand, SK, 25, who previously worked at a bank, feels that even though he could afford his own car, it is better to lease as it allowed him to wait and watch the system without making any radical decisions. Those who lease their cars from Ola and Uber pay a rent of roughly Rs. 1,000 per day. The average figure for gas and maintenance-related expenditure amounts to Rs. 500–700 per day. All 15 drivers said they aim to make roughly Rs. 2,000–3,000 per day. Maintenance and ownership-related figures vary depending on the condition of the car and the terms of ownership, but in terms of daily take-home revenue, all drivers said they made at least Rs. 1,000.

However, all of them put in 12–15 hours of work everyday. Surprisingly, many of them drove seven days a week and said they 'preferred' not taking leaves or even breaks during the day.

NASHA & MEHNAT

On one ride that I took at 4 PM, the driver, SB, informed me he had left home in the morning but hadn't had a chance to have lunch. When I asked about taking breaks, he said, 'We can take breaks but we don't need to.' SK, who has been driving for Ola for two years after quitting his bank job, said that he was now in the 'habit' of not taking breaks. He described this work as a nasha or addiction, adding that most people feel that every minute of work means more earnings, and hence they avoid any time away from the wheel. It is tough to arrive at a per-minute earning figure at this point but this linkage of every minute with earnings was a common thread across conversations.

Despite very obvious barriers to earnings and the acknowledgment of fairly similar, unvaried daily earnings, all drivers agreed that being on the road meant 'kaam aayega' ('work will come'). However, this is not to say that drivers accept any or all rides that are allocated to them. Eight out of 15 drivers said that they preferred knowing their destinations in advance, so they generally waited for passengers to call or else called themselves.

In at least three rides, the phones buzzed with the alert of the next ride, which the drivers declined, saying they would take bookings only after dropping me off. A far-fetched assumption is that it is in these stolen moments that drivers incorporate some breaks, but this is tough to confirm. Nearly all drivers said they do not take elaborate lunch breaks or pause at any specific places. They mostly ate in their cars, and not at a fixed time.

These working conditions, marked by long working hours and absent breaks, presented a contrast to their previous employment. Those who had been career drivers said that if long hours meant more money, they were up for it. For the first time, they said, they could assess their worth through the intensity of their working hours instead of their earlier, fixed salaries. Those who worked at offices before becoming drivers felt that at least they didn't have to report to anyone. Of course, they too appreciated their hours translating into money, but the 'freedom' from not talking to a boss was a significant relief.

As SK explained, ‘The problem with modern offices is that we all know what time we will enter, but not the time we will exit. I was spending nearly 12 hours at my previous workplace too, but here even the time I would have otherwise spent on my commute yields cash.’

All those who had shifted from white-collar jobs explained that they were making more money than they had at their previous jobs, and that they felt emotionally relieved at the thought of not having to deal with a reporting manager’s constant bickering. When I asked SK if he had not toiled at his previous 12-hours-a-day bank job, he said it had been marked by too much uncertainty, given that he was part of the sales and marketing team and constantly made sales pitches. ‘At least I don’t deal with that much pressure here, and neither do I hear people badmouth me all the time.’

Despite obvious mandatory requirements for earning incentives, such as driving 200 km a day, most drivers felt that their current employment had brought them greater control over their working hours than the previous ones.

Given that the (algorithmic) mechanism of how rides are allocated is unknown to both users and customers, drivers did not have a specific response when I asked them about this lack of knowledge. Almost all drivers agreed that though specific parts of NCR experience a lull in rides at certain times of the day, mostly, there was abundant work. Drivers were particularly sharp in expressing resentment at the idea of sitting idle. As one driver said,

***Agar app on rahega to duty
zarur aayegi.
(If the app is on, rides will surely
be assigned.)***

NOTE ON RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on observations from the field and semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, the majority of whom are cab drivers, in New Delhi, India. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 drivers and interacted with additional respondents working in these companies, specifically those operating customer kiosks at the metro station and service centres for Ola and Uber. I also recorded observations at sites where drivers would congregate for short breaks in different parts of the city. For the purpose of interviewing, I took rides of an average duration of 40 minutes to different parts of the city. Later, I did some follow-up questioning over the telephone. Of the 15 drivers, eight drove for Uber and seven for Ola. They can broadly be classified as career drivers and those who migrated from non-driving jobs into this business.

Among the Ola drivers, two out of seven owned the cars they were driving, while the rest had leased them from the company. Among the Uber drivers, seven owned their cars; one leased his from Uber. All but four drivers were in the age group of 25–40 years and all were migrants who had moved to Delhi sometime in the last decade.

It is crucial to note that these weren't sitting-across-a-table interviews but those conducted on the go, in a very specific setting, where the drivers were in the front and I was seated at the back. Together, we participated in a structured interaction that would conclude in a transaction. Given that this transaction could have been at the back of their minds while they revealed their actual thoughts about customers or the company, I did employ some amount of echo-probing to ensure that they trusted me as a neutral, if not an empathetic entity – at least in that moment where they shared grievances or complaints against users.

This structure of mobility-induced subversion of the face-to-face interview into a face-to-rearview format also meant I could record the postscript of my interaction – how drivers reacted to notifications for rides after mine. These observations, instead of direct questioning, helped inform my discussion on what drivers thought of the ride-allocation process and how they engaged with the unknown and invisible customer who called to ask how much time would they take to arrive. This pre-arrival phone call often sets the mood for the ride, and the questions posed by the two sides are a crucial indicator of the terms of expectation in this service delivery set-up.

The framework within which I analyse my findings certainly borrows from the existing literature on performing platform labour, precarity et al, in a tech-mediated set-up, in addition to the existing domain of mobility justice, wherein I try to identify not just the modalities of new-age models of efficient mobility, but also highlight the cost borne by invisible intermediaries. Especially in the context of the gig economy positioning itself as an 'efficient' way of service delivery, I could see an obvious binary in the 'carrier' and the 'recipient' of efficiency.

Sarah Zia

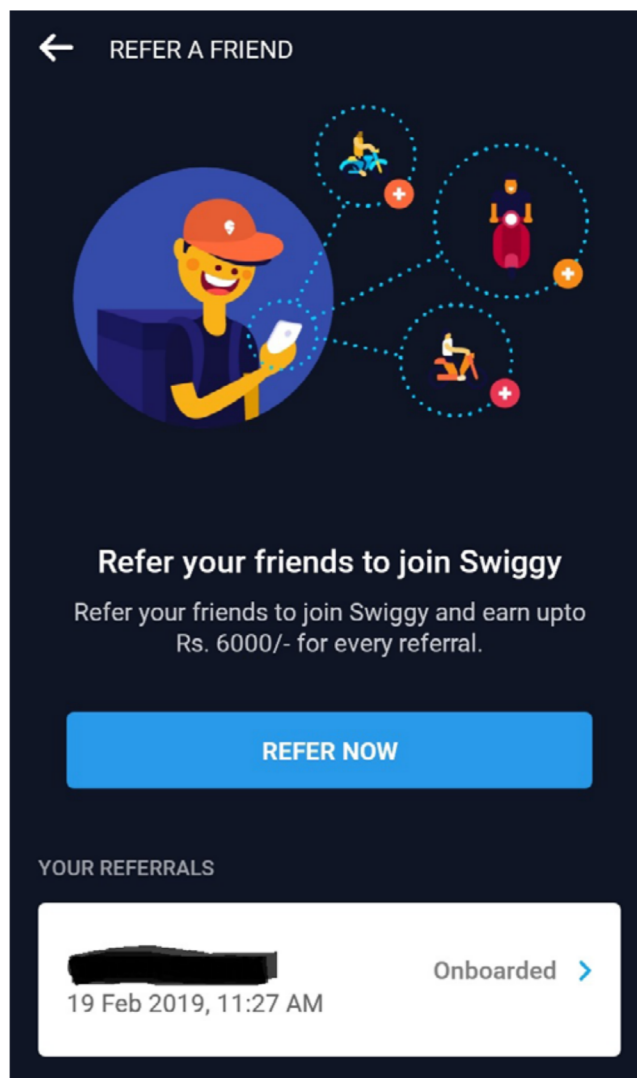
I am an independent researcher and a journalist with a leading English daily. My research interests include media, mobility, and digital ethnography.

5

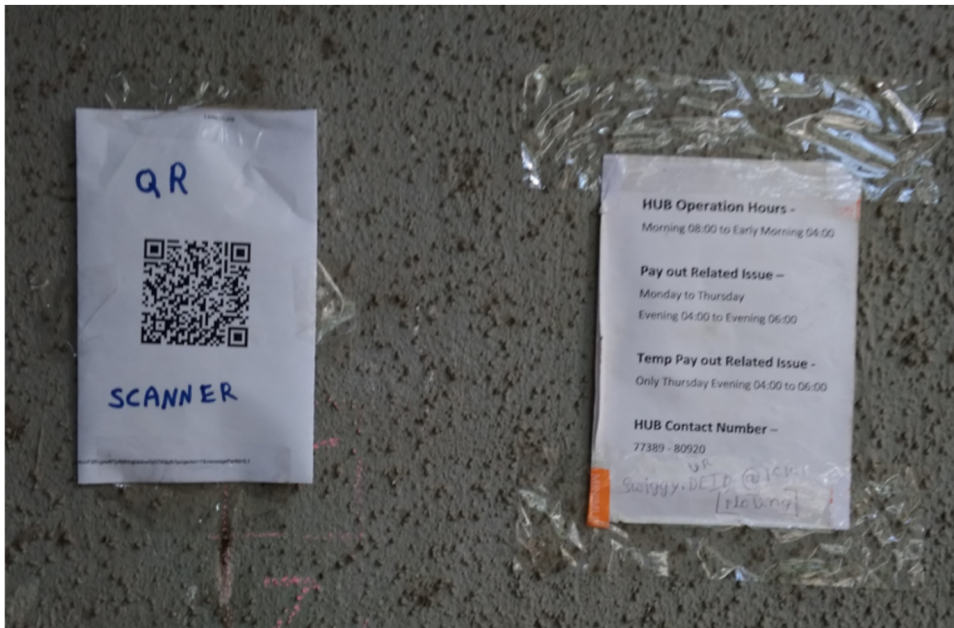
Platforms' Control of Working Bodies & Working Hours

This section of the report describes the relationship of the food delivery worker with three platform companies – Swiggy, Zomato, and UberEats – in Mumbai and the commonalities and specificities in how these companies control the workers' visibility, working day, and free time.

