The Road to Freedom: Worker Autonomy in the Platform Economy

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Abstract

Platforms have become a source of livelihood for millions around the world and have dramatically restructured the world of work. By classifying workers as "independent contractors", "micro-entrepreneurs" or "partners", platforms evade contractual obligations to protect workers. With the onset of neoliberalism, ideas of freedom, autonomy and flexibility – key to the cultural appeal and business model of platforms – gained ideological force that has since increased in vigour. Platforms actively champion these ideas as desirable, liberating and emancipatory for workers. Examining ride-hailing platforms in India (a country with a massive informal economy and high unemployment), this paper problematizes the discourse of freedom, autonomy, entrepreneurship and partnership as constructed by platforms. The analysis places three key actors viz. Companies, Customers and Drivers in a three-way reciprocal relationship. While most scholarship approaches the subject of work in platforms from an objectivist viewpoint, this paper explores the narratives of work as articulated by drivers themselves, thus illuminating the subjectivities that get engendered as a result of changing work conditions and discourses surrounding it. By analyzing data gathered through in-depth interviews with Uber and Ola drivers in Delhi-NCR, this paper explores the ways in which freedom and autonomy, as formulated by companies, are structurally and systematically denied to drivers. Further, it shows how drivers' own understanding of these ideas stands in sharp contrast to the ways in which they are strategically deployed by platforms.

[**Keywords:** Platform Economy, Freedom, Autonomy, Partnership, Uber, Ola, Work]

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"What needs to be said is not that one way of life is better than the other, but that this is a place of the most far-reaching conflict; that the historical record is not a simple one of neutral and inevitable technological change, but is also one of exploitation and of resistance to exploitation; and that values stand to be lost as well as gained."

– E.P Thompson, *Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism*

Introduction

In many forms of work that have emerged in the last two decades, we have witnessed a reconfiguration of what it means to be a "free worker". With the rise of platforms[2], it is claimed that workers have become their own boss, exercising autonomy in deciding their conditions of work (place, schedule, intensity and so on). These apparently desirable changes are implicated in technological innovations, both in the sphere of production and circulation, the lines between which have blurred. As a result, a new class of workers has emerged, lacking all forms of work-based security (Standing, 2010)

Freedom and autonomy lie at the heart of the discourse generated by platforms and their advocates. This discourse represents the apogee of what Barbrook and Cameron (1995) call the Californian Ideology, which propagated the notion that cyberspace can be used to liberate individuals in radically new ways and solve previously insurmountable social problems. Fetishizing the powers of the internet, denizens of Silicon Valley and their votaries claim that platforms empower consumers by affording them an array of choices at reasonable prices; build communities of trust via sophisticated reputation/rating systems; and liberate workers from tyrannical workplace conditions. "*This is the future*!" they exclaim. And we believe them. "After all who can argue against the future?" (Slee, 2015: 37).

It should be noted that platforms typically do not see their workers as employees with concomitant rights and privileges, and instead treat them as "independent contractors". Critics argue that through this move, platforms intend to bypass laws and regulations that protect employees from workplace exploitation.

Although platforms span many industries, our study focuses on ride-hailing companies in the Indian context where Uber and Ola are the biggest players. Both these companies see their drivers as "entrepreneurs", and not employees, which is to say that each driver is a business-person and a business unto themself. They officially refer to them as "partners", or

[2] By platforms we mean companies which use digital infrastructures (applications, data-aggregation tools, cloud-technologies) to mediate interactions between buyers and sellers of goods and services, and which have emerged as integral drivers of economic disruption and job-creation around the world (Google, Facebook, Amazon, Uber, Zomato etc.)

"driver-partners", implying equality between them and the company. This is legally justified by claiming to be technology companies (and not transport companies), on which standard taxi regulations do not apply (Slee, 2015: 45).

But more important, in our opinion, are their rhetorical and sentimental justifications. By repeatedly invoking Freedom and Autonomy (capitalized here and elsewhere for the specific ways in which these companies use these terms) as core to their principles, platforms etch in the popular imagination an image of the self-interested, profit-maximizing individual, possessing perfect market-information. For these corporations, Freedom and Autonomy mean the ability to set one's work hours, switch on/off the app according to one's wishes, not have a boss managing one's activities and have complete control over one's work environment. Apart from monetary incentives, they claim to offer drivers another scarce commodity – time, as evidenced in their advertisement campaigns. A typical advertisement targeting potential-drivers shows people from different walks of life joining Uber to earn extra money, while continuing their various other commitments such as university education, familial-care or personal passions like photography[3].

In 2015, David Plouffe, the then Chief Advisor and Board Member of Uber said:

> "In a world where more people than ever before are struggling to balance work, family, and bills they can't pay, ridesharing is a way to put money back in your pocket and time back on your schedule…In fact, nearly 90 percent of drivers choose Uber because they want to be their own boss and set their own schedule. In other words, they want work that fits around their life—not the other way around" (Natalia, 2015).

Plouffe, citing a 2015 report by Krueger and Hall, (of which one of the authors, Jonathan Hall, was the then Head of Policy Research for Uber), claimed that in the USA, upwards of 85 percent of Uber's drivers chose the platform for reasons of flexibility, work-life balance, having no boss and so on.

Even if we were to question the methodology of surveys and reports these companies eagerly quote from – which is not an altogether unimportant question to raise given that they sponsor so many of them[4] – the point is, however, quite different. It is the ease with which they are able to proclaim that Freedom and Autonomy in the work space are inherently good things, desirable to all, and are major motivators for why workers have jumped ship en masse from other more "conventional" forms of employment to join these platforms.

[3] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8Rlp_2zYIA

[4] For another such example, see a 2018 working-paper on Uber drivers in England, two of four authors of which were Uber employees: The paper is titled 'Uber Happy? Work and Well-being in the "Gig Economy"' (Berger, Frey, Levin, Danda). It highlights that despite belonging to low-income sections and having low earnings, Uber drivers reported higher overall levels of life satisfaction than most other workers. The authors hypothesize that this is because drivers prefer flexibility and autonomy to more monetary factors.

This self-proclaimed victory of ideas on the part of platform entrepreneurs needs to be probed and read against the evidence of workers' actual experiences in multifarious contexts. This study is one such attempt. It explores how drivers perceive ideas of freedom, autonomy, partnership and entrepreneurship, and in what ways their perception, informed by local contexts, diverges from company narratives. Although we do this by studying the particular case of ride-hailing companies (specifically Uber and Ola), we believe that our findings may be extended to fit the general pattern of work in the context of what is being called the "Uberfication of Everything" (Rossi, 2015).

The Study

Background: Over 1.5 million drivers drive for ride-hailing companies in India[5]. To put that in perspective, the strength of the Indian army, the second-largest in the world, is 1.4 million. It is no exaggeration therefore to say that these companies have raised an army of workers. Uber and Ola, by far the biggest players in the Indian ride-hailing industry, command 95% of the 10 billion dollar ride-hailing market, and operate in 40 and 125 Indian cities respectively (Sushma, 2018). In recent times, the two companies have become almost synonymous with the phrase platform economy in India (other examples include Amazon, Flipkart, Swiggy, Zomato, Foodpanda, and Urbanclap).

