

Platform-Based Migrant Workers and Changing Urban Fabric: Examining the De-territorialised City in 'Atmanirbhar' India

Ambi

This paper critically interrogates the platform economy through the lived experiences of migrant gig workers in India, set against the backdrop of the Indian government's national discourse on self-reliance ('Atmanirbhar Bharat'). The research explores the paradox of 'self-reliance' and the reality of these workers' everyday lives within a platform economy. Addressing two significant gaps—the underrepresentation of migrants in the platform economy discourse and the paucity of studies examining governmental regulation of the platform economy in developing nations—this study provides fresh insights into how platforms, government policies, and migrant labour intersect and impact one another.

Guided by the theoretical frameworks of Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'produced space' and Engin F. Isin's idea of the city as a "difference machine," this research delves into the complex dynamics shaping the experiences of migrant gig workers in urban settings. Lefebvre's notion of produced space emphasises how social relations are embedded in spatial practices. Isin's concept of the city as a difference machine highlights how urban environments continuously generate and navigate social differences. These theoretical lenses are crucial for understanding the de-territorialization of cities facilitated by digital platforms.

The primary research question guiding this study is: **How do migrant gig workers experience and narrate gig work through their everyday experiences in urban cities? How does this correspond to the national and platform economy's discourse on the freedom and autonomy of gig work?** Using a social constructivist approach, the research employs qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and participant observation, to capture the nuanced lived experiences of platform-based migrant workers. The study is situated within the broader socio-economic and political landscapes. It examines how these workers navigate their daily lives amidst the promises of autonomy and flexibility purported by digital platforms.

Key findings from the ethnographic fieldwork reveal a significant dissonance between the freedom and autonomy projected by platform narratives and the actual lived experiences of gig workers. Despite facing precarious working conditions, lack of social security, and limited access to basic services, many workers demonstrate remarkable resilience. This starkly contrasts with the ideals of self-reliance and autonomy promoted by the Indian government and platform companies. The research highlights how digital labour platforms contribute to the de-territorialization of urban spaces, reshaping cities in the Global South and impacting the socio-economic integration of migrant workers.

The study underscores the need for urban policies that recognise and address the unique challenges faced by platform-based migrant workers. It advocates for inclusive strategies that prioritize equity and migrant welfare, ensuring that cities remain centres of opportunity and resilience for all inhabitants. By employing a Lefebvrian lens and examining the 'everyday' the research demonstrates how cities are continually reproduced and transformed through the interactions of digital platforms and migrant labour, reflecting the broader complexities of urbanisation and globalisation in a developing country, like India.

This research provides valuable insights for policymakers, urban planners, and scholars engaged in the study of Southern urbanisation. It emphasises the importance of a multipronged approach to understanding the evolving dynamics of cities and the critical role of digital platforms in shaping urban labour markets. The study contributes to the broader discourse on the platform economy, migration studies, and urban sociology, highlighting the multi-layered experiences and narratives of migrant gig workers in the context of contemporary urban transformations.