Once workers have joined, the companies communicate with them through updates on their mobile application for 'delivery partners' regarding promotions, referrals, new payout schemes, reminders about high order flow due to sporting events, and grooming rules.



There are also swathes of non-delivery workers, like managers, team leaders, and other support staff employed by the company who interact with delivery workers.



SWIGGY

A Swiggy hub¹⁰ in a western suburb in Mumbai had seven managers, who oversaw 2,500 workers, and saw about 300 walk-ins everyday. At the entrance of the hub there were two sheets of paper – one with a list of schedules for the redressal of various issues and the other with a QR code.

When scanned, the QR code led to a Google form that required workers to fill out their Delivery Executive IDs, location, and reason for visiting the hub. This system, devised by the newly appointed senior fleet manager, was a way of handling potentially angry workers, since it allowed managers to see who was coming in with what complaint(s) and enabled them to demonstrate awareness of workers' troubles – which made the worker feel important.

According to the managers who run the hub, it adds a 'human touch' to Swiggy's management of workers, which keeps attrition rates as low as 0.15 per cent. This is significant, as delivery workers have a reputation of working for a few months before moving to another company.

The senior fleet manager likened his position to that of a political leader – not only because both can mobilise hundreds, but also because managers have to be a step ahead of workers to ensure that they do not create 'unity'.

The hub and the non-delivery workers of the company function in anticipation of the anger of blue-collared workers. Due to this function of the hub, it could not be located in a corporate office, since it would not 'fit' there. The hub functions as both a physical manifestation of the company as well as a less tangible extension of the office into the 'private' lives of workers. The hub engages with the non-work lives of workers by organising cricket tournaments and setting aside one day a year for all Swiggy employees to leave aside their designations and work as delivery workers.¹¹ This cordial atmosphere compels workers into rule-following behaviour since it makes any kind of antagonism seem out of place. Other more obvious techniques include contests. Swiggy organises contests titled Mr Handsome and Ms Gorgeous, where workers share selfies with their bags, shoes, uniforms, and bikes to stand a chance to win Amazon vouchers upto Rs. 10,000.¹²

The company extended scrutiny by deploying auditors, based on a roster, who do a daily check of 30–35 workers' uniforms, bike and insurance papers, and manner of speaking. The auditors fill out forms – supported with photographs – on a purpose-built app even if there were no violations. This auditor was answerable only to the Bengaluru office. Such a role was created only for a few months, and one auditor was not sure what his next role would be, but he insisted that the company created new roles for which workers could be trained without much difficulty.¹³

¹⁰ A hub is an office run by Swiggy that workers can visit to address issues such as payments and ID activation.

¹¹ Swiggy Senior Manager, interview.

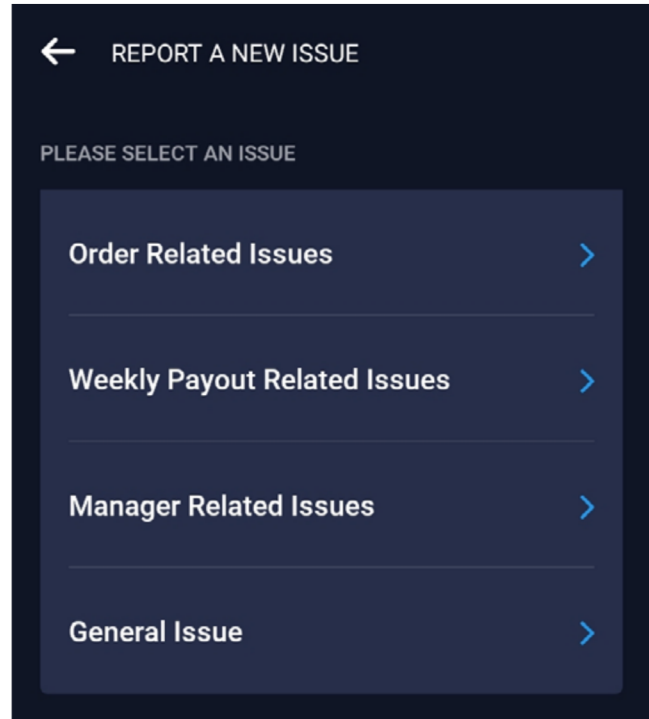
¹² Swiggy Senior Manager, interview.

¹³ Swiggy Auditor A, interview.

ZOMATO

Barring the main Delivery Partner Centre, Zomato did not have any physical offices that workers could go to register their complaints or even simply to congregate. Perhaps in anticipation of blue-collar workers' anger, like Swiggy, Zomato has split their Mumbai operations across two different locations: one for delivery partners and the other for the restaurant partners.¹⁴

The team leaders (TLs) in Zomato served as platform representatives to the workers. Earlier recruited from 'outside', now it was more common for workers – often those who show initiative in organising talks and even strikes against the company – to be made TLs who receive a fixed salary. TLs hold meetings or huddles behind malls and in public parks twice a day to troubleshoot issues that workers face like disabled IDs and payout issues. However, workers may only contact a TL after raising a ticket on the app.¹⁵



The TL is also expected to communicate messages from the company, since workers do not always read the SMSes or updates on the app. In case the TL was suspicious of fraud, like someone working on another's profile, workers were required to click selfies. These were checked against the photo in the ID or original profile by the office. If someone's photo was not convincing, their profile went into dispute and became liable to suspension or getting disabled.

Since the TL was an insider, that is, a former delivery worker, he needed to establish his new position in the hierarchy to be able to do his job without inciting other workers. He asserted his position by justifying that if one's work changes, it is a given that one's behaviour will change too ('kaam badlega toh tevar bhi badlega'). He pitched the company's rules by demonstrating their benefits for workers rather than presenting the logic of things as explained by the company. Since he had to face the angry workers on behalf of the platform, he maintained neutrality even when he considered a decision by the company to be incorrect.

¹⁴ Zomato A and I, interview.

¹⁵ Zomato V, interview.

Delivery workers were aware of the bind the TL was in as a representative of the platform, but they did not spare him from tough questions. In one huddle that I attended, the TL mentioned that the company refers to workers as ‘sir’ since they are partners. A few moments later, a delivery worker commented: ‘Company apne ko kya bolti hai? Partner. Profit toh aadha aadha baatna chhaiye’ (‘What does the company refer to us as? Partner. In that case, they should share half their profits with us’).

Workers often acknowledged the TL’s limited capacities by distinguishing him from the company, as they were often critical about the company in his presence. In a conversation about a worker who got into an accident and was not compensated, they mentioned: ‘humare TL ne humari help ki lekin company ne kuch nahi kiya’ (‘Our TL helped us, but the company did not do anything’).

Despite the presence of a TL and reassurances that the company penalises errant customers and not just workers,¹⁶ the workers felt like they were unheard. During the Indian Premier League (IPL) season in late March 2019, Zomato increased workers’ delivery area to 15 km to respond to the order flow. Workers complained that they could not cover the order targets but the office suggested that workers resign if they could not fulfil requirements and TLs could not do much. In a YouTube video that a delivery worker shared with me, one worker pointed out that the company sometimes cares for customers at the cost of the workers and expects workers to do the same:

You [the company] are making new rules and not asking for our views, but only those of customers. Customers are human; aren’t we human? Customers keep troubling us with their calls, and when we call Zomato customer care, it takes 15–20 minutes, and they do not receive our calls.¹⁷

¹⁶ Zomato I TL.

¹⁷ Rangsharda Hotel Maidan Zomato Strike (Mumbai Police ko Salaam News, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3AVCi-i9KVg>

UBEREATS

UberEats workers in Mumbai visit the Head Office in Kurla to join the company, submit identity proof and other documents, and resolve payment issues. At the time of my fieldwork in 2019, the company had launched more locally spread UberSpot and UberDost centres. These centres onboard new joinees as well as address common issues but were not commonly known by workers in my sample.¹⁸



A senior operations expert based out of the head office had several experts who reported to him. These experts engaged with workers at the time of joining, and in resolving conflicts and around payments and disabled IDs. The senior expert had joined as an intern when he was pursuing his B.Tech. Later he got absorbed into the company because of the guidance of a manager who helped him grow despite his introversion. He spoke of how the company allowed workers to build not only soft skills like email-writing but also by learning programming languages like SQL. This aligned with his plans to pursue an MS from the US. He argued that the company took care of logistics workers too. If they worked hard, the company ensured that the app would recognise it:

*Your app speaks for you... your app shouts out for you whether you are a high[ly] engaged driver partner or [a] less engaged driver partner, theek hai [okay?] If you say you are high[ly] engaged, your app has the feedback or the proof ki [that] you're highly engaged.*¹⁹

Delivery workers did not share this faith in the app's promise of rewarding those who were 'highly engaged.' They observed that although it recorded minute movements and customer reviews, their payments were not based on those recorded factors alone. One worker from Bandra explained that even if workers were highly engaged, how much each worker cost the company would influence their future in the company. He mentioned that the company preferred new workers since they were paid much less than older hires. He explained that when he was first hired a few years back, workers were paid Rs. 600 on 15 orders, whereas those hired in early 2019 or had acquired new IDs then get paid Rs. 250 on 12–15 orders. He explained his own dismissal in this way. He was one of the highest-rated delivery workers who informally trained new joinees. Despite his star performance, he was one of the 700 workers in Mumbai who found their IDs blocked in February 2019.²⁰

¹⁸ Swiggy C and UberEats Y, interview; UberEats B, December 4, 2019.

¹⁹ UberEats Senior Expert.

²⁰ Ex UberEats S, interview.

