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Nair, Gayatri; Divyadarshi, Jennifer

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Unexceptional neoliberalism: enterprise and informality in the gig economy of India

Gayatri Nair and Jennifer Divyadarshi

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About the author:

Gayatri Nair is an assistant professor of sociology in the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi. Her research interests are in urban informal labour, digital economies and issues of caste, gender and technology.

Jennifer Divyadarshi is an independent social science researcher. Her research interests are caste studies and agrarian issues and digital economies.

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About the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies:

The Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS) is the first research institute of its kind in the global South. It draws on the intellectual resources of the University of the Witwatersrand and partner institutions in South Africa and beyond, to host an interdisciplinary research and policy project focused on understanding and addressing inequality in the global South.

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

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Abstract:

This paper examines the conditions of work in the platform economy across India, which has witnessed a significant expansion in the number of gig workers joining platform enterprises. The precarity underscoring work in the gig economy is now widely acknowledged, but what does this entail for workers in India and the global South who have typically been a part of the informal economy? The paper explores whether the absence of labour regulation and social security in gig work marks it as an extension of informal work. Based on interviews with gig workers and rooted in their experiences of work that remains unregulated, we consider whether gig work is an instance of "unexceptional neoliberalism" as it extends informality to new sectors. The paper unpacks the impact of the neoliberal state's agenda of promoting enterprise on gig workers who are now subject to algorithmic controls of platforms, alongside "traditional" constraints of caste, class and gender, even as they are considered by the State and digital platforms to be autonomous entrepreneurial subjects.

Key words: Gig workers, digital platform, app based work, neoliberalism, informality, surveillance, caste, India

Introduction

This work examines the political economy behind digitised platform work while focusing on platform workers. A new way of living has emerged, as services such as transport and food and grocery deliveries are available through digital platforms, giving rise to a large workforce engaged in a distinct form of digitally mediated work. Such work, termed gig work, refers to short term jobs secured over digital platforms that connect service providers with consumers. The platforms characterise the relationship as a partnership with workers who provide services through the platforms, in which there are no guarantees of minimum income or determined hours of work. Instead, platforms suggest, flexibility and autonomy emerge through this arrangement, as workers can choose when to work and consumers find service providers "on-demand", and with no binding relation assumed between workers and platforms. For many young gig workers, such work presents an escape from traditional occupations which are monotonous and have lower earning capacities, as well as freedom from an overseer. Some turn to platform jobs for temporary solutions to engage in the urban economy before searching for solutions that promise a dignified life. To some, it is a hiatus in their financial struggle; to many it serves as a new opportunity to begin a life that is starkly different from what their older generation had.

Gooptu (2013) examines the manner in which aspirations around work and mobility shape how work is structured and undertaken by the young, giving rise to the new and neoliberal "enterprising self". No longer necessarily seeking the security and stability of government jobs, young workers, Gooptu points out, deploy strategies and skills of enterprise that enable them to scale new terrains of work. While such modes of adaptation are visible across varied sectors of work and kinds of workers, whether the enterprising self has taken hold as the normative subject citizen in India bears deeper consideration. As Gooptu outlines it, the enterprising self is not to be located only in the domain of economic activity but in all spheres and is identified through the absence of making claims on the State, taking responsibility and managing risks for themselves (Gooptu, 2013: 4).

In a neoliberal context, the promise of the platform emerges not just from its potential for enterprise, but from the autonomy it offers to workers. The platform is designed in a manner that value is generated from the individual's work, organised independently from anywhere and at any time. Here, as opposed to flexibility of work that reorganised capitalist production globally, platform-based gig work is seemingly rooted in the notion of flexibility for workers, that is, with workers determining their hours of work and working without direct oversight. Given that these work conditions are reminiscent of informal work in India, it raises the question of whether new forms of work, ushered in through technological interventions and resting on models of workers as independent

contractors, are a break from previous modes of work. This study explores the relation with informality and its impact on platform workers, in the context of neoliberal India. Cross (2010) provocatively argued that in India, neoliberalism has been unexceptional for workers in the informal economy, who already experience insecurity and an absence of labour regulation and social security in work. In this work, we examine the gig economy to consider whether it is an instance of informality or what Cross terms "unexceptional neoliberalism" at work, and if so, what the figure of the worker as "entrepreneur" means for new forms of work that are pushed as part of the State's agenda for the future of work. We draw from Cross's (2010) consideration of the unexceptional nature of neoliberalism in India, to focus on two conditions he identifies – an absence of regulation and of social security – to consider if India' gig economy extends the informality of already informal workers. We explore how this features within the neoliberal context of India, where the State's development focus is on the promotion of an enterprise culture.

Under neoliberalism, the development discourse in India has undergone a wide change, moving from state-led planning exercises (Zachariah, 2005) rooted in welfare to 'development as opportunity' (Irani, 2019) where development is recast as the potential to generate profits. In such a construction of development as opportunity, entrepreneurship is idealised and everyone is seen as both possible entrepreneur and equal (Irani, 2019: 2), therefore collapsing the self-employed into the entrepreneur. The informal sector was considered the source of constrained or restricted entrepreneurial potential that merely needed to be released for its potential to be realised (Roy, 2010; Sanyal, 2017; Irani, 2019: 40). In this discourse, the lack of regulation in the informal economy was seen as the ideal grounds for value generation. In other words, it was capital trapped in the informal economy which had to be set free, not labour. In neoliberal India, where the State underwent a structural change but did not recede entirely, a discourse of entrepreneurial citizenship now set new terms for informal workers. Risk and responsibility came to be reframed as entrepreneurial opportunity for workers, claiming to offer them a dignity denied in informal work.

Gig platforms have paid special heed to this aspiration for dignity, highlighting that autonomy and flexibility can be the foundation of enterprise for the gig worker. On the other hand, state agencies and platforms themselves credit their role in creating jobs in an otherwise depressed economy[1]. Indian entrepreneurs are especially keen to evoke neoliberal pride in creating jobs not only in India but across the world.

[1] CNBC-TV 18. 2019. 'Niti Aayog tries to counter bleak unemployment data, says Ola & Uber helped create over 2 million jobs,' 31 January, https://www.cnbctv18.com/economy/niti-aayog-says-ola-and-uber-helped-create-over-2-million-new-jobs-pegs-total-new-jobs-at-8-million-2142841.htm (Acessed 10 August 2022).

The novelty of the platforms lies not just in the digital infrastructure that enables such digitised forms of work but also in the way they have bypassed the traditional regulatory frameworks for both capital and labour. From the perspective of labour, this has meant the rise of a precariat class, on the brink of economic insecurity (Griesbach et al., 2019; Moore, 2019). On the one hand, such forms of work are seen as ending older modes of employment (Sundarajan, 2016), introducing flexibility in scheduling one's work and also bringing about greater worker autonomy (Vallas & Schor, 2020). But there also remains a large degree of obscurity in their workings, particularly in the platform is managed and how prices of services being delivered are fixed (Fairwork, 2021). There is now empirically grounded literature that has cast doubt on the flexibility and autonomy that it offered (Dubal, 2019; Gall, 2020; Gray & Surie, 2019; Kidder, 2006; Petriglieri et al., 2019; Vallas, 2019; Hyman et al., 2021). Srnicek (2016) calls this "platform capitalism, highlighting a model driven by the need to acquire cheap labour, with capital investment enabling platforms to stay afloat as they enter into local markets with consumer subsidies". Srnicek (2017) speculates that when regulations begin to catch up, and workers start to mobilise, platforms will become financially unviable.

We explore, in this paper, what draws workers into and pushes workers out of the gig economy in India. Thorough an examination of the political economy of gig work, from the perspective of workers, we consider the nature and impact of (de)regulation of gig work – how do workers experience the presence or absence of the State and societal control of platforms over their work? – and whether social security offers a safety net to workers. The section on social identities highlights the socio-cultural norms around gender, caste and class that influence entry into gig work and shape work conditions – that is, the social regulation of gig work, otherwise a characteristic of informal work.

