

Platform Labour and Social Gerontology: A Sociological Insight into Cab Drivers' Experiences in Chennai.

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Abstract: *This paper examines the everyday realities of cab drivers in Chennai who engage in app-based employment through platforms such as Ola and Uber, emphasizing their understanding of work, autonomy, and aging in the gig economy. Drivers from varied social and economic backgrounds are drawn to this sector due to its low entry barrier, such as minimal investment to acquire or lease a vehicle and its perceived independence. Many view themselves as entrepreneurs rather than employees. However, this sense of freedom is often undermined by the influence of digital algorithms and platform governance, which subtly regulate their work routines and decisions. Since the introduction of ride-hailing services in Chennai in 2014, significant changes have occurred in both commuting habits and employment structures. These platforms have redefined urban transport and simultaneously opened up employment opportunities for a broad spectrum of individuals, ranging from rural youth to older urban residents. Fieldwork indicates that for some, driving is a full-time occupation, while for others, it serves as a secondary source of income. The study also addresses pressing issues within the field of social gerontology, highlighting the challenges faced by aging drivers—such as financial insecurity, lack of formal protections, and uncertain futures in a rapidly digitizing labour market—which have received little attention in prior research, particularly in the context of Chennai. Although platform-based work has created new economic opportunities, it also introduces distinct risks and insecurities, especially for senior and long-serving gig workers. This research found and suggested that government intervention in this field is urgently required to strengthen the taxi union. It also emphasized the need for social security measures for drivers, especially aging ones, to help sustain their livelihood after they stop driving.*

Keywords: Social Gerontology, Livelihood Insecurity, Urban Transport, Gig Economy, Chennai Cab Drivers.

Introduction

There is a growing observation that contemporary business models increasingly empower technocrats. Companies like Ola and Uber, which manage a vast network of cab drivers across the country, do not own a single vehicle themselves. Instead, they leverage the power of technology to manage the resources of others. Transportation, which began with walking and swimming, evolved significantly with the invention of the wheel—laying the foundation for modern mobility systems. While several modes of transport now exist, the most drastic changes in recent years have been driven by smartphones and digital applications

such as Ola and Uber (Slavnic & Urban, 2018). In India, organized rental cab services emerged around 2004, when people typically booked rides by telephone. However, the real transformation occurred in 2010 with the introduction of mobile apps. The launch of Ola and Uber, along with other competitors, brought intense market competition. These companies introduced various strategies such as coupon codes and promotional offers to attract customers, significantly changing commuting habits. Dalia (2018) notes that India accounts for 23% of global app-based transport usage, ranking among the highest in the world. A significant turning point came with the launch of Jio in 2016, which dramatically expanded internet accessibility across the country and accelerated the adoption of digital mobility services. This widespread shift toward digital engagement is well-articulated by Marres (2017), who examines how users interact with digital platforms providing a valuable lens through which to understand the growing reliance on app-based transportation. This field study investigates how cab drivers are adapting to these technological shifts and critically examines how digital platforms are shaping their work experiences. Are these drivers' becoming entrepreneurs, or are they merely exploited workers under the guise of flexibility and autonomy?

This research highlights the precarious nature of employment among app-based cab drivers. While these drivers depend on digital platforms to access customers, they lack financial security and employment benefits, as platform companies do not recognize them as formal employees but rather as independent contractors. This classification situates them within the broader framework of the gig economy—an employment model defined by short-term, flexible work arrangements in which organizations engage workers on a temporary or freelance basis, rather than offering stable, long-term jobs.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected from 24 drivers affiliated with three different drivers' unions in Chennai, specifically from the areas of Kodambakkam, Nungambakkam, and West Mambalam. A structured questionnaire was used to conduct a small survey aimed at understanding drivers' perspectives on using digital platforms to connect with customers. Due to the COVID-19 situation, most interviews were conducted over the phone. This research particularly focuses on how cab drivers perceive platform-based work as an employment opportunity, with special attention to the experiences of older drivers and how they adapt to technological changes and the evolving nature of work. The study offers valuable insights into the relationship between drivers and customers, while also highlighting the broader challenges faced by gig workers. Secondary data, including published academic papers and government reports particularly those from the Government of India and NITI Aayog on the app-based cab industry were reviewed to support and contextualize the analysis.

