

Locating Migrants in India's Gig Economy

A SCOPING REPORT

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Executive Summary

Gig workers working for on-demand platform services have been adversely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Cab hailing services came to a standstill in several Indian cities as the central government imposed a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 for over two months, restricting people's movements. Food delivery and home-based services were deemed 'essential' services and continued to operate during the lockdown. They received little support from the platform companies as well as the government to cope with the effects of the health and economic crises. A significant proportion of these workers are migrants from rural and semi-urban areas, who moved to the cities in search of employment. Yet, their lived experiences, aspirations and demands as migrant workers in the gig economy remain unexplored in academic and policy discourse.

Against this backdrop, this report examines how the migrant status of the 'gig' worker may shape their experience in the platform economy.

Based on our conversation with platform workers and representatives of platform worker unions based in Jaipur, Hyderabad, Chennai and Bangalore, **we observe that migrant workers constitute an overwhelming majority on on-demand service platforms.** Although migrants may not necessarily migrate to join platforms, their transition to app-based work is motivated by hopes of a lucrative income and incentives. While the transition proved lucrative initially, platform companies began to lower per kilometer rates, reduce incentives and increase their commission.

We highlight that the business model of platforms as intermediaries warrants and relies on a free-flowing supply of cheap and easily disciplined labour, which is ensured by the large pool of migrant workers, who act/operate as the 'reserve army of labour' for platforms.

Typically, migrants are engaged in work characterized by informal work arrangements. **While engaging in platform work as 'independent partners' entails working for a formal enterprise, their working conditions continue to be characterized by informality, such as lack of job security, social security, provision of minimum wage, etc.** The modality of platform work is such that there is no scope of human interaction with workers being managed and disciplined by an opaque algorithm which decides the frequency of their matches, ride fares and even allocation. Far from being treated as independent partners, app-based workers are subjected to arbitrary impositions (such as reduction in rates, increase in commission etc.) which they can either concede to, or 'voluntarily' leave.

Such a work arrangement that is app-mediated and algorithmically-managed underscores the alienation of the platform worker from their employer as well as peers.

Finally, **we highlight the impact of Covid-19 on migrant workers in the gig economy, specifically in the initial months of the pandemic in India. In the absence of meaningful response from platform companies in addressing their concerns,** the livelihood of platform-based cab drivers was especially at stake. Those who continued to work incurred significant losses due to drop in incentives as well as increased expenditure owing to rising fuel costs and precautionary hygiene and sanitary measures. As the Covid-19 situation worsened in India, **migrant gig workers were faced with the tough choice between remaining a gig worker in the city or returning to their native town or village. Without viable job alternatives, their livelihood continues to hang by a thread.**

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Introduction

Following the pandemic outbreak, everytime a lockdown was imposed in an Indian city, it triggered reverse migration of workers with hundreds of migrants fleeing the cities to escape joblessness.^{1,2} With anxious migrants heading home, yet again, it appears as though we could be at the brink of another mass exodus. A year later, the infamous lockdown of 2020 continues to evoke visuals of hundreds of poor migrant workers walking thousands of kilometers from major cities back to their villages.³ The 2020 lockdown and subsequent closures gutted their livelihood without providing any safety nets. The plight of distressed migrants compelled the Indian public to acknowledge the existence and struggles of migrant workers and the pandemic while exposing the frailty of migrant workers' livelihoods, brought their vulnerability into sharp focus.

Against the backdrop of the large-scale reverse migration witnessed in several parts of India in 2020, this report aims to shed light on the lives and livelihood of migrant workers in a sector that is yet to take cognizance of its large migrant workforce—the 'platform' economy.

Workers engaged in providing on-demand services had been adversely impacted by the lockdown announced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Cab-hailing services came to a standstill as the central government imposed a nationwide lockdown for over two months, restricting people's movements.⁴ Food delivery and some home-based services were deemed 'essential' services and continued to operate during the lockdown.⁵

However, workers received little support from the on-demand service companies (interchangeably referred to as platform companies in this report) as well as the government to cope with the effects of the health and economic crises.⁶

Previous studies have indicated that a significant proportion of platform workers in Indian cities are migrants^{7,8,9,10}, who moved to the cities in search of employment. Despite an overwhelming presence of migrants in the workforce, discussions on the platform economy have rarely focussed on their vulnerabilities. Their lived experiences, aspirations and demands as migrant workers in the gig economy remain unexplored in academic and policy discourse in India. This report aims to address this gap by examining how the migrant status of those working for on-demand service companies may shape their experience in the platform economy.

In this study, we understand migrants as individuals and groups who moved to urban centres in search of employment from semi-urban and rural areas. They may have migrated to a city within or outside their home state. Our findings present how the on-demand service companies captured the imagination of migrant workers, the app-mediated alienation of migrant platform workers from each other, their employer as well as their customers, and the challenges faced by migrant platform workers during the initial months of the pandemic, a period that was marked by uncertainty. This study focuses specifically on two kinds of services: ride-hailing and food delivery.

