
Digital labour & challenges to collectizing in India's Online Food Delivery sector

Neha Arya*¹

¹Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi (IIT-D) – IIT Delhi Main Rd, IIT Campus, Hauz Khas, New Delhi, Delhi 110016, India, India

Abstract

Proliferation of non-standard employment (NSE), and in particular digital labour, is a worldwide trend. This is changing traditional notions of work, with digital platforms creating new economic opportunities for a section of the workforce. On the other hand, it also raises discourse around new (tech-mediated) forms of labour exploitation and control, with digital work often being associated with precarious, insecure, and invisible work. While digital platform work is typically considered to be highly flexible, and "independent", digital/algorithmic management of such work gives rise to power asymmetry and a high degree of platform control. Unsurprisingly, digital platform-based work is increasingly being characterized by tension between worker's autonomy and dependence on the platform (Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2022). Alex J Wood (2021) argues that the traditional notion of antagonism (which mostly include direct, visible conflict between employers and workers) is insufficient to understand the fragmented nature of labour struggles witnessed across countries, in the digital economy. Recently, digital media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter are emerging as popular media among platform workers for sharing their difficulties, and building solidarity (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). However, Hussain (2023) highlights challenges (heterogeneity of workforce, need to earn, and isolated working environment) to collective action among food delivery workers in the Indian city of Hyderabad during the Covid-19 pandemic.

My paper, based on data collected from 326 food delivery workers across three Indian cities, discusses self-identification of workers (platform "employees" versus *independent* workers), and willingness of workers to collectivise. It highlights tensions between owners of capital and workers, to explore mechanisms through which each party contests power imbalances. Couteruses, though important acts of resistance available to workers, it finds that almost 84% of workers chose to not associate with any formal/informal workers' collective. Only 12.3% were reportedly associated with a WhatsApp group of workers, which were mostly supervised by the platform company. High economic precarity of workers primarily deterred their participation in collective action. However, several migrant workers, sometimes formed WhatsApp groups to help each other at work.

The paper concludes by highlighting the need for prompt regulatory action by the state, interventions by platform businesses, and understanding by consumers. Right to collectivise is essential to the right to decent work. Black-box algorithms cannot be used as shields to absolve accountability and responsibility.

*Speaker

Keywords: India's platform economy, Digital labour, Decent work, Collective action