India's Gig Shift: Precarity Behind the Platform

The term 'gig economy' was first introduced by Tina Brown, editor of *The New Yorker*, in 2009. It gained traction with the rise of digital technologies and increasing awareness of global challenges like population growth and resource depletion (Singha & Saikia, 2024). As Alauddin et al. (2024) mentioned, gig work

refers to short-term contracts and freelance work distinct from permanent employment. Additionally, the 2007 financial crisis prompted many individuals to seek creative ways to generate income, often by utilizing underused resources and skills. Brown used the term to describe how workers in the knowledge economy increasingly engaged in "a bunch of free-floating projects, consultancies, and part-time bits and pieces" via digital platforms. The gig economy is broadly defined as a labor market characterized by the dominance of short-term contracts or freelance work, rather than traditional permanent employment. In today's business landscape, an increasing number of companies are adopting platform-based business models and digital strategies to stay competitive. Organizations like Ola, Uber, Amazon, Google, Salesforce, and Facebook are building online networks that facilitate digital interactions between users. These digital platforms vary widely in function and purpose, ranging from service-based platforms (e.g., Uber), to product marketplaces (e.g., Amazon), payment systems (e.g., Paytm), and software development ecosystems (e.g., Apple). This digitally driven new economy, built upon such online frameworks, has been described using various terms that are often used interchangeably. Some of the most common labels include the "creative economy," the "sharing economy," the "peer economy," and the "gig economy."

Numerous studies have examined the impact of digital platforms like Ola and Uber, uncovering intriguing comparisons between the two services. Several reports indicate that India is undergoing rapid urbanization, with projections suggesting that a majority of the population will reside in urban areas in the near future. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), India's urban population is expected to double by 2035. This demographic shift presents significant challenges for urban transportation. In this context, app-based taxi services such as Ola and Uber offer timely solutions, providing door-to-door pickups and comfortable travel particularly valuable during peak hours. One of the most profound influences of these digital businesses is the creation of habitual usage patterns; even those who were unfamiliar with such technologies, now regularly uses these apps. The widespread adoption of these platforms clearly reflects their success in catering to the increasing transportation demands of rapidly expanding cities (Saha, Kalita; Saha,2018).

Vallas, S., & Schor, (2020) in their analysis of gig work, emphasizes that we often generalize platform workers as a single group, but in reality, there is significant diversity among them. They identify three key categories: primarily dependent workers who fully rely on platform earnings, partially dependent workers who engage with platforms as a part-time source of income, and supplemental workers who use the platform to earn extra income alongside other jobs. This diversity is shaped by two main dimensions—platform income dependency and time commitment—which also contribute to growing criticism of the platform economy. Higher dependency on platform income tends to correlate with more negative experiences related to autonomy, safety, job satisfaction, and earnings. This has fueled debates around the power structures in the gig economy, particularly questioning whether workers—especially those who are primarily dependent—are being empowered or exploited. Central to this discussion are questions about how power and value are distributed between platforms and workers, whether the platform economy redistributes wealth or merely intensifies inequality, and whether platform workers should be considered independent contractors or employees. Critics argue that the platform economy may lead to the

marketization of work, weakening job protections and fostering increased competition, which could depress wages and working conditions. Furthermore, there is concern that full-time employees may be replaced by gig workers, who are often more cost-effective for employers.

Ola and Uber in Chennai: Social Gerontology and the Gig Economy

There are multiple digital taxi service providers in the city, but Ola and Uber are the two leading players. Both launched their services in 2014. During the initial phase, their growth was sluggish and attracted only a specific segment of the population—mainly youth and tech-savvy individuals. Demand was limited to certain pockets of the city, such as Old Mahabalipuram Road, which is a hub for software companies. However, over time, these services gradually gained popularity among people from different sections of society. They attracted more women users by introducing safety features like panic buttons. A major turning point came with the launch of Jio in September 2016, which rapidly gained around 100 million subscribers and significantly improved internet access. The year 2017 marked a major shift in cab usage. Ola and Uber began investing in digital marketing, and the widespread use of Jio further expanded their reach. They introduced attractive offers such as coupon codes and free initial rides to cultivate a habit of usage among new users. Researcher personally experienced this shift in 2017. I used to occasionally travel from the central railway station to my home, a distance of about 5 km, and typically paid ₹75 for an auto ride. But Ola offered the same ride for ₹60. It was a major psychological shift for me—realizing that a car could be just as affordable as an auto. As the number of users has increased, the number of drivers registered with Ola and Uber has also risen. This research found that a significant number of respondents over fifty years old have also joined the platform. They mentioned that initially, they earned a good amount of money, but faced technical glitches. Despite these challenges, they managed to persevere. However, as both customers and drivers became more accustomed to the platforms, the companies started increasing their benefits and charges. Mr. Arul, 52, year old men shared his story with me,

