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Cab Aggregator vs. Driver Partner: Conceptualising Labour Agency of digital platform workers in Mumbai, India

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Abstract:

Cab drivers working on the digital platform of cab aggregators have a unique employment relationship, where the production process is effectively 'unbundled' from formal occupation and the workers are referred as 'driver partners' or 'independent contractors'. Cab driverson digital platforms have limitedlegal protection and are deemed to be*workers without employers* working for the*shadow corporations* of the gig economy. The digital platform intermediary is considered to undermine the collective agency of labour through individualized performance linked pay and incentive system. By having digital platform and *Algorithmic Management*as intermediary, most of the angst between labour and capital is either redirected towards algorithm's obstacles or in devising means to ingeniously optimize individual's gains within the boundaries of algorithm. While effective in asserting control over labour process, a recent spate of strikes at multiple Indian cities highlights the undercurrent of worker's activism against the cab-aggregator's digital platform. Using empirical evidence from city of Mumbai (India), this paper conceptualises the potential of collective action of labour agency and its scope to renegotiate, rework or resist discriminatory practices or perceived injustice of the platform economy. On a related note it reveals the strategyof the cab-aggregators to maintain the status quo and mitigate the business risks posed through the labour collectives. Overall the paper attempts to theorize the conflict and negotiation between the cab-aggregators and driver partners.

Key-words: Digital economy, gig worker, Uber, cab-aggregator, India

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1. Introduction

With advances in digital technology, digitally mediated work platforms in personal transportation have witnessed a rapid growth in many cities worldwide(Iacobucci, Hovenkotter, & Anbinder, 2017; Meyer & Shaheen, 2017). The digitally mediated work platforms have been criticized for commodification of labour, poor regulation and one-way manifestation of work and employment terms, thus leaving little scope for the gig worker's collective action(Aloisi, 2016; Stewart & Stanford, 2017; Todolí-Signes, 2017). Cab-aggregators like Uber and Ola have transformed the conventional employment relations, where rather than having managers in flesh and blood, a series of algorithms manage the performance of driver partners. By inserting an additional layer of algorithm between capital and labour, along with individualized target and incentive system, the digital platform is considered to have weakened the collective agency of the labour. Notwithstanding such assertions, a recent surge in spate of strikes by the driver partners in the city of Delhi, Mumbai and Hyderabad highlights the underlying conflict among the driver 'partners' and 'aggregators' in several Indian cities. An undercurrent of activism in the cab-aggregation sector[4] highlight the fact that the collective labour agency can't be fully bypassed by having an algorithm as intermediary(between capital and labour) or by 'gamifying' the individual performance linked incentives. However, there exist a knowledge gap about how these movements are formed and coordinated and whether such collective actions by the drivers equip them with enough credentials to successfully bargain with the firms like Ola/Uber. While strikes act as ultimate and most visible resort for the cab drivers to push for their demands, it is interesting to understand how the cab drivers are mobilized for joint action and if they can pressurize the cab-aggregators to negotiate. The existing analysis also falls short on conceptualizing the outcomes of labour activism and essentially miss the cab-aggregator's viewpoint on the new forms of labour challenges that have cropped up in their digitally mediated work platforms. Also less is known about how the cab-aggregators have responded towards these collective actions and what strategies do they adopt to mitigate the concerns leading to activism of the driver partners.

Using framework devised by Katz (2004), this article conceptualizes the scope of labour agency and probable outcomes for the cab drivers working through the digital work platforms of cab aggregators in Mumbai, India. The article has two-fold objectives - first to identify the driver partner's experiences of labour market injustice mediated through the digital platform and algorithm. Second to conceptualise the potential of collectivism and its scope in negotiating for better integration terms with the cab-aggregators (Ola/Uber) and government. The article empirically examines the labour

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[4]https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-ola-uber-driver-partners-call-for-flash-strike-from-midnight/articleshow/60738640.cms (Accessed on 25th Feb. 2018)

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/hyderabad-stranded-fleeced-after-uber-ola-flash-stir/articleshow/61195284.cms (Accessed on 25th Feb. 2018)

agency and strategy of resilience, reworking and resistance of the driver partners in Mumbai, India. Mumbai is financial capital of India and already has unionized traditional black and yellow taxi services. However, the existing union of traditional black and yellow taxis does not consider the drivers working through Ola/Uber network as their members. This essentially leaves the cab drivers on Ola/Uber platform to devise own ways to collectively pitch for their concerns with the cab-aggregators or the state government.