1 Prashant K. Nanda & Malyaban Ghosh, [Cities begin to see an exodus of migrant workers](#), Mint, 7 April 2021

2 PTI, [Maharashtra lockdown turns migrants anxious, many head home again](#), Indian Express, 8 April 2021

3 Joanna Slater & Niha Masih, [In India, the world's biggest lockdown has forced migrants to walk hundreds of miles home](#), The Washington Post, 28 March 2020

4 Sofi Ahsan, [Wheels stuck, but worries are many for Ola, Uber drivers](#), Indian Express, Chandigarh, 4 April 2020

5 Ankita Chakravarti, [Covid19 lockdown: Online delivery of food items is essential service but don't rely on it for your dinner](#), India Today, March 2020

6 Kaveri Medappa & Pradyumna Taduri, [By crowdfunding benefits for embattled workers, app-based services are evading their own obligations](#), Scroll.in, 22 April 2020

7 Salman S.H. & Varsha Bansal, [Delhi, and not Bengaluru, is the place to be for gig economy workers](#), livemint, 12 April 2019

8 Rina Kashyap & Anjali Bhati, [Taxi Drivers and Taxidars: A Case Study of Uber and Ola in Delhi](#), *Journal of Developing Societies*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X18757144>

9 Khatoon et.al, [The Platform Economy : a Case study on Ola and Uber from driver partner's perspective- in the cities of Kolkata and Hyderabad](#), TISS Hyderabad

10 [Amazon India to add 50,000 temp jobs but the migrant workers have gone home](#), Deccan Chronicle, 22 May 2020

Methodology

We undertook this study as exploratory research into the intersection of the platform economy and migrant labour. We draw on eight in-depth interviews, conducted between July 2020 and August 2020, with researchers studying the platform economy, migrant on-demand service workers as well as representatives of worker unions. The Covid-19 crisis restricted our ability to reach out to platform workers, limiting the number of workers we could reach out to. We focused on doing expert interviews to fill this gap. It also forced us to conduct all our interviews through telephonic conversations. We informed each of our respondents about the broad scope and objective of the study, and received their explicit oral consent to record, report and quote their inputs.

We conducted scoping interviews with two researchers whose research focuses on platform labour. Their inputs provided insights into patterns of inter-state and intra-state migration of workers in the platform economy. We conducted in-depth interviews with three union leaders who represent platform workers in transport and food delivery services across major cities in India. We also interviewed three drivers who had migrated to major cities from nearby towns and villages to work as drivers and later on, started driving for on-demand cab-hailing platforms. Two were drivers in Hyderabad, while the third was a driver based in Chennai. All of them had migrated to their nearest major city about 10-20 years back and have been engaged in platform work for the last 5-6 years. The in-depth interviews lasted about 40 to 90 minutes each.

Findings

In the three sections that follow, we present how platforms captured the imagination of migrant workers, how app-mediated algorithmic management of migrant platform workers compounds their alienation, and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis, the challenges faced by migrant platform workers in continuing or ceasing to work for on-demand platforms.

Migrants

THE CONTEMPORARY 'RESERVE ARMY OF LABOUR' FOR ON-DEMAND PLATFORMS

Migrants form a major segment of the service sector workforce and as a corollary, that of on-demand service work. State-wise variation notwithstanding, our respondents based in Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Jaipur indicated that migrants constitute an overwhelming majority of platform workers. In the private transportation services sector, they added that most of the platform workers were intra-state migrants from neighbouring peri-urban and rural districts. For instance, Mani (name changed), a cab driver now based in Chennai, had moved to the city 10 years ago from a neighbouring town, Ranipet, to find employment in the city as a driver.

Most people come from outside Chennai. Nobody will be a local person. Like Ranipet, Madhuranthagam, Villupuram, like that. Roughly 100-200 kms away from Chennai.

Mani (name changed), a cab driver in Chennai

In Jaipur, close to 90% of food delivery workers are from other districts of Rajasthan and are considered 'local' workers. Since there is hardly any employment prospect in the village, so we come to the city. Other state migrants are almost negligible.

Dharmendra Vaishnav, Indian Delivery Lions (IDL)

As Dharmendra, who heads Indian Delivery Lions (IDL)—a union of food delivery partners in Jaipur pointed out, with rural India starved of adequate livelihood opportunities, people are 'pushed' to the city in search for greener pastures. Even for those engaged in farm activities, seasonal unemployment is a recurrent phenomenon, amplified by the deteriorating climatic conditions. This further pushes out seasonal agrarian workers to the urban informal sector. Digital labour markets thereby become a short-term adaptive strategy for such climate impacted migrants as well¹¹.