I am driving for almost 20 years and attached my car to Ola and Uber in 2015. It was really good in the beginning, from 2015 to 2017, he recalls. I was making a decent amount of money." But things started to change in 2018. That's when Ola and Uber increased their commission rates and started charging a lot of fines. Drivers' wages began to drop. Even when customers cancel rides, we get fined. And speeding fines? The biggest problem is the commission. "It's between 26% and 30% for each ride. So, for example, if I earn 100 rupees, nearly 30 rupees go straight to the company. With the rest, I have to pay for diesel, dues, and car maintenance. In the long run, if Ola and Uber don't increase the driver's commission, it's going to be really hard for us to survive.

Increasing commissions and penalties have become a major issue for drivers, as they must maintain their cars while earning a living and supporting their families. They are also fined when customers cancel on their side or when traffic prevents them from reaching the destination on time. In such situations, it has become very difficult for them to continue in this profession. Mr. Anbu, 58, has been in the driving business for nearly 25 years.

I am generally satisfied with joining Ola and Uber, having attached my car to the platforms about five years ago. A friend who was already earning well on the platform recommended it to me. Sometimes, due to heavy traffic, it takes longer to reach the customer, and they cancel. Other times, people cancel for no reason, but it still impacts us. On some occasions, I make good money, earning between 23,000 to 27,000 rupees. However, during tough times like the COVID-19 pandemic, I struggled a lot and was earning less than 10,000 rupees. The pandemic has severely affected my livelihood and earnings.

Mr. Mohan, a 57-year-old cab driver, has been working in the profession for nearly 15 years. He joined the platform in 2016 and initially earned good money. He mentioned that,

As a member of the cab union, I have always been involved in efforts to improve the working conditions for drivers. However, I am now completely frustrated with the platform. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been facing numerous challenges, and this situation has significantly worsened.

These changes not only increase the monopoly of these corporate houses but also affect the taxi unions in Chennai. The unions have presented a demand to the corporations and the government for a fairer distribution of the fare between the drivers and the corporations.

Conclusion

The rise of platforms like Ola and Uber has undeniably transformed the transportation sector, providing new employment opportunities and convenient travel options for the public. Drivers, many of whom view it as a new form of business and part-time income, have been significantly impacted by the changing dynamics of the gig economy. While some drivers, especially younger ones, benefit from these platforms as secondary income sources, many have expressed frustration over reduced earnings due to increased commission rates and strict algorithms that control their work experience (Smith, 1988). The introduction of regulatory measures, like the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill, 2019, and the formation of taxi co-operatives, reflects efforts to address these challenges. However, the question of whether drivers are entrepreneurs or exploited workers remains a point of contention.

From the perspective of social gerontology, which examines the aging process and the challenges faced by older workers, the experiences of drivers like Mr. Mohan, aged 57, highlight additional concerns about job security, physical demands, and financial stability in the gig economy. Older workers, who may not have the same flexibility as younger drivers, face unique challenges as they adapt to the demands of platform-based work. These challenges are compounded by health concerns and the lack of long-term financial security, particularly in a field that offers limited social protections and is already marked by discrimination especially for immigrant workers both within and outside the workplace (Bartel et al., 2019). Despite feeling exploited, many drivers have acknowledged the sense of security that comes with being self-employed, especially during the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the platforms have introduced a new culture of commuting, the issues surrounding fair compensation, algorithmic control, and the vulnerability of older workers are still pressing concerns. These factors need to be addressed by both the government and the platform companies. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the complexities of the

gig economy, where technological innovation intersects with the lived experiences of workers, and highlights the need for continued dialogue and reform to ensure fair and equitable working conditions for workers of all ages.

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