The rest of article has been organizedas following. Section 2 provides the overview of literature on labour and digital platform economy. It also identifies the ways through which labour on digital platform resists or attempt to maximize their gains within the realm of algorithmically designed work platform. Section 3 discusses methodology used for this article along with identifying the resource persons interviewed and secondary data source for the study. Section 4 gives local context of cab service sector in Mumbai and outlines the different segments of cab-service providers. Section 5 gives empirical details from the field and discusses the antagonism between collective labour agencies and cab-aggregators in Mumbai. This section also conceptualizes the process, scope and outcome of labour collective and identifies the potential role of state government of Maharashtra in determining the integration terms for the driver partners. Section 6 concludes the article and identifies the potential research trajectory that could be further studied to understand role of labour collective in the gig economy.

2. Gig Work and Labour Agency – The dawn of new era of digital work platforms

The model of cab-aggregator lowers the transactional costs for the firms as the workers can be considered as 'freelancers', working as own-account worker or micro-entrepreneurs who could even pursue cab-driving as part-time job (De Stefano, 2015; Hall & Krueger, 2018). This also allows the aggregators to safely distance themselves from both buying and maintaining a large pool of cabs and contingencies related to formal employment liabilities(Sundararajan, 2016; Surie & Koduganti, 2016). On the worker's front, it essentially means that an intermediary or the cab-aggregator facilitates the service production or value creation, for which they have to pay a service price or commission. In order to highlight this new type of employment relationship, the aggregators often refer to their drivers as service partners and not as employees. Drivers under such employment arrangement have been denoted as *workers without employers* working for *shadow corporations* and such instances are becoming a salient feature of the gig economy (Friedman, 2014). The cab-aggregators worldwide have been under scanner for their business model and their journey till now has not been without controversies. Also referred as gig economy, the digital platforms are alleged to commodify the labour, create non-standard employment with long and tedious working hours with low income opportunities (Berg, 2016; Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; ILO, 2016; Prassl & Risak, 2016; Scholz, 2017).

For cab-aggregators there are two important parameters for their success - first the motivation of the driver partners to drive more by remaining active (online) on the digital platform and second nudge the behavior of driver partners towards delivering better (and polite) service experience for the riders. Through digital mediation and *gamification* of the incentives, the cab-aggregators are able to achieve these duel objectives. Messages related with daily, weekly or monthly targets on number of trips to be completed and corresponding reward (incentives) keep on popping up on the driver's phone. The logic of surge pricing and demarcating surge zone areas, so that drivers could rush to capture the increased dynamic pricing is yet another manifestation of game's logic in otherwise routine and

monotonous work. There are innovative checks and balances to discipline the drivers and getting the customer's feedback at the end of every ride (often a compulsory rating) is one such measure. The practice of seeking mutual feedback was previously unheard of in the cab-service industry(Mason, 2018). Every week the cab-aggregator would send the personalized feedback to the drivers on their overall ratings on parameters such as politeness, cleanliness of cab etc. and by warning or even barring the very low scorer and it act as a deterrent for the drivers against misbehaving.

While the design of algorithm and its efficiency largely take care of the driver's performance and behavior, an additional element of competition further reinforces the need to remain available for job. By having a large number of cabs on the street, the cab-aggregator pitch the drivers' against each other, for instance, if a driver declines the customer's ride request, it will be automatically sent to other drivers in the vicinity who might be willing to take up the task. It also means that the drivers need to remain continuously active on the online platform,or else other competing drivers could be the beneficiaries. This highly individualized approach towards earning as per one's efforts is instrumental in providing a sense of control and freedom to choose among the drivers. The idea embedded in the minds of cab drivers is that they are limited only by own physical and mental capability to remain online and drive more. This highly individualistic and neoliberal approach of being responsible for one's own earning is not new in the modern service oriented workplaces (e.g. individual pay and incentive structure in large ICT-ITES firms), however the cab-aggregators have taken this logic a step ahead through digital generation of individualized targets and pay systems for the cab drivers.

