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Hazy
Data Days:
Delivery
Dispatches
from
Hyderabad

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and Mounika Neerukonda

I. Delivery Boy

In any city in India, no matter the time of day, something you can't miss is the sight of food delivery riders darting around on their bikes, sporting those boxy, colourful backpacks. They're on highways and in small gullies—zigzagging casually through oppressive traffic, appearing to tempt fate as they playfully slide in and out of the blind spots of rickety buses. You can easily discern the riders' loyalties, to one of two to three large platform companies, from the colour of their uniform and delivery gear. Making delivery workers wear these uniforms is a somewhat sneaky manoeuvre by platforms, because platforms don't technically employ riders. In fact, in other countries, asking delivery riders to wear uniforms has gotten platforms in trouble as workers have used this fact to argue in court that these big platform companies control how they work without employing them or giving them any benefits or protections. All in all, however, workers in India don't fret much about having to wear a uniform.

These big platform companies take great pains to always make clear that delivery riders are most definitely not their employees, not even a little bit. They refer to them as “delivery executives” and “partners,” but never employees. Sometimes, in tweets, ads, and when speaking to the media, platform CEOs lavish grandiose praise on their riders, pronouncing them “hunger saviours” and “delivery heroes.” But never employees. For the most part, people just call these riders “delivery boys.” Of course, like the uniforms, objecting to being called “boy” is not the hill anyone's going to die on.

One other feature of this work concerns who does it: the vast majority of delivery workers in India are men. This is so characteristic of this type of work, that most people only notice this fact when an anomaly presents itself—that is, on those rare occasions when a woman turns up at your door with your order, or when you glimpse a long braid snaking down from under the helmet of the harried motorcyclist travelling beside you. Or, when you, a woman, decide to work as a delivery boy.

II. Another Day

The weather was getting warmer. Riding around on a Scooty all day in December had been dire. Winter was still better than the rainy season, though. Thankfully she had only started this work after the last monsoon, and she was determined to find another job well before the next one in June.

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 15:19]:

Data log updates ["12.9716"],["77.5946"]

Kranthi slowed to a halt. The app confirmed that she reached her destination.

Parking her Scooty in the shade of a Neem tree, she took off her helmet with a practised ease. A chilly breeze rustled through the leaves overhead. She shivered. It's not that warm yet.

She looked around. It's a quiet street in Somajiguda, lined with apartment buildings on both sides. She got the bag of food out of the black thermal case fastened to her Scooty's back seat. It's a paper bag, emblazoned with the restaurant's name: PENANG. Kranthi had worried that the paper bag would get damaged if anything spilled on her way here, but it seemed to have held up fine. She wondered vaguely what kind of food Penang makes.

Which house was it again? Kranthi glanced down at her phone.

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 15:20]: *Delivery Instructions*

Come to the black gate opposite the neem tree and call me.

Kranthi squinted at the row of three black gates. Why is it that these instructions were always uninformative? Sighing, she swiped her screen, getting ready to call the client. Just then, a man opened the middle gate and strode forward towards her.

"I've never seen a female Swishy rider," he said, by way of greeting.

"Yes sir, I've only been doing this for three months."

She offered him the bag of food. He gave her an odd look but didn't say anything further. She learned to expect this comment. In fact, it's the rare exception when clients don't say something about her being "female."

Working for a delivery platform is an odd choice for a woman, but when Kranthi signed up to work for Swishy, she hadn't really had any other choices. She remembered the call she got from someone at Swishy, a month or so after she had started doing this work. They had wanted to feature her in an advertisement for International Women's Day. The woman on the phone had explained to her, *"It's really easy, it will only take one day. We will take some videos of you riding a scooter and delivering food. Basically, it will be about how Swishy is creating jobs and empowering Indian women. You'll get 2,000 rupees."*

The extra cash had tempted her, but Kranthi had balked at the idea. She hadn't told her parents about working for Swishy, or even that she had lost her previous job at the call centre. The thought of them watching a Swishy ad with her in it made her shudder. She could only imagine how humiliating they would find it that their eldest daughter, the first one in the family to get a BA degree, was doing this type of work. She had politely but firmly explained to the woman on the phone that she couldn't do this ad, wondering if she would lose this job, too. The woman on the phone hadn't pushed it.