With an unemployment rate as high as 6.1%[6], and a predominantly informal economy which employs over 80% of all workers[7], India has left most of its workers in an utterly precarious position. It has become an ideal market "to tap" for cheap labour for platforms. In turn, aggressive advertisements assuring steep incomes, work-hour flexibility and a (supposedly) desired status of Entrepreneurship, proved to be seductive for an already-discontented workforce to pass up. Throw into this mix the low costs and ease of joining with minimal paperwork and bureaucratic hurdles, and add to it the non-requirement of high skills and qualifications (other than possessing a driver's license), and soon you had lakhs of individuals getting in line (or more accurately, logging-in) to sign-up.

[5] See article titled 'Overworked and Underpaid India's 'Gig-Workers' are Survivors of a Flawed Economy (2019): https://scroll.in/article/926146/overworked-and-underpaid-indias-gig-workers-are-survivors-of-a-flawed-economy

[6] See article titled 'Is the Job Scene in India Bad? Depends on How you See it, says Govt (2019): https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/jobs/indias-unemployment-rate-hit-6-1-in-2017-18/articleshow/69598640.cms?from=mdr

[7] See report titled 'State of Working in India 2018' by Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University

The rise of the platform economy has generated considerable global interest among researchers and policy-makers working on issues of work, labour and employment. With regard to the Indian context, in their study of Uber and Ola drivers in Bangalore, Surie and Kodungati (2016: 29) found that these companies have provided stable/mid-term opportunities for wealth-creation for its drivers, thereby increasing their confidence in handling labour-market fluctuations. Surie (2017: 15) also argued that these platforms led to the "formalization" of previously informal work, providing drivers with job security and regularized incomes. Based on fieldwork in Mumbai, Sharma (2018: 184) refuted Surie's findings, concluding that as opposed to formalization and its concomitant benefits, there has instead been a steady increase in precariousness and informality among drivers. Another study that viewed delivery workers in India's E-commerce industry from a Marxian perspective found that work conditions and social-security issues led to high levels of precariousness and alienation among workers (Nasreen and Purohit, 2018).

While most scholarship approaches the subject of work in platforms from an objectivist viewpoint, this paper explores the narratives of work as articulated by drivers themselves, thus illuminating the subjectivities that get engendered as a result of changing work conditions. Moreover it seeks to understand what drivers make of the aforementioned core-ideas of Freedom, Autonomy, Partnership and Entrepreneurship, an exercise the authors found lacking in literature regarding the platform economy.

A cursory Google search reveals the numerous strikes that have taken place in the last few years by drivers of the two companies in the country, indicating the widespread discontentment felt by them (See for example Shah, 2018; Sushma, 2018). In this context, we believe this study is especially timely, adding to the limited yet growing voice of criticism against corporate practices and arrangements in the platform economy in India and around the world.

The specific questions this study attempts to investigate are as follows:

1. Do the simultaneous, digitally-mediated interactions between the three keys actors viz. Companies, Customers and Drivers create or inhibit material conditions for freedom/autonomy for drivers?
2. How, and to what extent, do these ideas/discourses affect and shape the perception of drivers towards their work?
3. In what ways does Freedom/Autonomy enable or disable our understanding of this kind of work?

The field: Our fieldwork entailed interviews with 46 drivers in all, with roughly even numbers from each company (and with a handful of drivers driving for both Uber and Ola simultaneously). From the range of ride-hailing services provided by these companies, we interviewed drivers providing the UberGo and Ola Micro/Mini services. The time-span of fieldwork was three and a half weeks (May 26 - June 20, 2019). We employed the non-probability convenience sampling method using which respondents were selected on the basis of ease of access and proximity to the researchers. We initially approached the respondents by taking rides (during both, day and night) across Delhi-NCR. To minimize possible external factors that could influence responses, such as the perceived responsibility/material incentives for drivers to react positively to customers' requests (responding to customers' questions so as to prevent low ratings etc.), we also approached parked vehicles identified as Uber and Ola. The interviews were semi-structured, touching upon themes such as personal profile, remuneration and incentives, rating-system, freedom, partnership, daily challenges and risks, interactions and experiences with customers, strikes, possible unionization, changes over time, and individual or collective strategies employed to deal with the immanent challenges of work.

Our respondents were all men (due to which we have used the masculine pronoun hereafter), between the ages 22 and 40 with a couple of exceptions on either end. The older men tended to be more resigned to their fate and softer in their criticism towards the companies, whereas younger men, perhaps because they had greater expectations and still had time to switch career-paths, were relatively more dissatisfied with their work conditions. Most drivers hailed from three states in India – Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Haryana; a few (less than ten) were from Delhi. In terms of previous jobs, most were in the driving line itself (tourism, private, goods transport). Others were in non-permanent, informal wage work and a few were farmers. Broadly, drivers joined the platform for two reasons – higher incomes (the most important one) and upward mobility in class and status.

The car-ownership patterns were also varied and informed their overall work experience. The most common type was those drivers who had taken their car on a bank-loan, which typically entailed a monthly EMI of Rs.15-17,000. Next were a few who owned a car before they joined either company. These drivers had a better experience compared to others, since they did not have to pay any monthly EMI, and perhaps were relatively well-off to begin with. The third type of arrangement was one in which drivers drove for a separate car owner ("*maalik*"). This type most closely resembled conventional wage-work, wherein the hours and wages were fixed. Here freedom was directly curtailed by contractual obligations, and

also in other ways, for example with apps that these companies have designed for owners to keep track of everything a driver does in a day (number of trips accepted/rejected, routes taken, hours rested and so on). The last (and most inflexible) arrangement was when drivers had leased a car directly from Ola, under their Ola Fleet Technologies wing – (Uber does not offer this service). These drivers were required to pay a security deposit of Rs. 40,000 and a daily rent of Rs. 1,100 on average, over and above the commission on each trip-fare. They were entitled to only two paid leaves a month. On all other days they managed to save next to nothing. They were monitored closely and could not strike for fear of being thrown out.

The drivers who drove part-time had a relatively better experience, as their subsistence did not depend solely on this work. However, there were only a couple of part-timers among our respondents. Almost all drove full-time and were primary bread-earners for their families. On average our respondents drove between 12-14 hours a day, six days a week. The typical daily earnings of drivers – after excluding commission, gas, maintenance, car-insurance premiums, toll-tax (if necessary), entry-tax for Haryana (if necessary) – amounted to Rs. 500-700 only.