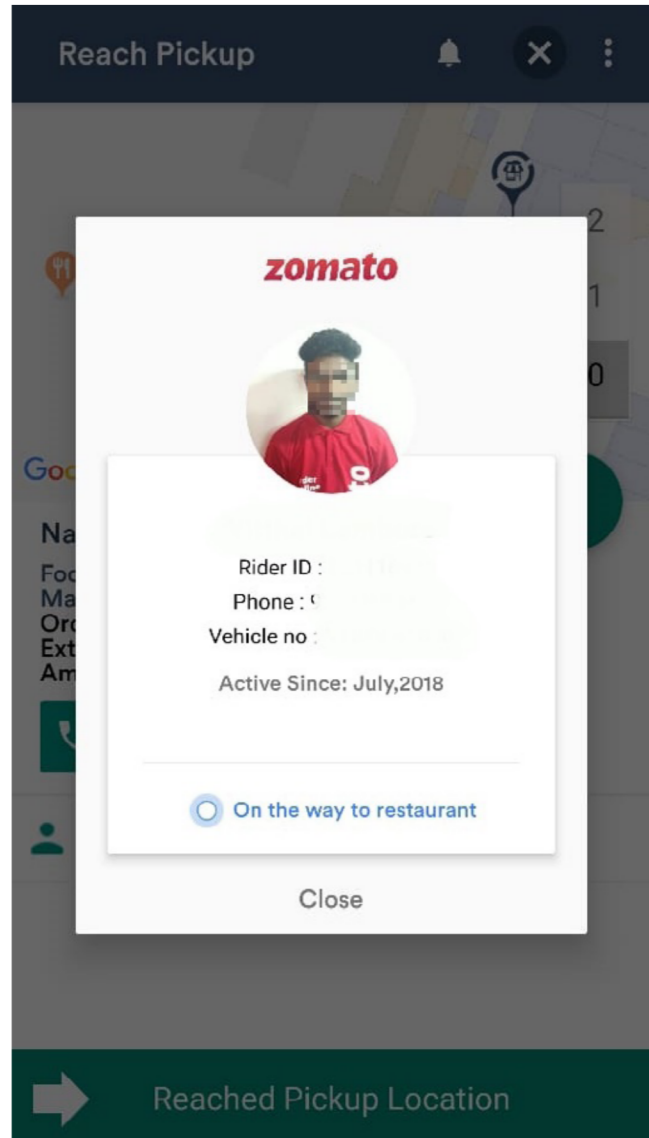
BRANDED, UNIFORM WORKING BODIES

Since workers are hyper-visible representatives of the platform, their actions and how they are perceived are understood to affect the reputation of and possibly demand for the service. Given the seeming centrality of public perception, platform companies monitor and control what workers look like and how, why and where they are visible. The granularity involved in anticipating what different types of customers might perceive as respectable or impressive service is made clear through the existence and role of Swiggy's Starbucks Captains. These workers are stationed in the Starbucks outlet to liaise between the baristas and delivery workers. They wear the Starbucks uniform - coffee shop camouflage - and also serve as another check to the grooming standards of the delivery worker. If s/he was not properly groomed, the Captain could reassign the order to another.²¹

Platform companies control workers' appearances through uniforms provided for a fee, which is a t-shirt in the company's colours and its logo. All platform companies have auditors to check workers' grooming, uniforms, and behaviour. Auditors hired on a short-term basis show up without warning in areas where workers congregate. They are empowered to fine workers who are not in their uniforms or have unacceptable grooming standards, which include not wearing shoes or full pants and sporting coloured hair.

Delivery workers sometimes do not wear the uniform for a variety of reasons – shame, heat, or the need to go elsewhere after work. They circumvent being caught by auditors by tipping one another off about their presence.²²

How workers look serves another function. Uniforms brand working bodies as respectable and reliable. They serve as identity cards that allow workers access to certain spaces, like residential buildings and office complexes. While workers' apps also have their ID cards, the exigencies of the everyday situations in which they have to be produced do not accommodate soft copies of ID cards.



²¹ Swiggy Fleet Manager, interview.

²² Ex UberEats, S, interview.

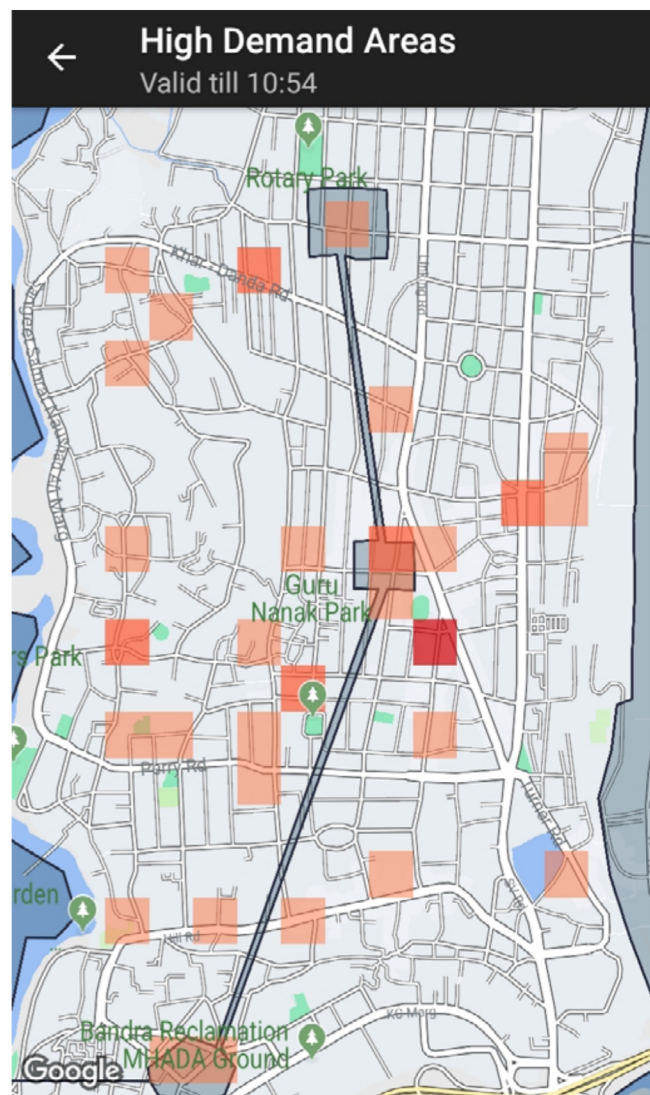
Since those demanding IDs are often security guards and the traffic police, who do not always have the patience for the worker to pull out their phone, open their app, and show them their ID card. Additionally, an ID card that is not a hard copy does not augur confidence. However, many workers recount having to meet the additional condition of showing their identity card, since ‘anyone can wear a t-shirt.’

Despite this respectable, branded appearance, the uniform-wearing worker is excluded from other spaces. Delivery workers waited for orders in the food court or outside restaurants in malls,²³ but due to their uniforms, they were visible as workers sitting in a space for consumers. Some mall authorities did not allow workers to wait for orders on the grounds that they hamper the ‘presentation’ of the mall. So a system of ‘mall boys’ has been devised to keep the food court populated by consuming publics. Engaged by Swiggy and Zomato, mall boys in plain clothes ferried food from the food court to waiting workers in two shifts and were paid Rs. 500 as daily wages. The delivery workers I spoke to used a WhatsApp group to share screenshots of the orders mall boys had to pick up from restaurants in malls.²⁴

THE WORKING DAY(S), WEEK, & FREE TIME

Starkly different from doing delivery work in shifts for a restaurant, *udupi* (upper-caste South Indian owned restaurant), or fast-food chain, app-based workers are able to choose when to work and for how long. Yet, an examination of these decisions and rhythms of the working day and week reveals constraints posed by demand peaks. These peaks occur during the working day at lunch and dinner times, on particular days in the week, and on festivals and during sporting events.

Visible to workers through visualisations in the form of ‘heat maps’, demand peaks are suggestions to move.



²³ Zomato I TL, interview.

²⁴ Zomato, V, interview.

But any acts not in line with suggestions invites punitive action, like the disabling or blocking of IDs. One worker went outside her 'area'²⁵ and found herself logged out of the app. Almost immediately, the company called her, asking what she was doing so far away from her area.²⁶ To log back in, workers have to contact a TL or manager who identifies their reason and explains what workers did incorrectly. However, once an ID is blocked, the matter rests with the head office, and the outcome is less predictable.

Within the working day, companies identify 'peak hours' for lunch (12–3 PM) and dinner (7–9 PM). If workers are found to be idle, they receive a message urging them to start moving. If they ignore it, their IDs get blocked.²⁷ Similarly, if they reject orders more than twice, their IDs are blocked.²⁸

Workers' definition of their working week is informed by the platforms' anticipation of high demand. Across apps, workers are allowed one day's leave between Monday and Thursday but companies generally do not permit leaves on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.²⁹ Even if a company does not require the worker to inform them about taking leaves, the order flow is higher on Friday and the weekend. Thus, choosing to take leave then means losing out on earnings.³⁰ One worker found his ID suspended because he could not work on the weekend. He explained that he had been unable to inform the company beforehand because he had learnt about friend's suicide and tried explaining to managers that there was no way for him to foresee the tragedy.³¹

Even when working outside of demand peaks, moving is understood as important in order to get orders. A TL tells workers: 'order dhundo; order tumhein nahi dhundega (Look for orders; the order is not going to look for you).' In his opinion, this active use of free time to look for work is what distinguishes hardworking from lazy workers. Across platforms, some combination of auditors, fleet managers, TLs, and other representatives of the platform companies enforce control over the workday and week and the visibility of working bodies. On the other end, platforms give individual customers a degree of control over workers through ratings. As a group, customer demand shapes the peaks on the basis of which companies nudge and penalise workers. Workers' experiences are also influenced by the views of a diversely constituted wider public – potential and current customers and figures who enable delivery work, like security guards, traffic police, and mall authorities. Platform companies do not award any special controls within the platform to this wider public, but work necessitates engagement with them, and has implications for workers.

²⁵ Upon joining, delivery workers are assigned a fixed area - between 5-8 kms within which they are expected to pick up and drop off food.

²⁶ Swiggy Woman A.

²⁷ Zomato I TL.

²⁸ Swiggy C and UberEats Y.

²⁹ Swiggy Fleet Manager, interview.

³⁰ Zomato V.

³¹ Swiggy S.

NOTE ON RESEARCH METHODS

This study covered three groups of respondents. One was of 13 app-based workers associated with Swiggy (six), Uber Eats (two), and Zomato (five) and delivering food in the Western Suburbs in Mumbai, India. This group includes one cyclist and four women. The second group was of eight delivery workers associated with restaurants and udupis (five), a non-vegetarian restaurant (one), and a fast food shop (two). Also, I interviewed one chef at a cloud kitchen to understand the differences between app-based and restaurant delivery and the impact of apps on the work of food delivery. The last group was of seven managerial and supervisory workers who worked as platform company representatives to workers.

