Platforms, Power, & Politics

DIGITAL LABOUR IN INDIA

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July 28th 2021
5 PM (IST)
11.30 AM (UTC)

https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_dK1i_pvXSTSXS2gNq80qFA

Few recent developments in labour and employment have attracted as much attention as the expansion of platform economies. Spanning a range of services and industries, digital platforms have become a permanent fixture in upper-class urban consumption in India.

In this webinar, we will launch and present four research reports on digital labour in India, hosted at the Centre for Internet and Society. Together, they uncover aspects of labouring in three dominant industries of platform work: logistics, transportation, and domestic and care work. These works were supported separately by the Azim Premji University and Foundation, and the Feminist Internet Research Network (incubated by the Association for Progressive Communications).

Informed by deep ethnographic work, these reports unpack the contours of power, control and resistance that shape the experience and outcomes of working for digital platforms. The reports arrive at the ways in which platforms, as moving techno-social assemblages[1], distribute risk and reward in ways that implicate the livelihoods, agency, and bargaining power of actors across digital platforms' value chains.

Each of these reports also contributes towards developing a southern understanding platform work. In contexts where there is an increasing reliance on technology providers for developmental outcomes and provision of public services, and informality is the dominant labour market structure, what does it mean to work on digital platforms? By situating the histories of informal work in India, and the intersectional identities constituting informality, these reports highlight how digital platforms can both reinforce and reorient the transaction of informal service work.

With restrictions on public mobility and the "hygiene theatre"[2] resulting from the outbreak of covid-19, digital labour platforms have sought to entrench their position in urban India as providers of 'essential services'. As digital platforms gain centre-stage in India's various marketplaces, it becomes all the more urgent to collectively reflect upon languages of strategic intervention that can enable a worker-first and southern imagination of digital platform work, and grassroots as well as policy thought around it.

We invite researchers, practitioners, activists and students from across disciplines to join us in this venture.

The event will be segmented into 4 presentations (of 10-12 minutes each), with space for discussion and feedback at the end of each presentation. The detailed agenda, and a reading list are provided below.

1 Edwards, D.W. and B. Gelms. (2018). 'The rhetorics of platforms: Definitions, approaches, futures', *Present Tense: Special Issue on the Rhetoric of Platforms, 6(3)*.

2 Thompson, D. (July 27, 2020). Hygiene Theater Is a Huge Waste of Time. The Atlantic. Available at *https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/scourge-hygiene-theater/614599/*

AGENDA

5:00 PM | INTRODUCTION

5:05 PM | SESSION 1
Perspectives from Platformisation of Domestic & Care Work in India
Ambika Tandon & Aayush Rathi, Centre for Internet and Society

5:25 PM | SESSION 2
Promise and Prescriptions in the Platformisation of Food Delivery Work in Mumbai
Simiran Lalvani, University of Oxford

5:45PM | BREAK

5:50 PM | SESSION 3
'Taxi' Nahi Chalata Hoon Main (I don't drive a Taxi): Flexibility and Risk in the Ridehailing Platform Economy in Mumbai
Anushree Gupta, IIT Hyderabad

6:10 PM | SESSION 4
The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Performing Precarious Cab-driving in Delhi
Sarah Zia, Independent researcher

6:30 TO 6.50PM | DISCUSSION & CLOSING

Moderator: Noopur Raval, AI Now

READING LIST

1. Ambika Tandon and Aayush Rathi (2021).
Platforms, Power and Politics: Perspectives from Domestic and Care Work in India.

Through exhaustive platform-mapping and feminist ethnographic work, the authors uncovers the implications of digital platforms' operations on domestic and care workers' civil liberties, social protection, and gainful work outcomes.

Access the full report here:
https://cis-india.org/raw/platforms-power-and-politics-perspectives-from-domestic-and-care-work-in-india

2. Simiran Lalvani (2019).
Workers' Fictive Kinship Relations in Mumbai App-based Food Delivery.

This essay unpacks the kinship term bhai (brother) in order to understand the implications of such kinship sedimentations on food delivery work in Mumbai. Complicating the notion of an atomised worker, it details how having a fictive kinship ties with a bhai eases entry to platform work, upon joining ties guide negotiation with the discipline imposed by the employer and reflects on the experience of women workers.

Read the essay here:
http://blog.castac.org/2019/07/workers-fictive-kinship-relations-in-mumbai-app-based-food-delivery/

3. Sarah Zia (2019).
Not Knowing as Pedagogy: Ride-hailing Drivers in Delhi.

Ride-hailing platforms have "disrupted" public transport in India since their arrival but what hasn't received enough attention is how these platforms create a deliberate regime of information invisibility and control to keep the drivers constantly on their toes which works to the companies' advantage. This essay explores how the lack of transparency around algorithmic structures not only prohibits drivers from knowing completely and surely about their work ("why did I get this ride?", "why did my ratings drop?") but also how they build tactics of coping and earning from a place of unknowing.

Read the essay here:
http://blog.castac.org/2019/07/not-knowing-as-pedagogy-ride-hailing-drivers-in-delhi/

4. Anushree Gupta (2019).
Ladies 'Log': Women's Safety and Risk Transfer in Ridehailing.

Gig work produces new risks and safety concerns that require new mediations and negotiations. This post outlines the gendered cityscapes that drivers in the ride hailing sector navigate on an everyday basis. Building on insights from fieldwork in the ridehailing economy in Mumbai, the essay argues that drivers rely not only on their spatial knowledge of the city, but also on social knowledge that genders social exchange, predicates identities and draws boundaries. Analysing women's presence as workers and passengers/customers, the author highlights the figure of the woman and the gendered forms of labour that underpin gig workers' everyday realities.

Read the essay here:
http://blog.castac.org/2019/08/ladies-log-womens-safety-and-risk-transfer-in-ridehailing/

5. Noopur Raval (2019).
Power Chronography of Food-Delivery Work.

This essay presents the observations around the design of temporality within app-based food-delivery platforms in India. It draws on semi-structured interviews by field-researcher Rajendra and his time spent "hanging out" with food-delivery workers who are also often referred to as "hunger saviors" and "partners" in the platform ecosystem in India.

Read the essay here:
http://blog.castac.org/2019/08/power-chronography-of-food-delivery-work/

6. Simiran Lalvani (2021).
Sexual Contracts of App-based Food Delivery: An Examination of Social Reproduction through Feeding and Being Fed in Mumbai, India.

What happens to socially reproductive norms of feeding when apps seem to democratise work? How does this work mediate the tension between workers', consumers' choices and the prescription of dominant norms about feeding and being fed? This paper examines the socio-cultural burdens and risks that arise for workers and customers through 3 interrelated aspects – (i) household requirements of food delivery work, (ii) the definition, social meanings and anxieties associated with eating out and (iii) how platforms make anxiety inducing outside food popular, if not palatable.

Read the chapter here:
https://www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/44269/plattformkapitalismus-und-die-krise-der-sozialen-reproduktion?cHash=2fbe6d0d75def9f0295410605939c43a

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