The customer was saying something, and she hadn't heard. She snapped out of her reverie.

"Sorry, sir?"

"I said the spring rolls are missing."

Kranthi's stomach dropped.

"Sir, please report it on the app,

I just brought the bag the restaurant gave me."

He gave her a suspicious look.

"Really sir, I'm sorry but there's nothing I can do.

Swishy will refund you if you report it. Please give me a good rating, it's not my fault." Kranthi looked pleadingly at him.

"Fine." He turned his back, walking back the way he came.

"Have a nice day," Kranthi offered as he retreated into his apartment complex, but he either did not hear or ignored her.

Kranthi fastened shut the thermal bag, and looked at her phone. No new orders. Jolting the Scooty into action, and putting on her helmet, she decided to head back to Base to wait out the familiar post-lunch lull.

She wasn't looking forward to being back at Base. Especially at this time, after the afternoon rush, she was bound to find at least another six or seven riders milling about there waiting for orders. There were no other women riders in this part of town, and these men never let her forget it. She always had to fend off a constant stream of comments and unsolicited advice. They often clustered around her, curiously comparing her incentives and earnings to theirs, and advising her that she wasn't earning nearly enough. For a while, she had avoided the crowded waiting areas, finding a quieter spot to wait a little ways away. But then she had received that message from the App, which cut short that brief respite.

Hello Delivery Partner, We have noticed that you are not getting enough orders from Swishy as compared to other delivery partners. Please note that logging in from spots where order flow is minimal to receive Minimum Guarantee daily is an unacceptable behaviour. We request you to refer to the “Heatmap” section in your App and increase your daily order count. Repeating this behaviour will lead to ID deactivation. For any issues about this action. Please reach out to us via connect form. Regards, Team Swishy.

Kranthi turned the corner, manoeuvring towards the gaggle of riders at Base. She grimaced as she caught sight of Vishnu. She bristled at the memory of him patronisingly telling her to find a different job, “you will make more working at a mall.” Was he right? Or were they just trying to get rid of her so there would be one less rider to compete against?

Thankfully, Chetan and Sai were at Base as well, talking with three others she didn’t know. They were friendly with her. Chetan had even helped her when her tyre had gotten punctured, and Sai had added her to a WhatsApp group with the area’s riders. Sai flashed her a smile as he noticed her pulling up. The other three men’s eyes followed her inquisitively.

III. Notifications

The afternoon’s interlude at Base was her first chance of the day to grab a quick bite and cast an eye over the spiralling notifications racking up on her phone.

[WhatsApp notification: you have 122 new messages]

Group name: *Swishy boys Punjagutta Zone*

[Voice Note, +91 98787 54176 ~ Ganesh]: To all the bhaiyon, annalu in the Swishy boys Punjagutta Zone group, namaste, namaskaaram. Please, I am having a problem and I need some help urgently. I got blocked by the app because I didn’t deliver one order today. The police officer stopped me on the way to the client and he took my bike.

I called Swishy customer service number and they said I will be blocked until they finish investigating. What can I do?

[Voice note, +91 84002 32794 ~ Vishnu]: Ganesh bhai, go to the centre in Madhapur and talk to them face to face, that's what I did, it worked for me.