I recruited app-based delivery worker respondents in three ways. I met some through the comments I left on YouTube videos of food delivery worker strikes in Mumbai. These comments had a short introduction to the study and to me. I found others by visiting areas that are considered high-demand, based on other workers' suggestions or my own observations. I also made contact with workers who were willing to participate in this study through my friends who order food regularly. I interviewed auditors while waiting in the field and managerial staff when I visited the companies' offices, whose addresses I found online or with direction from workers. I recruited non-app-based delivery workers through snowballing and my contacts in a transport workers' union.

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6

Varieties of Labour in Platform Work

Gig work offers entrepreneurial freedom, promises of flexible routines, and the opportunity to work autonomously and ‘be your own boss’. The platform economy’s business model claims to connect buyers directly with sellers through digital applications. It has been hailed as a revolutionary tool for providing economic opportunities based on micro-entrepreneurial approaches. But the reconfiguration of work and productivity through technological mediation also hides the constraints and terms of employment that belie the very freedoms that this work affords. Socio-historical contingencies and ground realities of taxi driving complicate the political agnosticism of gig work narratives that promise unbridled economic growth and productive employment opportunities for all. Not anyone can drive an Uber. Indeed, platform work is not just an easy way to earn money on the side.

Research on the ride-hailing sector reveals practices of algorithmic control and coercive competitiveness produced through information asymmetries that are inherent to the design of digital platforms (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). These technical systems tend to mask the multifaceted labour that platform workers – in this case, the drivers – perform and the risks that this work begets (Chen 2017). Platforms then cease to be purely economic entities that can be described only in relation to market forces and metrics. Drawing attention to the material imprints of digitisation and platformisation helps uncover the precarity that firms and businesses inject and/or exacerbate in their tussle for authority over social space.



Mumbai has had taxi drivers for decades now, with a long history of transport labour migration flowing into the city. The urban landscape, the history of the profession,³² and the socio-cultural fabric of the city undergird the everyday experiences for most drivers in the city. Contrary to the imagery associated with the entrepreneurial figure of the driver in the platform economy, the bulk of the workforce consists of drivers who have experience in the radio taxi sector or have driven a kaali-peeli (black and yellow cabs). Two respondents stand out in particular; in narrating their life stories, they mention that taxi driving was an intergenerational profession in their families. Both respondents reported that their grandfathers were drivers and that the profession held importance in their social lives. Their grandfathers' legacies impacted their professional trajectories and prompted them to start driving for aggregator platforms.

Migrants and men from marginalised communities dominate the platform labour force. Uber and Ola advertisements and marketing campaigns push the image of self-reliant service professionals as driver partners who go out of their way to provide 'high-quality' service to customers (Uber India 2017; Ola 2018). However, S's experience of working as a taxi driver and the financial implications of his attempt at micro-entrepreneurship indicate the extent of false advertising in the platform economy. He said,

'After purchasing a car, I have incurred a debt of Rs. 2 lakh. When I couldn't earn from driving my own car, I started driving for someone else. I have three kids and I haven't been able to save anything. All my earnings go towards everyday needs, food, and other household expenses. I also have my parents to take care of. But life goes on.'

S, Ola Partner



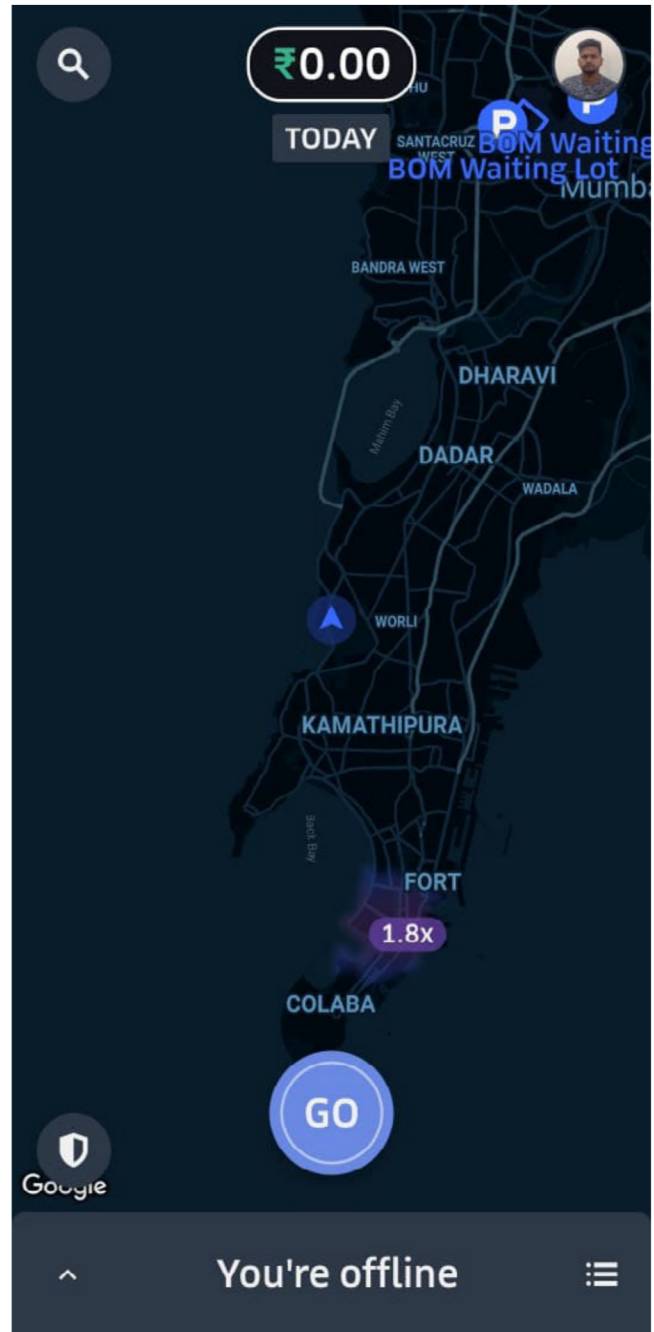
In this report, I present findings from fieldwork conducted in the ride-hailing sector in Mumbai. I trace the organisation of work, modes of labour, and associated risks that underpin the social realities of gig work. These are analytically organised as three kinds of labour³³ – spatial and temporal labour; affective or emotional labour; and infrastructural and data labour. Highlighting the socio-cultural and historical situatedness of these practices, I problematise uncritical claims that regard platformisation as positively innovative.

³² For instance, Bedi (2018) has studied the chillia community, which has historically dominated the taxi driving workforce, and their socio-culturally embedded labour practices.

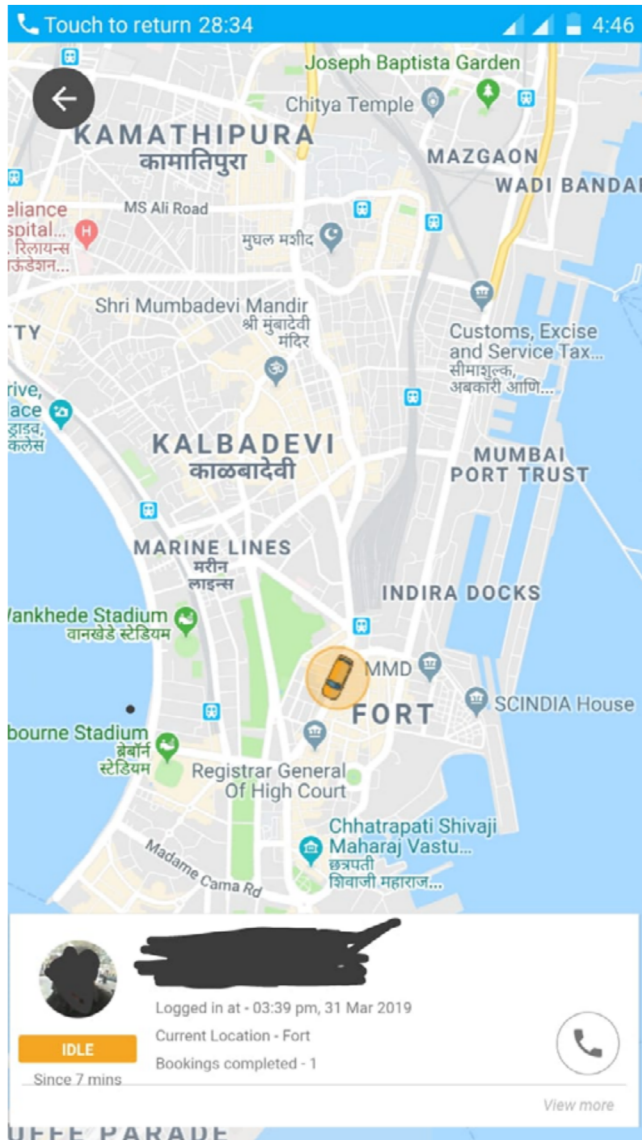
³³ My classification is similar to Fuchs and Sevignani's (2013) cognitive, communicative, and cooperative digital work.

SPATIAL & TEMPORAL LABOUR

Digital economies are characterised by spatial and temporal dissonance created by flows of data and the constantly shifting nodes in the networks. Traditional services are rapidly being digitised and offered via smartphone applications. As these shifts have been largely concentrated in urban areas, changes occur in both the social relations and built environments of cities. Emergent 'digital geographies' collapse physical distance, blurring the lines between the local and the global (Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski 2018). Uber drivers in Mumbai then become workers embedded in a global chain of production, as their labour helps accumulate profit for an international corporation. Obfuscating spatial boundaries and temporal limits are in fact essential features of digital platforms that offer 24/7 services across cities and localities. Aggregators like Uber and Ola provide round-the-clock taxi services, at customers' 'fingertips'. Drivers are assured flexible working hours and high economic returns. They perform what Anderson (2017) describes as spatial labour on an everyday basis, in transcending boundaries of the private and public, of gated communities and narrow bylanes, and of city centres and borderlands.



While the proliferation of these cab services in Mumbai has increased options for mobility and transportation alternatives for customers (catering to populations who have higher purchasing power), this flexibility is paradoxical in several ways. Drivers I interviewed attributed their uncertain routines to the absence of fixed incomes, which translates to long working hours in order to complete incentive targets and ensure higher earnings. These demands on their daily schedules require constant adjustment; thus, the work eats into drivers' personal time and makes their everyday lives extremely uncertain. While drinking water is relatively manageable, drivers rely on street food and other available alternatives, rather than



carrying food from home, due to erratic schedules. The availability of public washrooms is another consideration that is also mediated by their social identities.

