

Call for Research Fellows - Field Studies of Platform-Work

We are inviting applications for **three Research Fellow positions** to undertake field studies of platform-work in two cities, including Bangalore and another city (to be decided). The project seeks to produce a comparative understanding of at least two different kinds of platform-work as unfolding across Indian cities. Each fellow will be responsible for one field study (one form of work in one city) based on their language fluency and research experience. The Research Fellows will be associated with CIS from December 2018 to May 2019, undertake fieldwork, participate in two research workshops, and prepare an Ethnographic Report based on the fieldwork.

Project Background

The researchers@work programme at the CIS is undertaking a study, supported by research assistance from Azim Premji University, on 'Mapping Digital Labour in India' with a specific focus on platform-work.

Platform-work refers to different kinds of digitally-mediated service work. Since the rise of 'Sharing Economy' (or 'gig economy') services like Uber, Ola, UrbanClap, and Swiggy, platform-work has been gaining ground as viable employment in India. Rough estimates suggest that various logistics arms of Indian e-commerce companies more than 1 Lakh delivery personnel for 'last-mile' delivery services. Similarly, OlaCabs 'employs' 6.4 Lakh 'driver partners' and its competitor Uber had 2 Lakh active drivers across 100 Indian cities in 2017.

On the flipside, the arrival of these platform-workers has disrupted and threatened existing labour market arrangements as we have witnessed in national protests by taxi and auto rickshaw unions. Platform-workers have also gone on strikes to secure better wages and fair treatment from tech companies. However, given that platform companies claim to be mere "technological intermediaries" and not service providers, it has proven difficult to bring them under the ambit of existing labour regulations globally.

Research Questions, Methods, and Timeline

The Research Fellow is expected to work part-time (50% of monthly work hours) from December 2018 to May 2019 (6 months), and undertake an ethnographic field-based study of platform-work and platform-workers involved in a specific app-based logistical (say, delivery services) or transportation (say, taxi services) sector.

The field studies will be driven by the following questions:

1. How are gig economy platforms impacting the labour market in India? Is platform-work driving new patterns of migration across geographies (including rural to urban) and

industries? What skills are being demanded of platform-workers, and how are they acquiring such skills and entering this job market?

2. What legal, social, economic, and technological challenges are being faced by platform-workers, and what structural barriers (say, digital divide) are shaping the ability of platform-workers to articulate and access labour rights in these industries?
3. How are existing forms and practices of labour management and self-organisation (including formal unions) are being recast in the context of platform-work?

The ethnographic studies will be undertaken using the following methods:

- **Participant observation** in two types of sites: 1) within the space of work (say, taxis for Ola/Uber drivers) and, 2) at the spaces of rest/refreshment (say, parking lots and bus stops in select neighbourhoods where drivers and delivery persons often congregate to take a break or eat their meals).
- **Semi-structured interviews** with following types of interlocutors: 1) platform-workers concerned; 2) allied service sector workers associated either with the company concerned or interactive regularly with the platform-workers (say, workers at restaurants that get food delivered by the platform-workers concerned); 3) representatives of relevant workers' unions and trade associations; 4) technology company representatives (designers, engineers and product managers at these platform companies) and, 5) relevant regulatory authorities.
- **Go-alongs** of two types: 1) going along with key informants (ridesharing drivers and app-based delivery persons) in their own daily work-commute routines, and 2) going along with passengers in the space of ridesharing taxis, public buses, trains and paratransit commute.

The timeline for the study will be as follows:

- **Last Week of November, 2018:** Research Fellows are selected
- **December 01, 2018:** Work begins (starting with background research on relevant labour market and history in the city concerned)
- **Mid-December, 2018:** Initial research workshop in Bangalore, all Research Fellows are to participate in this, along with CIS staff, and project advisors
- **January-March, 2019:** Field studies to be undertaken by Research Fellows, supported by fortnightly research calls with the CIS staff
- **April-May, 2019:** Preparation of draft ethnographic reports by Research Fellows, supported by fortnightly research calls with the CIS staff
- **May 31, 2019:** Submission deadline for complete draft ethnographic reports
- **June 2019:** Final research workshop with Research Fellows, members of CIS team, and project advisors (final ethnographic report is to be submitted before this workshop)

Eligibility and Application Process

We are seeking applications from individuals who:

- Preferably have a postgraduate degree (current students may also apply) in social sciences, journalism, or legal studies (undergraduate degree-holders with research experience may also apply)
- Are based in the city where the field study is to be undertaken, at least during the duration of the study
- Are fluent in the main regional language(s) spoken in the city where the study will be conducted, and in English (especially, written).

Applicants with previous research and writing experiences on issues related to labour and work, digital or otherwise, will be given preference.

Please send the following documents (in text or PDF formats) to raw@cis-india.org by **Sunday, November 18** to apply for the Research Fellow positions:

- Brief CV with relevant academic and professional information
- Two samples of academic/professional (published/unpublished) writing by the applicant
- A brief research proposal (not more than 500 words) that should specify the city of study preferred by the applicant, and the sector (either delivery services or taxi services) where platform-work will be studied by the applicant

Remuneration

Each Research Fellow will be paid a remuneration of **Rs. 1,50,000 (inclusive of taxes)** over three equal installments - 1) on signing of the agreement in December 2018, 2) on completion of fieldwork by end of March 2019, and 3) on submission of complete draft ethnographic report by end of May 2019.

Research Team and Advisory Board

The study will be co-led by Noopur Raval (PhD candidate, University of California, Irvine) and Sumandro Chattapadhyay (Research Director, CIS).

The study will be overseen by a team of advisors comprising of Dr. Kavita Philip (Associate Professor of History, affiliate faculty, Informatics at University of California, Irvine), Rakhi Sehgal (labour researcher and trade unionist), Susana Barria (Public Services International), and Dr. Winifred Poster (Lecturer of International Affairs at Washington University in Saint Louis).