For the themes that concern us here, there were too many similarities between Uber and Ola for us to mention them separately. We have therefore used the plural "companies" to mean both. We have indicated specific differences where necessary. The rhetoric of nationalism attached to using Ola, which it often invokes as a kind of modern-day Swadeshi Movement impulse[8] was *not* a major concern among drivers, as is popularly imagined. In fact, many of them had more respect for Uber's technological apparatus and professionalism, attributing it to their being a foreign company.

Limitations: Due to the limited nature of the project, our fieldwork was confined to Delhi-NCR and may not be fully representative of nation-wide trends, or even encapsulate all aspects of driving within Delhi itself. Further, since we only interviewed UberGO and Ola Micro/Mini drivers, it would be inaccurate to say that our observations perfectly apply to all other services as well. Another limitation, inherent to the interview method, is that respondents did not have much time to think through responses, and perhaps might not have presented crystallized opinions about questions asked. Nonetheless, our fieldwork provided valuable insights that are intrinsically linked to the systemic aspects of driving in ride-hailing companies, and we believe to that extent they are useful.

[8] See for example: 'Ola Plays Nationalist Card in Race against Uber' https://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/ola-plays-nationalist-card-in-race-against-uber-116062701172_1.html

Company, Customer, Driver

This section is divided into 3 parts based on the centrality that each key actor – company, customer and driver – commands. These three entities are not isolated or mutually exclusive, but constantly interact in the functioning of these platforms and hence there is some amount of overlap between parts. What each entity does informs and is informed by its interactions with the other two. That being said, there is still a somewhat generative priority that each entity or actor possesses in different contexts.

Further, and this is crucial, the pressures and actions of entities are not reported as they might *actually exist*, but rather as they are *seen* to exist in the various articulations and perceptions of drivers.

I

Drivers and the Companies

The relationship between driver and company is an uneasy one, fraught with ill-will. While this could be expected from the companies' side towards drivers given their agenda to outdo competition and extract as much labour as possible at low costs, what stood out most clearly in our interviews was the deep discontentment and anger that drivers felt towards these companies, and dismay at their life-condition as a result of its policies and practices. The act of speaking in direct, antagonistic terms and unapologetically implicating these gigantic corporations, as opposed to justifying their actions in abstract, metaphysical terms or in the vocabulary of theodicy (so often assumed to be the refuge of the poor), speaks to the fact that there exists among drivers a sharp political and social awareness of their condition, and a sense of *deliberate* injustice committed against them.

No doubt, there were some exceptions; a few drivers did praise the company – albeit narrowly – by pointing out that no matter what their faults, *at least* they have provided many with jobs. One driver stated exactly this, and even threw in some praise for our prime minister, saying that it is *he* that made this possible[9]. A few others believed that because these are multinational companies with a multinational clientele, they must be doing *something* right – however they often found it difficult to identify precisely what that something was.

[9] Notably, NITI-Aayog's (the government's policy think-tank) CEO Amitabh Kant and Vice-Chairman Rajiv Kumar tried to claim a victory on the government's behalf, by saying that Ola and Uber have created 2.2 million "jobs", in a statement meant to counter the country's staggering unemployment numbers quoted by *Business Standard* (mentioned above). See: https://www.reuters.com/article/india-economy-jobs-govt/india-federal-think-tank-says-creating-jobs-for-new-entrants-idUSD8N1YQ003

But we have jumped ahead. Let us first introduce what driving on these apps effectively looks like.

Getting on the road: To begin driving, one has to have a car, smartphone, sign-up on the application and provide required documents (PAN card, bank details, drivers' license, vehicle-related certificates etc). Once drivers' documents are verified they are called into the companies' offices and receive 2-3 hours of training, which largely entails how they must behave with customers, what (and what not) to say and do with them and so on. One driver put it bluntly saying, "*training ka koi matlab nahi, voh sirf humein gulam banna sikhate hai*" (there is no use of the training, they only teach us how to be slaves).

Once on the road, they are matched with customers in their vicinity. Ola, more than Uber, sends an incoming-request notification to its drivers upwards of 15 minutes before the current trip is scheduled to end. Drivers find this policy extremely frustrating, since by the time they accept the request, complete the ongoing trip and drive to the new pick-up location, the customer on the other end gets tired of waiting and often cancels the trip, leading to the drivers' resources in the form of fuel and time being totally wasted. Uber and Ola do not pay drivers for driving to the trip location, a distance which at times is over 4-5 km, and which often involves huge amounts of traffic in between. Further, as policy, drivers are only compensated if customers cancel 5 minutes after booking, or if they have already arrived at the destination. "*20-30 minute time waste karne ke bawajood, humein sirf 30 rupay dete hai*" (despite wasting 20-30 minutes we get only 30 rupees as compensation). But worse is when drivers do not get paid the cancellation charges despite customers breaching the 5-minute buffer period. "*Inka poocho mat, kuch bhi karte rehte hai*" (Don't ask, they – the companies – do whatever they feel like), was one drivers' take on this. Customers, on the other hand, can claim cancellation fee waivers by concocting any story, and 9/10 times, they are likely to get reimbursed, even if they are at fault.

Drivers are instructed by the company to follow Google Maps to a T. In scholarship on migration it is often highlighted that due to better information, community networks and shared identity, local labourers have it better than migrants. But since the skill level in driving for these companies lies in the ability to drive a car and follow Google Maps, local knowledge of roads, streets and places in the city does not have a bearing on drivers' ability to perform well. In that sense, there is no real disadvantage that migrants face in the "workplace", a view confirmed by most of our respondents.

The System: Drivers repeatedly resorted to the use of the term "system" in their responses. It is necessary to unpack this seemingly simple, yet densely intricate term. This word has multiple meanings, and refers to multiple objects, and thus cannot be said to command a singular definition in the drivers' minds. However, there is an element of objectivity while referring to the system – therefore it is locatable in each definition. Further, it is always invoked when the company and its practices are visibly, and centrally, involved. Some of its meanings (with an example each) are as follows: 1) the ensemble of apps, maps and smartphones ("system *humein duty deta hai*" – the system gives us duties); 2) the specific functions the app performs ("*rating* system *bas dikhawa hai*" – the rating system is just for show); 3) the multi-layered digital technologies employed by the companies in their control-centers ("*customer-care bolta hai* system *mein complaint nahi dikha raha hai*" – customer-care says the system does not show your registered complaint); 4) the changing policies and practices of the companies ("*incentive* system *ko inhone khatam kar diya*" – they have ended the incentive system); 5) the structural relationship between driver and company ("*yeh* system *humein daba ke rakhta hai*" – this system weighs us down).

Exploring the contours of the driver-company relationship further, we look at the first four meanings of the term *system* to begin with, i.e. those involving company policies and the actual, corporeal digital technologies they use, along with their concomitants – Artificial Intelligence programming, centralized control, cloud-computing and online exchanges. The last, and more intangible meaning, deserves to be analysed on its own.

