

Manhandled by Algorithm: Uber

Om Prakash *, Kishore Yadav †

The gig economy has reshaped the way of doing business, and it is gaining popularity. Temporary freelance work is preferred by the employers, in this mode of doing business rather than permanently employing workers. In this platform economy, which is an offset of the gig economy, workers do jobs, and customers want their jobs, it is the platform providers that act as intermediaries to facilitate that interaction, mostly using mobile phone apps and take a share of payment as cut for their services. Uber extensively uses the concept of freelance workers and thrives on the platform economy.

Uber calls drivers as driver-partners and not its employees. This partnership is not to associate with drivers, but to disassociate with the liabilities of employee and employer relationship. Drivers are spied upon, and their every movements is monitored by the Uber Company via app. Drivers have to work for 12-18 hours on average to earn their living. Even drivers are lured to move to a particular place by using surge pricing or boost pricing mechanisms. Drivers often face injustice many times when they reach the surge price zone, surge price reduces or expires. Drivers even complain that at times they received a lesser amount than what was initially shown on the app. If a driver complains about lesser return, they get a reply that it's due to the dynamic pricing policy of Uber. Moreover, Uber's cut varies as it is not a flat amount or percentage to be cut, due to this drivers express dissatisfaction.

Driver rating is a mechanism to keep a close eye on driver's performance. The rating is given to the drivers by customers when a trip completes. If a customer gets angry or is in a bad mood, he may give a bad rating to the driver in such a case overall driver ratings take a hit. If customers complain, drivers can be put immediately off the road and it takes time for drivers to explain their side and resume work again. The Uber policy, in this regard is heavily in favour of customers, even if a customer is wrong and their complaints are misleading. Due to this drivers often feel hard done by and are penalized for no mistakes of their own. The same has been realized by Uber also, that a high percentage of cases are false.

The job of a driver is highly insecure as the company never considered them an employee. They are not even entitled to minimum wages or any form of employee benefits. After considering how much life of an Uber driver is controlled through the app in the platform economy, it's felt highly unethical on employer's part not to consider them as employees. Even the legal structure is not mature enough to support drivers and grant them rights. Drivers can't even have trade unions to put up their points and it seems that the cab company is almighty.

The Uber's algorithm keeps a tight grip on the drivers, which human managers can only dream off. The rating system acts as a performance review mechanism. If some wrong happens to the drivers or he wants to explain his part, he often interacts with a CSR questionnaire or representatives who are pertained and have template response for every query. Drivers feel manhandled by the strict heartless responses of the Algorithms based on the driver rating system. Algorithm treats drivers as humanoids rather than humans. Drivers demand for a human manager who can be more approachable and considers their problems before taking decision.

Of late in countries like the UK, drivers are being considered to grant access to how the algorithm works and utilizes information to shape up their job profiles. This will help to avoid unethical use of information by the company to favour their policies and act against

injustice to drivers. Inch by inch, the gig economy is shaping up towards the participatory design mechanism, where all stakeholders will get to put up their points and influence the company's decision-making.

Due to this pandemic era, many drivers have lost their livelihood and India's case is no different. As many drivers have their primary source of income to work as a CAB driver, they are fighting for their survival. All of a sudden, their earnings have vanished and as the company never considered them as employees, so they are left on their own. Governments around the world have noticed this fact and are working towards a stable gig economy structure. The legal framework will slowly catch up to meet the requirements of these workers and one day their plight will be heard. In the future, there should be and will be a government body to focus on how the gig economy shapes up, given right to the workers and the legal framework to manage drivers' grievances and issues.

*E-mail: mcs192567@iitd.ac.in

†E-mail: mcs192656@iitd.ac.in