2.1 Digitally mediated cab services – Employment relations in cab-service industry

In principle, the driver partners seems to have ample choice in terms of when they wish to work, duration of work time and the choice of geographical area. Some researchers have even considered them as micro-entrepreneurs given the ownership and control over their work hours and efforts they wish to put in maximizing the gains. However a careful evaluation of how performance of the driver partners are managed, researchers have identified subtle yet powerful control mechanism put in place through the operating logics of the digital platform. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) uses the term *'Algorithmic management'*, where multiple algorithms has effectively automated the decision making in terms of designing the work incentives, customer rating, penalizing continuous cancellation of ride requests with minimum human intervention and have essentially replaced the task traditionally done by managers in flesh and blood.

The cab-aggregators effectively use the logic of*'gamification'* by incorporating logic of games such as point scoring (rating), measurable evidence of past accomplishments (number of trips), levels of accomplishments (ride targets along with incentives) in non-game or work context (Mason, 2018). By having individualized driving goals and commensurate incentives or rewards the cab-aggregators subtly nudge and manage the performance and motivation of the driver partners. Also an additional element of competition among the driver partners further create pressure to be efficient and personalized feedback in terms of customer ratings, number of rides completed further reinforce towards achieving the established goals set by the cab aggregators. Mason (2018) argues that the gamification of cab driving has in a way interposed an additional layer of algorithm between the labour (cab drivers) and capital (cab aggregator firms).

"When players were unsuccessful, their dissatisfaction was directed at the game's obstacles, not at the capitalist class, which sets the rules.....Learning how to operate cleverly within the game's

parameters becomes the only imaginable option. And now there is another layer interposed between labour and capital: the algorithm.” (Mason, 2018)

While gamification and algorithm can give a perception about control and operate within the parameters specified by the cab-aggregators, but this phenomenon of control can't be an unending affair. A recent spate in strikes across multiple cities proves that even after having an algorithm in between labour and capital, the sense of fairness cannot be manufactured, especially when the returns of cab driving are poor. This article target to highlight the fact that even with digital intermediation, the labour (here cab drivers) have their own agency and mechanism to register their grudges, protest and even put the cab-aggregators on discussion table and bargain for better integration terms and privileges. However, the point to be noted here is that this new form of labour agency is essentially different from the traditional labour agency in the set-upblack and yellow (traditional) taxi driving segments. In traditional cab-driving segment, the individual efforts leading to higher or lower personal income is similar to the case of driver partners of the cab-aggregators. However, two parameters differentiate them from the drivers of the cab-aggregators. First, they do not depend on digital application for securing their customers and second their labour agency is expressed through a formal representation of taxi worker's union and they tend to bargain with the department of transport (state government wing) for higher fares or concessions (in terms of taxes). The traditional union of taxi drivers does not consider the driver partners of cab-aggregators to be a part of their activism, which essentially leaves them on their own to chart out a course of action. Moreover, the cab-aggregators do not consider themselves as an employer and therefore do not agree to the proposition of having a formal labour union that could be engaged in collective negotiations. The driver partners preference to have more privileges and benefits and the cab-aggregator strategy to keep the prices at a competitive point, creates a unique tussle and power play. The upcoming section outlines the background of the key cab-aggregator firms in Mumbai and identifies the key friction points with their driver partners.

2.2 Conceptualising Labour Agency in Gig Economy

Katz (2004)has identified three forms of labour agency: *Resilience, Resistance* and *Reworking* and the manifestation of each type would depend upon the context of work and type of workers involved. Resilience refers to the strategy of labour where they work under the given terms without questioning the authority about its fairness. At times the workers might believe that the conditions for working might improve gradually or there is no point in creating a resistance as it might irk the employers. Resistance refers to actions taken by labour agency to display their displeasure over the terms or policies of the employers and such display could either be very evident as outright strike or a subtle form of honing passive aggressive behavior. The idea is to signal the employer that all is not well and the workers show their discomfort through indirect means. Under Reworking, the workers go for outright protest and seek negotiations to change the integration terms and make it more favorable. Reworking of integration terms could be long and tedious process as it involves convincing and bargaining several stakeholders that could involve the local government employer, workers and customers. First step for any collective action is identification of a common cause and an agreement over having a unified action, seeking desirable change.