The tangible system: Rosenblat and Stark (2016) direct our attention to the various power and information asymmetries which Uber uses to control its workers. One such asymmetry, they explain, is part of the app's design. Drivers are not shown the duration or destination of the incoming trip request which they are required to accept within 15 seconds. Some of our respondents described being flung around town to remote or far-off locations as a "*sirdardi*" (headache). Uber drivers were particularly peeved, since their incentives are based on the number of trips and not the distance (like in Ola). Very short trips were not preferred either, as the minimum base-fare was considered inadequate compensation. Drivers must therefore be ready to ride anywhere and for any length of time before accepting a trip. They run the risk of being "off-roaded" (blocked off the app) if they cancel too many times after accepting a trip-request. "Too many times" is totally arbitrary. Drivers we spoke to believe that if they are indeed free, they should have the right of refusal with no penalty.

Uber and Ola have total freedom to cut fare-rates when and how they want. One respondent said that fares these days are so low, that he would rather drive an auto, or perhaps quit driving altogether. However, unlike in the case of traditional taxis or autos, whose fares are decided by elected governments, these companies cannot be appealed to or bargained with when they toy with fares. They tell drivers that lower fares will lead to higher demand, according to their "system's" calculation, thus clearly using asymmetric-information-advantage to justify exploitative policies. Lower fares are never taken well by drivers, as they have to work longer hours to earn the same amount as before. The idea is that perhaps more drivers and cars will get on board due to increased demand. But given that the excess total supply of cars is claimed to justify fare/price reduction itself, each *individual* driver is being squeezed out by the same fare-reduction in the companies' hope to capture market share. From the companies' viewpoint, there is an increase in Uber/Ola's *Absolute* Surplus Value – in a Marxian sense – through the reduction of wages.

The incentives offered to drivers on completing a certain number of rides in a given time-period have near-totally been hollowed out. Further, its terms change randomly over time-periods as short as a week, without prior notice. As reported by many drivers, three years ago Uber offered incentives up to Rs. 10-11,000 for twenty-twenty five trips completed. Today, they offer Rs.1,100 or less for sixty trips to be completed within four days. Due to these changes, many drivers said that incentives are not worth chasing anymore. These changes kicked-in around 2016, with the situation progressively getting worse since. Given that incentives were a major motivation for drivers joining the app, especially those who have been on it for two-plus years, drivers strongly believe that these companies should be held accountable on grounds of false advertising.

There are a few drivers however who do still try completing incentive-targets. But there was another serious problem that they encountered. Week-after-week drivers would drive twelve-plus hours a day in pursuit of bonuses. And week-after-week something strange would happen on the final day. For example, drivers would reach fifty-nine trips (out of the targeted sixty), after which they would stop getting trip-requests. This would happen on the last day of the time-period during which they were supposed to meet their trip targets. Soon they realized that there was something deliberate at play preventing them from meeting these targets. One driver said, "*yeh company humein aise loot-ti hai, aur iss tarah laakhon rupay kamaati hai kyunki unhe incentive nahi dena padta*" (These companies cheat and rob us, earning lakhs more in this way as they don't have to pay bonuses to us). After driving all week in the hope to earn a little bit more, drivers receive a rude shock when they are

prevented from doing so for no fault of their own. Thus, using information-asymmetry and opacity of policies of pricing and incentives, these companies and its systems are able to exercise control over drivers' wages and work-hours in multiple ways.

One of the most important claims the platform economy makes is that it has found the answer to the problem of trust within markets (Slee, 2015). Why after all should one get into a strangers' car, or stay at a strangers' apartment? The reputation/rating system platforms have created is meant to foster trust and respect among workers/customers by allowing them to rate each other on the basis of behaviour and overall experience. It typically consists of a scale of "stars" between 0 and 5, and includes comment/feedback boxes. This two-way rating is also meant to efficiently weed out bad apples – (mainly workers are ousted from the app, but theoretically customers can be as well). However, there are some troubling aspects to this in the case of Uber and Ola – both with design and use.

For instance, when customers rate drivers, the scale starts at zero and ends at five. The driver-app, however, is designed in a way in which when drivers rate customers, the scale starts at five, and drivers can work backwards till zero. Thus, clearly, the assumption from the get-go is that the customer is always-already good/right; the driver however has to work hard to prove himself.

Almost all drivers said that the rating system for them (when customers rate drivers) does indeed have an impact. If a driver has a low rating, he gets trips sporadically even in high-demand areas i.e. his trips come slower, and his waiting time is relatively higher. He may also be off-roaded if his rating is very low. Customers, on the other hand, are unaffected by ratings according to almost all our respondents. The reason some of them gave for this is that these companies need customers much more than they need drivers, of whom there is already an excess reserve. Some added that customers can afford multiple phones and phone-numbers, and since they do not have to render any personal information to these companies, they can simply switch to another number and download the app again*if* they somehow get blocked-off of it.

Many respondents said that often companies manipulate their ratings through their control-systems, especially when drivers are close to reaching incentive targets, and as a result trip requests dry up. *"Unke (company) ke hi haath mein hota hai. Jab chahe rating kum kar dete hai, aur tabhi jab incentive milne waala hota hai*" (The ratings are in the companies' hands. When they want they reduce it, especially when we are about to meet our incentive targets). Given that these companies are closed-off to investigations and have deleted information in

the past[10], there is no way of ascertaining the veracity of this. But more importantly, when drivers complain about this to customer service representatives (CSR), they are dismissed and re-educated about how objective and perfect the system is.

System manipulation could often take a darker turn. Many drivers recounted instances of other drivers being held at gunpoint, kidnapped and instructed to drive to obscure locations where the customer had to conduct some illegal business or the other. One such driver we interviewed had had this exact experience. When he complained to Ola, they said sorry they cannot help and claimed that the customer had used a fake ID and was therefore not in their database.

Horrifically, many drivers had heard of cases wherein drivers had been murdered, and their cars stolen[11]. The response of companies when the deceased drivers' kin complain and demand action/compensation is a standard one: they simply delete the drivers' data from their system and claim that he was never registered with them. This, our respondents said, enables them to completely evade any legal responsibility. On being asked how a company can risk such a thing since it could become a major media scandal, one driver replied, "*media toh inke jeb mein hai*" (the media is in their pocket). He also said that nobody cares enough about drivers to raise their voice. There was no heartbreak in his voice as he said this. That is just how things are, he seemed to imply.

The system knows everything, said respondents. It knows exactly where we are, what we are doing, when we accept duties, when we reject them, where we go etc. Hearing all this, one gets the sense that drivers are profoundly aware of being watched, inducing a feeling of constraint. They question the system and its supposed objectivity and reject the companies' "rhetorical appeal to algorithmic certainty and authority" (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). One respondent put it sharply, "*System ko sab pata hai – phir bhi* itna *galat kaise ho sakta hai?"* (The system knows everything – then how can it go *so* wrong?). The only way they explain this is by concluding that by design and in implementation, the system favours the company and customer.