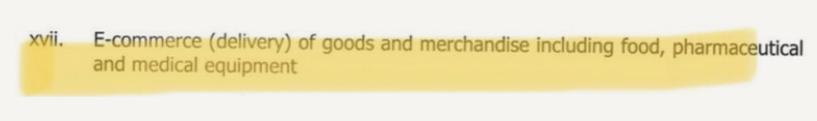
[Text message, +91 98787 54176 ~ Ganesh]: Thanks anna 👍

[Voice note, +91 84008 78316 ~ Hari]: Namaste to all the bhaiyon in the Swishy boys Punjagutta Zone group. I also got detained by the police today on my way to Base. I had to give them 200 rupees before they let me go. Another Swishy boy in Lakdikapool group said he had his bike seized yesterday by the police, but he got it back in the evening. This is becoming a big problem.

[Voice note, Chetan]: Namaskaaram Hari anna. I spoke with Shaik bhai from the gig and platform worker union. He said that there's a police crackdown against delivery boys. The Telangana government notice about the COVID lockdown said that we are doing essential work and that we can move around during the lockdown but the police are still detaining delivery boys and taking bikes. If you get stopped, you can tell the police that we are allowed to do our work.

[Voice note, Vishnu]: Chetan bhai, your head is always in the clouds, government this, union that. As if the police will listen. The only way to make them let you go is to give them what they want – cash.

[Voice note, Chetan]: You do what you want. I am sending a photo of the government notice, show it to the police if they stop you. Photo attachment from Chetan:



xvii. E-commerce (delivery) of goods and merchandise including food, pharmaceutical and medical equipment

Kranthi stopped playing the voice notes in the group. They were from earlier in the morning, and it seemed like there had been hundreds more since, with new ones every second. Impossible to keep up. She herself had never posted a message in the group, never thought to seek or impart counsel in this group of forty-odd men.

[WhatsApp notification: you have 36 new messages]

What if the police seized her bike? What would she tell her parents about where her Scooty disappeared to? Anxiety swelled up inside her in step with the pinging notifications.

[WhatsApp notification: you have 53 new messages]

What if the police arrested her?
How would they behave toward her in the station?

[WhatsApp notification: you have 93 new messages]

[WhatsApp notification: Message from Anushree 🌸]

Seeing Anushree's name pop up in the sea of WhatsApp notifications was a salve to her nerves.

*[Text message, Anushree 🌸]: Kranthiiii hi! I'm bored at home *re*, looking for some timepass. If I order food on Swishy, can I put a special request for you to come and deliver it? 😂]*

*[Voice note, Kranthi]: Anu, hiiii! Such nonsense! And *arre* you never listen, what did I tell you about sending messages like this, what if someone at home sees. Anyway, didn't you also start working for some other platform? Why aren't you at work today?*

[Voice note, Anushree 🌸]: You still haven't told your parents about Swishy? How have you managed to keep it secret for so long, I thought they would have found out by now – seen your uniform or your phone or something.

[Voice note, *Anushree* 🌸]: Arre nooo, City Company is not like Swishy. I'm not running around all over Hyd on my bike every day, ayyo.

Avunu, I also have an app, it matches me with clients and tells me when I should go to their house, and what beauty treatments they want. Today I have no shifts so I'm at home only.

[Voice note, *Kranthi*]: Are you mad, I can't tell my parents about Swishy! They still think I work at that call centre. I am very careful not to leave any hints. You know, every day, I leave home in my normal clothes, and then go change into the uniform in the bathroom at Central mall. And then change back in the evening before going home. It's too much *re*. I just want to find some office job quickly and quit before anyone finds out.

[Voice note, *Anushree* 🌸]: I don't know, it feels really risky *re*. Why don't you take some time off and focus on applying for some positions?

[Voice note, *Kranthi*]: We need the money. Naanna hasn't gone back to work since his knee injury, and Ankit will start his B.Tech this year. I need to do this, at least for now... but I'll figure it out, I don't want to do this for much longer.

[Voice note, *Anushree* 🌸]: You should come join me at City Company. It's probably easier for women to do beauty work than your type of work.

[Voice note, *Kranthi*]: Maybe... I'll call you later when I am done for the day, then you tell me more about this City Company. Okay, okay I am getting a new order, I have to go.