Most of them move to cities temporarily, to test waters before eventually settling in with their families. Even as urban labour markets provide better paying jobs, migrant workers are burdened with high cost of living and lack of affordable housing in the urban centres. The lack of social institutions to support migrant workers in the city and the government's failure to provide long-due welfare measures for migrant workers leave them on the fringes of the city.

Omer (name changed) migrated to Hyderabad from a village in Nagarkurnool district in 2000. He worked as a cab driver in the city, driving for a travel agency. After working in the city for five years, he decided to bring his wife and children to live with him. Following the launch of Uber and Ola in Hyderabad in 2014, he became a 'driver partner' providing on-demand cab services. Omer described migrating to the city as a "daunting task" fraught with challenges.

¹¹ Aditi Surie & Lakshme V. Sharma, *Climate change, Agrarian distress, and the role of digital labour markets: evidence from Bengaluru, Karnataka*, Decision (2019), 46:127-138, DOI 10.1007/s40622-019-00213-w

It is a daunting task to move to the city - landlords aren't accommodative, security is an issue. Everything is so much more expensive. Schooling for instance is very expensive. In the village, Rs. 3000 is sufficient for school fees but in the city it is not less than Rs. 8000. Rent is a major concern too. 80% income goes on rent and school fees. The rest is used up for daily existence.

Omer (name changed), a cab driver in Hyderabad

It is the aspiration of every person that going forward his family's condition should improve. The city provides a better education facility for his children, healthcare, source of income for his wife, etc. So, even if the family lives in subsistence, they still feel it is okay to bear the hardship.

Shaik Salauddin, National General Secretary, IFAT

Many migrant bachelors live together cramped up in a single room, to save on rent and send more remittance to cope with financial hardship back home.

Vinay Sarathy, President, United Food Delivery Partners' Union

Most workers who choose to migrate tend to have some form of existing social and kinship networks at the destination. The value of social networks lies in providing information on employment prospects, and social and emotional support. Even for the most enterprising workers, it is difficult to survive on their own and cope with the uncertainty of city life.

Recent migrants to the city, especially those hailing from a different state, typically opt to work in the food delivery sector. They tend to be much younger than workers engaged in the transportation sector. This can partly be attributed to the lower financial entry barrier posed by food delivery work. Owning a two-wheeler (for food delivery) is far less expensive compared to owning a car (for transportation services) which incurs more expenses and leads to higher debt burden and longer repayment commitments. While owning three-wheelers (for transportation services) may not be as expensive, it is fraught with regulatory barriers.

Migrant workers who drive cars for on-demand transportation services are less likely to own it themselves; instead, they lease a car from the on-demand service companies or are employed for a fixed wage by car-owners who have attached themselves to Ola or Uber¹². In both these arrangements, migrant gig workers are under pressure to pay a fixed daily fee (for the lease) or meet targets set by the car-owners. Hence, they do not enjoy much agency over their time or work in ways that an owner-cum-driver might.

Our respondents indicated that platform companies entered their respective sectoral markets in a covert yet systematic manner. Omer recalled that before officially launching in Hyderabad, officials from Uber approached drivers at the airport taxi stands and established a good rapport with them by visiting them frequently. On the pretext of understanding and resolving their existing issues, the officials would seek their suggestions on how an ideal cab company could be conceptualised. Eventually, they were invited to an upscale hotel, where they were introduced to the platform.

We were royally treated - we were invited to a huge AC hotel, fed very good biryani and even served mineral water bottles when we entered...They showed us a glimpse of the potential earning opportunity, if we started using their app.

Omer, cab driver in Hyderabad

The initial splendour led drivers to view platforms as a dignified alternative within their profession. Simultaneously, hoardings across the city announced that drivers could earn upto a lakh per month working for Uber, with flexible working hours. In addition, word of mouth backing the validity of these claims spread swiftly, partly because initial referral bonuses were as high as Rs.10,000 for each successful referral.

Many workers were also lured by the notion of independence and flexibility afforded by the platform. To be one's own boss and not be answerable to anyone, was unheard of and a welcome change to the subservience that drivers had grudgingly internalized as a prerequisite in their profession.

Before joining Ola, I used to drive for [IT] company in the night shift. A main reason why many people started driving for Ola is because somebody in their neighbourhood might have joined and made Rs.1500-2000 per day. Naturally, I began to feel that there was no point in staying up all night and driving, when I can drive for Ola during day time, and make more money. So, I decided to switch... Initially, the incentives were so great that for every Rs.1500 I made from trips, I would get additional Rs.1500 from Ola...I also got a free mobile phone!

Mani, cab driver in Chennai

As one of the early users of Ola/Uber, I initially earned Rs. 500 for each customer who booked a cab via the app. I convinced customers to install the app, because of the Rs. 500 per ride which I would get from Ola/Uber.