The Intangible System: We now turn to the relatively immaterial usage of the word "system" – namely the relationship between platform and driver as it exists structurally, as well as how

[10] See Netflix documentary titled 'The Uber Story' (2019): https://www.netflix.com/title/81155897

[11] Indeed the risk that taxi-drivers face of homicide has been documented in other contexts as well. See for example, this report from Canada titled: Cab Driving Riskier than Police Work, which found that taxi drivers were twice as likely as cops to be victims of homicide. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/cab-driving-riskier-than-police-work-1.1258776

it is mediated in real-time. The lack of Freedom and Autonomy, which in the analysis above resulted from design and policy imperatives, is in some ways more apparent and deliberate in the following analysis since it loses the character of technological opacity and is a clear(er) function of human actions, as they play out within a structure.

A good place to start exploring this relationship is the companies' customer service helplines for assisting drivers on road. Drivers refer to this service as "customer care", which interestingly hints at the relationship between company and driver as being one of service-provider and client, and not that of equal partnership. This helpline service however is a point of extreme frustration for drivers. Although it worked very well in the past, when Uber and Ola were still young and looking to appease and assist drivers as best they could, today drivers say that helpline representatives seldom answer, and are of no help when they do. "*kabhi kabhi toh ghanto tak jawaab nahi dete, humaare paas time kahaan jo hum call karte rahe*?" (Sometimes they don't answer for hours. Where have we the time to keep calling?). Helpline representatives claim to either not understand what drivers say or be in no position to help. Drivers attempt to use this service on many occasions, such as when their payment is late, if customers do not pay (a frequent phenomenon), if customers misbehave/threaten them, and if maps malfunction and so on.

Fisher (2009) describes the experience of the "centerlessness" of late capitalism, (by which he means the absence of a controlling authority and our inability to accept that), using the example of call center experiences. Consumers of late capitalism experience two realities, according to him. One in which efficiency is guaranteed and service provision is ultra-smooth; and the other which he describes as "the crazed Kafkaesque labyrinth of call centers…where it's a miracle that anything ever happens" (Ibid.) The second reality is incredibly frustrating, where one repeatedly renders details to operatives not equipped to handle the issues, and customers soon realize that nobody knows or can do anything to help. It is experienced as a "system that is unresponsive, impersonal, centerless, abstract and fragmentary". We posit that this experience is context-specific – while customers on the app belong to reality-one, drivers are firmly grounded in reality-two.

Drivers explained that no matter what, in disputes the company sides with customers. The company penalizes drivers without bothering to enquire about the issue from them, while being apologetic to the customer. "*Phir kaise keh sakte hai ki hum partner hai*?" (How can they then say that we are partners?), ask drivers.

In the last 3-odd years, drivers have also witnessed changes in the attitudes of customer-care representatives, both over the phone and in the companies' offices. If earlier they were

treated kindly, today on call they are often dismissed or admonished for not knowing better and wasting the representatives' time. Earlier, when drivers would take their complaints to the offices, they would be greeted cheerfully, given refreshments and be asked to wait in air-conditioned rooms. Today, they are barely allowed entry, let alone a glass of water. Both companies have bouncers at their offices – not security guards, big burly bouncers. Drivers claimed that the bouncers are there to intimidate them, and ensure that they do not stir up any unnecessary trouble. These, they say, are clear signs of how the company has moved well past caring about them.

Further, drivers are encouraged by the company to use the complaint section in the app to write to them, instead of calling or physically approaching them. The problem however is that drivers do not think this is accessible. Some said they cannot type out and send their complaints as quickly as customers do because of their inability to read/write in English. (Despite having options for other languages, drivers feel the companies prefer English). They also do not have the time or luxury to sit and write elaborate stories since they need to squeeze in as many trips as possible, unlike the customer. In such a situation, the company almost always ends up acting in the customers' favour.

Negotiations and strategies: Drivers have many demands of their own and respond in multiple ways to the perceived (and actual) injustices of companies. Some of these demands include wage increase, safety feature for drivers, instituting accident-insurance schemes (both companies do have insurance for their drivers, but respondents either did not know about it or did not know how to claim it or what its terms were – thus it is incumbent upon Uber and Ola to bridge this information deficit), strict action against customers, formal recognition as employees, provision of paid-leave and so on.

In recent years, strikes have been one way of expressing anger against and bargaining with companies. However, most drivers admitted that strikes are ineffective and achieve next to nothing, for which there are manifold reasons. These include weak unity in the overall driver pool, lack of unions to organize them, monetary compulsions that force them to drive every day and the size of Delhi-NCR with the logistical unfeasibility of bringing them together. Some respondents also claimed that the company buys-off strike leaders, after which the strike dies a natural death. This leads to disillusionment among drivers, who stop seeing strikes as a legitimate means of protest. Drivers driving for Ola Fleet Technologies fear that if they participate in strikes their car will be seized by Ola.

The anger felt towards the company is often expressed in aggressive tones. One respondent who spoke very badly of Uber, asked us mid-interview to confirm if we were actually students or company surveyors. Before we responded he interjected, "*agar aap Uber ke CEO bhi hote main aapko yahi bolta. Aap mujhe usse phone pe baat karao, main use itni gaaliyan sunaunga ki uske kaan se khoon nikal aayega. Usko bhi pata lage ki humein kitna daba ke rakha hai*" (Even if you were the CEO of Uber I would have said the same things. If you make me speak to him over the phone I will abuse him so much that his ears will start bleeding. He should also know how much they oppress us). A couple of others expressed their desire to attack and vandalize the company head-office, which for them has become symbolic of authoritarian injustice.

To all this, the companies' response to drivers is standard: "You are *free* to leave if you don't like it"; "You are *free* to drive longer and make more money". This not only displays arrogance of a company sure of its already-achieved success, but clearly displays the weaponization of the language of freedom deployed by companies. In their justifications, drivers ought to be happy with what they are getting here viz. a living wage, and therefore should be grateful to the company for providing jobs.

To conclude, the design of the system and its usage by companies, the structural and on-ground relationships and interactions between company and driver, the pro-customer/anti-driver orientation of the companies, and the heavy hand with which they deal with drivers, all suggest that it is far-fetched for drivers to look upon themselves as free or exercise any real autonomy – including the company-promised (limited) Freedom and Autonomy.

II

Drivers and Customers

The platform economy works with contradictory impulses – while standardised quality services to customers are guaranteed by the company, it is claimed that drivers, on whom the customers' experience largely depends, are free to determine their own conditions of work. In this section, we will see how drivers' freedom is antagonistically related to the economic model of these companies, which is hinged upon offering highly-rated drivers and providing quality services to customers. This service-guarantee on the part of drivers entails what Hochschild (2003) calls "emotional labour" – i.e.

> "labor that requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others…This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our individuality" (Ibid: 7).

She states further, "the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself" (Ibid: 5).

It is helpful to recall from the previous section that structurally, these platforms favour the customers in terms of technology, entitlements, benefit of doubt, satisfaction, etc. over their drivers.