For instance, H, a driving partner and owner with Uber, expressed concerns around these personal conveniences:

‘...since I’m a muslim, I can’t pee anywhere. I need a toilet and water for that, so I carry a two-litre water bottle. If there is a decent toilet, it feels good. I don’t feel ashamed.’

H, Uber Driving Partner and Owner

The sociality of driving in Mumbai is closely associated with the vibrant street food culture in Mumbai – sidewalks and pavements often become sites of social exchange, leisure, and sustenance for individuals constantly on the move (Ray 2018). In line with Solomon’s (2015) analysis of the politics of street food in Mumbai and its embeddedness in urban spaces, dislocated platform economy workers partake in the culture of round-the-clock available food, be it at the vada pav stalls on the pavement or McDonald’s outlets in malls. Indicating parallels with working-class traditions prevalent in the city, the platform worker is then inserted into the socio-cultural assemblage that has historically constituted the urban space in Mumbai.



Inside the taxi cab, drivers' customised workspaces demonstrate the overlaps between the personal and the professional, which the platform model necessitates. Drivers decorate their dashboards with trinkets and artefacts, personalising the car with religious idols, the national flag, in-car stereo sets, or other personal items, besides the wires and smartphone devices through which they access the platform. The lack of distinction between workspace and personal space is countered by an assertion of the self while working (Ng and Höpfl 2014).

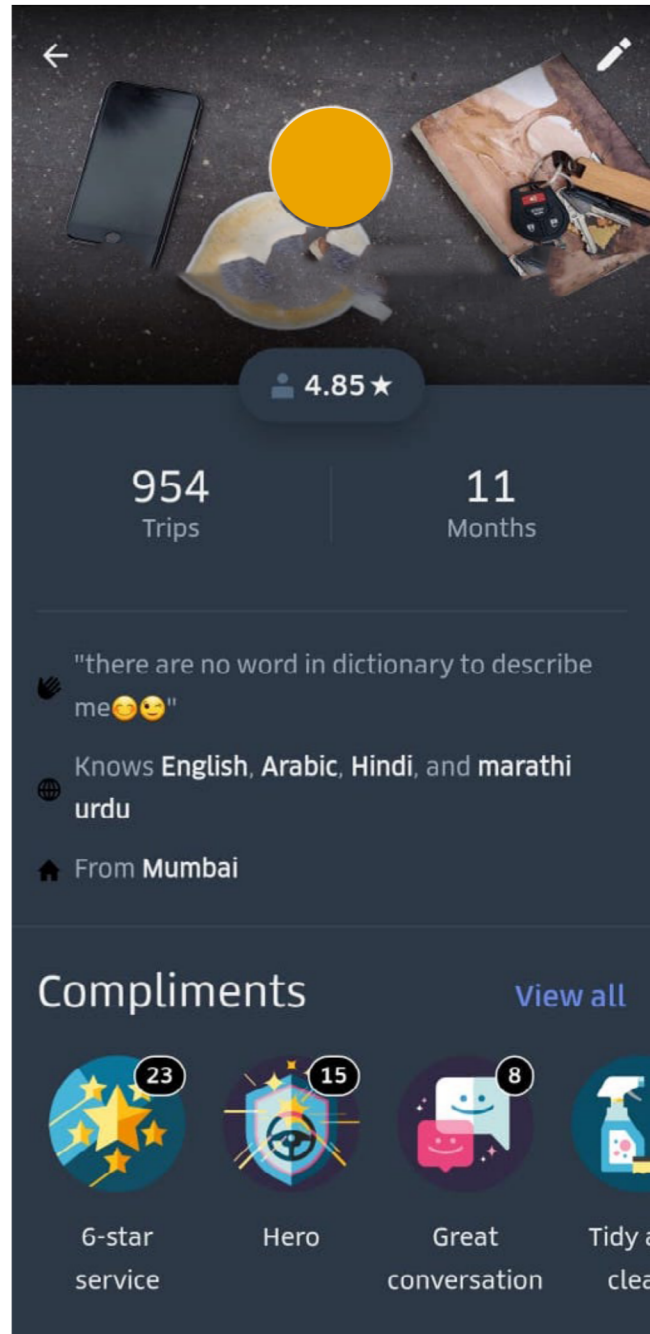
However, the blurring of leisure and work time has psychosocial implications for workers (Fischer 2011) and could lead to spatio-temporal disorientation. Drivers suffer as a result of over-exposure to hostile traffic environments, long distances, and exhausting workdays. Considering Sharma's (2008) framing of taxis as media in themselves, power differentials between the customers and drivers seem to crumple and overlap inside the metal body of the taxi. But the time-coordinated rides effectively wield control over the lifeworlds of the drivers, putting customers in a relatively higher position of power. Bodily risk and health issues arising from overwork and the stress of driving through congested traffic are some of the many detrimental outcomes of the digital disruption in the ride-hailing sector. Digital platforms, as Anderson (2017) argues, should be evaluated in the context of a struggle for the production of social space and the claims that various stakeholders can make on it.

AFFECTIVE OR EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Gig work involves a significant amount of emotional labour, as Raval and Dourish (2016) argue in their research on the ride-hailing sector in the United States. Bridging the gaps between the virtual and the physical, or the digital and the real, requires affective labour, along with know-how about the technicalities of the profession. Anderson (2017) describes relationships in the digital space as being predominantly rooted in notions of calculability; rating systems and GPS locations affect the interactions between the customer and the drivers inside the physical space of the cab. Drivers are expected to put on 'smiley faces' (Nixon 2009) and interact with customers in a respectful, dignified manner, lest their ratings be impacted. Providing a 'quality service' necessitates smoothing out the affective creases. But several respondents also recalled tiffs with customers as everyday occurrences. They attributed these experiences to unreasonable customer demands or minor glitches in the software which generated faulty bills or disagreements over a particular route to take through the city.

'A lot of times customers ask if they can smoke a cigarette in the car. If I refuse, they give me lower ratings – some give me one star after the trip ends. This has happened to me three or four times, followed by my work ID being blocked.'

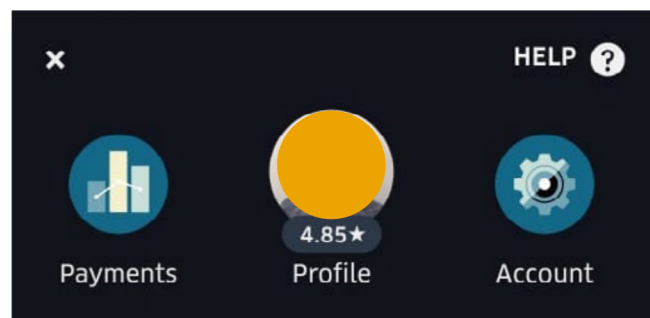
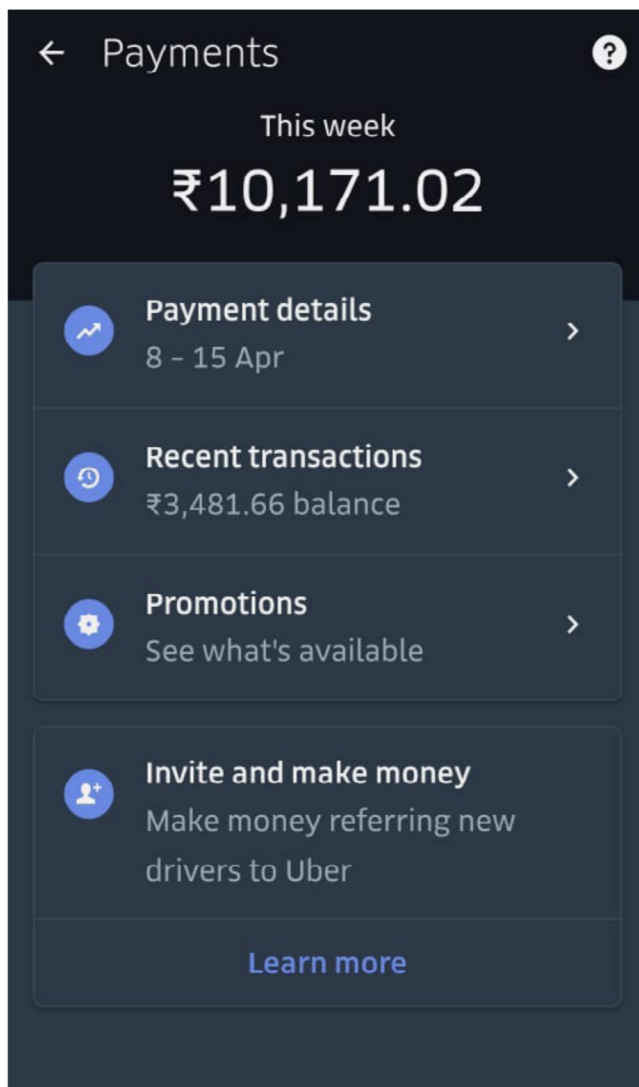
V, Ex-Ola and Uber Driving Partner and Owner



The financial stresses of working gigs are augmented by the running debts incurred while obtaining entry into the industry. When drivers are required to resolve conflicts with customers with little or no help from the aggregator companies, congeniality and good conduct are underpinned by the constant stresses and strains of working under physical and mental duress. All this contributes to the declining wellbeing of drivers – a consequence of working long hours for many consecutive days – raising serious concerns about their mental health and occupational safety. Many drivers told me that as their daily work routines became haywire, their ratings dropped drastically. Subsequently, the aggregator companies deactivated their accounts, which they felt was extremely unfair. Low morale combined with taxing working conditions also prevents drivers from learning, or developing skills or availing any other fruits of the entrepreneurial lifestyle the platforms assure. Working-class masculinities crumble in the face of insecurities, both financial and temporal, leading to disempowerment and the loss of a sense of control (Choi 2018).

Drivers are marginalised and forced to operate under conditions of severe precarity and tight control; this often leads to outbursts and violent arguments with customers and other people on the road. Many drivers described incidents in which customers verbally or physically assaulted them even if they were not at fault. Snippets of altercations between driver partners (with Ola and Uber) and their passengers, available on YouTube (Deo 2018), are typical examples of everyday conflicts. Moreover, social media is now an outlet for sharing such incidents publicly. But aggregators do not assume any responsibility for the safety and security of the drivers. While SOS buttons in the app are available for passengers, drivers do not have access to any security and safety measures, whether for legal and financial matters, personal safety, or wellbeing. If offered at all, these benefits are framed as favours or additional responsibilities, signalling the company's goodwill and, more importantly, capital resources (in the case of many startups, this includes access to the inherently complicated affairs of venture capital and investment support).

