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# Motherhood at the margins: ASHAs and the digital labour of antenatal care work

Neha Gupta\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tata Institute of Social Sciences – India

## Abstract

ASHAs, or the Accredited Social Health Activists, are crucial links in the public health network in India. The government of India created the ASHA program as part of the National Rural Health Mission to address the healthcare needs of underserved populations in the country. This voluntary workforce is often the first and sometimes the only health access for a majority of the country's population. At the time of inception, the ASHAs were recruited to register the births in their neighbourhoods. However, today their labour has expanded to meet most of the primary health needs of the community they serve without adequate compensation. Through an ethnography of ASHA workers in the small industrial town of Bhiwandi-Nizampur, located at a distance of approximately 51 km from Mumbai city, this project aims to reconceptualise digital labour in practice when performed through frugal technologies for the health surveillance of migrant mothers. It specifically focuses on antenatal care work and how ASHA workers track migrant mothers in this marginalised town. Bhiwandi's geographic location at Mumbai's periphery attracts migrant populations from all parts of India. While this influx of diverse populations, especially from the northern and eastern parts of India, has fomented a culturally eclectic environment, it has led to marginalities of access associated with agricultural and industrial economies that centre on migrants. The town has largely been kept out of the ambit of public welfare schemes. Against this complex layering of multiple marginalities, the ASHAs undertake the care work for pregnant migrant populations by tracking their health throughout the pregnancy, registering births, maintaining the neighbourhood WhatsApp groups to provide relevant information, and others. Among other things, the ASHAs also self-surveil while undertaking this work. For instance, they are supposed to take geotagged photographs of themselves while doing neighbourhood visits. In light of this, the project views ASHAs both as neighbourhood public health officials and as gig workers investigating, in particular, how digital technologies mediate antenatal care work. The project furthers the conversation about practices of feminist "gig" labour by highlighting how women of the ASHA workforce use, manoeuvre, adapt, and subvert technologies of surveillance as they work with mothers at the margins.

**Keywords:** ASHAs, motherhood, digital labour, gig work, surveillance, tracking

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\*Speaker