Omer, cab driver in Hyderabad

For migrant workers like Mani and Omer, on-demand work with its lucrative incentives and promise of flexibility presented an appealing alternative to their under-paying jobs that hardly met their needs. Migrant workers are economically more vulnerable; the majority of their earnings go into paying rent and repaying debt, while barely managing their living expenses or sending remittances back home. The potential to increase their earnings significantly motivated migrant workers to adopt on-demand work. Besides the higher income, the semblance of being a 'partner' improved their social standing back home.

Before joining Ola and Uber, as a driver in a travel company, I used to make Rs.15000-18000. At the time of its launch, I used to make about Rs. 50,000 - Rs. 60,000 per month. Even to get the car I didn't have money. I borrowed Rs. 2.5 lakhs for it and only then started driving.

Jagan (name changed), a cab driver in Hyderabad

Some (migrant workers) sold their old vehicles in the village and bought new bikes, specifically for working here. Most were not even familiar with technology but learnt it on the job. They tell their families they work as 'partners' and not drivers. The social standing of a 'partner' or 'executive' is higher than that of a 'driver' or a 'delivery boy'. The wording plays a very important role here.

Shaik Salauddin, National General Secretary, IFAT

Thus, the potential to earn more and the semblance of independent, flexible work made on-demand work popular among migrant workers. A steady supply of migrant workers moving to on-demand work consolidated the presence of on-demand service companies in the service sector. Initially, on-demand work was so lucrative that drivers working for households and travel companies began to shift. And the transition was profitable, as there were instances of workers earning as high as Rs.90,000 a month¹³.

However, such high earnings lasted only about a year or two. Starting 2016, incentives were retreated¹⁴ and commissions for the platform were imposed gradually – initially pegged at 10%, the commissions hovered in the range of 30–35% at the time of interviewing. Simultaneously, the earnings per kilometer were lowered, despite the sharp rise in petrol prices. Some drivers who joined the platform in the recent past had to pay hefty joining fees as well.

¹³ Apurva Venkat & Shashidhar KJ, [Have Uber and Ola Met Promises Made to Drivers and Commuters?](#), Medianama, 12 June 2017

¹⁴ Apurva Venkat & Shashidhar KJ, [As Ola and Uber tweak their incentives, drivers say that it is driving them to suicide](#), Medianama, 12 June 2017

Now it is not profitable to provide incentives, because the company has controlled everything - the rates, the inflow etc.

Given the volume of inflow, the companies need not bother about incentives much.

Vinay Sarathy, President, United Food Delivery Partners' Union

Earlier it was free, but right now for drivers to join they [the platform companies] are taking Rs.3000. They are charging the drivers.

Jagan, a cab driver in Hyderabad

This is possibly the only job where even the (nominal) income decreases instead of rising

Dharmendra Vaishnav, IDL

Such impunity and indifference wielded by platforms, in large part, can be attributed to the guaranteed supply of drivers and delivery partners. What often gets overlooked is the migrant status of this 'reserve' pool of workers. Unlike native city dwellers (who have better access to job related networks, referrals, etc), migrants are often willing to work at subsistence wages^{15, 16}. The reserve force consists largely of unemployed, distressed rural migrants from nearby districts and suburbs. Their vulnerability is so acute that they tend to take up any job, regardless of how exploitative it may be. Their migrant status leads them to become the de-facto 'Reserve Army of Labour'¹⁷. This latent supply of workers gives platform companies additional leverage over their workforce. Platform workers constantly face the threat of being unemployed or replaced, particularly if they do not comply with the platform's mandate. One of our respondents who wished to remain anonymous also noted that this looming threat also results in tensions between native workers and migrant workers engaged in on-demand work. Natives tend to resent migrants for capturing their previously well-paying jobs and depressing overall wages across the sector.

The agenda of the platforms presently is to recruit new workers - they have already begun advertising for jobs even amidst the pandemic, as incidents of protests keep rising! We re expecting that they ll fire old workers and recruit those who are presently unemployed.

Dharmendra Vaishnav, IDL

¹⁵ Harsh Mander & Gayatri Sahga, [Internal Migration in India : Distress and Opportunities](#), Centre for Equity Studies, 2010

¹⁶ Ravi Srivastava, [Understanding Circular Migration in India: Its Nature and Dimensions, the Crisis under Lockdown and the Response of the State](#), Centre for Employment Studies Working Paper Series, April 2020

¹⁷ RAL cumulatively refers to the unemployed, partially employed, seasonally unemployed and underemployed. The formation of the reserve army is enabled by the 'capitalist accumulation process itself, as it uproots peasants from agriculture and retrenches workers from industry'. Retrieved from : [The Reserve Army of Labour](#), Aspects of India's Economy, Nos. 70 & 71 (April 2018)

Stuck Between an App & No Workplace

FRUSTRATIONS OF THE ALIENATED WORKER

Historically, migrant workers have been concentrated in occupations characterised by precarity and informal work arrangements without fixed pay or binding contracts. Those who transitioned to platforms were motivated by the promise of better conditions of work and pay. However, after the initial promises of platforms, in the long-term drivers' working conditions remain largely unchanged. They are rarely provided fair wages, social security or paid leave.