[Text message, *Anushree* 🌸]: Okay talk to you later, be safe 💕💕

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 15:29]:

Customer C007298HYD order placed from Restaurant R98HYD.

Demand and supply forecasting;

real-time capacity estimation at current zone.

Accessing historical data...

Calculating route, food preparation time, last mile distance...

Classifying food produce as [vegetarian]...accessing probabilistic similarity between ordered product and food knowledge graph.

Inputting data from current order, live traffic.

Partner P3986HYD_F logged in at location_17.427515_78.450643.

Assigning order to Rider P3986HYD_F.

Partner P3986HYD_F Order Choice: Accepted.

[Location Ping]: Data shared with Google Maps, Swishy, WhatsApp.

IV. The Streets

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 15:31]:

Partner P3986HYD_F en route to Restaurant R98HYD.

Optimising quickest route to Restaurant R98HYD.

[Location Ping]: Data shared with Google Maps, Swishy, WhatsApp.

Hyderabad's streets had never felt more familiar.

Kranthi had lived in this city for her whole life, but the past few months had made her acutely conscious of things she'd never previously paid much attention to. Working for Swishy had intimately acquainted her with gullies she'd never visited, the ebbs and flows of traffic rhythms, the roads with the most potholes, the cleanest public toilets. She even came to know the haunts of the street dogs that would bark and chase after her bike, only to be brought up short when they caught up with her, as if surprised at having arrived at their destination.

Far too often, the app confidently plotted for her routes that were inconvenient, and sometimes downright impossible—it would dispatch her via main roads during peak traffic hours, or expect her to waltz right through construction barricades, or down unpaved alleys that would do in her Scooty, or through shady side streets that made her hairs stand on end.

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 15:46]:

Restaurant R98HYD Order_2376 status:

'Being prepared.'

Order_2376 status updated in Customer C007298HYD App:

'Being prepared'

Partner P3986HYD_F location marked: Arrived at Restaurant R98HYD.

Partner status updated in Customer Partner C007298HYD App:

'Waiting at restaurant.'

Partner P3986HYD_F wait time counter started.

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 15:58]:

Restaurant R98HYD Order_2376 status: 'Ready for pickup.'

Partner P3986HYD_F Order_2376 pick up: 'Yes.'

Partner P3986HYD_F status marked: 'En route.'

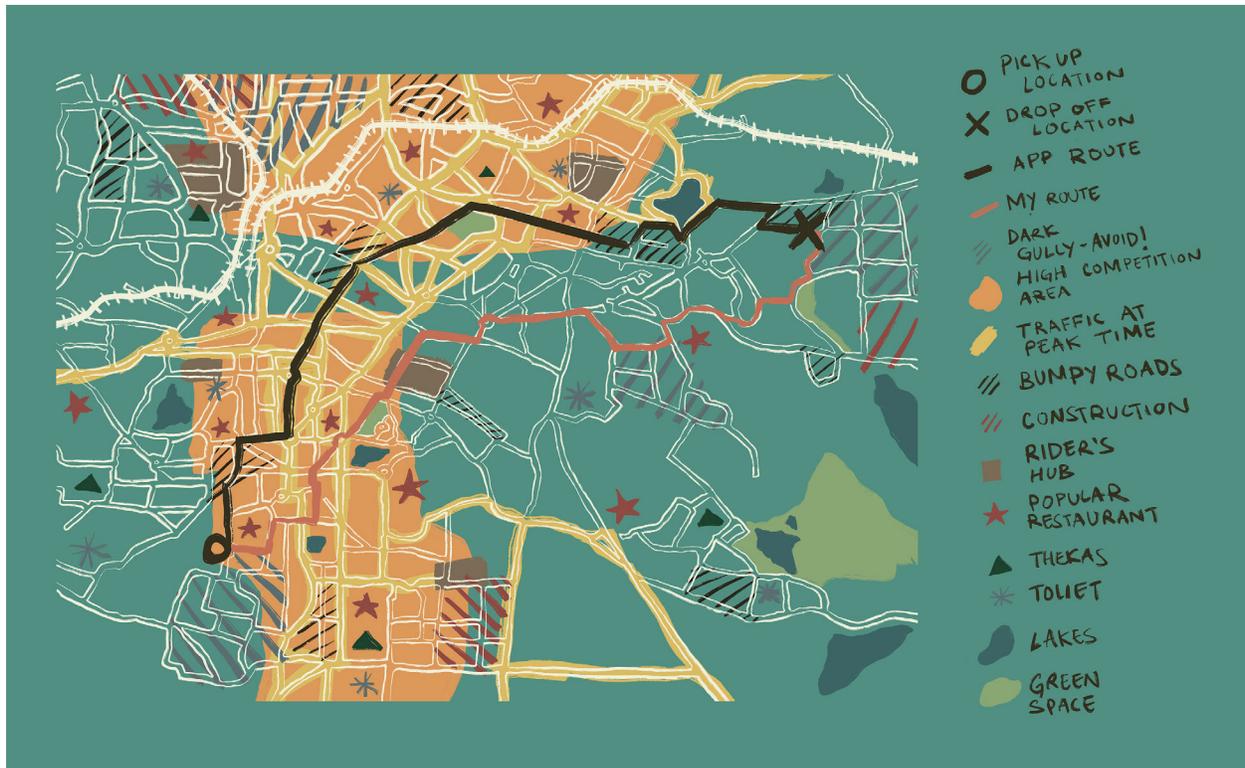
Order_2376 status updated in Customer C007298HYD App:

