



“India's Gig-work Economy” Roundtable

Transcript / Transcribed by Noopur Raval

Introduction [Noopur]: Hello to everyone listening in! I am Noopur a PhD candidate in the Informatics Department at the University of California Irvine and a Co-PI on the project 'Mapping the Landscape of Digital Labour in India' hosted by the Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore and generously supported by the Azim Premji University. Today, joining me are the four research fellows who have been conducting ethnographic studies of app-based ridehailing and food-delivery platforms in two Indian cities, Mumbai and Delhi. Since we began in January 2019, we have had multiple meetings across three cities, Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru where the fellows and I had to develop interview questions, discuss how to find app-based gig-economy workers, how to recruit them and so on. We have also had to devise ethical guidelines to figure out how to insert ourselves to study workers whose work is shaped to a great extent by the accelerationism and disciplinary logics of platform companies such as Olacabs, Uber, Swiggy, Zomato and others. Through a series of blog posts on the CASTAC blog, of which is the last one, each fellow has presented reflections on what they saw in the field.

[Simiran]: Lalvani, studying food-delivery work in Mumbai, wrote about the kinship ties among male and female workers and how they affect the ability to survive and succeed at work. Next, Sarah Zia, studying the app-based taxi hailing platforms in Delhi-NCR, wrote about how platforms' algorithmic uncertainty inspires tactics of coping. Then, Anushree Gupta, who also studied ride-hailing platforms but in Mumbai, wrote about how women subjects in the gig-economy are constructed as 'risky subjects'. Finally,

Rajendra Jadhav, who studied food-delivery but in Delhi, wrote about issues of temporality in the work.

Hi everyone :) hi hi hi

Please introduce yourselves and tell us what you did in this project

[Anushree]: Hello everyone my name is Anushree and I am working as a research associate with Tandem Research right now. When I got associated with this project I was studying at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai and as a part of this project I studied the ridehailing economy in Mumbai. **[[Simiran]:]** Hi my name is **[Simiran]:** and I studied app based delivery workers in Mumbai and I'm currently working as a consultant at Microsoft research on the future of work project and try to this I didn't me in developmental studies from the Center for informal sector and labor studies at JNU New Delhi.

[Sarah]: My name is Sarah and I work as a journalist at live mint on of business daily in New Delhi and in this project I focused on specific features of pre clarity in ride hailing in Delhi NCR region full stop hello **[Rajendra]:** my name is Rajendra I studied food delivery workers in the Delhi NCR region.

[Noopur]: The first question I have for all of you is about the respective cities that you studied app-based work in - Mumbai and Delhi. How does each city shape the platform-work experience? How do existing and traditional work arrangements get changed when platforms come into play?

[Anushree]: I saw specifically in the context of Mumbai the city is known for its diverse urban landscapes and the kinds of populations that migrate to the city from all across the country and all across the world as well. What was interesting to me while doing this research was that when I was interacting with the union members and also with other drivers and other non-driving partners their opinions about unions as well as my interactions with union members, the history of the unions in the city and more often than not this conversation was associated with the political causes and political parties. It gave me an insight into the political climate of the city and also their associations with the previous tax unions in the city. Another very important part of the fabric of the city

is the black and yellow cabs in the city which have been operating for about half a century now and the platform economy has now kind of disrupted their operations and usage. But also something that came out during field work was the flow of workers from traditional services to app based services which is kind of happened in phases and oh, all of these platforms have played a different function in the history of this. While the radio taxis were more important in teaching workers to become professionals in the service economy the new platforms have given them a larger customer base and hired access to audience.

[Noopur]: I have a follow-up question for you Anushree which is that specifically in the context of Mumbai, when I visited and used these app-based platforms, there was also an option to book a kaali-peeli meaning a black and yellow cab from within Uber or Ola itself. Do you know why that is the case?

[Anushree]: So there were a lot of issues around the emergence of the app-based platforms and services and how they were disrupting the existing arrangements so in a bid to pacify the yellow and black cab drivers who are already operating in the city, these platform companies decided to go ahead and provide access to traditional taxi services as well. But also the related development that happened there is at the Maharashtra state government also provided another app to the black and yellow Cab drivers and as far as I found out during my fieldwork there hasn't been any resolution on that front and most black and yellow cab drivers also use the State government made app but they also log into apps and every time I tried to book a black and yellow cab using Ola and Uber I could not get one.

[Noopur]: So, you are saying that one can now avail of a kaali peeli through multiple tech and non-tech ways in Mumbai

[Anushree]: Yes exactly

[Simiran]: I was very curious about locating this work socio historically because in Mumbai there is also a tradition of delivery boys and hawkers being associated with Udipi restaurants and others before these apps came about. So, I felt that these non app-based workers had difficulty joining apps because they lack domicile proof to prove they live in the city. There is also a perception that one needs to be English speaking. I

am not implying that app-based workers have no rural roots or are all English speaking or educated but this is the perception that was held by non-app workers that was interesting.