The strategy of resilience, resistance and reworking is easily visible in the context of industrial era employment relationship. Still in manufacturing enterprises of India, there are many strong unions, which at times have even backing of political parties, who can push for resistance or reworking of the integration terms. Likewise in service sector, firms having employees on their payroll could have certain degree of labour agency embedded.However, as noted in previous sections, having digital platform as intermediary the cab-aggregatorsclaim to be mere technology provider firm, and not an

employer of the drivers. This assertion fundamentally weakens the labour agency, as the conventional, industrial era labour relations won't be fitting in this new form of employment relationship. The meaning and implications of resilience, resistance and reworking in the cab service segment would essentially differ from the firms having employer employee relationships. The empirical section of this paper discuss more about how the concept of labour agency could be applied in the case of driver partners of the cab-aggregator firms.

2.3 Local context of the study – The cab-aggregators in India

While Uber was established in the USA and has significant presence is larger (first and second tier) cities of India, Ola is an Indian enterprise, which have wider presence in even some smaller to smaller (tier three) cities of India.Table 1 provides the brief corporate profile of Ola and Uber in India, who engage a number of cab drivers as service partners and not as employees. Both the cab-aggregators have strong financial backing from the investors, however they still have to stabilize their profits. The cab-aggregator typically charges between 20 to 25 percent of the final bill as service commission and it is a key source of their revenue.

Table 1: Brief profile of Uber and Ola

Parameters	Uber	Ola
Country of origin	USA	India
Year of establishment	2009 (India 2012)	2010
Annual turnover	6.5 billion USD (2016)	150 million USD (2015)
Cities in India (numbers)	29 cities in India (2016)	110 cities in India
Number of cab-drivers enrolled (driver partner)	240,000 (India)[5]	900,000 (India)

Source: Individual firm website[6]

Both Ola and Uber have strong presence in Mumbai and most of the times driver partners would register themselveswith both Ola and Uber. This essentially means that the driver has an option to get business through Ola or Uber platform and might choose one over the other aftergaining sufficient experience of both the platforms. Unlike in many Western countries, Ola/Uber have cab-leasing sister concern company, which engage in leasing cabs to willing drivers and charge a fix daily or monthly rental (more details in the empirical section of the paper). Ola/Uber conduct their own inspection of vehicle physical condition and also engage indriver's background check as well as police verification. The drivers are given a brief orientation and are shown video clips giving them basic information on safety and required behavioral conduct. The cab aggregators reserve the right to revoke the partner status of the drivers, in case they are found to indulge in prohibitive activities such as causing grave damage or injuries to passengers.

3.0 Methodology

The research was executed at two stages. In first stage, groundwork related to collecting and analyzing secondary data set related with cab-aggregators (e.g. news articles, blogs, documentaries etc.) was carried out. In this stage the interview questions to be asked from the driver partners werecompiled. In the second stage, field visits to Mumbai were made and a total of 16 drivers

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[5]https://www.ft.com/content/12bf0cce-0d99-11e7-a88c-50ba212dce4d (Accessed on 23rd Feb. 2018)
[6]https://www.olacabs.com/about.html (Accessed on 23rd Feb. 2018)

working through Ola/Uber platforms were interviewed. The interviews lasted between 20 to 50 minutes and all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, the researcher also attended two union meetings organized in Mumbai by International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). ITF is a global trade union federation that fights for improving work lives of transport workers across 147 countries[7] and have supported strikes by Uber drivers in Japan and Argentina (ITF, 2017a, 2017b). Many driver activists, working through Ola/Uber platforms, across different parts of India attended these meets and the researcher had an opportunity to interact with driver activists from various Indian cities. The researcher also had opportunity to become a part of the driver's WhatsApp group and closely observed and analysed the interactions and discussions to understand process of consensus building and planning interventions.