In addition to occurring because of exploitation and institutional oppression, instances of drivers getting into ugly arguments with customers, sometimes resorting to violence, also reveals a fear of the other, or the different (Anderson 2017). Indeed, a large majority of drivers in Mumbai hail from lower-caste and lower-class communities, and are often Muslims or migrant workers. The nexus of caste-class inequalities has a bearing on social relations within urban spaces, which accentuate underlying hierarchies and vulnerabilities.



There is also an element of gamification in algorithmic management systems within the gig economy, further complicating the notion of worker agency. The elaborate system of reputation mechanisms keeps in check the quality of services provided which, in turn, determines employability on the platform. Based on game theory (Pendergrass 2019), business models use reward mechanisms, such as surge pricing and quantitative incentives (for instance, based on the number of rides drivers complete), to control workers' ability to find work. These systems also choreograph workers' social interactions through constant monitoring, which severely compromises worker autonomy. The rating game appears to be highly rigged when one considers the grossly biased feedback mechanisms, which disadvantage workers on the platform far more than they advantage them by improving the quality of their service and thereby, their earnings (Chan 2019). Indeed, gamified performance evaluation metrics serve as improvised tools of labour control and become exploitative (Gandini 2019). Considering the material realities of most low-skilled workers, such as financial pressures and household responsibilities, the dismal lack of opportunities for high-paying work cumulatively create a low-level equilibrium trap for most drivers. Only a few are able to break away from this and not necessarily on favorable terms.

As a profession, driving has traditionally been low-skill work and the increasing professionalisation in the platform economy of the trade indicates a service economy turn. Prassl (2018) describes the 'Humans as a Service' model, linking the pressure to cater to customer needs, to ensure higher earnings, to the affective labour that drivers must perform. Since most drivers hail from marginalised backgrounds, superficial or forced professionalisation without adequate training programmes for acclimatisation to the job, or support systems for workers results in a greater burden on individual workers. Lags within skilling ecosystems and failures to prepare workers for job market scenarios reduce employability gains and exacerbate digital divides. Further, they retain age-old work hierarchies that make unreasonable demands on marginalised workers to make them good service professionals.

'I was able to save and buy a second car. But then the demand for Ola started declining, so the company reduced the incentives. Good facilities were still available for customers, but our incentives were reduced drastically. A lot of my cars met with accidents and a lot of other issues started cropping up. My business suffered heavy losses. I shut my shop and started driving a car myself, which I wasn't doing till then. Previously, I had employed drivers . This was two years ago. But even after I started driving, it didn't work out. So I had to surrender my car to the bank.'

R, Ex-Ola Driver Partner and Fleet Owner

INFRASTRUCTURE & DATA LABOUR

Digital infrastructure for online platforms intersects with urban infrastructure of mobility. These intersections become evident in the boundary setting exercises and everyday practices of drivers, whether geographical or social. By demonstrating the feasibility, necessity, and efficacy of technological solutions for managing and advancing urban landscapes, online platforms are recast as indispensable to modern cities. Techno-utopian imaginations of smart cities equipped with e-governance systems reimagine urbanity. While value creation is premised on the ‘data’³⁴ and labour citizens and workers provide, these techno-utopian visions also legitimise surveillance and normalising algorithmic control that diminishes individual agency. As blackbox mechanisms spill outside the platform and into civic life, the platform model creates a systematically disconnected and misinformed citizenry.

Digitised urban infrastructure is portrayed as a novelty that is highly efficient and capable of erasing old, fragmented, and hierarchical social relations. However, as social relations co-evolve with technological shifts, they tend to retain historical hierarchies of labour, unequal distribution, and access to the material gains that accrue from said technological advancement. Infrastructural labour, of which data labour is a subset, then emerges as yet another facet of labour relations within the platform economy, as technologically mediated and with extractive tendencies that entrench existing inequalities. The reconfiguration of social control and urban infrastructures is imminent in the altered materiality of a city wrought, by the advent of platform capitalism.



Research on crowdwork in the gig economy shows that collaboration and coordination between individual workers, or the communication within the crowd (Gray et al. 2016), plays a pivotal role in oiling the platform machinery. Historically, the taxi driving community in Mumbai has operated similarly, with ‘webs’ of social networks between drivers who would help each other to find work and finances, and to build a community around the trade (Bedi 2016). During the fieldwork for this study, social media groups of driver partners were crucial for understanding the everyday realities of the ride-hailing business in Mumbai. Members of the group help each other get customers, discuss the necessary maintenance for their vehicles, and inform each other about regulatory changes and compliance requirements, such as fitting the cars with speed governors or required licenses for driving tourist vehicles in the city. Even as passengers secure rides through these networks and social media groups, it reinforces the on-demand nature of the work, ensuring that drivers are constantly on the move and available during ‘peak hours’. Several respondents supplemented this finding by describing their practices of using aggregator platforms and quantifying the availability of rides according to time and areas within the city.

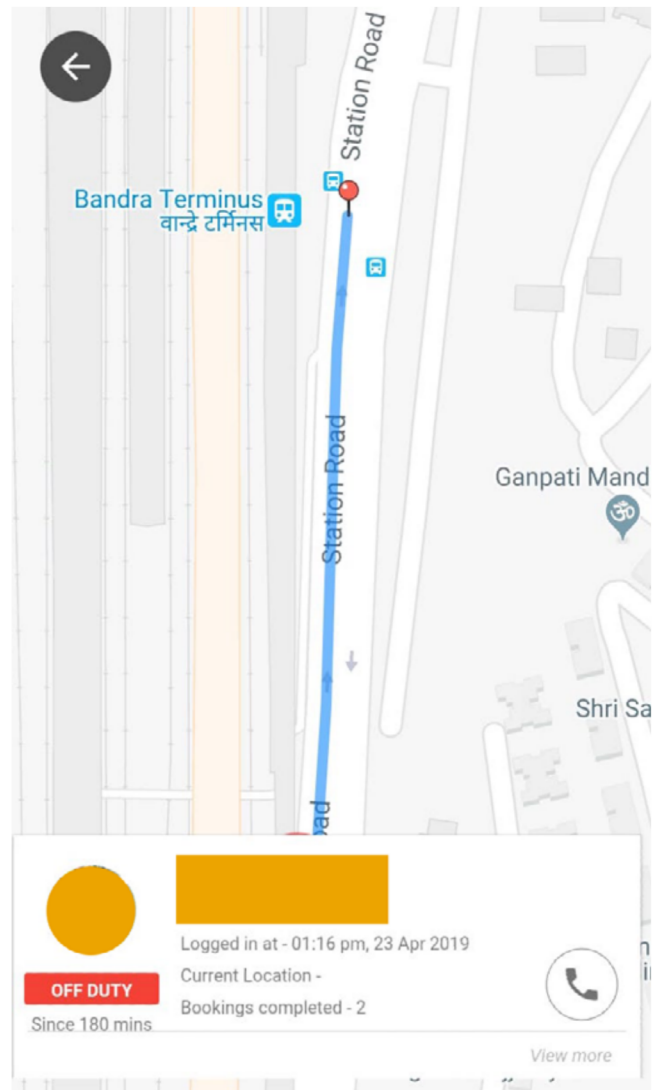
³⁴ This discussion presupposes the contextual and manufactured nature of data, as technological artefacts which are manipulated by the social, cultural, and political contexts that they are ‘mined’ from. In line with Gitelman’s (2013) analysis, the production of data and constant evolution of knowledge then preclude ascriptions of objective neutrality to the generative processes which collect, compile, and process data. Interpretative biases are imminent in engineering insights from data which frame their very extraction from ‘an otherwise undifferentiated blur’ (Gitelman 2013, 3).

Round-the-clock availability in the gig economy has implications not only for workers' everyday routines but also the city's transport infrastructure. It enables seamless mobility across the city through the day and at night. This infrastructural promise is often realised by a perpetually mobile workforce of drivers with malleable routines. While the contours of the cityscape assume a digital form via smart software models and satellite maps, the faults and gaps in the virtual outputs are corrected by engineered encounters and on-ground real world experiences of the footsoldiers of ride hailing platforms: the drivers. So while software-sorted societies establish boundaries in a technologically institutionalised urban life (Wood and Graham 2006), detailing the contributions of multiple actors and stakeholders in their construction helps to move beyond technological determinist perspectives and expand the understanding of the value platform workers create. The infrastructures of convenience in the platform economy, when posited as innovative business models, undermine the labours of its core workforce as these models fail to remunerate or even acknowledge, at times, the fundamental significance of the workers to the enterprise.

That many drivers' cars also double up as personal vehicles implies that their regulation and maintenance contributes to that of a large chunk of the personal car traffic in the city. This has implications for potential collaborations between aggregator companies and urban governance bodies such as the transport ministry, tourism, and other civic authorities, providing the former significant political and financial advantages in negotiating terms and conditions with the latter. All the while, the backbone of the platform's value creation process is the legions of drivers employed. A management-level employee at one such firm acknowledges the essential role that drivers play in making the platform model viable,

'We consider each and every driver partner as extremely important; they have also shown faith in us. It is because they are doing business, we are able to do business as a company.'

D, Uber Operations Manager



The autonomy of drivers' work routines on the platform is bounded by the mobile application, their physical location is constrained by other technologies such as Google Maps, and access to earnings is dictated by payment wallets. While each of these technologies benefits from the movement of drivers within the ride-hailing sector and across the city (by helping expand the user base, enabling passive user feedback from both the passenger and driver, providing geospatial data for improving accuracy, and so on), their intersection within the platform concentrates aggregate benefits for the platform companies. The platform functions atop a technical infrastructure, which in itself is an assemblage of various software applications, hardware systems, and users. The implementation of each technical system involves a learning curve for which the platform itself provides little meaningful support. Training support for software usage is less hands-on; it presumes basic know-how of smartphone devices which may or may not be true for many drivers.