[Sarah]: In the case of Delhi, cabs have always more or less been seen as a luxury unlike the kaali peeli cabs in Mumbai or say in Kolkata as well. These apps have altered the cab culture very visibly. Prior to Ola and Uber there were radio cabs, but they were not the same phenomenon obviously. They used to work in specific pockets better, such as the airport route. Also, the arrival of these services has meant that taxis are ordered and taken through narrow parts of the city. From a worker perspective to identify very specific features a lot of people I interviewed were career drivers. Driving has been their mainstay regardless of the vehicle they were using.

[Noopur]: I do have a follow-up question...for those listening who may not know, there is old Delhi and New Delhi, infrastructurally, people will book a cab and try and take the driver to this part of the city and problems arise. Do you want to comment on that?

[Sarah]: Right so when you say there is old Delhi and New Delhi, now there is also a third layer called NCR or the National Capital Region where Gurgaon and Noida are also a part of the fabric of the city. Drivers told me that in parts of old Delhi they chose to drop people off at the broadest point near their destination but in the trans-Yamuna context there is also the issue of constant heavy traffic. Certain drivers who are older on the platform feel more comfortable doing these negotiations but the newer drivers obviously did not feel like they had the power to make these decisions.

[Rajendra]: In case of the food-delivery workers in Delhi, they push them to deliver orders on time. This pressure makes them violate traffic rules, they ride on pavements, they break traffic signals. This also disrupts the social understanding of how to move in the city. This is a problem that I have observed.

[Noopur]: Okay, the second question. Since January we have discussed that the work that you guys did is new, not just as a topic but also in terms of recruiting people, your methods etc. So, I wanted to ask you all what was the attitude of your respondents, how did you recruit, what did your respondents say to you?

[Simiran]: One thing I found really interesting was that I did not want to order food and then speak to someone. I thought I should find other ways to recruit people.

[Noopur]: Why not order and recruit because so many people seem to be taking this pathway to approach gig-economy workers?

[Simiran]: Yes it may sound a bit silly but one thing is that I have never ordered food online so I wanted to keep it a bit blind that way but also the other thing is that I did not want my first interaction with the worker to be as a consumer or in a consumer-provider relationship. So, I was searching on Youtube, looking for city names and looking for search terms such as strikes or protests. Looking for videos about these things and their views on the companies. I was looking for ways to message people but I could not find direct ways to message them so I had to leave public comments on videos telling them that I am a researcher and that I am interested in speaking to them. This was very interesting because there were also people from non-metro cities, from small towns doing this work who were also very eager to speak to me. They were expressive already and wanting to speak...

[Noopur]: Do you want to chime in Rajendra?

[Rajendra]: Yes, so in my case I was not used to ordering food before that but for the purpose of rapport building. I had to start ordering food. When they came to deliver food I would have some initial conversation with them – what is their background, their socioeconomic background...also I used the place where the security guard sits in my society, I used that space and initially interacted with these people and then recruited 15 delivery workers after that.

[Anushree]: Initially when I was planning the study, I wanted to speak to all the different stakeholders in the ridehailing space including traditional taxi drivers, union leaders etc....So the attitude of the workers, the people who were company representatives, I managed to speak to two people after a lot of effort somehow. They were very guarded in the interview. Both those respondents weren't willing to talk to us and we had to cajole responses out of them. Apart from them fleet owners and union members were very eager to talk to us. They saw the study as a way to put their voice out. I had to establish my identity as well as a researcher. I used telegram and facebook groups extensively. Just

as Simiran said, I didn't want to talk to them like a customer. Later when I did interview people after taking rides with them I could see a visible difference. In the context of the strikes in Mumbai, that also provided me an inlet to enter their community. But on the other hand, I was also very conscious about telling them what this report would accomplish. Especially the union leaders wanted some action to be taken based on this report.

[Noopur]: So that is a great segue for me to throw the question back to you which is that what did your respondents say to you? When I looked at taxi drivers and app-based beauty workers. There is always a negotiation, they also ask you questions – who are you? ...often it becomes a script, it's something you have to do time and again. What would convince or encourage them to speak to you?

[Sarah]: So, when you identify as a researcher and ask them these questions there is a certain expectation of allyship. So, I started asking them what they think is a good customer. That was a good entry point to assuring them that I was on their side. Some of them were still very cautious. We were talking about things like drunk women and they would be quick to tell me that not all women are bad. Or not all customers are bad. But discussing customers and their behavior was generally a good way to connect with them. The other thing I would do is that once I booked a cab I would never call them. Even if it is a ten minute cab, when my trip was starting on a positive note...so you want to perform a good customer persona, I wanted them to talk more and relate to me like they would relate to a driver but it was not easy.