Platforms replicate the existing structures of informal work¹⁸. A striking difference between platform work and other forms of informal work arrangements is the near-total mediation of the relationship between the worker and the company through algorithms. Almost all interactions with platform workers are algorithmically managed via the mobile app, from determining ride matches to frequency of ride allocations and ride fares. Although workers are formally recognised as 'partners', implying they are free agents, the platform's algorithmic control over their work effectively deprives them of any agency. How the app matches ride requests or calculates ride fare remains opaque to the drivers. They are left to second guess its logic and adapt to it.

Initially I had my own car. However, the app favoured leased cars. So if a driver has a leased car, they would get more trips, matches and requests... I changed to a leased car.

Omer, a cab driver in Hyderabad

They say you are the boss but everything they control using the app - if there is any conflict with a customer or some customer comes drunk or creates problems while paying or asks to go in very narrow gallis that we cannot come out of - we are penalised for all of this. Response towards drivers is less and response towards customers is very high.

Jagan, a cab driver in Hyderabad

App-mediated management alienates workers from the platform and their peers. By design, on-demand platforms drastically reduce the need for their workers to come in personal contact with the company or fellow workers. They are allocated rides, communicated important updates, paid for their work—all through the app, leaving them with no scope to meet, know, or interact with their employers.

Every now and then we read about Ola in the papers we realise that we don't know who is the Ola owner or any manager, we don't know anyone.

Mani, cab driver in Chennai

¹⁸ The [Fair Work ratings](#) show how platforms companies in each country perform against five principles of 'decent work'. Of the 12 'gig-work platforms' assessed in 2019, only Flipkart scored above five (out of ten). Both Ola and Uber scored 2/10, while food delivery platforms had an average score of 4/10.

We learnt from the experience of one of the drivers we interviewed that app-mediated interactions leave little room for any meaningful choice. Jagan joined Ola's car leasing scheme with the assurance of car ownership after four years. He trusted the platform company to honour their claims and signed the lease document without reading the fine print. In hindsight, he recounted this as misplaced trust since the scheme chained him to the platform. His income effectively declined after deducting the per-day leasing cost and fuel expenses. Lured by his desire to own a car, he was now debt-trapped, with no way out.

In Ola's leasing scheme, you pay Rs. 30,000 while signing the lease and a daily instalment of Rs. 1075 for four years; after that the car will be yours - that's what we were told. If you calculate Rs. 1075 x 4 years - it is more than the cost of the car! When we took the agreement to an advocate, he told us that the agreement had nothing in our benefit, it only benefited the company... Previously, the [leasing] agreement used to be on paper. It needed a manual sign. Now it is a digital agreement. Everything comes in the app. It needs you to tap on 'Agree'. It is compulsory to agree, if you want to access the app. Nobody can read what it says - it is 15-20 pages in very small letters, you cannot read.

Jagan, a cab driver in Hyderabad

Jagan was compelled to seek legal recourse after efforts to reach out to higher officials in the company proved futile. The offices of most platform companies remain inaccessible for platform workers. Drivers that we interviewed described visiting the office and approaching officials as a tiresome experience. They would have to spend a whole day at the office to resolve simple issues such as ID card verification or updation, foregoing a full day's rides and earnings. They are then compelled to avoid office visits, unless essential—particularly if in-app options and calls to the platform company officials have not yielded results. And when the workers have tried to raise grievances related to platform regulations, some offices hired bouncers to simply show them the door. The opacity of the platform's decisions, and the lack of meaningful access to the platform's decision makers beyond call centre support and back offices leave platform workers disconcerted.

Workers are so detached from the platforms - nowhere close to being a 'partner'. For instance, when I visit the office, I have to first encounter the bouncer stationed outside the office. In case of an ID issue, they'll let me in. But if I have some issue regarding the wage - like why it had dropped below the existing rate, the bouncers wouldn't let me in. The standard response they'd give is - 'this is the company policy, if you want to work, then stay, else feel free to leave'. What is the need for such bouncers in the offices of platforms?

Dharmendra Vaishnav, IDL

No one responds to our phone call. If we were to call the office. When we call the customer care, they say okay sir we'll speak to our supervisor. I am personally concerned about my Rs. 90,000 which is stuck with the company (Rs. 30,000 each for my three leased cars). Apart from this, they still owe me Rs. 9000 that I'm not getting back.

Omer, a cab driver in Hyderabad

The [Covid-19] impact was felt immediately, especially as our rent was due and bills kept piling up (gas, electricity etc). Majority, including me, have taken informal credit - from moneylenders, friends, relatives etc. I am yet to pay the rent in addition to the loans. I worked [rides bike for Ola] for 5 days and did not manage to bring back even Rs. 200.

