Nations, People and Accountability in Platform Economy
A Comparative Case of Uber in India and the UK

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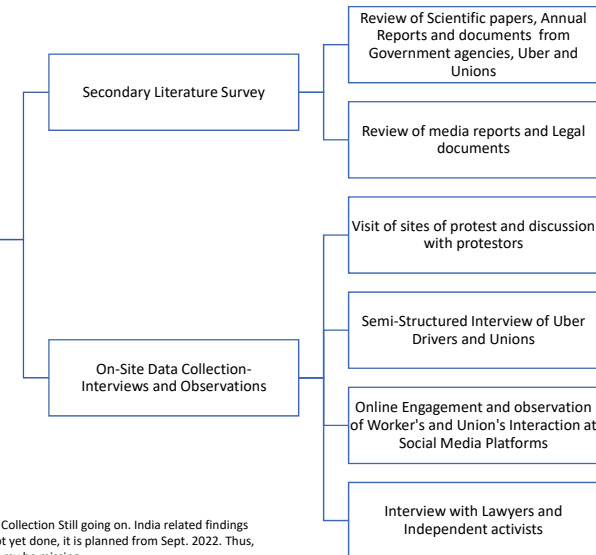
Introduction

The Internet-enabled labour platforms such as Uber, Ola, Deliveroo, AMT, Upwork, Fiverr and many others can be seen as digital-technical instruments to match the demand and supply of labour. These platforms are a mascot of freedom and flexibility. They provide freedom from punitive bosses and flexibility from a strict 9 to 5 job. However, recent studies suggest that platforms actively determine terms and conditions of work, and workers' behaviour, including wages, promotions, rewards and punishments, using algorithms. Thus they de-materialize, de-regularize the work and de-corporealize the workers by going beyond their apparent roles as labour mediators.
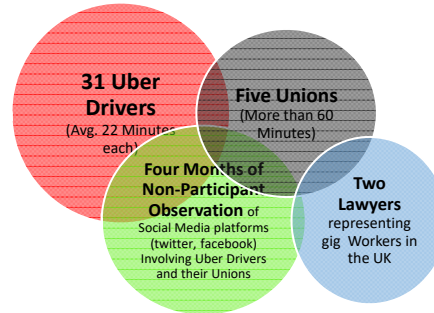
Research Problem

The transformation of work with the development of computing technologies seems inevitable. The growth of artificially smart or intelligent technologies seems further reducing the need for human managers to personally direct, evaluate, and restrict the workers for the repetitive and codifiable work across economic sectors. The Algorithmic mobile application of Uber is a classic case of algorithmic management. Where it appears that there is no need for managers to control the labour process. However, whatever it may seem, data and research suggest different realities than one imagines in their cozy spaces. The interaction of labour platforms with national Institutions and individual workers seems to create different realities of work relations that have been rarely highlighted by scholars of political economy, economic sociology and development studies in general and scholars of employment relations in particular.

Research Methodology

- Secondary Literature Survey
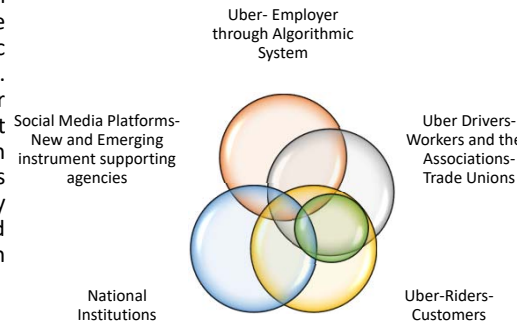 - Review of Scientific papers, Annual Reports and documents from Government agencies, Uber and Unions
  - Review of media reports and Legal documents
- On-Site Data Collection- Interviews and Observations
  - Visit of sites of protest and discussion with protestors
  - Semi-Structured Interview of Uber Drivers and Unions
  - Online Engagement and observation of Worker's and Union's Interaction at Social Media Platforms
  - Interview with Lawyers and Independent activists

* Fieldwork and Data Collection Still going on. India related findings and Interviews are not yet done, it is planned from Sept. 2022. Thus, comparative element my be missing.