The political economy of labour in India

Gig work necessitates a large workforce available on-demand for work. In India, the expansion of the gig economy has also been driven by an employment crisis that has long been brewing. In fact, shifts towards enabling micro entrepreneurship have also been based on the experience of what is termed "jobless growth". With the emphasis shifting toward skilling for the labour market and entrepreneurial opportunities, there is greater weight on young Indians to turn to themselves and networks of kin and caste to secure employment.

These conditions have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. A looming employment crisis preceded the pandemic, but with successive lockdowns, job losses have risen, and the share of informal workers, already high in India (more than 90% of all workers) has now increased (Abraham & Basole, 2022). Gig work, with its easier

onboarding process, has been a route out of unemployment for many during the pandemic (Fairwork, 2021). Even though figures remain evasive, there seems to have been a rise in employment on platforms during the pandemic. Some of the workers we spoke to told us that they found gig work by googling "jobs you can start in a day", indicative of how any job was seen as more valuable than unemployment. The rise in the labour force available for platform work has also impacted workers adversely, particularly as it is used as a means to undercut their bargaining power. When workers have gone on strike, they have found work being subcontracted to different platforms. On platforms such as Urban Company (UC), workers have even been sued for protesting (Barik, 2021), a move that banks on implicit state support for platforms, widespread fear of unemployment and a large and constantly expanding pool of available workers on the platform. When such labour is not immediately available locally, platforms also seek to migrate workers to other locations. Beauty workers spoke to us, for instance, of not only moving between different parts of the Delhi National Capital Region for gig work but also showed messages they received from the platform asking interested workers to move to other states for work.

Platforms have thus emerged and expanded in India, at a time not only of employment crisis but also as capital-labour relations are being reshaped. Where, earlier, a minority of those employed in the organised sector were guaranteed labour rights, this small win is now increasingly under threat. The pandemic in particular has played a decisive part in weakening labour regulations, with four Indian states announcing a repeal of labour laws, purportedly to promote economic growth (Obhan & Bhalla, 2020). Further, the Indian state whittled down a large set of labour laws, introducing a new labour code that leaves workers in a weakened position (Sood, 2020). Even as neoliberalism has been structurally reshaping Indian society, the elimination of even minimal forms of state support have had a significant effect on workers.

In such a context, worker collective action has been vital to the survival of gig workers. Gig-worker collectives have been emerging at a time when conditions for workers in general have been declining, especially during the pandemic, when conditions exacerbated and gig worker protests broke out. Their presence and actions are instructive in rethinking the widespread resignation to and acceptance of neoliberalism and informality. Worker action has been particularly vital to understand that neoliberal subjectivity is not a spontaneous response to embedded neoliberalism. Aspirations for work do not always pave the path toward developing market-friendly skills, or to new forms of work; stability and security remain anchors for those looking for work. Gig work appears for many only as a stop-gap, or work to be done in a crisis, or as long as their bodies can withstand it, as it continues to deny most the not only the opportunity for enterprise but also of survival.

Background: India and the global gig economy

The rise of the global "on-demand" economy, with services that can be secured online and in a short time, has rapidly increased and expanded into the taxi industry and food, personal shopping, home cleaning and beauty and spa services. According to the Mckinsey report (Manyaka et al., 2015), by 2025, 230 million people could find some or other employment through digital platforms world-wide, while Woodcock and Graham (2020: 9) suggest that more than 70 million people globally are contracting work through digital platforms. Figures for India remain speculative. There are 0.7 million registered gig workers in India, largely those engaged in geographically bound gig services such as ride hailing, food delivery, logistics and beauty work. A report by a state-affiliated think tank, the Niti Ayog, estimates there to be a total of 7.7 million gig workers in India, distributed across low, medium and high skills, with workers in low and high skill categories rising (Niti Ayog, 2022: 3).

Platformised gig workers in food delivery, ride-hailing, goods delivery and care work are geographically tethered (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). They are largely driven by capitalism in urban locations, thus affecting urban life in the global North (Bauriedl & Strüver, 2020). Due to differences in urban landscapes, mobility culture, population structures and gendered divisions of labour, the experience of gig workers in the global North is different from those in the global South. The spatial proximity, population density and digital infrastructure that allow for mapping the urban landscape ease the provision of services in urban areas of the global North. Further, the cost of services and of the internet has made this a popular choice. The global South presents some points of convergence but also some distinctions in the experience of gig work. While urban landscapes shape gig work differently in the global South (Qadri, 2021), there is a similarity with the North in gendered divisions of work and "easy onboarding" making platforms viable as "on-demand" sectors.

However, the history of work and, particularly, regulation of labour in the North and the South produce significant and important distinctions in discussions both of contemporary gig work and also its future. Whether service providers are really independent or simply workers has occupied much theoretical and empirical attention in scholarship on platform work in the global North. While the question remains significant, especially given the popularity of the platform model, it is important to recognise the significant differences that appear between the global North and South. In India, as in other countries of the global South, informal work remains dominant. Despite the years of informalisation of work within formal economies that have been experienced by the global North, the scale and depth of the informal economy and its intricate ties to the formal sphere remain distinctive in the South, emerging from relations and patterns of global capitalism (Agarwala, 2009). Informal workers in India

come from a history and continuing absence of regulation that translates into forms of economic and social insecurity.

Gig work in India

In such a context, the paper addresses what platform work actually represents – an informalisation of work within the formal sector or a new addition to the large and heterogeneous informal economy. From the point of view of the State, platform work occupies a new position that fits within its imagination of entrepreneurial development, where platforms are considered job creators, especially as platforms emphasise enterprise among workers. In the global South, platform work is not seen to bring about any transformation in conventional ways of working. Rather they are considered as opportunities to absorb labour and create technology hubs (Zhou, 2020).

While piece-rate pay work has a long history in India, digitised gig work is recent in the Indian urban scene and the scholarship documenting this has focussed on the institutional regulatory aspects of gig work, as well as the experience of gig workers. From the perspective of both institutional regulation and the experiences of workers in the gig economy, there is growing consideration of the ways in which gig work presents an instance of informalisation, as platforms operate as formal enterprises with the aim of formalising the informal economy (Surie, 2017). Platforms, however, do not create a route to formalisation in state regulation, especially as empirical evidence points to the detrimental impact of platformisation on the informal economy (Surie, 2020). The concern for state regulation has instead been driven through collective action on the ground, such as instances of drivers' unions filing a petition in 2017 to be recognised as "workmen" under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 (Ghosh, Ramachandran & Zaidi, 2021), on which a decision has yet to be taken.

The neoliberal State in India shares the view of minimising regulations on labour; recent attempts at deregulation have been undertaken through the introduction of new labour codes which seek to consolidate previous labour laws but also in effect weaken labour power in the process of codification. For instance, the Code of Industrial Relations 2020, which includes laws related to industrial disputes, weakens collective bargaining powers of unions, and strengthens the power of employers (Sood, 2020). In effect, such practices have contributed to considering new regulatory means for improving conditions of gig workers (Choudhary & Shireshi, 2022; Ghosh, Ramachandran & Zaidi, 2021) as workers continue to experience the brunt of informality within the gig economy (Behera, 2020; Medappa, Ray & Hussain, 2020; Nair, 2020; Sharma, 2018). Such informality can also be considered through the lens of social control effected through structures of patriarchy and caste which play a role in shaping the "workplace" in the gig economy (Anwar, Pal & Hui, 2020; Raval & Pal, 2019) and the distinct experience of

upwardly mobile women customers of such platforms (Annavarapu, 2022 Anwar, Pal & Hui, 2020; Lekha & Reeve, 2016).

We add to this rich and developing scholarship on the gig economy in India through an analysis of three distinct sectors of the gig economy – ride hailing, food delivery and beauty work – to consider how workers experience the absence of regulation even as the State aims and platforms claim to be shaping them into enterprising subjects.