Dharmendra Vaishnav, IDL

Such app-mediated alienation from the employer aggravated the issues faced by the platform workers during Covid-19. Although the pandemic had its toll on all workers by impacting their livelihoods, migrants were the most hard hit.

Where they expected platform companies to extend timely and adequate support, they only received empty promises of PPE and loans via push notifications. While some platform companies offered relief in the form of one-time ration packages and PPE kits in the early days of the pandemic, others dodged this responsibility altogether. All the drivers and union representatives we interviewed noted that the majority had not received even the token relief and those who received it found the relief package to be insufficient¹⁹. Paradoxically, the relief collected by the platforms were formulated as charity campaigns for the heroic acts of workers²⁰.

Initially, through the union, we got rations worth Rs. 600. From the company side, nothing has come. They have provided a loan - you know how much? Rs. 1500! That too in 3 installments, to be paid back with interest! What will you even get in that Rs. 500? In my house, there are five people - me, my wife, 2 kids and my mother. All are with me. My village is about 80 kms from here but there is nobody there. We are all here (in Hyderabad) only.

Jagan, a cab driver in Hyderabad, about his ordeal during the lockdown of 2020

¹⁹ Shilpa S Ranipeta, [No income, EMIs to pay, inadequate relief: Ola, Uber drivers struggle to make ends meet](#), The News Minute, 18th April 2020

²⁰ Kaveri Medappa & Pradyumna Taduri, [By crowdfunding benefits for embattled workers, app-based services are evading their own obligations](#), [Scroll.in](#), 22 April 2020

From Ola's side, they have not called. We have been driving for them for so long, but they've done nothing for us. Only notification came - During this Covid time, if you have any health problems, let us know. Even in the options, if I selected some health problem [in the app], there was no return call or message.

Mani, cab driver in Chennai

Zomato stated it would reimburse upto Rs. 1000 for purchasing ration. We just had to upload the bill in the app. However, most reimbursement claims were rejected. Later, we were notified that bills without GST numbers would not be refunded. Close to 90% of the workers had to forego this reimbursement as they couldn't produce a GST bill. Usually, workers purchase from neighbourhood stores, which rarely provide bills.

Dharmendra Vaishnav, IDL

Ola gave a ration kit containing 3kg rice, 1 kg sugar, 3kg chana dal, 1kg urad dal and 1 salt packet. Not everyone received it either - of 350 drivers in my locality, only 20 received. When we questioned the managers, 50 more received ration kits. Totally 70 of us received the ration.

Omer, a cab driver in Hyderabad

With regards to Covid-19 health insurance, the platforms rolled out statements on numerous protection and insurance measures^{21,22}. However, for the drivers, these are just hollow claims with no validity. Although some have received notifications about the insurance, upon inquiring further (via the app, calls) they have received no concrete information on how to avail them. Given this lack of clarity, some respondents opine that insurance provisions have been deliberately kept inaccessible.

²¹ Covid-19: Ola Announces Floater Coverage of Rs 30,000 for 20 Lakh Driver Partners, News18 Business, March 2020

²² COVID-19: Uber to provide Rs 25 crore in grants to driver partners in India, The Economic Times, 9 April 2020

Ola only sent us that notification - that you can file your income tax returns and get your money back. We thought at least some Rs. 10000 - Rs. 15000 we'll get. The notification read 'Ola IT returns' with a phone number below. I called up, they asked for Aadhaar, etc... all those details I provided. Then they said I have to pay Rs. 500. It was their fees. I said, I am ready to pay it, just let me know how much is the amount I'll get back? They said they will check and call me back. But they didn't. Then I kept trying.. After several attempts, I was informed that I'll get back Rs. 700! I had been driving for FIVE years and I would get just Rs. 700! Then I left it, what's the point? To get that Rs. 700, I have to pay Rs. 500.

When I first saw the notification, I called up 3 drivers and told them about it - that we may get some money from IT returns. Since I am somewhat literate, I am able to do all this. There are so many other drivers, who don't even know to read - they also drive for Ola. They just know where to give Okay, navigate, stop, get the amount, etc. What will such people do?

Mani, cab driver in Chennai

As the faultlines of app-mediated work have been deepened by the pandemic, workers have turned to unionising and striking as their last resort.²³ Across major cities, there are sector-specific (such as food delivery, transport) unions for platform workers. Workers mobilize under the banner of the unions to voice their concerns collectively and demand reform. However, platform companies strategically dissuade their gig workers from mobilizing - by providing monetary incentives to skip strikes or sit-ins, and in some cases, blacklisting user accounts of those participating in protests.

They also blacklist those leading union efforts, blocking their IDs. You cannot drive for us if you are fighting against us is the approach. Platform companies reward workers who don't show up for protest. Through their supervisors they offer paid leave without deducting commission, pay their per day lease amount etc. in exchange for not participating in strikes. Pura union ka partition kardiya [They have split the whole union]!