'En route.'

Partner P3986HYD_F live tracking enabled in Customer C007298HYD App.

[Location Ping]: Data shared with Google Maps, Swishy, WhatsApp.

With time though, Kranthi was able to reroute most delivery journeys with ease, finding ways around the obstacles that were invisible to the app. She navigated the various platforms she used with similar dexterity. Flicking back and forth between Swishy, Google Maps, and WhatsApp as she rode, she streamlined every delivery.



Swishy [07.02.2021 | 15:38]:

Partner P3986HYD_F Deviating from optimal route...rerouting...

[Location Ping]: Data shared with Google Maps, Swishy, WhatsApp.

V. Whims

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 16:05]:

Customer C007298HYD selected Call_Partner option.

“Hello? Swishy boy aa?”

“Hello sir, I am coming, I picked up the food now from Chutneys.
I will be at your address in 25 minutes.”

“Aha, you are not a boy! Sorry sorry, what’s your name?”

“Kranthi.”

“Funny, I’ve never had any woman come with my order. But maybe because you are a woman, you’ll help me out and do me a favour.”

“...”

“I need you to stop on the way and pick up something.”

“Sir, I don’t know, I may have a problem with Swi—”

“No no, it’s no problem. I’ve done this before.

Just listen, go to the theka on Yousufguda main road, it’s called Mathura Wines, and bring four bottles of Kingfisher beer, the 650 ml ones. I’ll give you cash.”

“I can’t do that, Yousufguda is not on the way, it will delay me a lot”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind if you take some more time.”

“No sir, Swishy will block me if I take too lo—”

“Arre just do what I am asking na, no need to make such a big deal out of it.”

“Sir please try to understand, it’s strange for a woman to go to the theka...”

“Why are you being so difficult, you know I give you a rating right?”

“...”

“Just bring it, I’ll give you a good tip and rating.