Method

We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 25 workers across these sectors of gig work (ten beauty workers, seven food delivery workers and eight ride-hailing workers). We also interviewed five organisers of gig worker collectives and unions to understand collective action among gig workers and the future of work(ers) that such collectives envision.

Interviews were conducted from June 2021 onward, with some interviews being held in-person and others being conducted over the phone for reasons stemming both from pandemic-induced measures and the convenience to workers. In some cases, where it was convenient to workers, interviews were conducted over Zoom. While the primary research site was Delhi National Capital Region, four workers interviewed were from other cities in India (Mumbai, Chennai and Bhagalpur) and were interviewed after establishing contact through social media. Workers were initially contacted through visits to locations which they frequented and thereafter through snowball sampling. We have anonymised names of our interlocutors throughout this paper.

Findings

'Decentralised' management – algorithmic control and surveillance

Platforms' claims that gig work is novel and distinct rest in large part on the role that digital technology plays in platform work. Assumptions about technological neutrality and its ability to enable autonomy have guided such perceptions. As a form of digitally mediated work, platforms have been scrutinised for the ways in which digital management and control operate. It has been significant to this discussion whether algorithmically determined practices ensure platform neutrality or put power in the hands of the platform while obscuring the source of this power. Thus, even as algorithms suggest "decentralised" and hands-off approaches to management, in effect they centralise control in platforms, where algorithmic decision making is pursued in favour of platform interests. Typically the literature on such algorithmic functioning is considered empirically in three ways: informational

asymmetries; automated management and control practices, including nudges through apps; and how such practices introduce what is termed 'digital Taylorism' (Altenried, 2020). Digital Taylorism refers to the compartmentalisation of the labour process into smaller standardised tasks accompanied by close monitoring and control over the workers.

For instance, informational asymmetries underpin Uber's functioning, which in turn renders possible direct control over workers as well as the ability to structure an asymmetric relation between capital and labour (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Such asymmetries are experienced by workers through being denied information on how locations, pricing and ratings are allocated and calculated. Uber, for instance, has now announced using "upfront fares" rather than their previous method of calculating ride time and mileage (Kerr, 2022). Each of these variables impact workers' incomes and the length of their working day and week, and consequently hollow out claims of flexibility and choice in platform work. Studies focussing on such asymmetries (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016) have pointed to the decidedly non-neutral working of platforms, especially in the deployment and control of algorithms which define control over labour. In this digitally mediated landscape, there are also vast amounts of data generated through the labour process by workers, but over which they have neither oversight nor control.

Most testimonials given by the partners reveal such patterns in the ways that apps operate. R explains how the platform is using algorithms to decide their pay and notes that it is based on several factors which are not made clear to workers:

> How much ever your tire turns that's how much your bill will be generated, so their method is algorithmic average, now if you have booked a cab until airport, right now the time shows one hour and ten minutes, but for some, it took longer than that and we had to wait on the roads, so shouldn't we get waiting charges? Our lock period time is all we get; this is algorithmic. (R interview, 2021)[2]

M, also working with Uber, highlighted the lack of control workers have over pricing:

> They don't tell you but whatever price they set we've to take the charge according to that. We don't have the option to deny , so most of the drivers are powerless and they have to continue as of the contract regardless of what profit they earn. (M interview, 2021)[3]

A belongs to a business family, and when he moved to Delhi, he wanted to practise a profession different from his parents'. So he joined the app-based ride-hailing services Uber and Ola and has even joined an association in Delhi for cab drivers. He felt strongly about both the arbitrary control over ratings by the management and its fiddling of ratings, especially as it disrupted his plans to take time off for leisure or care-work for his ailing wife:

> I think that they have something like algorithm, if they see someone is working fine, and is earning just enough to sustain himself or herself, then this algorithm starts to challenge you and try to bring down all opportunities that you get, so there is as much pain as much [as] you tolerate. (A interview, 2021)[4]

[2] Interview with R, Uber driver (6 October 2021).
[3] Interview with M, Uber driver (22 July 2021).
[4] Interview with A, Uber driver (4 October 2021).

Workers also experience algorithmic control through the opacity of decisions on how leads are assigned to them.

Even in the beauty and salon services sector, the odd hours at which jobs/leads get assigned leaves many hassled, and ignoring or cancelling some late night leads is difficult for fear of getting blocked temporarily. KP, a beauty worker, reflects on the odd booking/lead requests that she has come across in a day:

> …now if we don't take up some bookings then our ratings fall; after 75% they block it and they inform us too that they will block for two days and then they say, "please don't contact customer care or any other member". It is clearly written over there, that is why we are forced to take late night bookings. We get some early morning bookings where they tell us to come as early as 6 to 6:30am. Sometimes we wake up early for customers and they cancel bookings even after confirming, this is problematic. (KP interview, 2021)[5]

Work is arranged by the platform; the algorithm allocates leads or jobs to partners on the apps when they are logged in (active), and many don't ever log off from the app. The impression of a "flexible" work schedule diminishes with such work hours and the assigning of leads based on ever-changing opaque criteria.

Automated management established by platforms sets job targets for workers, rendering flexibility meaningless, prioritising the platform's interest over the needs of those working on it. A distortion occurs in the sense of control over time when partners resort to overworking, affecting their sense of autonomy. Compelled to work because of their circumstances, gig workers also pointed to their inability to contest such control, as automated management in platforms makes it difficult to speak to human representatives about their grievances. Such automated management also sheds new light on the precise nature of jobs that might be subject to automation, where it is middle management rather than workers who are replaced with technology. The shift towards automated management, such that workers rarely interact with human managers, has also been a feature of gig work, and, in India, has been a predominant feature of the pandemic. As Newlands (2021) argues, the balance between automated algorithmic surveillance or a human overseer is also contingent on the employment relation, especially where there is an effort to categorise this as an independent contract between partners rather than a form of employment. While such surveillance has been considered "banal" (Newlands, 2021) in the context of platforms, this is not always the case, especially when labour conditions degrade. The Indian context of state deregulation of labour becomes significant in this context, as platforms have a free reign over pricing, hours of work and conditions of work.

Resistance, when it emerges, is thwarted by means of digital surveillance, through which platforms identify user IDs of participating workers and block them from the platform. Such surveillance takes place on WhatApp groups but has also been associated with other social media sites, where anonymous handles of workers reporting conditions of work in food delivery were blocked.

[5] Interview with KP, beauty services worker (28 October 2021).

There is a perceptible fear among the workers that platform work is getting dehumanised, as decentralisation of management takes place and a culture of surveillance through algorithmic control gets normalised.

Rikta, a union organiser, points out that coding has taken over our lives; a single modification requires a simple tweak to the code, but this can have severe impacts on workers. Every gig worker remains wholly dependent on apps to manage their work – there is no fleet manager or team leader instructing them. In the event that there is a fleet manager, as in Zomato, the delivery partners are not aware of it and are therefore unable to reach out to them for assistance. When a penalty has been wrongly applied, there is no scope to negotiate. Even if one reaches support (by raising a ticket), there is a long wait and there is never any remedy. Rikta notes:

> Earlier it was not so, now they are just totally dependent on [the] app. So whatever the app shows that is what they follow or do. Earlier they would manage the app, they would modify things, now what happens is that if somebody has penalty then they are just done, they don't listen to you. (Rikta interview, 2021)[6]

Even as modes of gig work differ – geographically bound or cloud based – and specifics vary across sectors, there remain predominant modes through which algorithmic control over workers is exercised. In such forms of algorithmic control, platforms also incorporate customer-driven monitoring in the form of ratings, through which labour and the labour processes are managed (Gandini, 2019; Griesbach et al., 2019; Newlands, 2021). In such forms of control, even as workers seek to resist, the accuracy of algorithmic gaze (Newlands, 2021) is vital. In contesting such control, too, workers are demanding clarity about such forms of control rather than the arbitrariness and despotism of algorithms (Greisbach et al., 2019).