Jagan, a driver from Hyderabad

²³ The Wire Staff, [Swiggy Delivery Executives Strike in Chennai and Hyderabad Over Reduction in Payment](#), The Wire, 19 August, 2020

Following the Covid-19 crisis, platform workers' unions across states and sectors consolidated their efforts and presented a united front to amplify their concerns and push for relief and reform. When physical distancing imperatives were imposed in light of the pandemic, their ability to gather in big numbers had been constrained. Unions navigated this hurdle by leveraging the online medium to participate in webinars, and upload YouTube videos to showcase the appalling condition of the workers²⁴.

Publishing a [news] story against platforms is difficult. There is an internal nexus operating. When reporters approach companies for confirming a worker's claim, companies do not respond and stall them. If any issue gains traction, platforms simply purchase an advertising space in the newspaper and thereafter their stories don't get published - a sort of quid-pro-quo. It is not a level playing field to fight against them... Most ministers do not know what 'gig-fig' work is. If we tell them 'platform work', they ask us if it's railway platforms! There should be government policy on gig workers/platform workers.

Shaik Salauddin, National General Secretary, IFAT

The collectivisation of platform workers reflects the unique experiences, struggles and demands of those engaged in the on-demand service economy. While the migrant status of platform workers may not be foregrounded in their demands, it was reflected in their frustration with the app that left them with no workplace.

This app has been made by finding out loopholes in Indian law. This is intelligent fraud! They should just stop with all this fraud and looting us. In villages, the uneducated people - if they say something, they stand by it. These well-educated people, they are the ones cheating!

Jagan, a driver from Hyderabad

²⁴ IFAT & ITF, [Protecting Workers in the Digital Platform Economy](#), CIS, Aug 25, 2020

Leaving the City & Job Behind

UNCERTAINTIES CONFRONTED BY THE MIGRANT GIG WORKER IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF THE LOCKDOWN

The Covid-19 pandemic has gutted the livelihoods of cab drivers. Mani, an owner-cum-driver, lamented that his car had been idle for five months since March 2020. Comparing his plight to the larger driving sector, he felt that cab drivers had been the worst hit due to the pandemic. He explained that lorry drivers had not lost their livelihoods, auto drivers had some political support systems to enable access to welfare relief, those who drove for government officers continued to have a job during the lockdown, but cab drivers had no livelihood nor relief support. On-demand platforms did little to mitigate the woes of drivers working with them.

In this period, fuel prices had been a major concern for workers in cab-hailing services as well as food delivery. Dharmendra Vaishnav, pointed out that the price of petrol had increased by about Rs. 14 within three months into the lockdown. Far from accounting for this rise in the kilometer rates, on-demand platforms have only reduced the rates in recent months. By August 2020, Swiggy, for instance, had brought down the per-kilometer rate for delivery executives from Rs. 35 per delivery to Rs. 15²⁵. In this regard, Dharmendra felt that the government has also turned a blind eye to their concerns, despite their essential worker status. Since the lockdown in March, platform workers staged repeated strikes, protesting against the plummeting rates, suspension of incentives and demanding extension of moratorium on loan repayments ^{26, 27, 28}.

When diesel used to be Rs.46, they [Uber/Ola] gave Rs.14-16/km. Now when the diesel price is Rs.80, they give Rs.6-7/km.

Jagan, driver working in Hyderabad

Each worker needs to purchase petrol for their work. The petrol prices have soared. And this rise is mostly because of the tax that gets levied on it. So effectively, I am paying a lot of tax, while earning less and the government hasn't supported me during this time of crisis.

Dharmendra Vaishnav, IDL

²⁵ Bharathi SP, [Unattainable targets, paltry incentives - Chennai's Swiggy delivery workers protest](#), The News Minute, 15 August 2020

²⁶ Harshit Rakheja, [Ola, Uber Drivers Strike To Demand Extension Of Moratorium, Fare Hike](#), Inc42, September 1, 2020

²⁷ Ronak Chhabra, [Food Delivery Workers Protest Incentive Cuts Despite 'Recovery' Projections](#), News Click, 20 August 2020

²⁸ TNN, [Cab drivers, delivery workers to protest on Wednesday in Delhi](#), Times of India, 5 August 2020

With fares sinking lower and business being dull, drivers and delivery partners were faced with tough choices with respect to remaining in the city or even continuing in the same profession. While talking about the challenges faced by food delivery workers, Vinay Sarathy, President of the Bengaluru-based United Food Delivery Partners' Union, indicated that the burden of rent and vehicle dues in addition to the high cost of living made it difficult for food delivery workers, who were predominantly migrants, to continue to remain in the city.

Then there is the issue regarding access to rations. Most of them can avail it only in their hometowns and not necessarily here [in Bangalore]. So accessing rations is a huge problem.

