
Platform Labour and the Indian State: A New Interface?

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Abstract

Labour platforms are key actors transforming the dynamic of work and employment. Recent scholarship on platform work has effectively taken the workplace as the entry point to demonstrate the expansion of disaggregated forms of employment relations in the Global North. Building upon these lines of inquiry, scholars from the Global South have argued about the relevance of "informality" and "informalisation" as key concepts and processes that are reproducing and reinforcing the further expansion of platform work (Surie and Huws, 2023).

In this regard, the variegations within the national scale and particularly the question of the *state* is fundamental (Rolf and Schindler, 2023). However, academic discussions on the relationship between the state and platform work have remained muffled. In India, conservative estimates suggest there are 7.7 million platform workers (AYOG, 2022). This rapid expansion is happening at a background where the Indian State is officially pursuing aggressive digitalisation (Thomas, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present study asks two research questions:

- 1) *How does the state influence work practices in local platform economies?*
- 2) *How do platform workers interact with the state?*

By interrogating these two questions this paper intends to present empirical observations about the relations that bind the state and platform workers while also making arguments about the particularities of platform expansion in the Indian context. This paper uses data collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. This includes 40 interviews done in Kolkata with workers from Ola (ride-hailing) and Zomato (food delivery), as well as other stakeholders such as union leaders, platform managers, and government officials.

Preliminary analysis reveals how platform workers negotiate with institutional practices and state-imposed regulations. The condition of informality, which is a mediating principle for platform work in India, is reinforced through informal transactions with state actors, particularly the police force and union leaders. Although the state is often unambiguous in its collusion with platform companies, the relationship between the state and platform workers is not simply underscored by antagonisms. Relative to the associational power of workers the state can be seen taking a more reconciliatory approach. Secondly, action and resistance from the state and labour are dispersed in multiple sites and dynamically intertwined. From

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a labour standpoint, workers can act individually, in informal solidarity, or in non-workplace settings to engage in negotiation. This paper argues for re-framing the state-labour interface as a key entry point to understanding platformisation.

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