Moreover, drivers often complain about glitches in payment calculations and biased support for customers during conflicts or when interacting with traffic police systems. The adoption of digital payments has been riddled with issues of withdrawal limits and payout schedules which inconvenience the drivers. Demonetisation in 2016 necessitated virtual payment systems across the board, at which point the hurried shift to using digital wallets assumed unprecedented political significance in India. Many respondents described serious discrepancies in fare calculation mechanisms and presented evidence from their partner applications, wherein the additions and subtractions to the invoices made no sense. Moreover, one of the prominent narratives we encountered during the fieldwork was the lack of meaningful profits from the incentive system, which were introduced as a novel reward mechanism. Most respondents agreed that the incentives were not transparent at all and added no substantial value to their earnings. This suggested that the commonly deployed business strategy was in fact just a tool used to lure drivers to the platform and to create a dependency trap.



The deplorable state of infrastructural support available for drivers is further exemplified by the meagre presence of help centres or 'sevakendras' located in hard to find corners of the city. Visits to such centres during the course of the fieldwork involved navigating bylanes and making trips to nondescript business complexes. Some of our attempts were in fact dead-ends; others were reluctant interviews which included extremely curt responses indicating the limited scope of services provided at the centres. The main service centre of a large transnational aggregator platform was slightly more accessible, albeit with bodyguards stationed outside, presumably to handle dissatisfied driver partners. The contrast between the infrastructural labour the drivers do to platforms and the support available to them from the platforms becomes even more stark when one considers the vast amount of value created by the incessant stream of mobility, as well as locational and geospatial data on urban landscapes that the drivers' movements across the city provide. However, the autosarcophagy of this data collection process becomes evident in the feedback loops which use these data to create tools of 'soft-control' (Rosenblat and Stark 2016, 3761), such as surge pricing, nudge mechanisms, and ride allocation systems. Similar to what Chen (2017) observes of Didi taxi drivers in China, the infrastructural and datafication labour favours corporate interests by creating information asymmetries and systematically disadvantaging drivers on the platform. The pervasiveness of data accumulation is accomplished by interweaving technologies with socio-economic necessities which help assemble a platform society (van Dijck 2016).

Imagining the city as a shared infrastructure is complicated by the segregated urbanities which follow from the logic and historical practices of caste, class, religion, and ethnicity. The drivers, as platform economy advertisements would have viewers believe, do not lie outside social contingencies, political traumas, or cultural assumptions stemming from their lifeworlds. While the spatial, temporal, and affective labours of platform workers account for the push to bridge many of these gaps, infrastructural labours then push us to think about reconfiguration of the urban infrastructures more deeply. Platform capitalism seeks to make a caricature of a micro-entrepreneur, as divorced from other performative identities. But the social realities of workers are governed by the very aspects of social relations and cultural perceptions that digital infrastructures render incomprehensible. For example, many drivers reported issues with couples booking cabs late at night and expressed discomfort with the couples engaging in physical intimacy within the cab, and

made allusions to the dubious character of the kind of service that the platform expects them to provide. At least two respondents described instances in which customers made sexual advances on them, making them uncomfortable.

‘What I am going to tell you is so embarrassing that it’s almost not worth telling. We get some customers who are very bad. It has happened to me twice, at night. In the past, I have driven at night as well as during the day. I got a few customers who behaved inappropriately with me; not ladies, but gents. Their behaviour and nature was something else entirely. How can we accept them? We handle them however we can, drop them to their destination, and leave. I mean, we have wives at home.’
S, Ola Partner

Yet, the platform model takes off as a civic innovation, a revolutionary tool to manage and make urban governance systems more efficient and a novel opportunity to reinvigorate urban livelihoods. Digital technologies breathe life into state-led interventions to improve urban infrastructures, almost through coerced competition to avoid obsolescence. One such instance has been the Maharashtra Government’s attempt to build a similar platform for kaali-peeli cabs in the face of severe competition from aggregator platforms (Korde 2017). Motivated by taxi unions and associations in the city, the app was conceptualised with enthusiasm, to be further strengthened by upgrading regulatory and policy norms (Local Press Co. 2017). However, union representatives and drivers in the city indicated widespread discontent with the progress made on the City Taxi Scheme (2016) and the negligible support they received from the state government for improving their situations.

फिटनेस और रजिस्ट्रेशन की परेशानियों पर लिखा लेटर

■ **विस, नई दिल्ली** : दिल्ली टैक्सी ट्रिस्ट ट्रांसपोर्ट्स एंड टूर ऑपरेटर्स असोसिएशन ने चुनाव आयोग को पत्र लिखकर ट्रांसपोर्ट डिपार्टमेंट की कार्यप्रणाली पर सवाल उठाए हैं। कहा गया है कि डिपार्टमेंट के अधिकारी आचार संहिता की बात कहकर जरूरी कामकाज को निपटाने में भी आनाकानी कर रहे हैं, जिसके चलते गाड़ियों की फिटनेस से लेकर रजिस्ट्रेशन के काम में भी मुश्किलें हो रही हैं। असोसिएशन के प्रेजिडेंट संजय सम्राट का कहना है कि एक बड़ी समस्या ऑल इंडिया ट्रिस्ट परमिट के तहत चलने वाली टैक्सियों की हैं। केंद्र सरकार ने टैक्सियों में स्पीड गवर्नर लगाना अनिवार्य कर

दिया है, लेकिन मार्केट में बहुत सारी गाड़ियों के स्पीड गवर्नर नहीं हैं। ऐसे में राज्य सरकार उन टैक्सियों को छूट दे सकती है। लेकिन ट्रांसपोर्ट डिपार्टमेंट इस बारे में आदेश जारी नहीं कर रहा है, जिसके चलते हजारों गाड़ियों की फिटनेस नहीं हो पा रही है। उनका कहना है कि अधिकारी आचार संहिता की बात कहकर जरूरी आदेश भी जारी नहीं कर रहे हैं, जिसके चलते ट्रांसपोर्ट्स को भारी नुकसान हो रहा है। ऑपरेटर्स ने सवाल उठाया है कि दिल्ली में स्पीड लिमिट 60 से ज्यादा नहीं है और जब टैक्सियों को दूसरे राज्यों में लेकर जाना पड़ता है तो हाइवे पर लूट और एक्सिडेंट का खतरा रहता है।

Exposing the far-reaching impacts of drivers’ infrastructural and datafication labour then helps make a case for the incomparable advantages that platforms enjoy vis-a-vis drivers. Using Simone’s (2004) concept of ‘people as infrastructure’, the social character of infrastructures can be observed in the networks, labours, and lived experiences of workers who sustain the platform economy. Digital infrastructures can then be understood as social infrastructures that reconfigure the social, cultural, and political in modern urban landscapes.

NOTE ON RESEARCH METHODS

The field research included interactions with five sets of respondents – cab drivers, fleet managers, company representatives, union representatives, and automobile finance firm representatives. Within the first group, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven drivers individually, and led a focus group discussion with a group of eight drivers. About 50 per cent of the drivers who were interviewed did not own the car they drove. Three respondents in this group were not working with a digital platform at the time of the interview. The second group comprised five fleet managers, of which three were non-driving partners with fleet sizes varying between two to ten cars, all of which they owned. The drivers employed by these fleet managers were not included in the first group. The other two were driving partners who owned a single car which they shared with another driver; they followed a 12-hour shift system. For one of the driving partners, both the driver and the car owner were interviewed. The third group consisted of three representatives from a ride-hailing company, of which two were support staff who provided quick support to driver partners and one was a high-level managerial employee (operations manager). The fourth group was constituted by four union representatives and organisers, who had driven for multiple aggregator companies. The fifth group included two representatives from finance agencies who specialised in providing transport finance.

Respondents were recruited by reaching out to drivers who were active members in Facebook groups of the Mumbai region. Union groups on Telegram and other social media platforms were also leveraged to introduce the research, establish the researcher's legitimacy, and develop trust amongst the members of the community. Then, snowball sampling helped recruit drivers, union members, and fleet managers who were willing to participate. Interviews were also conducted by hailing cabs through the aggregator platforms. While this last method helped widen the geographical spread of the respondent group, it also introduced the element of bias, given the power hierarchy between the customer and driver, as we discovered over the course of the study. We contacted representatives of various firms by making in-person visits to offices and centres.

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7

The Power Chronography of Food Delivery Work

This section presents observations on the design of temporality within app-based food delivery platforms in India. It draws on semi-structured interviews and my time spent ‘hanging out’ with food delivery workers who are often referred to as ‘hunger saviors’ and ‘partners’ in the platform ecosystem in India. Like in the second section by Simiran on food delivery workers in Mumbai, I observe that app-based work in Delhi is structured and monitored in similar ways. However, I go into a detailed description of how work time and the temporality of work are configured in order for app companies to fulfil promises they make to customers in urban India.

Before such app-based services came into existence, there were popular claims involving delivery time; for instance, ‘delivery in 30 minutes or free pizza’ by Domino’s. However, the entire process of food preparation, travel, and delivery was not as transparent or quantifiable in a granular way as it is now through popular apps such as Swiggy, Zomato, and UberEats. While companies make the promise of ‘anytime work’ to potential employees, I observed during the fieldwork that app-based food delivery work is anything but flexible. People can indeed start working at any time of the day, but earning a living wage is not easy. While workers are free to log out or switch their apps off at any time, they would be constantly nudged through calls by warehouse managers as well as through text messages telling them how they were missing out on earnings. It is also important to note that, in India especially, food delivery as a standardised form of work, exists in a regulatory grey space. For example, there is not much clarity on the upper limit of working hours in a day or week. In the following sections, I provide details about how work in this system is temporally structured.

SHIFT-BASED WORK

Workers in the Delhi-NCR region reported that they could choose to work different kinds of shifts: part-time (8 AM–3 PM or 7 PM–12 AM), full-time (11 A–11 PM), or ultra full-time (7 AM–11 PM). While workers can pick their timings on weekdays, working on weekends is mandatory. So while companies claim that riders can log in and out at any time of the day, their pay depends on the number of deliveries they make and the hours they work. But it is not that simple. It is not just the quantifiable units (for instance, an hour or a day) that are overbearing, but the fact that these rules demand high levels of alertness and care from workers. Any kind of carelessness or lack of attention (to time or text message announcements) could be detrimental to claiming pay for completed work. For instance, a worker said that if he logged out even a minute before the end of his shift, he would lose out on his incentive. Another worker added:

‘If you log off even five minutes before 11 PM, a call comes from the company asking you to log back in immediately.’