AM, who works for a food delivery app, reported his experience with the rating system on the app, which, in his opinion, is inaccurate:

> My rating was 4.72, everyone works for good ratings. This is in Swiggy, you work the entire week for good ratings, behave well with customers, it is our job, sometimes we get tips, so the company arbitrarily reduces our ratings in Swiggy – this angers us. This makes them (other workers) very angry and they can't think of taking holidays after that or even doing an outing after this. (AM interview, 2021)[7]

Performance assessment is also controlled through algorithmic management, in which customers now participate to enforce worker discipline. Workers remain highly dependent on customer ratings and a fall in ratings results in uncompensated time spent in training or being blocked from the platform. Consumers too are subject to forms of surveillance on the platform. For instance, during the pandemic, given mobility restrictions imposed by

[6] Interview with Rikta, union organiser (26 October 2021).
[7] Interview with AM, food delivery worker (20 October 2021).

lockdowns, a logistic vertical[8] called Swiggy Genie was introduced on the food delivery app for purchasing groceries, medicines and so on. The app collected data from these services, such as noting high demand items and the time for delivery. This informed its entry into new models of rapid grocery delivery, but such models rest on high risk labour to be performed by gig workers.

This form of functioning by platforms has been called digital Taylorism, referring to the standardisation of work sought through such algorithmic control as well as the quantification and surveillance of labour (Altenried, 2020). There have also been contesting views around this, suggesting, for instance, a departure from traditional Taylorism in certain forms of platform work, where digital mediation in fact engenders greater autonomy than on the factory floor (Wood et al., 2019). Taylorism is significant to an analytical consideration of gig work not merely for what it makes possible within the labour process, but also for what is introduced into the contract itself – an insecurity – which Bourdieu (1998) notes as emblematic of precarity itself. Whether digitally mediated work introduces new forms of Taylorism (digital Taylorism) or simply extends Taylorism into new forms of work is vital to consider. Such accounts of Taylorism have largely centred around cloud based work, however, and it is important to examine how this shapes geographically-bound gig work where such forms of standardisation and control operate as well – especially during the labour process itself, rather than at the end of it (Wood et al., 2019). Workers across the three sectors reported stress associated with completing tasks in fixed time slots determined by the platform; workers' own skills that can shape the labour process are not considered, as the platform looks to standardise the delivery of services. Our respondents, with the exception of two (students who were working part-time), had years of previous experience in work. In many cases, but especially within beauty work, workers were drawing from skills honed through previous employment. In addition, as part of working on the app, platforms provide basic training to use the app. Workers therefore relied on previous work experience to navigate gig work as well. In driving, for instance, this may emerge through knowledge of the streets and neighbourhood layouts.

But platforms rarely took such knowledge and skills, or real conditions, into consideration. Platforms typically demand both a supplementing and standardisation of skills, subjecting it to Taylorist management, for instance, demanding the use of certain routes for ride hailing and food delivery, with average time taken over these routes set by algorithms without accounting for real-time changes because of traffic, accidents and so on. Many workers, especially in ride hailing and food delivery, spoke of being "nudged" into constant movement by apps even

[8] A vertical here refers to an added logistics service provided by the platform; the service is to pick up and drop off items, from shops to homes as well as between homes, and is undertaken by workers signed on to the app.

as they were stuck in traffic and discussed a rise in accidents resulting from the stress of finishing tasks within times determined by the platform.

Labour conditions, skills and the entrepreneurial self

During one of our field visits in Delhi, at a busy centre in Nehru Place that doubled as a metro station with several food joints, we observed many food delivery boys from Swiggy and Zomato (food delivery platforms) clustered at the boundary wall or in the parking lots, but interaction between them remained minimal. Busy on their own phones, mapping their work day as they waited to pick up their deliveries or receive new orders, they were not keen to speak to us and barely spoke much among themselves, each standing next to their bike, eyes fixed on their apps.

Most of our respondents working with other ride-hailing apps such as Uber and Ola and the beauty and salon app UC indicated similar situations where they hardly get time to interact with their co-workers if they cross paths. There has been a socio-spatial atomisation of workers: each one seems to be working in a silo. Out of concern for themselves, they might check their rate cards with co-workers to see if they are making the same as others. But typically, platform algorithms drive them toward working more to earn a little more, and most end up working "overtime" to earn extra or to improve their ratings. The significance of algorithmic control is evident, however, with arbitrary changes made to rates of pay and expansion of delivery zones, translating into higher effort at lower pay and ratings for workers.

Furthermore, changes to rates and commission charges have been especially stark following the lifting of the pandemic-induced lockdowns. An estimate shared by R, an Uber driver, that was typical of other drivers was that driving for around five or six hours each day used to earn ₹2000 to ₹4000[9] (about $26 to $52 at the time of writing). But after the pandemic-induced lockdown, even riding for twelve hours, he cannot match his earlier income. Therefore he rides for sixteen to eighteen hours most days, and at least ten hours a day, to earn his previous income. Noting that it is hard to take breaks or leave, R shared:

> No one takes leaves, now that the rates are so low, also due to Covid one has to keep earning. Rates are reducing, ₹14 to ₹16 [18 to 21 US cents] were the rates, it is in the papers, I have it lying with me, but now it has reduced to just ₹6 [7.9 US cents]. (R interview, 2021)[10]

[9] ₹ = rupees
[10] Interview with R, Uber driver (6 October 2021).

Falling rates, coupled with the pandemic – when movement was restricted and there were fewer customers – has affected R, who was only able to earn about ₹500 to ₹600 ($6.52 to $7.87) during the pandemic. He recognised how the company was squeezing out labour at any cost to survive during the pandemic and felt that the platform was being dictatorial, as it was not drivers but the platform which decided on the new low rates for them.

Similar conditions seem to prevail across every other digital platform. One salon and beauty worker at UC – PJ – describes how, in the heyday of the platform, workers discovered that they could make very "good profits" while working with the company. PJ's total income a day was ₹3000 ($39.37) and it was her work which helped her financially sustain the challenges she faced as a single parent. PJ's previous work involved the same kind of beauty services in a salon, but her income was less. When she first joined the platform she could easily complete one target after another, and was soon able to pay off her home loan, but this did not last.

> My average earning in the beginning was a lot but now I have really reduced work hours. Now that my financial burden has reduced as well, so also I have less earnings. Now I earn up to ₹30,000 to ₹40,000 [$393.74 to $524.99], for a month. Earlier I even earned up to one lakh[11] fifty thousand rupees [$1968.57]. My highest ever has been one lakh and fifty thousand rupees. (PJ interview, 2021)[12]

For workers across sectors, high earnings were more typical in the early phase of platforms and have since declined. This is partly driven by an influx of workers onto the platform but is also due to highly variable pay and incentive rates. For instance, when Uber had just entered the Indian market, it successfully lured drivers into joining their platform with incentives, work flexibility and independence, and workers experienced a gold rush. In the process these drivers adapted to the new business model, but as rates were lowered and commissions hiked over a period of time, the average hours of work increased. With the pandemic, drivers stressed that they needed to spend longer hours on the road in search of a gig. R, who is also a union organiser of cab drivers, driving with Uber since 2016, noted that after the Covid lockdown, his average hours of work are now twelve hours, earning approximately ₹1400 ($18.38), of which ₹700 ($9.19) has to be maintained as a minimum wallet balance to get more rides from the platform. Rising fuel costs over the past two years have only made matters worse for most drivers.

The pandemic has especially reduced not just the amount of work but also the pay scale. Those who joined these platforms during or after the pandemic were either trying to mitigate the effect of job loss or were looking for chances to keep earning at least until something better came along. S, who works at Swiggy, a food delivery platform, said:

> In the beginning, when Swiggy came in the market, we received ₹40 [52 US cents] base fare but after six months they changed to ₹35 [46 US cents] and after one month of Covid lockdown in 2019 they changed the

[11] A lakh = 100 000.
[12] Interview with PJ, UC salon and beauty worker (30 September 2021).