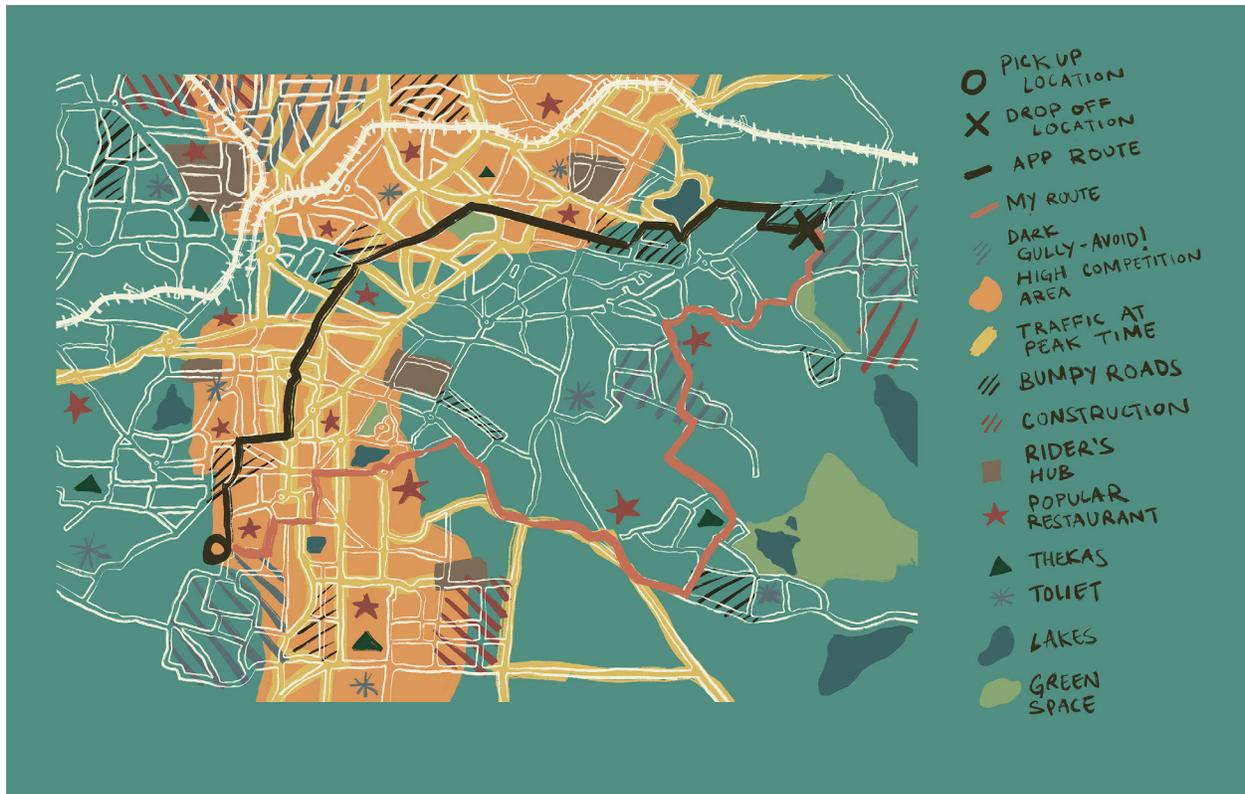
Four bottles of 650 ml Kingfisher. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 16:08]:

Partner P3986HYD_F Deviating from route...rerouting...

[Location Ping]: Data shared with Google Maps, Swishy, WhatsApp.



VI. 6 p.m.

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 18:00]:

[Partner P3986HYD_F: Force Log Out...]

Just eight orders today. Kranthi had hoped to squeeze in at least another order, but that last one took too long to complete, and she ran out of time. It left a bad taste in her mouth. That customer's smug face swam before her eyes, blending with the faces of the leering men who had been clustered around the theka. Parking on the side of the road, she rested her helmet on the seat, and massaged her temples, trying to restore some measure of calm. A flash of orange whizzed past her—it was another Swishy rider. She sighed. The dinner rush was starting, but not for her. As on every other day, the app had logged her out the moment the clock struck six.

She had been puzzled the first time this happened. Why couldn't she access the app, while riders all around her were getting assigned orders? She had asked Sai and Chetan, but they had been as confused as her—they had never been forcibly

logged out of the app, not unless Swishy had blocked them. Wondering if there was something wrong with her account, Kranthi had called the rider support helpline. When she finally got through, she was shocked to find out that it was standard protocol for women delivery drivers to be automatically logged out at 6 p.m. for their own safety. This had infuriated her—it wasn't fair that she wasn't allowed to work during the peak dinner rush! It had finally clicked—of course the men at Base earned so much more than her.