Questions from the cab drivers included components of personal and socio-economic background; work history and their work and employment experiences through digital platforms. In addition, the perception of injustice (or unfairness) in the cab aggregator's policy, along with opinion about the potential efficacy of collective action and their willingness to participate in activism were explored. From the ITF representatives and other leaders or activists involved in organizing the cab drivers in Mumbai (e.g.*Bhartiya Mill Mazdoor Sangh*), the issue of labour collectives in the cab service sector was discussed.The challenges of organizing the cab-drivers along with resistance from cab-aggregator firms were also discussed.

4.0 Perception of injustice among the cab drivers – An empirical account

For any kind of resistance or reworking to happen, the essential precursor is a sense of commonly understood wrongdoings or injustice of the cab-aggregators. Discussion with the drivers revealed several bones of contention, which were believed to be unfair and undermining the driver's potential of earning more. The most pertinent among them was related with the cabs leased by the Ola/Uber through their sister concern firms. In Mumbai, it is not unusual to spot cabs that are principally owned by the sister concern firms of cab-aggregator and any driver with valid driving licence and willingness to accept the leasing terms could secure a cab from them. Highlighting the conflict of interest in such cases, one the driver cum owner of a cab responded:

"If Uber claims to be a tech company, then they should better remain as technology provider. Why they are getting into business of providing leased cabs? It's obvious that the cabs owned by the company will get better business opportunities than us, or else from where the driver will pay 600 rupees per day lease amount, take care of diesel and yet save for himself?"

(Interview, May 2018)

The theme of having a perception of giving unduly advantage to company's leased cab was a recurrent theme of discussion with the cab drivers having their own vehicle. Some activists' leaders have even done experiments where a bunch of cab drivers were online on the digital platform and one of them ordered a cab. Rather than passing the booking to any of the drivers standing nearby, the booking went to a driver coming from a distance of 15 minutes drive. Such anecdotal evidences further reinforce the perception of the drivers about biasness of the digital algorithms.

The second perception of injustice among the cab-drivers were related with reduction in business and income over a period of time. Such perceptions of unfairness were more evident among the drivers

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[7]https://www.itfglobal.org/en/about-us/who-we-are

who were more than one year old on the platform. Explaining the perceived logic of reduced income over a period of time, one of the drivers exclaimed

"When I first joined Uber, I use to get 12 rides in a working day of 12-13 hours. Now I remain online for over 15 hours, but still I struggle to achieve 7 or 8 rides. I believe when somebody joins new, the company wants to entice them with better business opportunities and the moment they get older than six months the favorable treatment is withdrawn."

(Interview, May 2018)

Another related unfair practices of cab-aggregators, as identified by the drivers, were related with mindless enrollment of new vehicles on the digital platform. Drivers were quick to identify that there has been drastic increase in the number of cabs under Ola/Uber platform in Mumbai and it was eating up the business opportunities of all the cab-drivers. The driver respondents felt that the firm should display some restraint in increasing competition among the drivers and work towards putting a cap on the number of vehicles that could be enrolled with them at a particular point of time.

While the drivers has a choice on the number of hours they drive, often they do not have absolute control over the work hours. Contingencies such as loan repayment of the cab on monthly basis (if secured through bank loan) and after deducting service fee (of around 25 percent of each ride value), maintenance and fuel costs; economics of driving does not offer a lucrative savings. A part of discontent was rooted in the tall claims made by Ola/Uber representatives about the potential earnings. While joining Ola/Uber many drivers were promised earning potentials that were lucrative, however when the drivers bought cab and started the work, soon they realize that their earning potential was much lower than the promised returns. Drivers even claimed that initial six months were great in terms of business, however post this time period, a steady decline in daily earnings were observed. Two reasons were perceived as the potential explanation – first Ola/Uber does not have a cap on maximum numbers of cab enrolled on their online platform and second Ola/Uber deliberately favour new entrants and over a period of time, this favored status is withdrawn. Highlighting the sense of being cheated, one of the drivers identified the anomaly by saying:

"While orientation, the representatives made high claims and gave me rough estimates of earning over 90 thousand in a month, however after driving the cab for few months, I still find such kind of targets to be elusive. I bought this cab through bank loan and now find it difficult to remain profitable after accounting for EMI, petrol, service commission and maintenance."