[Rajendra]: In my process, when workers came to my doorstep, I would ask them would you like some water, would you like to come inside and sit. By that time, I would tell them who I am what research I am doing. After that they would ask me who are you, what we will get out of this, are you working for these platform companies...once we had this conversation, they would feel comfortable. Then they wanted to share their experiences, but they were not sure whom to share these experiences with.

[Noopur]: Were they happy when you said that you work with a research organization and not a company? Or what did they say?

[Rajendra]: At the time of interview, I would tell them I am not from a company, I would

ask them before recording anything. I also offered to give them the recording and the transcript. I tried to tell them that their identity or words would not be used against them.

[Simiran]: It's really interesting, when I went to a platform company's office or when I went to the manager hub they would ask me for some identity proof. I would give them the CIS (Centre for Internet & Society) letter. Then they would google the name of the organization and be convinced. Workers never asked me who I was associated with. But they would ask me if this is my job. Like are you doing this for a living? Just go around and speak to people? They were not passive...I would just giggle and say yes

[Anushree]: These conversations about a job, I would ask them what their version of an ideal job was...what would you want your children to do... that question itself is such a conversation starter because it got them to start talking about their personal lives...where will their children study or how will they get married. But in terms of, like, they would ask me if I would want to drive a cab for a living, some respondents told me to not consider this as a job option as well.

[Noopur]: So I will follow up on that and throw the question back to all of you, initially we had conversations on not just studying the future of work but also life, not being extractive or instrumental and being interested in people as a whole, who are they, where do they come from, which to my mind produces a different picture of the gig economy itself. What do you think?

[Anushree]: I am sure that since we had these conversations before starting, I was very conscious when I went to do research that this is a full person, this is a complex rich person I am talking to and that I am only going to be able to discern some fleeting aspects of their personality. That bent of mind helped me relate to them and that bent of mind also made me realize when they were not interested in talking to me. When I felt that I was being pushy or extractive I would let it go. But realizing that these are also people and how do they survive in a city like Bombay helped me. Another bit on method, as someone who has been living in Bombay for the past couple of years, I would ask them about the city, about rains, floods that happen every year. So, I used to talk to them about that, how does that affect your life, if you have ever decided to take a cab how did it

feel? These questions were not in line with what we wanted to eventually find out but it really helped to understand what kind of person we were talking to.

[Noopur]: Absolutely.

[Simiran]: In fact, going in treating them as people and not going in to study them economistically, there were two things that I found very interesting. One was that the relationship of delivery-work and free time had changed with the coming of apps and I was able to see this because of this approach. In traditional delivery system, in free time, workers would wait for orders. Here companies would expect workers to roam around looking for orders. So, they were expected to be bindaas, carefree and look for work.

[Sarah]: I also want to add that often workers would not know who they would find as customers so they would go around the city and find a diverse set of customers. Sometimes I would ask them where are you from which is not a very loaded question in the Delhi context. That would take them on a nostalgia trip. In the vein of treating people as people, that was also nicer than asking them directly how much do you make a month. Sometimes I would also talk about my own life, in Delhi this is a very loose definition of being a migrant, you could be a first or a fifth generation migrant. So that fluidity helped in talking and establishing rapport.

[Noopur]: Absolutely. Now I want to switch gears and ask we were definitely keeping an eye on what was happening. We discussed the role of telegram, Youtube, Facebook and other platforms. What role were they playing?

[Anushree]: I think I relied on telegram the most. It was also surprising that such a diverse set of people were on that platform. I had never used telegram before this project but the comfort levels of all the people using it was really surprising. Drivers in the union members group was sort of surprising to me, they were posting images from the road, they were posting audio notes, they were moderating conversations in the group. Telegram was my major source of responses and I also got to know what was happening on the ground. Because of some issue that happened I was in both the groups, in Mumbai and Pune driver groups. It was a good source of information to find out how drivers were managing their everyday. I had some struggle establishing trust that I was

not a company person.

[Noopur]: Which is also hard to do online right? Establishing identity in an online group. I was also honestly surprised because I thought it is a more elite platform, but my hunch is that they had taken to Telegram because of its image as a more secure platform.

[Simiran]: None of the food delivery workers were using telegram, they were mostly using Whatsapp. Youtube was where issues were being discussed by workers, or by small channels. One big complaint by workers was that no big media channels were covering their issues. There are also tutorials by such small content producers. The comments section is filled with discussions, it is not just simplistic solidarity, there are differing opinions, there are lawyers writing there saying we are willing to take the company to the police.