Vinay Sarathy, President, United Food Delivery Partners' Union

These mounting expenses in the absence of income forced Omer to return to his village in Nagarkurnool district. He weighed his earning potential as a cab driver against the risk of being infected and chose to leave the city. "The only people travelling in the cabs are Covid patients who want to visit the hospital. I personally know three drivers who had Covid this way", he said as he explained his decision to leave Hyderabad.

However, this choice to leave the city did not exist for all. When we asked Jagan if he considered going back to his village, which is 80 kms away from Hyderabad, he said that he had nothing to go back to. He added that only those who own some land can afford to go back to the village.

It is for our children's education that we left the villages and came to the city. Now how will they study? We don't know! Whether they will even be able to, I don't know!

Jagan, a cab driver in Hyderabad

For Mani, a cab driver with Ola in Chennai, there was a different reason.

Back in my hometown, I have debts to pay off. That's why we come to the city, to make some money. Now because we don't have any work here, if we go back, what will happen is... those lenders will... behave harshly. They will come to our home, say something, ask something. When we are here [in Chennai], they will call and whatever it is, we'll deal with it on call. I can at least say now I am out, I will call you back and things like that. Rather than going back there and having to answer these questions, we can try to manage it from here itself. That is more peaceful.

Mani, cab driver in Chennai

Though Jagan and Mani had not left their cities, they were unable to earn their livelihood during the lockdown; their cars remained idle for at least four months. Both of them had to shift to masonry in construction sites, in search of alternative sources of income. Mani lamented that he may have been in a far better situation, had he been in professions that have continued to operate during lockdown.

We have that skill but we are unable to earn with it right now. During this Corona time, who is able to earn? Painter, electrician, mason - they are the ones who are able to earn now. I am even thinking... if I should just leave driving altogether.

Mani, cab driver in Chennai

For Jagan, the income he would make from driving fewer customers would barely cover the cost of working itself.

Some of my friends are still driving - they make about Rs. 350-400 - that's it. I stay close to the airport, which is at least 30 kms away from the city. If I take a ride/customer from here, I will get Rs.300-500 profit. But there aren't customers coming from the city to the airport, in this Corona season. I won't get a customer to come back home. I have to come back as an empty vehicle only. And that will at least cost me Rs.300. Because it will take at least 4 litres if I estimate at 10-12 kms per litre. One litre costs about Rs. 80 now. Then I just make Rs.200 for working from morning to evening. After working 14-16 hours, we will get Rs.200, that's it.

Those drivers living in the city will make about Rs.300-400 and they are making do with it. Even for them, minimum 10-15 kms they have to ride without customers, since there aren't enough bookings. For me the loss is too much, since I live away from the city.

Jagan, a cab driver in Hyderabad

For Omer, who did return to his village, things were not looking quite well either. At the time of this study, he was on the lookout for a job while occasionally driving a tractor or lorry. Having lived in the city for close to two decades, returning to the village had not been easy. Besides the struggle to find gainful employment, even adjusting to the rural way of life had been a challenge.

I am 40 years old – the chances of me getting a job is negative... my situation has become like 'Dhobi ka kutta na ghar ka na ghat ka' [I belong neither here nor there].

Omer, a cab driver in Hyderabad

Leaving the city and their job behind had been as hard as continuing to hold on to them, especially when there was no respite in sight for the foreseeable future. A variety of factors such as employment opportunities, access to social welfare schemes, economic stimulus, and factors such as children's education influenced migrant gig workers' choices to remain in cities or return to their hometowns or villages.

Conclusion

This report documents how the lives and livelihoods of migrants are shaped by the influx of on-demand platforms in the economy, by foregrounding their lived experiences as migrant platform workers. Strategic advertising in rural districts by the platform companies and low barriers for entry motivated migrants to transition to app-based work. In contrast to the dehumanising work in the urban informal economy, the chance to become a 'partner' with the 'flexibility' to decide one's own work timings seemed like an appealing alternative. Platforms leveraged the abundant supply of migrant workers and the ensuing competition to arbitrarily depress rates and incentives, and extract larger commissions from workers. Such measures compelled workers to work extra hours, to maintain the subsistence level of income. With the app mediating all interactions ranging from legal agreements to ride allocation and payment processing, the power disparity between platforms and their workers only deepened. Workers were managed, supervised and disciplined through the app and its algorithms. These factors cumulatively heightened their isolation and vulnerability as they were effectively left with two alternatives—comply or quit. The final section of the report presents the uncertainties confronted by migrant gig workers in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic and the lockdown.

Against the backdrop of the migrant crisis ushered by the 2020 lockdown in the initial months of the Covid-19 pandemic, and continued economic uncertainty thereafter, this report presents the overlap between two axes of vulnerability—migration and the platform labour. It reveals the centrality of migrant workers in the platform economy, highlighting their lived experiences, aspirations and demands. This report presents findings largely from the transport sector in cities in southern India. Future research may build on the insights from this study and explore other sectors within the platform economy to further academic scholarship and policy discussions on the intersection of platform labour and migration.