(Interview May 2018)

During the discussions with drivers, it emerged that initially the cab-aggregators offered very lucrative incentives to encourage more number of drivers to join the platform, however once the target number of cabs were achieved and turnover of cabs stabilized, a more realistic incentive schemes were introduced. Those who joined early enjoyed an extended period of enhanced earning and some were encouraged to the extent that they inducted multiple cabs by hiring drivers. However, with the current competition and number of vehicles on Mumbai roads, having a driver for the cab is no more a lucrative proposition. As a result many owners with multiple cabs on Ola/Uber platforms have either sold off additional cabs or have given it out to individuals on fixed term lease model.

4.1 Forms of individual and collective action of the cab drivers towards the perceived unfairness

Table 2 summarizes the various strategies of the cab drivers while dealing with the cab-aggregator firms. Most of the driver partners would fall in the category of Resilience, where they are reluctant to participate in joint action or voice their concern forcefully thinking that either it would be futile or they might have to face repercussions from the side of cab-aggregators. Some drivers even reported being blocked temporarily on Ola/Uber platform, when the company realizes that they were trying to instigate drivers for collective action and bargain for better integration terms. Interestingly the non-participating drivers do keep a tab on outcomes of the collective action pursued by the activists and hoped for favorable outcomes.

Table 2: Data analysis process

Major themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes (Examples)
Resistance	*Pragmatic switching:* This sub-theme show that the drivers does not owe much loyalty to any of the cab-aggregator and can switch between the platforms instantly	1. App switching 2. Differing incentives 3. Swindling	*"Both Ola and Uber keep on sending the targets along with respective incentives, I switch the app to whichever appears more lucrative"*
Resilience	*Mute workhorses:* This sub-theme indicates the strategy of cab-drivers where they accept whatever is offered by the cab-aggregator and abide dutifully to their dictum	1.Advantages 2.Disciplined 3. Indifferent	*"I can't afford to loose my Ola/Uber enrollment. They are known to blacklist drivers who get into activism and create troubles for them"*
Reworking	*Negotiating integration terms:* This sub-theme reveals outright challenge to the cab-aggregator's terms and aim towards re-negotiating the deal	1. Consensus building 2. Pressure tactics 3. Alternate platform	*"It's only when we called for the strike and broke windshields of a few deviant cabs, Ola.Uber came on negotiation table"*

Source: Author's field data and analysis

The cab drivers do have their own ways and mechanism to express resistance and at times even resort to steps like strike and seek for reworking of the integration terms. For some of them, trying to outsmart the algorithm and optimize their own benefits is one of the strategies. For instance, after securing a passenger through the cab-aggregator platform, the driver would negotiate with the customer about cancelling the ride and then paying whatever amount that was displayed while booking the ride. Some others would invariably try to call and enquire about the passenger drop-off destination to check if it would be convenient to go for such locations. While both Ola/Uber have clear instructions of not asking about destination of passenger prior to start of ride, seeking this detail

over phone and cancelling the ride is not uncommon. Table 3 summarizes the wide range of spectrum of intervention and ambitions displayed by the union activism, where strikes are the most visible and strongest response towards the perceived injustice of the cab-aggregators.

Table 3: Summary of strategies adopted by unions

Strategy	Description	Response of Cab-Aggregators	Potential outcomes
Mobilization	The tools are formal and informal meetings, What's App group	Blacklisting of certain activist drivers	For the cab-drivers it means increasing the collective consciousness and creating a widespread opinion about the common concerns or points of contention
Discussion with Uber/Ola representatives	Drivers either individually or in small groups tries to meet with the representatives of Ola/Uber to discuss possible solution towards their concerns	Conveying the fairness of their approach through various communication mediums	This is a part of Reworking strategy, where the cab drivers try to negotiate with the Ola/Uber officials for a better deal. At times the drivers even come up with issues of individual drivers, who have been blacklisted by the cab-aggregator
Strike	This could be declared by a faction of driver activist or through the support of political parties	Maintain status-quo or partially agree to some demands and dole out some extra incentives	This is the ultimate and most visible resort that is a part of Reworking strategy. This is detrimental for both the cab-driver and aggregators as there is a substantial loss of business and income
Creating own app based platform	The ambitious plan is to create a competitor firm so that it can do away with the perceived injustice committed by the cab-aggregators	With backing from investors with deep pockets, Ola/Uber are not much worried about potential threats from new digital platforms (App) developed by the driver partners	While ambitious, the ground level execution suggest that such attempts have not yet been successful in context of Mumbai (e.g. Aamchi drive of black and yellow taxi)