[Anushree]: One more thing about the Youtube thing, how there are these influencers, I went and looked back at this person's videos. This was also a pointer to what I would look at in the future. Seems like the personality he had built through his videos; people were looking up to him and critiquing him as well. One of my respondents was also a Youtube video uploader and he was in dialog with these other influencers.

[Noopur]: There is also someone as influential like Aijaz Khan right?

[Simiran]: Yeah, he is a tv personality and workers had access to him since someone once made a delivery to him. He went on Facebook live video and spoke against particular managers who were troubling workers. He also appealed to the Maharashtra labour ministry to do something about it.

[Sarah]: He also does Tiktok videos now and recently did a video about lynching and got arrested for it.

[Noopur]: Oh wow that is very interesting and I guess that is a whole area for future research because I remember that in the beginning when Simiran said that I am going to recruit people through Youtube videos I was thinking, good luck trying to do that. The other interesting thing was that when I did bulk of my research in 2016 with a focus on Bangalore. If anything, Bangalore is a more tech savvy city. There were Whatsapp groups

for sure but there wasn't such a rich kind of media culture like this. Something I have been meaning to write about forever is how workers would hang out and congregate over food and in parking lots. So, for me it was a lot about hanging out in a parking lot ten kilometers away from the airport, too far away from the city. So, from there to this is a huge shift.

We are kind of nearing the end of time for this discussion. I want to ask you a last two-part question. The first part is that we have a diverse group of researchers here but three of the researchers are women. Can you comment on how gender and class informed your research? The second part is also then in terms of the workers, how does workers' background inform their entry into gig-work?

[Rajendra]: Young people who have recently migrated to Delhi, app-based work is easy to find for them compared to other work in shops or businesses. Also people who are in crises, people who had lost their businesses or jobs, this was an option for them. One of my respondents, his shop owner had died in an accident. Also other people who wanted to do a part time job to earn extra money – they also came to this work.

[Noopur]: Absolutely, I am glad you brought this point in because unless and until we detail these distinctions and different motivations for who enters the gig-economy in India and we are also probably not doing justice to how researchers can help them – it is not one answer for everybody.

[Sarah]: I want to talk about the researchers' identity and how it plays a role. I would take a cab at 11 in the night after finishing my work and often get into conversations where drivers would tell me they are skeptical of picking women up from party places late in the night. In other situations I would say something back if I was talking to a driver who is saying I am very respectful of women and their safety and choice but since I was trying to recruit people and understand this phenomenon, they would say women should also be careful. You don't realize that wearing certain kinds of clothes or looking hassled. I wonder if I was wearing a short dress would they be willing to talk to me.

[Noopur]: I will let the others comment but we discussed this earlier, how dress plays an important role in how we present ourselves as researchers.

[Simiran]: In academia we are often asked to wear a kurta to declass ourselves and here I took a chance, I would wear jeans or whatever I would normally wear. Food delivery workers were much younger, and they actually found that welcoming, it established familiarity.

[Noopur]: In that sense it was speaking to the aspirational space of the food delivery worker as well right? Versus if you went in as an older or conservatively dressed woman

[Simiran]: Yes. When I went and met women workers, they would often notice my hair and say we are both tomboys. I have a short pixie and my hair was shorter when I was doing fieldwork, it was a bit boyish. The women workers would feel solidarity. One woman even told me that she wants to cut her own daughter's hair short. The other comment I wanted to make on workers' identity is that one, the traditional non app worker, in Udipi and restaurant workers, they received accommodation and meals from the owner/employer. That was a big factor in shaping the identity of the worker. That was an arrangement of social reproduction that enabled the migrant worker to interact with the city. The second thread I want to pick up is the change in waiting time. When an app requires you to ride around the city without purpose looking for new orders. This has implications for women food delivery workers who cannot easily loiter around in public space like that.

[Noopur]: Then the last question, in a few words or a sentence, what are the future directions for research that you want to pursue or think should be pursued in platform work?

[Rajendra]: Apart from the platform and gig economy workers, there are restaurant managers and customers. The relationship between all these stakeholders needs to be explored. The relationship between restaurants and companies and the customers is changing rapidly, earlier restaurants did not see any incentive in signing up for these platforms.

[Sarah]: The kind of people I interacted with, MBA graduates, white collar workers who were quitting their work to join work that is not seen as similarly dignified are also joining this future of work and that should be studied.

[Simiran]: I think that the morality within these interactions, the non-economistic aspects of these interactions should be studied more closely.

[Anushree]: I think for me an important discovery was that there are women in this space, but it was not easy to access them which surprised me a lot. Also, the aspect of masculinity as well as religious and sociological factors that bear upon gig economy work should be studied more.

[Noopur]: Thank you, thank you everyone for joining me in this discussion and for those of you listening, if you haven't read all the blogposts I mentioned earlier, please go to the CASTAC blog and read those posts and give us your feedback and comments. Thank you!