Customer Control: The phrase "*Customer bhagwan hota he*" (Customer is God), used by more than one driver encapsulates the pre-dominant attitude towards customers that drivers have. In a society where guests are equated to God and an ethic of hospitality is highly valued, the customers are made to feel entitled to services they are provided with. This casts customers in a managerial/disciplinarian role vis-à-vis drivers. Thus, the responsibility of screening drivers (through ratings and complaints) is delegated to customers, for which the company then need not shell-out resources (Slee, 2015).

It is important to highlight here that in the platform economy, reputation of companies is directly proportional to profit. The responsibility of maintaining the faith of customers in the company is an added burden on the drivers, as clearly stated by one respondent: "*Uber hum pe bharosa karke hume duties aur clients deti hain…Agar unka hum pe viswas toot-ta hai toh Uber pe bhi toot-ta hai*" (Uber trusts us and gives us duties and clients…If the trust is broken on us, the trust is also broken on Uber).

Drivers drive numerous customers on any given day. In the platform economy, one's existence as a worker requires one to achieve near-perfect ratings, or be kicked-off the app. The rating system also has options like 'Great Conversation', 'Polite', 'Great Attitude', '6-star Service', 'Hero', etc. to choose from. These become aspirational categories for drivers, who orient their behaviour accordingly. In doing so, the company not only sets the standard and defines the nature of excellence for drivers, but also tries to instill a sense of pride in them upon achieving these standards. This service-standard guarantee places a disproportionate amount of power in the hands of customers who hold drivers to impossible and arbitrary standards of their own: "*hum customers ko waapis bol bhi nahi sakte…Kuch bhi ho, complaint karne ki dhamki dete hain ya rating gira dete hain*" (We can't even talk back to the customers. They either threaten us with complaints or give us a very low rating).

The pressure to comply: Almost all drivers felt that they were obliged to provide satisfactory services to the customers. Customers however generally felt no need to reciprocate. But,

"*paanchon ungli ek baraabar nahi hoti*" (all five fingers are not the same), said multiple drivers, when asked about their experiences with customers. Though drivers said that they often got "good" customers (by which they usually meant customers who are educated/ polite/well-mannered/with fancy jobs etc.), they were bound to daily deal with "bad" ones as well (drunk/smokers/loud/unruly/demanding/those who refuse to pay etc.). It could be that drivers equated "good" to well-educated/fancy jobs because they saw their own work as a means of upward status mobility and wished to stake a claim to a certain kind of "good" life by drawing such equations. Moreover, they perhaps justified being treated badly by "good" customers, because as some of them articulated, good customers know better and are right.

Emotional Labour: Drivers expressed helplessness while having to drive badly behaved customers, since customers did/said anything and the company believed them. Patience and anger-management are important job requirements (and perhaps may even be called a necessary "skill"), without which it would be impossible to survive in this line of work. Disguising fatigue and irritation becomes part of the job which renders invisible the "labour" put into avoiding customer dissatisfaction (Hochschild, 2003). "*Hum react karenge toh hamara hi loss hain. Isliye chup baith-te hain*" (If we react, it's our own loss. That's why we keep quiet), said one of the drivers, while explaining how it is foolhardy to fight back.

It is not difficult to notice that while drivers do not have a ruthless/entitled attitude towards customers, customers often have a mental image of drivers as being either unsafe or crooks looking to exploit/steal money from them. For instance, one driver narrated an incident with an old woman who owned an Audi (he picked her up from her home) and yet fought with the driver for three rupees and alleged that he wanted to steal from her: "*tum saare driver ek jaise ho. Mil ke customers ko loot-te ho*" (You drivers are all the same. You all scheme to rob customers).

Drivers often feel looked-down upon by customers which affects their self-esteem. One of the customers asked a respondent to pick her purse up from the ground and when he refused, flew into a rage. "*Aise treat karte hain hume jaise hum naukar hain, bas aur kuch nahi hain. Arey, hum maalik he gaadi ka, hamari bhi atma-samman hai*" (They treat us as if we are just servants and nothing else. I am the owner of this car and I have self-respect too), he said.

Many drivers expressed that they do not feel they own their car when customers are inside. It is not surprising that the companies' advertisements often encourage customers to treat the

car and driver as their private property[12], thus legitimizing and encouraging customer entitlement[13]. Customers' demands range from the AC blast-speed, to instructions that drivers pick them up and drop them at exact locations of their choice, and in between get them water, pick up their bags and so on. "*Gaadi bed tak lane bolenge, ye kaise ho sakta hain? Bilkul do kadam bhi chalke nahi aate hain*" (They ask us to bring our cars to their beds. How is this possible? They won't even walk two steps). Uber and Ola assure customers pick-ups and drops at exact locations, but in India where streets and lanes are often very narrow and congested, these assurances are only delivered by drivers with immense difficulty. "*Rickshaw nahi jaati waha, gaadi ko pahunchana padta hain*" (Even where cycle rickshaws cannot go, we have to take our cars).

Wrath of customers: In the eyes of customers, drivers serve as the only human extensions/representations of the companies. Since machines are perceived as non-agential, they cannot be admonished. Therefore drivers become receptacles of customer aggression and rage. The assumption is always against human folly/plotting whereas machines are seen to be objective and perfect, leading to the drivers facing abuse by customers for no fault of their own (such as when maps malfunction or the actual-bill is higher than the expected-bill). Customers seem to be aware of the power they possess over drivers. One customer once told a respondent, "*main yakeen dilata hoon ki tu phir kabhi gaadi nahi chala paega Uber mei*" (I guarantee you that you will not drive a car in Uber ever again).

Risk: Drivers believe that nowadays since anybody can book a cab due to increased access to smartphones, they are frequently becoming prey to frightening and unwelcome experiences. This, they believe, is also a major safety concern for them. One driver told us that around twenty drivers have been killed this very year (again, it is impossible to get exact figures on this). Almost all drivers narrated incidents of other drivers being kidnapped, murdered, robbed, hijacked etc. They also said that many a time customers use cabs to conduct illegal transactions (as mentioned earlier).

Drivers believe that the risk they face is in part due to the non-verification of customers, who require no ID-proof to register on the app. Customers are also found using fake phones and stolen numbers, whereas the drivers need to submit ID proofs, photographs, address

[12] Uber's tag-line till some years ago was 'Everyone's Private Driver'

[13] See for example this ad produced by Uber India titled 'Your Car. Your Way. Say Hello to Your Very Own Uber #ApniHiGaadi – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_sQvfmtUV0

proofs and also go through a rigorous process of police verification before joining. The safety and security that companies claim to provide seem to be only for customers, while drivers are expected to fend for themselves. Drivers, (especially those driving at night), raised concerns of not knowing who their customers are and what they could possibly be carrying. Despite the risk being relatively higher at night, they also drive at this time due to monetary compulsions.

