

FORUM

## Coalitions of Socio-Technical Infrastructure: Platforms as Essential Services

Aditi Surie  \*

Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences, University of Cape Town, Academics and Research,  
Indian Institute for Human Settlements, 197/36, 2nd Main Road, Sadashivanagar, Bengaluru 560 080, India

*This commentary explores the experimental ways in which delivery platforms and local governments in India collaborated during the COVID19 lockdown in India in 2020. The case of one district government, which partnered with a large, corporate food delivery platform is explored here to investigate the platform functionalities that were the most useful to the local government. My exploration highlights how the developmental state mobilized commercial platforms for their constituent socio-technical infrastructural elements. What happens when corporate platforms are unexpectedly ushered into the realm of public values? Addressing this question, I argue that the government’s instrumental re-tooling of the private sector’s platforms to manage a public emergency contests absolute formulations of corporate platform power.*

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The 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in India lasted a little over 70 days during which the government strengthened the existing food-based welfare system in India and expanded it to high-risk groups like migrant workers and elderly people (Roy, Boss, & Pradhan, 2020). Several pathways for extending this food welfare took shape across the country. This article explores how the government mobilized the “delivery” services of corporate on-demand food delivery platforms for this food welfare work. Delivery platforms in India have had many perceived uses such as their employment generation capacity (Athreya, 2020), or their ability to increase market linkages for self-employed (own-account) workers and very small-budget micro-enterprises (Memorandum of Understanding, 2017). However, during the lockdown different levels of government in India were able to dissect the platform into constituent infrastructural parts to extract uses of the platform to serve the

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\*Corresponding author: Aditi Surie; e-mail: aditi.surie@gmail.com, asurie@ihs.ac.in  
Abstract

public good. When the optimal value of a delivery platform depends on its delivery fleet and its ability to deploy a workforce to achieve particular goals, we can begin to understand how the COVID-19 lockdown inspired the developmental state to deconstruct and reshape a corporate platform for public purpose.

This article showcases one experimental coalition between a local district government in Bokaro in the state of Jharkhand in India and Swiggy, a large popular food delivery platform. This case helps advance scholarship on platform power, which thus far has emphasized its infrastructural qualities (Kenney & Zysman, 2016) as inaugurating new modes of technological distribution (Evens & Donders, 2018) with human labor often viewed as the subservient aspect of the platform. In contrast, the Bokaro case explored here indicates that the platform's relationship with the workforce and its ability to re-arrange its marketplace or what it sells and delivers are "useful" or powerful features in the eyes of the local government, and the human labor power "associated" (though not employed) with the platform gives it significant value and use.

What does the on-demand platform look like when its market-based demand is taken away, and its services, application and data-enriched mapping systems, and other forms of infrastructure are used for public purposes? What happens to the platform when it shifts from providing on-demand services to individual customers to wielding a large workforce on-command for public purpose? During the lockdown, some local governments were able to replace platform listings, dynamic pricing, ratings and rewards while commandeering such key features of corporate platforms as their scale, app interface, and consumer-side network effects (Bakos & Katsamakas, 2008). Experimental coalitions between private platforms and the government during the lockdown indicate how the state has the power to transform commercial platforms into digital utilities, thus demonstrating how the state can "rework infrastructures and redefine the access to public and private services" (Chen & Qiu, 2019, p. 11) within the political economy of India.

Platform companies worked with select central, state and local governments to move cooked food and food rations within the public food distribution program (Surie, 2020b). In addition to this, governments allowed and supported delivery, ecommerce and grocery platforms to continue their operations thus allowing market-based food needs to be met along with state mandated ones. Specific models of public-private engagement have emerged from experiments during the lockdown, one of which is typified by a district in Jharkhand.

In a district of Jharkhand, an eastern state in India, food delivery platform Swiggy onboarded several informal vendors and grocery shops to replace its commission-paying restaurants. News reports quote district officials saying, "We will be replacing the restaurant listings with grocery shops. It will initially have 10–15 grocery shops and more will be added as per requirement" (Angad, 2020). The district administration provided the database of vendors to be onboarded, which significantly reduced the platform's service side offerings and any oversight the platform had on the new providers' quality of service. It severed the conditionalities

that food delivery platforms place on restaurants and grocery stores through exploitative commission rates (Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2015), which has been a fundamental way in which the platform–food producer relationship has come to be defined. In India, restaurants have had to collectivize as industry associations to counter high commission rates and platform conditionalities.