The cheery voice of the Swishy staff person at her onboarding session echoed in her mind, *"You can choose your own hours,"* he had promised, *"you have no boss other than you!"*

VII. Undercut

Was it worth it? A familiar nagging feeling tugged at her as she scrolled on the app to look back at the day's earnings. The rider interface was slick and datafied Kranthi's work day attractively—but something about it was also discordant. Something always felt off.

Swishy [07.02.2021 | 18:20]:

Day's Earnings ₹421.87

Total Deliveries Completed: 8

A few weeks into this work, Kranthi began to keep a mental map of her day—how far she travelled, how many trips she did, the rhythms of her work. She soon began to realise that, even with incentives and tips added, her earnings just never seemed to be that good. And that was even before accounting for her petrol costs.

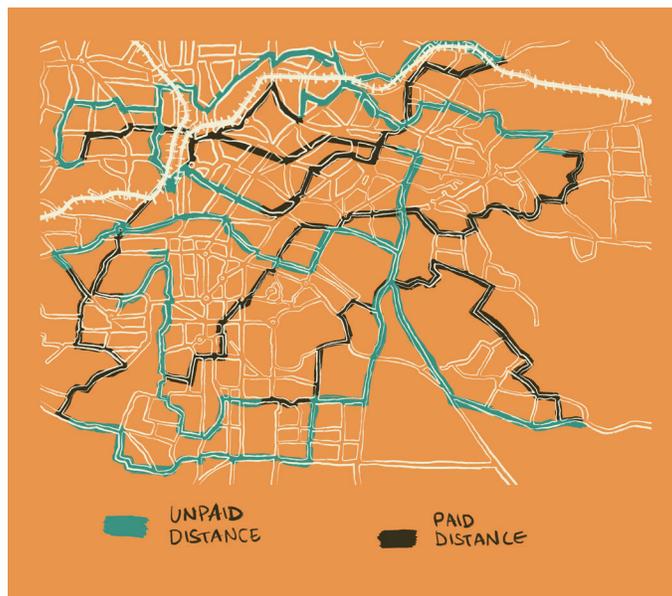
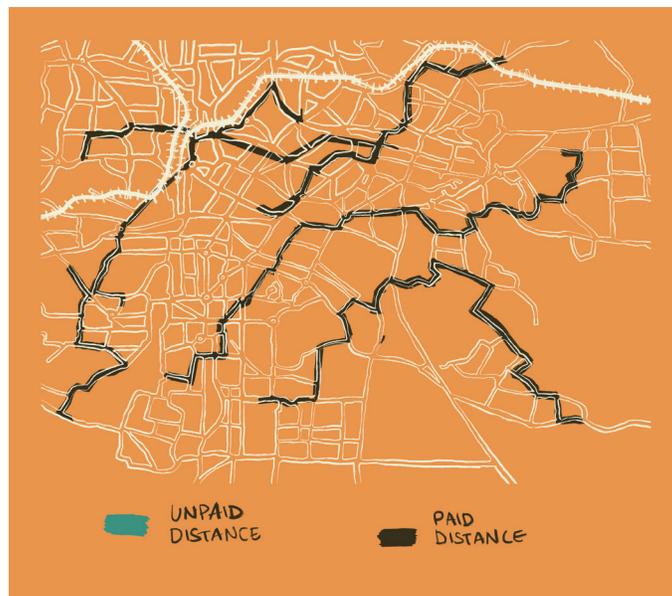
And then there were all the hidden costs that only became apparent to her after some time. For instance, after finishing a delivery, she'd have to travel several kilometres back to Base, which was not part of any order. Swishy didn't pay her anything for those trips back to Base. And so far, she'd been lucky, her Scooty hadn't needed any expensive repairs, nor had she gotten into any accidents. But she knew other riders who, due to some tragic twist of fate, had to shell out many tens of thousands of rupees that they never saw again.