Response of cab-aggregators towards the concerns of driver partners

The policies of Uber have already been criticized for transferring the risks and costs associated with driving to the cab drivers and capitalize on the existing precarious employment(Isaac & Davis, 2014). It is deemed to have outmaneuver governments, regulators and competitors and in this process have created political as well as legal controversies worldwide (Dudley, Banister, & Schwanen, 2017). As noticed earlier, the business model of Ola/Uber in India allows them to have leasing companies run by their sister concern firms (e.g. XChange Leasing India). These cab leasing agencies charges a monthly rental and allegedly are favored in terms of providing better ride opportunities with low wait time. Aware of these narratives, Uber had to release an official letter to manage this perception, where they categorically mentioned that irrespective of the ownership status, all the cabs are treated equally once they are on their digital platform. An excerpt from the company letter note that:

"....We would also like to clarify that Uber doesn't discriminate in any manner between XChange Leasing India vehicles & regular Driver Partner vehicles. Once a vehicle is online on the Uber App, all vehicles are the same" (Letter issued by Uber on November 15, 2018)

The concern of not having enough earnings by driving Ola/Uber is also known to the cab-aggregators. They have time and again emphasized that they act only as intermediary and keep on pushing for increase in number of rider base as it is in their own interest to have large pool of riders. Responding to concern of driver partners about increasing supply of Uber cabs, with no policy of having an upper limit on number of cabs, Uber noted:

"...stopping vehicle onboarding is not within Uber's control since anyone with a commercial vehicle and a driving license is free to download the app, submit documents and avail our services. Onboarding new vehicles is necessary to ensure business continuity and reliability of the Uber App."

Uber further justifies not capping the number of vehicle by insisting that new vehicle onboarding is necessary to compensate for the drivers or vehicles who stop being active on Uber App. A section of drivers are not satisfied with the explanations given by the Uber and demand for interventions, especially in terms of increasing the fares per kilometer basis. The allegations are that in order to provide cost-effective rides, they are reducing the fares per kilometers at a price point, which is even lower than the traditional, metered, non air-conditioned black and yellow taxis.

5. Discussion

There are still limitations in the labour agency of the cab drivers working through the digital platform and resilience seems to be the preferred choice for most of the drivers. Resilience also comes with a feeling of not to unnecessary get their hands dirty by outright resistance and demand for reworking of the integration terms. However, at the same time they would be glad to receive any of the benefits that could be possibly negotiated by their counterparts through any means. Social media particularly WhatsApp (a mobile App supporting group chat) becomes the most potent tool for spreading the awareness, calling for meetings or strike or in general discussion of issues and debating solutions. It is interesting to note that different types of drivers have different takes over the perceptions about the injustice done by the Ola/Uber digital platforms. The drivers who are on per trip payment basis are most likely to be indifferent and resilient towards the collective agency of labour. They could be paid at the rate of around 100 rupees per trip, irrespective of the distance covered in each trip. By

completing around 10-12 trips, they earn around 1000-1200 rupee per day and do not have to worry about fuel, maintenance or EMI costs. Also these drivers are more likely to switch cabs and owners and are not very particular about choosing a specific platform for getting work.

In contrast, the driver-cum-owners who have purchased cabs through bank loan are the ones more likely to register their concerns, as they need to manage the running costs, maintenance as well as the loan repayment. These driver-cum-owners are reluctant to hire help for driving the cabs, as it would be unprofitable for them to do so. Even the owners of cabs who hire drivers on pay per trip basis are the ones more inclined towards getting into collective action and bargain for better incentives on the number of rides completed. Drivers having leased cabs through Ola/Uber have mixed opinion on bargaining for a better deal. Some of the activist drivers have been warned verbally and were temporarily blocked from using the Ola/Uber App. This measure was to signal that any activity hurting the business of cab-aggregator will be dealt in a high-handed way, however after mounting of pressure from labour collectives, Ola/Uber whitelisted such driver activists. Yet another set of drivers are being ambitious in thinking of launching their own online platform where the service commission would be lower and will avoid all the potential injustice done by Ola/Uber. Some of them have even been pushing for finding investors for their project, however execution and ground level implementation of such ambitious projects are still wanting. While the new entrants into the online cab-service industry have lower costs than incumbents and similar availability of modern technology, still a few firms are having monopoly and the new technology may not quickly allow multiple players to occupy the niche (Gabel, 2016).