In such cases, those managing the backend systems sometimes make these calls to shield workers from the eventuality of losing pay and the hassle of resolving disputed payments by simply urging workers to stay on time and online. In that sense, there is not only an expectation of punctuality and always being on as a desirable thing, but it is also imperative for the workers to meet these expectations while they interact with the app itself.

TIME OF EATING, TIME OF SLEEPING

Typically, restaurants and food businesses in Indian cities are heavily regulated, especially in terms of closing times. While these rules differ for each city, in and around Delhi, restaurants must close by 10 PM; those that seek to remain open for longer need special permissions. With the arrival of app-based delivery companies, the time period for food production and consumption has been stretched. Also, with the right kinds of permits, cloud kitchens and home-based producers can operate through these platforms, thus making multiple food choices and cuisines available until as late as 4 AM. The question of who is being serviced at these late hours is beyond the scope of this report, but it means that workers are compelled to stay up late

to make deliveries. Not surprisingly, these late-night shifts are often better incentivised, not just with money but also because there is less traffic at night (a constant source of stress in daytime shifts). As other studies note, platform companies, especially food delivery services that primarily engage bike and scooter riders globally, enforce this cruel temporal inversion so that being a service worker in this economy also means working during customers’ time of leisure and/or comfort (Lee, Ho, Banks, Giampieri, Chen, and Le2016). In Delhi, where the winters are brutally cold, the profitability of delivering hot food increases. One worker I spoke to in March (springtime) explained,

‘I am not going to work with any food delivery company from April onwards because of how hot the summer is in Delhi. It is very difficult to ride in the daytime in summer.’

TEMPORARY WORK

Temporariness is the dominant fate of gig work – workers in our study (food delivery and ride hailing) often insisted that gig work was a stopgap until they could become business owners, find better jobs, or fund their education. However, there is seasonal movement of food delivery workers, a reminder of the contextual, ecological, and urban migration continuities that inform, support, and shape *who* constitutes the reserve force of gig work. In classic labour terms, the push and pull factors that bring people out of agricultural labour or other kinds of work must be studied with an eye to new forms of easy-entry jobs such as gig work. There are also other considerations of time, such as responsibilities and social obligations to family, that make food delivery work (which is fast paced, and involves a certain amount of recklessness and the willingness to put oneself at risk) less attractive to some (old men and women with families) and more to others (young, single men). In this vein, Sarah Sharma (2011) emphasises temporal power over speed discourse (she offers ‘power chronography’), where the ways in which food delivery work is temporally arranged, distributed, and rewarded privilege certain actors (mainly customers but also some kinds of workers) over others in the city’s labour market.

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Postscript

THE PANDEMIC & THE WORKING CLASS

Lockdowns to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus have threatened the lives and livelihoods of a variety of workers. In the most overt and urgent way, those who were not able to go to work or to work from home due to the nature of their work, were confronted with questions of food, shelter, and travel. Workers in small manufacturing units, construction workers, domestic workers, and others found it impossible to live in the city. This led to an exodus of workers from cities on foot and by train and bus.

During the lockdown, the immediate need of employers was to retain the workforce, the urgency of which was evident in the sudden dilution of labour laws and acts of unprecedented generosity. In 2020, various state governments relaxed labour laws that had implications for working hours and the handling of industrial disputes.³⁵

Another way of securing a workforce was to classify certain work as essential. Frontline workers included medical workers, delivery workers, bank workers, workers in pharmacy shops. Basically, those whose work kept people at home became essential. Yet, not all essential workers got essential protections since there was a markedly inadequate supply of masks, sanitiser, and other protective equipment. Social distancing norms were hard to maintain and only limited compensation was made available to some workers.

The pandemic made hyper-visible the importance of care work and the devastating effects for the working class. Various urban services and the bodies of the providers of those services made news. In response, appreciation and compensation for care by corporations and governments was reduced to carewashing³⁶ – clapping, cheering, lighting candles, and banging utensils as a form of gratitude. Alongside these performances of mass gratitude, the migrant workers' exodus from urban India made the loss of livelihoods and pressing questions of food, clothing, and shelter hyper-visible. Since March 2020, these developments have shaped discussions in the media led by activists and scholars, establishing the ground for workers to make demands of their employers and, at times, prompting philanthropic initiatives by wealthy individuals and celebrities.

³⁵ <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/changes-labour-laws-state-market-anarchy-labour-market>

³⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2020.1781435>

THE PANDEMIC & THE PLATFORM ECONOMY

The lockdown initially led to a complete shutdown of ride-hailing services between March and June 2020. The Uber office in Mumbai was shut down³⁷ and there were reports of job losses across platforms.³⁸ During this time, drivers of ride-hailing platforms found themselves without livelihood, and unable to pay back EMIs for vehicles or to feed themselves and their families. Their experiences during the lockdown were similar to those of segments of the working class who were either unable to go to work or work from home. However, platform companies managed to retain their on-demand workforce as they later began to offer ride-hailing services to essential workers,³⁹ government officials, and people who needed rides to the hospital.⁴⁰

Food delivery companies succeeded in ensuring that the state recognised them as providing an essential service even when restaurants and hospitality establishments were shut and ‘outside’ food carried some element of threat. Such lobbying for recognition as an essential service enabled them to stay operational in contrast to other platform services. This recognition was perhaps another means of maintaining an on-demand workforce. On the backs of this workforce, food delivery platforms also picked up an abandoned experiment and turned to delivering groceries, enabling people at home to access essential produce and engage in kitchen experiments.

Meanwhile, platform companies celebrated their workers as heroes, reassured customers about workers’ health and the safety procedures they had devised, and ran philanthropic campaigns to raise money to feed daily wage workers across the country. But despite companies’ claims of securing workers’ and customers’ safety, workers reported⁴¹ that they had to buy masks and sanitisers at their own cost. Food delivery workers who catered to containment zones and came into conflicts with the police who were enforcing the lockdown with little or no support from the companies that employed them. How did food delivery workers cater to containment zones, manage clashes with the police, and adjust household budgets given increased costs and reduced orders? To understand how gig workers provided essential services during the pandemic, our report suggests examining the realities from the pre-pandemic everyday that have contributed to the creation of this crisis of food, clothing, and shelter for workers.

³⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/startups/newsbuzz/uber-shuts-mumbai-office-services-for-riders-to-remain-unaffected/articleshow/76776608.cms?from=mdr>

³⁸ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/startups/newsbuzz/zomato-to-lay-off-13-of-its-staff-as-covid-19-severely-impacts-food-ordering-business/articleshow/75756434.cms?from=mdr>

³⁹ <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-uber-to-offer-cabs-for-essential-services-11586077100965.html>

⁴⁰ <https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ORF-Issue-Brief-377-Pandemic-Gig.pdf>

⁴¹ <https://thewire.in/business/covid-19-food-delivery-workers>

FIELDWORK BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the pre-pandemic period. But the findings are still relevant because the subject of our research – everyday structures and systems for the provision of urban services – endured the pandemic.

More reflections on sampling, access, and negotiating the field *can be heard in the roundtable* hosted by the American Anthropological Association's Committee on the Anthropology of Science, Technology, and Computing (CASTAC's) Platypus blog.

Our observations of workers' everyday lives and routines show how the always-on nature of gig work mandates adjustments in the rhythms of the workers' lives. While professionalisation of all kinds, especially in the service sector, necessitates similar adjustments, we argue that they are much more pervasive and all-encompassing in the lifeworlds of workers within the platform economy. The presence of surplus labour in urban contexts, ready to service the needs of the platform economy – ensures that workers are dispensable. The workers' fungibility and the on-demand nature of the work form a double-edged sword – while work is always available, the workers are expendable. The pandemic has only exposed these vulnerabilities and perhaps universalised them.

SUMMATIVE THOUGHTS

Through this report, we examine how everyday realities of the platform worker are shaped by the broader structures of gig work. While the broad contours of the gig economy (including region-specific precarities) are known, relatively less scholarly attention has been given to how the worker reacts, relates, and operates within structures that constitute urban spaces. So in this report, we document the everyday working conditions of platform workers in two cities – Delhi and Mumbai.

The first section unpacks the aspirations and motivations of the platform worker through a study of ride-hailing drivers in Delhi. Some of the questions examined in this segment include the following: how does the driver start their day? How does their workday unfold? What informs their aspirations? How do they make quotidian work decisions? With these as starting points, we examine why drivers choose this line of work, how they view their current working conditions against previous ones, and how they imagine their futures. The second section looks at the relationship between platform and worker through the question of time and visibility in Mumbai. It examines the temporality of food discovery-delivery work (pace of the workday, week and calendar year) and the visibility of food delivery workers (how their bodies look, where they are visible). It highlights platforms' reliance on supervisory and managerial workers who represent seemingly faceless platform companies. Together with algorithmic management, these local representatives communicate with delivery workers, monitor their appearance and grooming, and control their workday and week so that they might fulfil consumer demand. There are additional layers of interaction with others who operate institutions like malls and restaurants which shape the routine of a food delivery worker.

In the third section, we explore what it means to work without a designated workplace by focusing on the materiality of the spaces ride-hailing drivers occupy, and how that affects what they call work and performance. Here, we see the city emerge as an expansive field within which workers operate, looking through the eyes of cab drivers in Mumbai. This section also unpacks how delivery service mechanisms depend heavily on larger civic infrastructures. Through the three typologies of labour – spatial and temporal; affective and emotional; and infrastructure and data labour – this section problematizes the novelty of platform work and highlights the differences and continuities between gig work and existing forms of labour within the informal economy in India.

The fourth and final section details how work time and the temporality of work form the critical bedrock on which the edifice of efficient customer delivery services is built. Time has been a crucial element in the supply chain of food delivery even before the advent of platform apps, but the entire process of food preparation, travel, and delivery was not been made as transparent and quantifiable as it is now through popular apps such as Swiggy, Zomato, and UberEats. This section then argues that app-based food delivery work is anything but flexible; on-time delivery is key to efficiency. But for the worker, the nature of work is precariously temporary.

The purpose of this report is to capture everyday scenes from a gig worker's life, the decision-making processes that shape their work routines, and their relationship with the structural aspects of the platform economy. Working for platforms eliminates an easily identifiable boss. Yet we find new ways in which control, supervision, and management are institutionalised and document these findings through four accounts at the level of the individual, time, use of space, visibility of working bodies and city space. Throughout the report, we pay attention to how these everyday interactions embed certain opportunities, risks and precarities within the emergent structures of the platform economy.

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