> minimum base fare to ₹15 [20 US cents]. We received bus fare of ₹100 to ₹110 [$1.31 to $1.44] and that was also reduced to ₹60 to ₹65 [79 to 85 US cents]. (S interview, 2021)[13]

S, who had been a delivery partner with Swiggy for two years, described this period as difficult and was now looking for other kinds of work. In his experience, he believed there was no benefit in such work, because one needed to make initial investments with no assistance from the company at all:

> One has to buy a vehicle and it costs ₹70 thousand to ₹80 thousand [$870 to $1000] and then you need a smart phone also. So, for this job you need to invest almost 1 Lakh rupees [$1309] first. But the vehicle runs continuously, which increases the repair costs, almost ₹5 [thousand] to ₹6 thousand [$65.44 to $78.53] every month and sometimes even nine thousand [$117.80]. (S interview, 2021)[14]

Another beauty and salon worker with UC, RS, who works an average of six hours a day and earns around ₹500 ($6.54) in total, if she has picked up two jobs of ₹600 ($7.86) each. After accounting for commission charges, product costs and her house rental, only a little remains. RS notes the high minimum wallet balance (also called credit points) that one has to maintain on Urban Company:

> They (UC) have a service charge which is very high, if I have ₹2000 [$26.19] payment, ₹49 to ₹50 [64 to 65 US cents) goes as commission to company, this is unfair. So we are not in favour of online payments because they reduce a lot of money, then they insist we keep ₹1500 [$19.64] in their wallet, but we need money [meaning in cash] and I want to put credits as per what I want right. (RS interview, 2021)[15]

Thus, across sectors of work, workers report long hours and low pay, which exacerbates their work conditions. The pandemic in particular has caused stress, especially, at a time when food delivery workers were considered "essential workers" but found their pay drastically reduced. In this scenario, gig workers' earnings are barely enough to make ends meet for themselves or their families.

Ratings play a significant role in determining earnings, because in beauty services, ride hailing and food delivery, platforms place an emphasis on comportment, which requires workers to bring in new skills. Such ratings depend not only on customer evaluations but also on grooming demands set by the platforms themselves. P, working in food delivery, noted:

> Alright you gave your selfie, if in the selfie your Zomato t-shirt doesn't show then you will get a penalty, if you are not groomed ... Now the new one would not know anything and they don't understand why they are asking for a selfie. Once a selfie has been sent which has some mistake, then you are sure to get a penalty. (P interview, 2021)[16]

AM, a food delivery worker, recalled his "training" with the platform involving directions on how to treat customers.

> If you reach a customer, greet them, behave well with the customer so that they are happy, speak more softly so that the customer likes it and doesn't think you are rude. This is the way to make the customer keep

[13] Interview with S, Swiggy delivery worker (31 March 2021).
[14] Interview with S, Swiggy delivery worker (31 March, 2021).
[15] Interview with RS, UC beauty and salon worker (10 October 2021).
[16] Interview with P, Zomato worker (19 July 2021).

> ordering on that app, then our demands will increase and hence our service will also increase … (AM interview, 2021)[17]

KP a beauty worker, noted that there was a strong emphasis on appearance for beauty workers, emphasising "hygiene, behaviour and body language" (KP interview, 2021)[18]. Such demands, she believed, were not rooted in the reality of work, which required workers to travel under various weather conditions, from gig to gig, puncturing the illusion of the perfectly turned-out beauty worker.

In beauty work especially, where a large part of the labour process is also performed under the gaze of the customer, there was a concerted attempt to standardise the labour process. This standardisation was perceived as unnecessary by beauty workers who had previous experience and skills in work. PJ described the experience of such training:

> We have around ten to twenty years of experience, then comes a trainer who tells us waxing should be done like this; then how will we learn? What we have been doing for ten years, some new person comes and teaches us; we can't change that instantly, right? (PJ interview, 2021)[19]

Another beauty worker, PR, noted that following standardised processes can also lead to poorer outcomes for workers. She described training processes that allocated set time measures for various kinds of massages. Instead, she argued her skill and experience allowed her to gauge the actual time needed to produce a visible difference in the client's face, which would vary from person to person; she considered this difference important, as following standardised practices may lead to poorer outcomes, impacting ratings; this is reminiscent of Braverman's thesis of the deskilling of work linked to such forms of Taylorism.

In addition, the UC platform which our beauty worker respondents were attached to has also expanded into a skill accreditation program, in alliance with the Skill India program (Dash, 2019). The move has a significant impact on beauty work, where new workers have now been introduced to the platform who have no experience of work outside digital platforms. In beauty work especially, this marks a distinction from the early phase of the platforms, which relied on experienced beauty workers to draw consumers to the platform. By contrast, the nature of the work in ride hailing and food delivery work was not as reliant on the notion of experience as on the skills of driving and navigation. The distinction amongst skills required across platforms meant that, while there has been a large pool of workers available for ride hailing and food delivery, the numbers in beauty work were initially limited. Through associations with the Skill India program, there is now a sudden and significant expansion in the number

[17] Interview with AM, food delivery worker (20 October 2021).
[18] Interview with KP, beauty services worker (28 October 2021).
[19] Interview with PJ, UC salon and beauty worker (30 September 2021).

of workers available on the platform. This expansion in overall numbers has led to fewer gigs now available on the platform for each worker.

Enterprise or wage labour?

The impact of control of work and declining labour conditions through both algorithmic management and the pandemic has meant that workers across platforms rarely see gig work as an entrepreneurial venture. Platforms, by contrast, are keen to stress the role they have played in drawing workers out of the informal economy and empowering them. These narratives of empowerment rest heavily on the notion that workers can maximise their earnings on platforms and provide financial security for themselves and their families. In a series of videos released by the food delivery platform Zomato, called *Humans of Zomato*, the narrative of empowerment through hard work appears repeatedly (See images 1 and 2). Here, workers discuss their experiences in previous jobs and highlight how Zomato offered opportunities to calculate income and maximise their income, while maintaining a work-life balance.