III

Drivers, Other Drivers and the Self

This section explores the central ideas of the study viz. Freedom, Autonomy, Partnership, Entrepreneurship, with the driver and their self-perceptions in central focus. We probe the drivers' relationship with three aspects of their lives – productive activity, fellow drivers and the "self".

Reflections on Work

Many factors combine to form drivers' perceptions of their work ranging from interactions and experiences with companies and customers, to the various risks and dangers of driving in India.

Gadha Mazdoori (Donkey's work): Though drivers are not generally imagined to be manual/physical labourers in the conventional understating of the term (workers engaged in physically draining work), they often refer to their own work as that which involves immense "*mehnat*" (hardwork) and "s*irdardi*" (headache). Some drivers also used the phrase "*gadha mazdoori*" to describe their work, implying its immense physical (and as we will see later, mental) demands.

Promises versus reality: The deep discontentment and frustration with the companies' several unfulfilled promises was viscerally evident in interviews with drivers. It is in fact true that drivers did earn quite a lot (upto Rs. 90,000 a month[14]) during the initial few years. However, the honeymoon period of the relationship between companies and drivers ended quickly. It was clear-as-day that drivers would never again earn as much. Since driver expectations were

[14] See article titled 'My Life is Spent in this Car': Uber Drives its Indian Workers to Despair https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/dec/04/my-life-is-spent-in-this-car-uber-drives-indian-workers-to-despair

very high to begin with, the fall was even harder to take. The promises of the company today are seen as outright lies. "*Sab dikhawa hain, asli mei aisa bilkul nahi hain. Haan, maanlo ek minute ke liye ki utna kama sakte hain par aadmi ko khana, neend aur aaraam ki bhi zarurat hoti hain*" (Everything is a show. In reality, it's not like that at all. Yes, let's assume for a minute that we can earn that much but people need food, sleep and rest too).

Car as lived space: The working-day and the rhythms of the body combine to produce the re-imaginations of spaces in peculiar ways. When drivers spend an ungodly amount of hours on duty, the car becomes the frontier of their spatial imagination. The line between the workplace and home becomes invisible. The car itself stands in for the ideas associated with a home viz. shelter, belonging and security. But it lacks the privacy and peace of mind that is craved, which only a "real" home can provide them with. Drivers complain of being harassed by cops and the public when they stop for a snooze by the side of the road. They also mention the risks involved while driving with little-to-no sleep as well as with sleeping in their cars which makes them vulnerable to thieves and kidnappers. Many said that they do not have the time or luxury for even a quick nap – often being the only source of rest in a day – and have to resort to chewing substances like "*gutka*" (tobacco) to keep awake. Often drivers do not go home for many days on end, sleeping sporadically in their cars. What kind of freedom is this, where not only are they chained in their waking life, but also in their dreams? As a particularly powerful line in Shaunak Sen's documentary *Cities of Sleep* (2015) put it: "*Azaad wahi hai jo apne marzi se soye aur jaage*" (Only he who sleeps and wakes at will is free).

An entrepreneur's "duty": It is in fact interesting that all drivers that were interviewed referred to the rides as "duties" implying them to be onerous tasks, obligations, or responsibilities that have to be fulfilled. The companies "give" duties and drivers accept them. Drivers thus place themselves at the bottom of the company-customer-driver hierarchy and do not see themselves as some sort of empowered entrepreneurs, but instead look upon their work as dry, dull and a compulsion. They also perceive their work as involving many things other than driving, such as *tolerance* of customers' whims (previously discussed).

Fellow Drivers:

Competition: Drivers expressed powerlessness against companies and said they could not bargain with or threaten them simply because it would not make a difference to the

companies. Many looked upon fellow drivers as competitors who they ought to out-earn. Companies pit them against one-another by limiting incentives. Some drivers are of the opinion that incentives have been cut down because of misuse of the system by other drivers (for instance, deliberately taking only short trips and cancelling long one in a system where more trips means more bonuses). This sentiment is best captured by one respondent: "*ek machli poore taalaab ko kharaab kar deti hai*" (One fish is enough to spoil the entire pond).

Solidarity and networks of support: Despite some seeing others as competition, drivers always referred to other drivers as "*bhai*" (brother), suggesting an acknowledgment of the mutually oppressive conditions in which they all coexisted. There exists a sense of solidarity which at times translates into networks and communities of support. For instance, they have local Whatsapp groups in which they share information warning against certain "bad" customers/volatile areas, ask for help from other drivers when required (for example, in cases of punctured tyres), mobilize/raise awareness for strikes and build support groups to be activated in times of need. At times, these groups are also used to collect funds to help out a fellow "*bhai*" or his family during a crisis (such as in the event of an accident).

Self-Perception:

Partnership: The question of Partnership threw up interesting responses. Companies, as mentioned, call drivers "driver-partners" implying a relation of equality between drivers and board-members/white-collar workers. Drivers, however, have varying definitions of partnership. Some outright reject the tag, seeing it as another item of display merely there to make drivers and customers feel good. "*Partner ka matlab ek barabari hoti hai, lekin yahaan kuch barabari nahi hai*" (Partnership connotes equality, but here there is no such thing). Others had their own unique take on the meaning of the term. "*Hum unse jude hue hain, isliye hum unke partner hai. Dono ka hona zaroori hai*" (We are attached to them, therefore we are their partners. Both need to exist together). Partnership as mere attachment, no matter how unequal, is far from the essence of the companies' claims. Thus, we see how terms such as these, when imported, are either rejected or interpreted in contextually specific ways. The idea of equality, especially with customers and the company is not something drivers deem appropriate to even think about.

Status and Dignity: Driving is not work which is typically considered to be dignified. Drivers in India (taxi/autos/private drivers) are looked down upon by the elite as menial labourers.

Driving in massive multinational companies such as Uber and Ola, one would assume, would afford drivers relatively greater dignity. This was true in the initial days. Skilled workers, corporate salesmen, IT-employees etc. quit their coveted jobs to drive in these companies. Driving was gradually becoming more prestigious with the coming of platforms.

But when fares plummeted and driving became economically unrewarding, many drivers higher up in the skill ladder quit. Once again, drivers began to be seen as undeserving of respect. "*Yellow-plate waalon ka koi samman ya kadar hi nahi karta – na police, na aam admi*" (Nobody respects or cares about yellow-plate drivers – neither cops, nor the common man).

For not wanting to be judged by their immediate and distant kin, some drivers lie to their families about driving cabs, instead saying that they work in a company (interestingly, they do not see driving for ride-hailing companies as working *in* a company). Two of them belonged to the Jat community from Haryana, among whom this work is heavily frowned upon. By and large, drivers themselves do not see this work as status-enhancing (albeit they did see it as class-enhancing back in the good old days). Nonetheless, the appeal for being treated with dignity and as fellow human beings is very evident.

