

# **Work on Wheels in GIG Economy: Understanding Work and Employment Relationships in Delivery Services of E-retailing**

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The advent of e-retailing has brought about enormous transformation in the realm of traditional retailing services. Disguised as a mere system of computerized activities, the human component involved in this sector is hidden right from placing an order till its delivery. However, with growing resentment over inhuman working conditions, these workers once deemed as a segment of an invisible workforce in academic debate has of late caught attention of general public across the globe. Debates in e-retailing sector has mostly been raised over the exploitative working conditions of these ‘digisharks’ that range from violation of trade union and workers’ rights, use of invasive monitoring techniques to ‘dataveillance’ of workers that lead to long term health deterioration and safety issues. The subject matter of this paper is set against a backdrop of re-defining work and employment relationships in contemporary service economy. This would help contextualise whether these kinds of jobs, being developed through advent of information technology in service economy, resembles post-industrial theory or supports critics of such theory. This paper analyses work organization and politicisation of workplace relationships in delivery services, in reference to Braverman’s (1974) de-skilling thesis and Burawoy’s (1979) theory on ‘relations in production’. In addition to this, it seeks to understand the nature and governance of employment relationships involved in such contemporary services of GIG economy. It can contribute towards policy initiatives in safeguarding the interests of these blue collar workers of a growing invisible work environment.

In India, the paradigm shift, unlike other Asian economies, witnessed a transition from agriculture to service sector without much growth in the manufacturing sector. Furthermore, in the realm of service sector, disparity of wages and quality of work, has been a burning issue, with the sector’s expansion being increasingly characterised as, ‘jobless growth’. The stage for global division of labour in information processing work as Huws (2014) presents, was set in the era of 1990s to mid 2000s however, the dramatic change in employment relationship took place after the financial crisis of 2007-08. The new forms of web based work environment encompassed new forms of labour but old forms of exploitation, that have been claimed to have arisen, through dicey work arrangements being introduced with the help of information technology (Scholz and Ross, 2013; as cited in Huws, 2014). Even in Indian context, revolution of information technology shifted focus, from traditional to contemporary

services, where one such sector to have received a big push is that of, e-retailing. As a product of virtual services, the work organization has not been intensely captured in academia, as a consequence of which, the sector's workers have generally been excluded from the mainstream workforce. Though the sector is seen to be an intensive IT based service work, an empirical estimate by Anand et al. (2013, p.9) for the year 2012, claims that, around 74.4% of the sector's workforce is concentrated in the lower end segment that is, in warehousing and logistics, implying a high dominance of blue collar jobs that is expected to expand through creation of 0.8 million jobs by 2021 (Anand et al. 2013). Hence, employment of such huge number of feet on the ground signifies a new trend of *work on wheels* in contemporary economy that stands to be the backbone of the entire e-retailing industry.

The research uses Phenomenology approach, to understand the work of delivery boys engaged in e-retailing in Guwahati, a city in India. This paper intend to analyze the nature of work and control inherent in global digital economy or, specifically of a visible workforce of an invisible work environment that is being termed as a major emerging blue collar job in several metro cities of India. Delivery as work resembles a low skilled occupation that emerged as a response to organization of work in the retailing sector through advent of information technology. Even though Bell (1973) considered such occupational growth as insignificant compared to the cosmic growth of skill intensive occupations in the economy (as cited in Grint and Nixon, 2015, p.274), such claim seems to be at stake considering the current rate of expansion of the sector. The glorious post-industrial theories, in context to, emergence of such services in the economy seem to be utopian, as of now, considering the nature of work and skills it breeds. Moreover, as Grossman and Woyke (2015) highlight the basis of distinction between employer-employee relationship or, that of an independent contract is based on the degree of control. As stated, 'The more that control is exercised—in the form of scheduling, behaviour specification and training, rate setting, etc.—the more the law views that as an employer/employee relationship. The less control that is exercised, the more the law views the relationship as between an independent contractor and their client' (Grossman and Woyke, 2015, p.9). Though literature claims the workers of GIG economy to operate like independent contractors however, the degree of financial, behavioural and relationship control exerted on delivery workers implies the relationship of an employer-employee. However, in the verge of escaping from the responsibilities of employment relationship in contemporary work environment they disguise such relationship in the name of flexibility and independent contractor. Furthermore, does provision of high tech gadgets

or, usage of terms like, 'delivery executives' in place of 'delivery boys', dignify the workers or, does it call for reconsideration of the meaning of dignity from worker's perspective.

Hence, such impact of technology on global division of labour helps in conceptualisation of the emerging labour process and employment relationships practiced in such work. The role and governance of labour market institutions further contributes the regulatory gaps that needs to be filled in form of policy initiatives to safeguard the interests of these workers. It might help one conceptualize whether expanding informational economy, is heading towards professionalization or rather, proletarianization of the workforce? Moreover, bearing in mind the nature of work and orientation of the workers, the question on developing a worker centric organizational culture seems to be dubious. So, is it merely about increasing the number at the cost of meaningful work? Furthermore, if such growth is encouraged, is there any scope for identifying potential structures that can lead to development of skills and potential of the workers. Or, will such work continue to create *dronoid humans*, with more technological advancement of the sector in the coming future?