

Work, Insecurity and Marginalisation

Webinar on 18 September 2025

A Report

City as the site of Gig Work: Emergent forms of insecurity, precarity and spatial (in)justice

Speaker: Manish K. Jha (Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and Member, CRG)

Manish K. Jha began by explaining how the digital labour platforms and the digital economy have become integral parts of cities across the globe. As front workers of the digital economy, the gig workers experience numerous forms of insecurities and vulnerabilities that often complicate the systems, dependencies and habitation settings in cities and the related work undertaken. The speaker went on to discuss how the digital economy in many ways expose gig workers to urban dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and reveal insecurities and precarious life conditions. It was discussed that gig work has the scope of autonomy, flexibility, and expanded opportunities, amidst changing forms of welfare under neoliberal push and an increasingly market-oriented society. However, the nature and form of work culminate into circumstances that force the gig economy workforce to insecurity, structural vulnerabilities and exclusion. Many of the workers in the gig economy live in slums and low-lying informal settlements prone to recurring flooding, waterlogging and other adverse conditions. The question of spatial injustice was explored during the session through the lens of exposures to environmental and occupational risks in the workplaces and living spaces of gig workers, continuously up against the impacts of sudden weather changes and unforeseen climate-related disasters that have been crippling civic networks in cities in the recent times. Environmental change triggered-health problems and occupational hazards have severe consequences on their socioeconomic well-being, thus, pushing a considerable proportion of such working populations into the nuances of the security-insecurity conundrum. Digitally organised informality characterises worker-employer relationships in their attempts to cater to the demands of neoliberalism; and this in turn makes workers susceptible to spatial and temporal inflexibilities while providing customers the benefits of spatial and temporal flexibilities. Management through surveillance, manipulation of individual behaviour and isolation form the core of the digital organisations that pave the pathways for algorithmic controls. There was deliberation on the instances and processes that control socio-economic circumstances and produce spatial (in)justices. The speaker went on to examine how precariousness emerges as a defining aspect of workers' subjectivity, and shapes daily experiences, intimate relationships, and social interactions for gig workers, while they navigate city spaces. Precarity and spatial (in)justice are central to the experiences of gig workers, with

workers bearing the operational risks while platforms control the means of production. Digital labour intersects with spatial and environmental vulnerabilities in cities, where security questions nudge one to engage with numerous facets of social citizenship, and the ways of interrogating policies and practices of care and protection.

From authentic to authentication: How corruption is being used as a fig leaf to abandon rural workers and disenfranchise migrant workers

Speaker: Rajendran Narayanan (Associate Professor, Azim Premji University, Bangalore)

Rajendran Narayanan began the discussion by first flagging the paradigm shift in India's rural development policy with the right to work enshrined through the enactment of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005. MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of wage employment annually to rural households, establishing employment as a legal right by providing employment within 15 days of demand or compensations to workers through an unemployment allowance. This rights-based framework embeds accountability mechanisms and participatory governance structures, positioning MGNREGA as a cornerstone of inclusive development, having significantly supplemented rural incomes, particularly during agricultural lean seasons. The Act has delivered significant socio-economic benefits such as increased rural household incomes, enhanced female workforce participation, strengthened social equity and caste assertion, creation of ecologically sustainable rural assets, institutionalisation of social audits and accountability mechanisms. Despite its institutional strengths, MGNREGA is currently experiencing structural strain. Insufficient and delayed budget allocations have led to wage arrears, restricted work availability and erosion of the programme's demand-driven character. The speaker pointed out that recent years have witnessed increased digitisation, including the implementation of the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS), an app-based attendance mechanism. While intended to enhance transparency and curb corruption, inadequate infrastructure, digital illiteracy and connectivity challenges have resulted in wage denial and administrative bottlenecks. Narayanan spoke about the 'discouraged worker effect' produced by delays in wage payments and procedural hurdles, wherein workers refrain from demanding employment due to uncertainty regarding timely compensation, and the ways in which these undermine the foundational guarantee of the Act. Referring to recent research findings based on analyses of wage transactions, the speaker mentioned that results indicated that the Aadhaar-based payments system (ABPS) supposedly introduced to streamline payments and reduce corruption has no impact on reducing wage delays. Most of those impacted by arbitrarily imposed digital technologies are the poorest and over-represented by historically marginalised castes and tribes and protests by affected people against the digital impositions are not met with fruitful changes. The Union government's steps to arbitrarily halt all MGNREGA work in the state of West

Bengal for over 3 years on grounds of corruption, not only stand on shaky grounds, but have impacted millions of workers in West Bengal and increased out-migration. The most recent step, that of imposition of a 60% cap on spending limits in the first half of the financial year and other moves, may be considered as part of the larger design of the changing terrain of citizen-state engagement where citizens are atomised and the notion of citizenship is being transferred to that of beneficiaries, further bring out the notion of transference of the authentic to authenticating as the burden of proof has been shifted to the poor from accessing rights to establishing their citizenship. The Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision in Bihar is a case in point and pointed towards the steady erosion of constitutional morality which urgently needs to be resuscitated to restore dignity to the working classes.

Discussant for the session Byasdeb Dasgupta (Professor, Kalyani University, Kalyani, and Member, CRG) added that since the pandemic times, the country has witnessed growth of gig workers and has seen an exponential growth of dependency on gig workers as part of the urban economy. The working class can now be defined in terms of gig workers, who work 10-12 hours per day and even more, for earning a living, with dependencies on cell phones and vehicles (motorcycles and bicycles) which are either self-owned or hired, adding to the burden of payment of rents to the owners. Finding work through schemes such as NREGA requires authentication and despite there being opportunities of work, due to digital delays workers may find themselves without scope of economic engagements. Participants discussed several pertinent issues with both presenters during the webinar. Gig workers' connections to the consumers through the platforms were highlighted in which cases the time duration promised for deliveries were underscored. Drawing from Marx's references of the factory norms' eight-hour work schedule, it was mentioned that the machinic norms of struggles have been historical. Even old labour employment programmes since late nineteenth century during British rule, and similar patterns following through even today as seen in the struggles of farmers where they protest for rates of procurement with the government—raised the question, if at all such struggles are removed from those of colonial times or are similar even today. Given the ethical paradox between human and technology, there were deliberations on the possibilities of building on technologies that are less exploitative and foster trust and new forms of workers' movements and solidarities taking place. There were reflections on the levels of difficulties that are navigated by gig workers while they are delivering to high rise buildings which also become tools of obstruction and oppression and present challenges that go beyond navigation of time limits, traffic and city layouts. Accountability framework is important and also moving beyond the binaries of good and bad of technology is equally significant because the algorithm of technology goes beyond trust, control and laws and regulations.