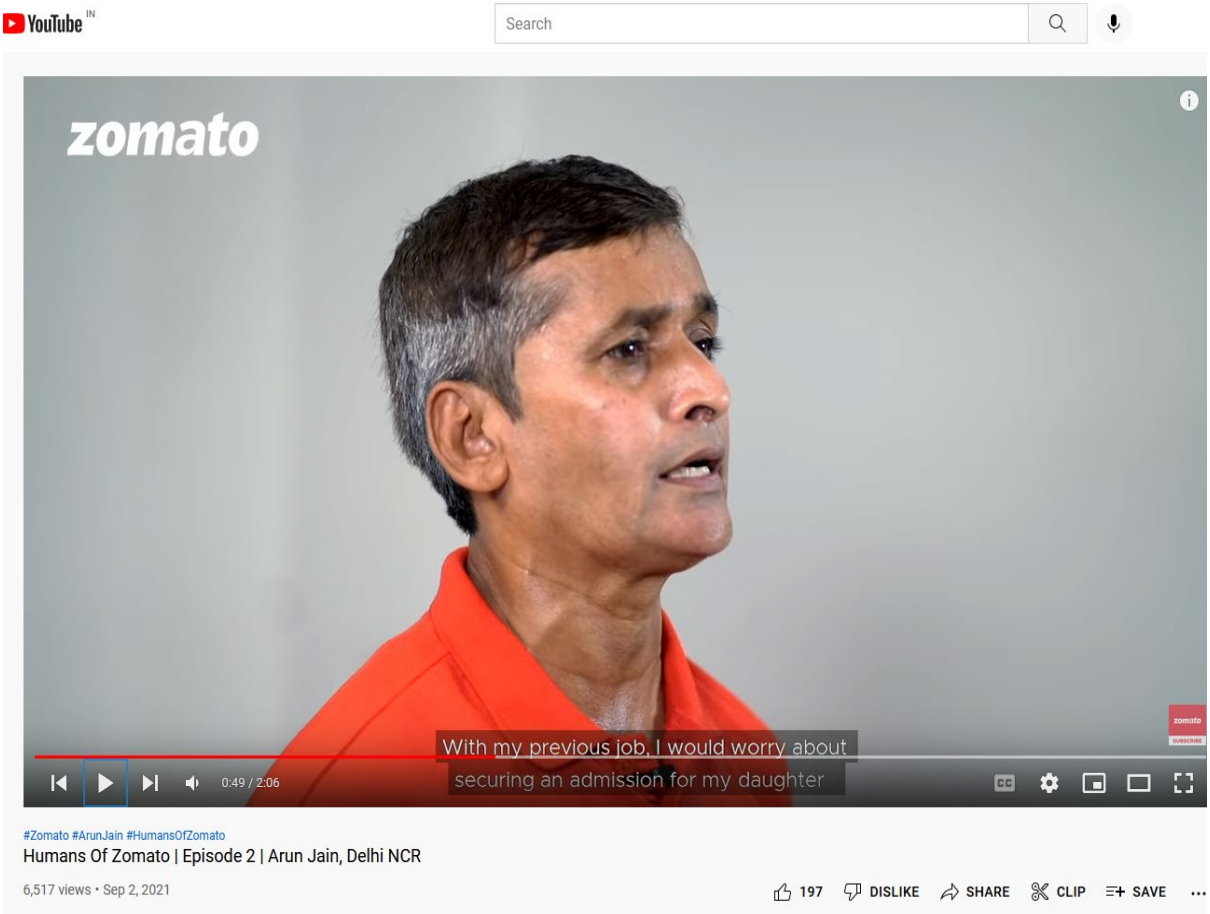

Image 1- Screen grab from Episode 2 of *Humans of Zomato*, available from Humans Of Zomato | Episode 2 | Arun Jain, Delhi NCR[20]: "With my previous job, I would worry about securing an admission for my daughter".

[20] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpe8fSmiogc&list=PLFkTGrWRclR3eKIGjCJoYGZ_DNyKQuGmZ&index=3

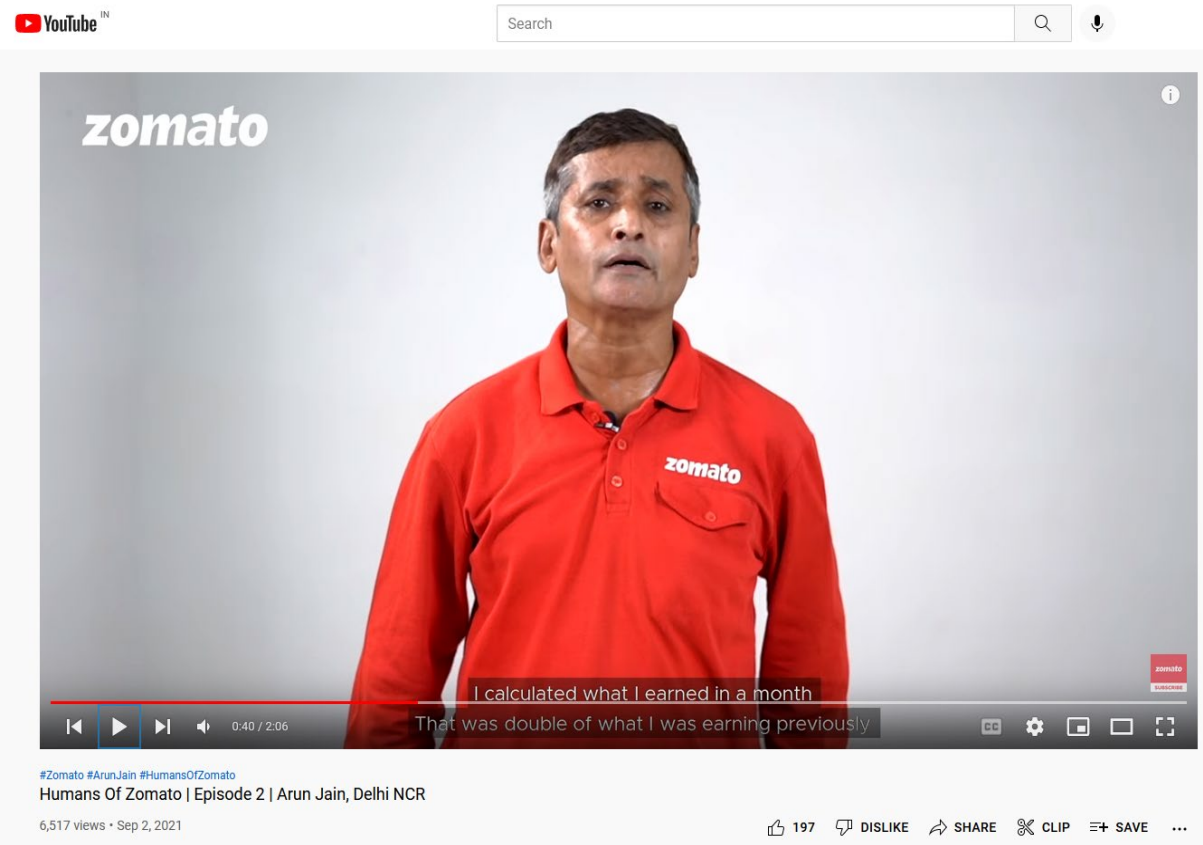

Image 2- Screen grab from Episode 2 of Humans of Zomato, available from Humans Of Zomato | Episode 2 | Arun Jain, Delhi NCR[21]: "I calculated what I earned in a month. That was double of what I was earning previously".

Platforms are keen to stress here the absence of either platform-induced long hours or auto-exploitation of the entrepreneur. Even if flexibility existed as a claim, as a practice it remained out of reach for workers as a result of other platform measures. PJ noted that the platform often controlled when leave from work could be taken.

> Why have a partner-like relationship with us? They should keep us on salary then. We came here because we believed there is freedom in this work, but they are telling us that they will tell us when we can take leave. We are getting very pressured with this. (PJ interview, 2010)[22]

Centralised control and management is in the hands of the platform, limiting entrepreneurial possibilities for workers as well as limiting flexibility and autonomy in work. Even when workers did not choose gig work for its enterprising spirit, they were intrigued by the new possibilities that lay in it. As SP, a food delivery worker put it:

> I keep working with the company, I will earn more and the company will keep increasing the price in future. But the total opposite of this happened; the more we worked the company kept decreasing the rates and I lost interest. (SP interview, 2021)[23]

The experience of gig work for a majority of our respondents has been tantamount to an experience of "daily wage work", recognised as one of the lowest forms of work in the occupational hierarchy in India:

[21] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpe8fSmiogc&list=PLFkTGrWRclR3eKIGjCJoYGZ_DNyKQuGmZ&index=3
[22] Interview with PJ, UC salon and beauty worker (30 September 2021).
[23] Interview with SP, food delivery worker (31 March 2021).

> When I joined, they told me that I have the absolute freedom to choose when to pick up the order and when not to. But now we get to know *that we worked like donkeys who were loaded and forced to work using a stick and if you don't work then you'll be beaten.* (SP interview, 2021[24]; authors' emphasis).

V, a ride-hailing driver, noted that enterprise was impossible when platforms controlled much of their work:

> Ours is a daily wage work … It is difficult to maintain one car, we just cannot think of another car at this time … even if we earn more we have to give out more in commission, 40 to 45% ... I cannot say I am independent, because our price is decided by Ola and Uber. (V interview, 2021)[25]

Thus, structurally, workers find themselves constrained by platforms. An enterprising spirit on the platform can only be channelled toward longer hours of work. Even when workers seek to maximise their earnings by working across multiple platforms, rates for commission and incentive pay set by platforms limits their earning potential through a longer and faster work day. This inevitably leads to problems for many workers, pushing them to their physical limits and increasing the likelihood of accidents and injuries. As one worker put it, this is work that can only be done by the young and it is only when their bodies can take the toil that workers can continue in the job. For workers, then, gig work does not offer long term prospects.

