

Gig Workers in the Platform Economy: The Case of App-based Cab Companies in India

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Abstract

Advanced forms of technology have enabled digital platforms that facilitate online correspondence between management, workers, and customers (Kallebarg and Dunn, 2016). Such dynamically interactive platforms' upsurge allows individuals to share their assets, time, and labor for remunerative tasks or jobs (Cherry, 2016; Sundararajan, 2016). This form of business model has furthered the opportunities for gig work, thereby resulting in an increasing base of the gig economy (Donovan et al., 2016). The gig economy mediated via digital platforms is characterized by short-term peer-to-peer transactions, remunerated per task or job, and consists of a high degree of autonomy and flexibility (De Stefano, 2015). The upsurge in the gig economy's phenomena due to extensive technologization has been discussed in the academic, media, and political realms. Yet, it remains under-theorized in the mainstream academic literature. The present dissertation focuses on how gig work is facilitated by advanced digital platforms such as app-based companies and the emergent labor-management dynamics associated with the ascent of app-based companies.

The growth of app-based companies connecting users with service providers has been unparalleled. App-based cab companies such as Uber stand out as an epitome of such a model that connects drivers with the customers through its app. For the dissertation, a three-essay format focussing on the context of app-based cab companies has been followed. The first essay offers insights into how app-based cab companies in the gig economy deploy entrepreneurship

rhetoric to gain institutional capital and highlight the implications of the rhetoric for the app-based cab drivers. The second essay explores the different forms of direct and indirect control mechanisms leveraged by the company to regulate the distributed and fragmented gig workforce. The third essay examines how these gig workers collectivize and resist the organizational control to exert their agency.

Given the broad research objectives, the interpretive research approach was undertaken. Following this, we adopted a flexible and open-ended research design in this dissertation. For the research work, both secondary and primary data were collected. The secondary data included press releases issued by Uber and Ola, news articles published in Times of India (TOI), and Hindustan Times (HT) in the Indian context. Archived data was also collected from drivers' app and phones (including messages, schemes, and other information conveyed by the companies) and drivers' social media groups such as Facebook and WhatsApp after taking permission from the group admins. Primary data involved interviews with 52 app-based cab drivers, 28 app-based cab companies' management executives, 19 active union members, and 12 union leaders. These interviews were conducted in different cities, including Kolkata, Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai.

In the first essay, we examine different aspects of entrepreneurship rhetoric deployed by the app-based cab companies and inquire how it is leveraged by the companies to gain institutional capital. We also explore how this rhetoric compares with the app-based cab drivers working experience. This essay contributes to the literature of cultural entrepreneurship by explicating the mechanisms that leverage the entrepreneurship rhetoric, and critical audiences' role in deploying the rhetoric to enhance institutional capital. In this study, we also observed a huge gap between the entrepreneurship rhetoric and the workers' experience that resonated with the arguments of Doody et al. (2016). The companies continued to deploy entrepreneurship rhetoric despite the glaring gap in matching the reality in other contexts (Mishra and Bathini,

2019). The intentional deployment indicates the rhetoric to be a legitimacy lie that is ethically wrong from both the perspectives of deontology and utilitarianism (Hannafey, 2003; Rutherford et al., 2009) because of its adverse consequences for the workers. The present study has policy implications as there seem to be dire repercussions of deployment of entrepreneurship rhetoric in developing countries.

The second essay offers insights into the direct and indirect mechanisms of control deployed by app-based cab companies. This study contributes to the literature challenging the neutrality of app-based cab companies' digital platforms (see Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Gandini, 2019) by unraveling the nuances of control mechanisms leveraged by these companies. The study identifies algorithmic management as a direct mechanism of control capable of directing, pacing, monitoring, constantly evaluating workers, and making decisions, and implementing it with minimal managerial intervention. Further, nudge (see Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) is identified as an indirect mechanism of control that targets the workers' mental processes to push them towards certain choices that would be profitable for the companies. This essay also contributes to the literature of organisational control by identifying algorithmic management as an advanced form of technocratic control and nudge as another dimension of normative control that targets mental processes rather than mental content. The study suggests that unlike the neutrality claims of app-based cab companies, they leverage strong control over workers, further augmented by the workers' economic compulsion.

Consistent with the argument that control and resistance are dialectical and co-constitutive (Mumby 2005), the third essay explores how the app-based cab drivers collectivize and resist to exert their agency. In the context of gig economy characterized by a fragmented, isolated, and dispersed base of workers (Lehdonvirta, 2018), the possibility of collectivization has been either written-off (Ketchell, 2019; Tronsor, 2018) or have been claimed to be happening on social media (Aloisi, 2015; Woodcock, 2017). The present study challenges these claims by

highlighting the ‘phygital’ form of collectivization where physical meeting places and digital space reinforce each other to enable faster and constant connections, enhancing a sense of community-hood. The study contributes to the literature on unionization by suggesting phygital collectivization as an alternative to the traditional unionization process, pointing towards the scope of labor movements in the gig economy. The study also augments the literature on workers’ resistance (see Mumby et al., 2017) by highlighting the different covert and public forms of resistance mechanisms at the individual and collective levels. Further, it delineates the role of phygital inclusion in translating individual-level resistance mechanisms to the collective level and shows the dynamics between individual and collective level resistance mechanisms.

Overall, the dissertation offers theoretical and empirical insights about the dynamics existing at the level of management, workers, and the role of broader social-political processes in the context of the gig economy mediated by digital platforms. This dissertation augments the literature of cultural entrepreneurship, management control, and extends the arguments about the scope of labor movements and resistance in the given context.

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