There is a subtle power play between the cab drivers and cab-aggregators, where both of them directly or indirectly want to assert their rights and dominance. In this power tussle the cab-aggregators seems to have an upper hand as they owe the control and rights to incorporate or dismiss any driver on their digital platform. Further, they are reluctant to share the source codes and open up their software for independent verification of the alleged biasness, thus creating more negative perception about its fairness. Owing to their experience of having physical confrontation with the drivers, the offices of Ola/Uber in Mumbai have bodyguards and bouncers to control any unforeseen situation. From the driver's side, the support of political parties such as *Shiv Sena* give immense strength to declare strikes and negotiate with the Ola/Uber managers. The drivers also gang up to protest arbitrary dismissal of their leaders from the digital work platform and in some cases have even succeeded in securing the re-entry into the platform.

6. Conclusion

The digital work platforms have bought radical transformations in work and employment nature of the cab drivers. With digital platform as intermediary it is understood that the labour agency and collective action are rendered redundant. However, this study challenges such notions by demonstrating that inspite of gamification, inbuilt competition and algorithms as intermediary, the cab-aggregators cannot completely bypass the collective action of labour agency. Especially when the economics of driving is bad, there will be resistance and reworking of integration terms strategies of the driver partners. The free market and neoliberal agenda of individuals being responsible for their own career and earnings have deep impact on how the work is organized in cab-service segment. This is also true for the traditional black and yellow taxi drivers of Mumbai, however paying almost a quarter value of earning as commission and a real threat of banning from the digital platform, in case of non-compliance with cab-aggregator's rules and policies, shows that the cab-drivers are closely monitored and controlled. This monitoring and control may not be as evident as in a factory set-up, but it does have significant impact on the way the cab driver behave and function.

There is a wide variation among the cab drivers thought process and attitude towards having a collective labour agency. Those who are driver-cum-owners and have taken cab on loan have a greater desire to maximize their earning and are more open to idea of having collective negotiations with the cab-aggregators. The real threat of getting banished on the pretext of anti-company activity also keeps the participating drivers on their toe and therefore they do not engage in outright resistance or reworking strategies. Section of drivers who believe that such strikes does not serve any purpose are coerced into supporting it as non-compliance entails the risk of damage to car and self by the protestors. The extremely long hours of work selected by the drivers does not leave meaningful time to be spent with friends and family members. Such is the nature of job that to remain profitable, the drivers have no other choice than working hard for prolonged hours.

While the work hours and working conditions are largely in the control of drivers, the competition and penchant to earn decent profits have pushed drivers into choosing self-exploitative practices. The argument which goes in favour of the cab-aggregator is that the drivers are consciously choosing what they deem fit and there is always an exit option by quitting the Ola/Uber platform. Earlier during the industrial era, coercion could have been one mechanism through which managers derived longer work hours and higher output. However, currently without any coercion or direct managerial intervention, the platform economy workers are willing to devote longer work hours. The neoliberal philosophy of one is responsible for their own career and earning have been manifested into the extreme where any slack in earning could possibly be attributed to drivers not working hard enough.This highly individualistic approach of organizing work often undermine the collective labour agency as the drivers tend to optimize personal gains more than worrying about the collective good.

The article noted the resistance and reworking strategy of the drivers and found that at times it is effective in getting some favour such as small increment in fares. The activism in the segment of Ola/Uber is still at a nascent stage and a unified and coordinated response across different cities is still wanting. The number of drivers who believe in the collective action is less and Ola/Uber is making every effort in order to keep the work platform union free. Future research can focus on the similarities and differences in work and employment nature of the traditional taxi and Ola/Uber drivers. This comparative account will reveal how the traditional cab drivers perceive their own work and earning opportunities vis-à-vis their counterparts on Ola/Uber platform.

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