Maybe the 25,000 rupees per month that Swishy dangled over newcomers was easier for the other riders to earn, who were able to work through the dinner rush?

Partner P3986HYD_F had apparently only worked 4 hours 47 minutes today, but Kranthi had spent 10 hours away from home.

Partner P3986HYD_F had deviated from the optimal route four times, but Kranthi knew she had made the right on-the-spot judgments to optimally navigate Hyderabad's messy urban sprawl.

Partner P3986HYD_F had been late to deliver one order, but Kranthi had had to choose between a low rating or missing the delivery window.



Research Statement

This is a fictionalised story about the lived experiences of platform-mediated delivery work in South India, written by three researchers.

“Kranthi” is a composite character, constructed from interviews with food delivery workers in Bengaluru and Hyderabad, field notes, secondary sources and investigations into platform companies’ logics and business practices. “Swishy” and “City Company” are fictionalised names of major platform companies that operate in India. In particular, aspects of the story such as the practice of engaging delivery drivers as independent contractors (and not employees), algorithmic control over the temporalities and spatialities of work, workplace surveillance, and gender-specific practices like logging out women drivers at 6 p.m., are all real-world practices seen in the Indian platform economy.

By alternating between Kranthi’s and platforms’ perspectives, we have sought to exemplify the overwhelming datafied mediation of the mundane. In the course of her work day, Kranthi is seen interacting with a variety of digital platforms and information systems, such as “Swishy,” Google Maps, and WhatsApp, generating in the process innumerable wisps and trails of data. The imbrications of Kranthi’s lifeworld with broader data worlds are seen to ambiguously texture her daily interactions (be it with customers, coworkers, her family, or the city at large), and enable, make contingent, or foreclose to her certain choices and futures. In this way, we have tried to show the different ways that people’s lives, through their routine encounters with data-based systems and platforms, are spliced, reduced, and decoupled from their contexts.

Beyond platform practices and datafication, people’s lived experiences of platform-mediated work are also shaped by their social location, or their intersectional experience in relation to long-standing and deep-seated axes of social difference, such as gender, caste, class, religion, ability, and migrant histories. In this story, we focused on one specific intersection: what it’s like for a woman from a lower-middle class background to do this work. Despite most platform policies and practices being putatively gender-neutral, being a woman in this male-dominated sector, navigating the public arena of the city, fundamentally shapes the twists and turns of this narrative.

However, it should be noted that the story does not capture the ways in which other dimensions of social location—notably caste structures, ability, religion and migration histories—condition people’s experiences of platform work and concomitant communicative spaces. These subjects unfortunately did not surface

much in our interviews, and have generally received less attention in existing literature on the Indian platform economy. In the absence of this empirical basis, and wanting to be circumspect in the extent to which we as researchers take creative liberties in representing our interlocutors' experiences in this fictionalised format, we elected not to centre these subjects in this work. However, we urge and hope that future research (including our own) takes up these important questions of how caste structures and other axes of social difference shape platform design, experiences of platform work and worker solidarity networks.

Finally, we sought in this story to highlight the innovative ways that platform workers in the real world individually and collectively exercise agency in navigating the structures that govern their working lives. Examples in this story include Kranthi deviating from the routes that Swishy recommends, workers supporting each other in WhatsApp groups, workers holding diverging views about existing unions, etc. Here, we conceive of labour agency as plural, as not necessarily antagonistic (à la "resistance"), and as something that can be seen daily, even outside exceptional moments of collective action.

This story was first presented at the Data and Society's "Parables of AI in/from the Global South" workshop in October 2021. The \$150 stipend we received for participating in the workshop was donated to a strike fund organised by the Jharkhand App-based Transport Workers Union to support striking Zomato delivery workers in Jamshedpur, India.

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