One respondent articulately encapsulated this notion – (albeit at the expense of disparaging other drivers in the process): "*Main aam drivers ki tarah nahi hoon. Voh sirf road aur kaam pe dhyaan dete hai. Main bahut saare cheezon ke baare mein sochta hoon*" (I am not like ordinary drivers. They only focus on the road and their work. I think about many things). He explained that, inter alia, he thinks about planets and stars, politics, Indo-China dynamics, people's personalities and the environment. It is assumed that drivers do not think about such things, or have the place to do so, he said. He repeatedly emphasized that he was different. But there was something general to be gleaned even in his claim to uniqueness, i.e. his appeal to be seen as a human being deserving dignity and not *merely* a driver deserving scorn.

Alternative employment: Most drivers we spoke to desired to leave Uber/Ola and find alternative employment. Only a handful had a clear plan, while for most the future was as-yet blurry. The reason for the indecision is that they did not think they were capable of doing anything else, and were fearful of the crippling uncertainty that comes with joblessness. This is particularly true for about half the respondents who have driven professionally in some capacity or the other almost all their lives. "*Aur kya hi kar sakte hai hum*?" (What else can we even do?). They did not think that any other work was appropriate for the "likes of them".

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) "habitus", we may highlight that the habitus imposes certain objective restrictions on our thoughts and actions, particularly by positively sanctioning those which are "objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field" and thus:

> "tends to exclude all 'extravagances' ('not for the likes of us'), that is, all the behaviours that would be negatively sanctioned because they are incompatible with the objective conditions" (Bourdieu, 1990).

Many drivers then, resign themselves to their fate, hoping that somewhere down the line, either these companies will listen to them or better ones will come along. Their capacity to aspire, borrowing Appadurai's (2004) phrase, imposes severe restrictions on the freedom to imagine alternate ways of life.

Concluding Reflections on Freedom and Autonomy

Women in Platforms: Although we did not come across any female drivers during our fieldwork, given that women have increasingly begun entering platforms (including Uber and Ola), some preliminary comments are pertinent. In India, women are not just socially disincentivized to work but also face many other constraints such as low digital literacy (pertinent in the platform context) and restricted spatial mobility (since they have to manage the household and children). Women's contact with outside, public worlds are often seen as potentially "dishonouring" for the family. Further, they are far more vulnerable than men to physical and sexual assault[15]. Although this needs to be explored further, we suggest that the problems identified with platform-work in this paper collude with these socio-cultural factors to produce unique and more intense forms of unfreedom for women.

Drawing from our data, we argue that the simultaneous interactions between the companies, customers and drivers inhibit rather than enhance conditions for Freedom and Autonomy to be realized in meaningful ways. Further, these vocabularies occupy a very small, and often irrelevant, part of the drivers' imaginations. The collection of drivers' narratives allowed us a glimpse into what constitutes a large part of their lives and helped us develop a richer, and more empathetic understanding of how their lived reality diverged from companies' images/popular perceptions of the "emancipation" and "progress" that this work supposedly engenders.

[15] These observations are borrowed from Kavita Dattani's work on platforms and domestic work in India which was presented at the RC21 Urban Sociology conference, held at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, between te 18-21 September, 2019

Contrary to popular claims that invoke Freedom and Autonomy as strong motivations for drivers joining/staying-in these companies, we suggest that their motivations have little to do with the great terms and conditions of work that companies promise, but indeed lie elsewhere: low cost of entry, lack of high-skill requirement, the false promises and assurances of the companies, the objective and perceived lack of alternative employment and other opportunities (driving taxis/autos has become increasingly unviable due to disruption of the cab-market by these companies) and to a very limited extent, flexibility (turning on/off the app at will). Further, drivers who have taken their cars on loan describe being caught in a "vicious cycle" of debt, from which there is seemingly no way out.

We submit that this study has wider applications to the world of work in other platforms. Almost all the companies in the platform economy (Airbnb; Ola/Uber; Zomato/Swiggy/Foodpanda; Urban Clap, etc.) work with the reputation/rating systems, the implications of which have been established above (see sections I and II). All of them designate workers as "partners". In food delivery (Zomato), household and personal care (UrbanClap), and e-commerce platforms (Amazon), worker interactions (on call/point of delivery) with customers make them the only human representatives of companies, with similar implications as in the case of ride-hailing companies. Further, technological control and disciplinary measures (rating, off-roading, incentives and data manipulation) of companies are functional across platforms. The ambiguity of workers' position resulting in a total lack of worker protection is a staple everywhere.

Perhaps we may read the simultaneity of systematic exploitation along-with workers' sanction-by-participation in the system as a contradiction, wherein the one does not necessarily rule out the other. Edwards and Wajcman (2005: 8-13) provide important analyses of such contradictions, highlighting their centrality to the wider universe of work. Other scholars too have been plagued by questions of why workers repeatedly sanction systems that take away so much from them. These questions are becoming fashionable once again in contemporary times when forms of work are undergoing radical transformations. Ogburn's idea of "cultural lag" may be invoked to highlight how technology has outpaced cultural understandings and legal infrastructures concerning work. Ogburn's most comprehensive example of this dealt with the time-lag between the increased rate of accidents in industrial work, and the compensation provided to workers for the same (Ogburn in Volti, 2004). In our times too, similar protections and regulations have lagged far behind workers' risks and vulnerabilities.

In India, where unemployment is widespread and a large majority of the workforce is engaged in informal, precarious work, instead of celebrating these companies' claims of providing "good" jobs, perhaps we should be doubly cautious for reasons such as the scale of their operations, market-power and discourse-manufacturing abilities these companies possess, all of which makes it difficult to identify worker exploitation.

In the 1990s, companies like Nike began to feel the heat when rage over its sweatshops began to create ripples around the world. Today, it seems like that anger has subsided, even though sweatshops have not disappeared. Many of us have become *used to* the way things are. With platforms, one of two things could happen. Either they go the Nike route, insomuch as the current anger dies a natural death. Or they catalyze a global response so strong[16] that it unravels the very foundations upon which they stand.

Scholars, activists, policy-makers and related parties working in the intersecting fields of work, technology, law and governance urgently need to recognize the various ways in which work is changing. A deeper understanding is required of the historical factors which allowed ideas such as protection, regulation, contract and security to be imagined in *opposition* to freedom, flexibility, autonomy and choice, as opposed to serving as the very *conditions* for the realization of the latter group of ideas. Research on the platform economy must be regional – accounting for local regulatory frameworks and economic contexts, but it also must necessarily be global, for these platforms often operate globally, aspiring to reshape how work happens across the world. With the uncertainty of what work will entail in the age of Artificial Intelligence, debates around "good" work must be rethought, reformulated and historically oriented, so that the outcomes ensure that we do not fall into the same seductive traps laid by Capital yet again.

[16] For early signs of this, see: 'Uber Drivers of the World, Unite!' in *New Internationalist* (2019) https://newint.org/features/2019/02/11/uber-drivers-world-unite

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