Gender, caste and class identities in gig work

Social identities segregate different individuals who interact digitally and physically through online platforms as well. The presence of digital platforms does not translate to exclusion of one's social identities. Gender and class reproduced themselves on a platform-based food delivery service, according to Milkman et al. (2021). Overall flexibility within gig work is a much sought-after trait, especially for women engaged in gig work who seek to schedule such work around their caregiving work at home. Similarly, caste and class privileges govern how workers can enter gig work, especially given the assets required to enter such work, and also determine which services enter the gig economy as consumers choose gig work to accomplish certain tasks that they wish not to perform. Caste, class and gender also play an important role in shaping interactions between consumers and workers (Anwar, Pal and Hui, 2020).

In the informal sectors, workers across platforms have reported the arbitrariness of ratings, which gives undue privilege to the customer to rate workers based on their levels of satisfaction with the service provided. Often this puts them at risk of losing work and compels them to go beyond the task assigned to earn good ratings. Poorly rated workers are either made to undergo mandatory training without being compensated for loss of wages or get blocked from the app, disrupting work altogether. Workers have pointed out the unequal nature of relations with

[24] Interview with SP, food delivery worker (31 March 2021).
[25] Interview with V, ride-hailing driver (24 January 2021).

customers, noting the insignificance of their own ratings of customers, and the actions taken by the management thereafter. RS, a beauty worker, felt this inequality deeply.

> As soon as we close a lead, we give a rating to the customer, but with their ratings it makes a difference of heaven and hell. Overall we have to maintain a 4.7 rating, earlier it was 4.5 – so there is a lot of pressure, those who go below that have to go for training … If I cancel then definitely there is a penalty, if they [customer] clicks that the professional has refused, then also we get the penalty. This is a minus point, every time the professional is not wrong, customers can also go wrong. (RS interview, 2021)[26]

Workers are also subject to other forms of harassment by consumers, with threats to physical security and fear of sexual assaults shaping such interactions. Platforms consider hyper-surveillance with technological innovations to be a resolution to this problem, such as through the use of SOS buttons on the apps. For instance, the UC platform makes it mandatory that bookings for female professionals be made by female customers exclusively. Despite this, women workers have faced situations where women have booked services for their husbands or for their brothers, or even male friends, which makes workers vulnerable. In the agitation against Urban Company by beauty workers in October, 2020, at Delhi National Capital Region, workers demanded human managerial intervention beside the technological intervention of SOS buttons on their apps (Nair, 2022), indicating that they were keen on a shared division of risk and responsibility between platforms and workers around labour conditions.

Meanwhile, a male Ola or Uber driver driving for an upwardly mobile middle class woman has been described as an equally risk laden job. Typically, drivers hail from a lower class position (Kashyap and Bhatia, 2018) and interact with upwardly mobile women from the middle class, who, as Annavarapu (2021) argues, perceive cab drivers as the "other", belonging to the margins of the city. A number of drivers reported a common narrative of a drunk female customer, who passes out during the journey, and whom they are worried to touch to awaken at the end of the journey.

They report this as a form of customer harassment, being forced to lose an income as they wait patiently for the passenger to wake up and leave the car while they are left without support from the platform. The anxiety in the interaction, however, emerges not merely from the skewed relation between customer and worker, but also from the interactions taking place across explicitly marked boundaries of caste and class that produce new gendered expressions of the elite drunk woman and the hard working male driver. It is also important to note that, while men indicate anxiety about accusation, for women, especially in India, the threat of assault remains significant.

[26] Interview with RS, UC beauty and salon worker (10 October 2021).

Therefore the interactions between customers and workers cannot be structured as equal on platforms. Safety, whether of the customer or the worker, is currently ultimately rendered an individual matter for which the platform bears little responsibility.

This absence of regulation also results in workers experiencing other forms of subtle discrimination. Gig workers are rarely permitted to enter the premises of restaurants or malls, with separate pick up zones created (often simply back door exits) which segregate them spatially. We spoke to a number of food delivery gig workers who had to wait outside the mall for food packs as even milling about inside the mall is frowned upon. Once the app pings to let them know that food is ready for pick-up, they must enter through the back doors of restaurants to collect packages.

Even the performance of work has to mediate its way through caste, class and race. The pandemic, in addition, has further entrenched such behaviour, as norms around hygiene and sanitation coalesce around caste and class. For instance, workers pointed out how the risk of working during the pandemic was both individually managed and concentrated in the bodies of workers alone. This was further reinforced by additional measures taken to satisfy the customer, such as uploading temperature information, vaccination status and so on, which remains mandatory for workers but not for customers.

The assumption that workers are carriers of infection corresponds to caste-based notions of purity and pollution, even if they do not match the caste identities of workers. RS noted, for instance:

> People used to behave as if we were carriers of corona into their houses, they behave really badly and almost drench us in sanitiser. they would spray it in such a way that they would not see that it is entering into our eyes, twice I have got eye infection too. They behave so badly, they think if this person has come then she has definitely brought corona with her. (RS interview, 2021)[27]

R, another beauty worker, highlighted this discrimination:

> Even if we sanitised ourselves in front of the client they still were not satisfied. Everyone sees their house as superior; we don't feel comfortable with such behaviour but we have to work in these situations if we have to keep earning. Many don't let us enter their bedrooms and they just spread a *chatai* (mat) on the floor and they say, "Here, I am lying down, why don't you wax this way?". So the client is comfortable, but we are not. After working for six years I have back ailments. (R interview, 2021)[28]

Workers in ride hailing highlighted the way in which they were made to feel dispensable when some customers treated them poorly by misinforming them about the customer's health, destination and more. The risk-laden bodies of workers are seen to be the responsibility of workers themselves.

[27] Interview with RS, UC beauty and salon worker (10 October 2021).
[28] Interview with R, beauty worker (27 October 2021).

Platforms have given only limited aid to workers, typically in the form of small bottles of sanitiser, and a single mask for the duration of the pandemic. Most workers we spoke to financed safety equipment by themselves; or, if sourced through the platform, its cost was taken from their payouts. During the peak of the first wave of the pandemic in India, platforms such as Uber, Zomato and Swiggy launched collection drives for workers, emphasising in particular the role to be played by customers in contributing toward food security for workers. However, workers reported not receiving any financial aid. Urban Company, however, offered an interest-free loan of ₹10,000 (approximately $130) during the period of lockdown, which was recovered incrementally from them once work resumed.

Across all sectors of work, there was no clarity as to how much their insurance cover was and how to claim it. KP, a beauty worker, pointed out this problem.

> They told us we have insurance, there is a OKA app for insurance, it is outsourced but its benefits I have never seen myself, even though I have twice met with an accident. Who will I speak with? There are no helpline numbers on which one could call. We cannot even call the managers, or text them, they see the messages but they don't reply. (KP interview, 2021)[29]

This has been one of the reasons that Fairwork India (2021: 2) rated platforms poorly on management, as platform responsibilities have not been clearly defined or spelt out to workers, rendering them vulnerable.

Deregulation and unexceptional neoliberalism

Jobs, as a social and political question, have remained vital in the Indian context, informing the developmental imagination of the nation. In the post liberalisation context, in what has been termed a period of 'jobless growth' this became particularly pertinent. The role of private capital and the State in job creation has undergone many shifts through the years of planning and since. That the State has continued to play a central role in India even after liberalisation is evident through (rural) employment guarantee schemes, which remain part of state policy even as bitter political contestation over them continues. Yet there has been a tendency to view job creation as no longer the role of the State, or even private capital's, but rather to replace it with the notion of self-employment and entrepreneurship.