The enabling role of associations in the case of restaurants can be contrasted with the experience of street vendors in cities who tend to work as “unregistered” economic units. As they are rarely part of collectives or associations, they often face the brunt of vending in “unzoned” areas, thus complicating their relationship with local governments and law enforcement (*Report on Conditions of Work*, 2007). Incomplete data on vendors often creates a scenario where a select few, with visibility to the local government would be onboarded first, thus creating a gradation of those who have access and opportunity to enter the platform. Small grocery retailers, on the other hand, are registered with municipal agencies often operating through market associations (e.g., Kirana Merchant Association) in Indian cities. These associations act as a layer of economic organization that can aid the “mass” onboarding of retailers who are already visible to the state. This case helps indicate how the micro retailer or vendor will fare as their services start to tie in with platforms. First platforms can offer small retailers a way to organize their earning ability in the otherwise informal services sector (Surie, 2017) and second, small retailers will have their access to platforms mediated by industry associations or collectives that are often embedded in municipal politics.

Platforms market themselves as efficient given their technological innovation around dynamic pricing (Banerjee, Johari, & Riquelme, 2016). This key aspect of platform governance allows corporate platforms to maximize profit, minimize sales time, and automate workforce management (Constantinides, Henfridsson, & Parker, 2018). In the case of Bokaro, for vendors and retailers on Swiggy, a corporate platform, pricing was determined through the directive of the local government, “as per the agreement, all goods will be sold as per MRP [maximum retail price]. Swiggy may levy Rs 40 as delivery charge, out of which Rs 5 should be deposited to the Disaster Relief Fund” (Angad, 2020). With the district administration setting the service price, the platform’s use of dynamic pricing—sensitive to cost and the supply-demand cycle—as a key instrument of internal platform governance (Bakos & Katsamakos, 2008) was replaced. In this experimental coalition, the platform’s contribution was that, “it already has (. . .) back-end support” (Angad, 2020) or the socio-technological infrastructure that can command a delivery workforce on will.

Reports indicate that the local government and the corporate platform brought on able-bodied men from civil society organizations. Earlier, these people were not a part of the platform-mediated workforce, but were stitched onto the existing delivery workers pool, negating and overriding the existing recruitment, rating and reward logics of the platform. Reports across India indicate that platform companies

were in dire need of delivery people during the lockdown and in the ensuing months (Shashidhar, 2020).

A Bokaro district official is quoted saying, “some organizations have approached us to provide delivery men who will [also] be given a specific T-shirt that would ensure seamless movement across the city” (Angad, 2020). A curious digital platform-to-analog aesthetic flourished during this time which involved platform companies creating analog markers of legibility. Stickers and badges identifying delivery workers as “essential workers” played into this enumerative aesthetic, which is part of the life of a platform in the global South where private e-commerce platforms have to play the role of information-keepers for the state (Heeks et al., 2020).

Payment of wages, the tracking of workers, and reporting on their bodily markers (like body temperature) continued to be done through the platform’s decision-making affordances despite its “dynamic” nature being halted temporarily. The balance of supply and demand, which dictates much of a platform’s economic thinking, was paused and the urgency of delivering emergency food needs took over. While this aspect is underreported in secondary sources, a similar experiment with the Government of Delhi resulted in a platform’s setting income without interference from state authorities (Surie, 2020a). Several large e-commerce grocers like BigBasket and Grofers offered minimum wages to delivery staff to attract new workers during the lockdown (Press Trust of India, 2020).

Earlier collaborative ventures have laid the foundation for the accelerated experimental coalitions of socio-technical infrastructure that were forged during the COVID-19 lockdown in India. Such experimental pre-pandemic coalitions between labor platforms and the state focused on employment generation, minimum wage assurance for particular kinds of platforms, and the creation of more opportunities for women. The lockdown created a petri dish to experiment with how state power can interact with the constituent parts of a platform and how platforms can and will comply with larger mandates of national economic development. Furthermore, in 2021, the Government of India announced that platform and gig workers will receive minimum wages across different sectors through a new labor code (Surie, 2020b), which is illustrative of an Indian form of regulating labor platforms, balancing their usefulness with their pitfalls. In China, a similar instrumental interest in advancing state welfare goals has dictated tech regulation.

This article began with the question of what becomes of an on-demand platform when its logic is replaced with public purposes. Such experiments in coalition building foreshadow how the contours of the private–public balance will turn out in the coming years. They show that a stable work environment—defined by stable demand and remunerated through the logics of minimum wage policies—is possible in the digital labor market. Labor platforms have thus far created digital cultures of algorithmic sense making, of calculating workday commitments on the basis of incentives or how platforms reward recurrence and “loyalty.” This case serves to indicate that these logics are amenable to much change. Such change is indicated

through modes of public–private collaboration that can graft public values onto the corporate logic of platforms.

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