Data Collection

Interviews and Observation in the UK*

- **31 Uber Drivers** (Avg. 22 Minutes each)
- **Five Unions** (More than 60 Minutes)
- **Four Months of Non-Participant Observation** of Social Media platforms (twitter, facebook) Involving Uber Drivers and their Unions
- **Two Lawyers** representing gig Workers in the UK

Employment Relations in the Uber

Uber- Employer through Algorithmic System

Social Media Platforms- New and Emerging instrument supporting agencies

Uber Drivers- Workers and their Associations- Trade Unions

National Institutions

Uber-Riders- Customers

Source: The Guardian

Source: BBC , UK

Preliminary Findings

"It's a Cash Out for Me." (Interview 8)

"Uber is changing, you can always call uber support or visit green light hub if you need any help. But most of the problems are solved over the phone." (I 16)

"Meri English acchi nahi hai, jab bhi mai Uber waalon ko call karta hoon, bahut dikkat hoti hai. " (My English is not good, whenever I call Uber management, its very problematic) (I 23)

"I am self-employed, I file tax in the self-employed category. But in reality, I am a worker of Uber. I do what the Uber (application and customer support) tells me to do. "

"Once a customer gave me one star and complaint Uber that I was asking for his personal information. Uber management called me saying I should not ask personal questions from passengers. But, Same Uber had told me to be pleasant and friendly with customers. It's confusing." (I22)

"I cannot talk about anything related to Uber. You must be aware of terms and conditions, no personal conversations, no talking about Uber." (I28)

"Uber wants us to be machine. It treats us as slaves. And you passengers are dots for us. We collect dots for points. Hahaha!" (I12)

"You can always choose when you want to work and when you want to stop. I work around 40-45 hours in a week, this is only source of my livelihood. Yes, with Uber its better than before, there is no boss but its taxi, it gets stressful in general." (I 26)

"Job allocation in Uber is fair, it allocates task on the basis of your proximity with passengers. It is not like *DantDer*, where only favorite drivers who have connections gets good and high paying jobs. " (I 5)

"You know this! What can you do about the discrimination! It happens, I have learnt to deal with it. Its better to be silent and smiling." (I 4)

Mixed Results: Good and Bad both prevail- Its balance depends upon worker's agency and national contexts in which she lives.

a.Old wine in a new bottle (?)– The social realities such as racial discrimination on the basis of nationality and color exists in Uber System.

a.Social realities flow in the algorithmic system of Uber – Technology should be seen as an artifact not independent of Individual biases and prejudices.

a.Worker's personal history shapes his agency, her approach towards state-institutions remains the more or less same as it was in last country. The changed national contexts may provide relatively better material living conditions. However, deep down she can be under-confident, scared and in continuous stress. This nature may seems making workers hyper reactive to the situations.

a.National Systems and already existing institutions have shaped the model of Uber that may be unique to UK.

Social Media as transnational organizations is emerging as important tool that can be seen complementing the gap between workers and Unions. It is by facilitating the sharing of working experiences, work related problems, day to day frustrations, and offers, may be creating collective consciousness.

a.Language skill, Art of Communication- Accent, cheerfulness, welcoming nature, and professionalism laid out by Uber can be seen as key to the algorithmic promotion and success in platforms. However, excessive subtle pressure from Uber in association with customer rating to perform emotional labour leads to stress and frustration among workers. Stress and Frustration can be higher in immigrants in comparison with nationals.

a.The Unions or any such collective action organizations becomes important to Uber drivers, when they face deactivation, accident or any unfortunate event. They became helpless once their account is blocked, they can just email to Uber management for resolution. It depends upon Uber when It will respond and how it will respond.

a.The Algorithmic management systems are very easy to change and modify according to the local needs. It is still not very clear that how and who makes decision to bring city specific local changes, like Uber should take complete trip charges in advance or just a small amount on hold.

You can request for References and Bibliography or more details about project– Email me at adarsh.kumar@uni-jena.de or scan QR code to message me.