The rise of the gig economy in India must be placed and considered within this development context. Here the gig worker can be considered a partner of the platform precisely because their roles as entrepreneurs have been considered one and the same. But, as this study highlights, workers are rarely in a position to exercise entrepreneurial agency. Even if their entry into gig work may have been mediated through the cultivation of a "neoliberal" and

[29] Interview with KP, beauty worker (28 October 2021).

enterprising self, conditions of work in the gig economy controlled by platforms deny this room and role to workers. Instead of being released from the constraints of the informal economy (as platforms conceive it), workers find themselves entrenched further in informality. Flexibility in work and autonomy for workers comes to be routinely denied, just as it is within informal work, and the notion that workers can be freed of the domination of the overseer in gig work is upturned through algorithmic control and the management that workers are subject to. Such exercises of power by platforms are made possible through the active deregulation of labour enforced by the State, such that hours of work and minimum pay guarantees are not part of the state mandate, even as minimal social security is. Even as Cross (2010: 370) notes the absence of social security as a sign of informality, it would be important to note that, for informal workers in India, social security provisioning takes place primarily via the State, a move that is being similarly contemplated for gig workers.

Legally, gig workers, are defined as workers who are able to earn through a work arrangement that lies "outside of traditional employer-employee relationship" (The Code on Social Security, 2020: 35), but this recognition does not translate into guaranteed social security. The code was expected to bring in universal social security for all workers but has instead created "gig workers" and "platform workers" as a separate and nebulous category. Further, its minimal provisions, requiring 1% to 2% of the annual turnover of platforms, is unlikely to translate into real benefits for workers (Centre for Internet and Society and IT for Change, 2021).

Currently in India, social security as part of employment is only enjoyed by a minority of the workforce – 10% - mostly in the public sector (Harriss-White, 2010) and classified as organised workers by the law. Such workers represent a labour elite in contrast to informal workers whose labour conditions remain unregulated and who work without social security. It is the large presence of the informal workers in India and their efforts at collective action, petitioning the State, that have led to minimal provisions being made for informal workers (legally characterised as "unorganised workers") by the State. Unions of gig workers in India have responded to the regulatory conundrum by challenging the neoliberal state's conception of workers. The Indian Federation of App Based Transport, a union of transport-based gig workers, has filed a legal petition challenging the non-inclusion of "gig workers" and "platform workers" in the category unorganised workers (informal workers), who, under Indian law, are offered social security, not by employers but by the State. The petition challenges the State's conception of the category of gig workers (present in the Social Security Code) by declaring that platforms have violated the right to life and rights against forced labour of gig workers (Writ Petition Summary, n.d.). The petition also simultaneously challenges the

alternate conception of workers, that is, unorganised workers, which fails to account for the informality of gig workers and include them as a category of unorganised workers.

The predominance of the gig economy has expanded the domain of such unexceptional neoliberalism across the urban landscape of India, and through it, made visible the informality baked into it. Gig workers occupy a nebulous zone, not classified as formal workers, as platforms insist on identifying them as "partners" or "contractors" to escape legal and financial responsibility, and also not recognised as "unorganised workers" under Indian law. It is important to note that the mitigation of informality here continues to be sought, by the State, through social security measures alone. The deregulation of labour conditions continues as the unexceptionality of it takes root in spaces formerly marked as part of the formal economy. In this, gig platforms appear as part of the "interstitial informal economy" (Harriss-White, 2010), with formal enterprises and informalised workers.

Conclusion

The paper considers the question of the future of work(ers) in India from the perspective of workers engaged in digitally mediated forms of work. Such technological mediation of work was initially considered to be "disruptive", rendering older relations of work obsolete and replacing them with a new value orientation based on sharing and empowerment. However, platform work and gig workers do not appear to be an aberration in the history of work but rather the norm. Such work remains rooted in an unequal division of power between capital and labour, with its novelty lying only in obscuring this relation.

Technology itself has not produced such obscurity, just as it also cannot clarify the social relation of capital and labour on its own. New forms of work such as gig work can only be understood through the social relations that shape the practice of work. Consequently, as this study highlights, this relation has remained fundamentally the same, even as gig work was to introduce new paradigms such as flexibility for labour; in practice, it continues to render workers flexible for capital and therefore vulnerable. Even as the entry of platforms may have increased employment opportunities, the absence of regulation by the State has meant that, for workers, such work appears to be an extension of informal work, where hours of work, pay and conditions of work are determined by their employers – platforms. Technology, especially through algorithmic control, creates a facade of accountability and flexibility, but workers experience the continuous control of platforms through algorithmic management of their work. Under such conditions, there is little room to check for social regulation of work when caste, class and gender hierarchies remain unchallenged. Minimal gains made through the exercise of laws checking such discrimination in formal enterprises remain absent in the informal economy.

In neoliberal cities, digital platforms promised empowerment and democratised access to services, and fundamentally altered consumer behaviour. But this promise has rested on the exploited labour of gig workers, who must undertake higher risk and responsibility at work (Venkatesh and Easaw, 2015), much like their counterparts in the informal sector of India, rendering them similarly precarious. The enterprising citizen subject, or the entrepreneurial gig worker, remains only a fictitious character, as workers are constrained by platforms and rendered vulnerable through the absence of state support, especially in the context of rising unemployment. For gig workers, this has meant that there are few alternatives, and has contributed in part to generating consent for work in the gig economy. Many workers speak of only being able to undertake gig work for a limited time as it extracts a daily toll on their bodies. More recently, however, gig workers, especially in ride hailing, have spoken of how the rise in fuel prices, and the absence of state regulation on pricing, is forcing them out of gig work into unemployment, as undertaking gig work is not a source of income but of loss. Furthermore, as this study elaborates, gig workers find their work to be heavily controlled rather than autonomous, though the control is invisibilised through digitisation, leaving workers vulnerable and outside the purview of state intervention in labour and social conditions.

There remains a clear need for both labour regulation and social security provisioning (the social security code is yet to be implemented after two years). The significance of social security provisioning notwithstanding, it is also vital to recognise that the regulations considered by the State are only in the domain of social security, but leave untouched the regulation of work hours, pay, and conditions of work (including the creation of safe working conditions for gig workers) and recognition of dispute resolution mechanisms, including rights to protest, representation through unions and so on. In such a scenario, even if gig workers earn minimum social security benefits through the implementation of the Social Security Code, their conditions of work will continue to remain informal, given that their labour remains unregulated. Particularly concerning here is that the Social Security Code is part of the Labour Code envisioned by the neoliberal state in India, which has dealt a severe blow to labour rights of workers across sectors but will hit gig workers, who are part of a nebulous category, hard as they remain beyond the purview of either labour laws or wider provisions made available to unorganised sector workers. This growing expanse of precarity (Nair, 2022) then presents a gloomy picture of the future of work, where informalisation becomes the norm not merely in the global South but also in the North, through the unmitigated power enjoyed by technological platforms. The challenge to this, however, is emerging not from the State but through workers themselves in both the global North and South.

Collective action by gig workers, in the form of strikes, protests and mobilising on the ground and online, has sought to challenge this informality. Workers contest low payouts which mandate long hours of work, challenge the deskilling they are subject to through control over the labour process by platforms, and demand recourse and redress measures when they are unfairly penalised in ratings by customers – all characteristics of the informality of their work. The study emphasises this routinisation of informality in gig work, which workers encounter without state support. Worker action and organising has been instructive in unpacking the continuing links with the informal economy and posing a challenge to it not only facing the State but also employers, a route less taken by informal worker action in India (Harriss-White, 2010). In challenging this through both legal remedies and also direct action on platforms, workers are seeking to challenge not merely the grounds of their informality – working conditions, precarity, and absence of social security – but also the model of platform work built on the back of the atomised worker, characterised as "independent". Through collective action, therefore, workers have countered the logic of atomisation and have demanded substantive independence from platforms. Through such collective action, workers are pointing toward new directions for a future of work in which the possibility remains alive of technology making flexibility and autonomy of work a true possibility. In foregrounding this through rights-based discourses around work, workers in India are providing a critical roadmap to challenge platforms specifically for their rights but also to challenge neoliberal paths of entrepreneurial development.

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