Platform Cooperatives for a Feminist Future: Analysing regulatory and socio-economic challenges in India

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Platform cooperatives are cooperatively owned computing-based platform economy models, as against ownership by capital infusers/VCs. There are multiple initiatives taken by governments and workers in this direction, including in the UK, Spain, and the USA over the past couple of years. The recently released Strategy Paper for the Kerala Knowledge Economy Mission identifies the Platform Cooperative model as a solution to address increasing social security concerns, as platformisation of work will continue in the foreseeable future. In India, SEWA Federation has been experimenting with the platform co-op structure. They have a Farm2Table platform and a beauty services platform organised as platform cooperatives.

Platformisation of labour has created an unhealthy tussle between the market and the workers. Regulatory regimes are grappling with the question of directing policy to be supportive to all, benefiting the various stakeholders involved. The fallout between corporate owners of gig platforms and workers have shown that there is misalignment of goals of these two interest groups.

These instances imply that futuristic amendments to the policy regime can enable the collectivisation framework. There have been no previous instances of in-depth analysis of the regulatory framework in India to facilitate the development of platform cooperatives, particularly regarding policy-level support to cooperatives. The research proposes to analyse the possibility of Platform Cooperatives as an organisational design alternative for a feminist future of work in India planking the analysis on regulatory perspective.

Platform cooperativism is a relatively under-researched area, particularly within the global South. While new offshoots of the idea, such as data cooperatives have started taking shape, it is the ideal time for theoretical and regulatory studies. This can enable the crafting of policy directed at supporting Platform cooperatives. Further, an India-specific policy analysis will answer the thorny questions of their socio-economic relevance and viability, which should be established to drive policy-level changes. Platform cooperativism could benefit women in the digital economy, who have been steadily losing autonomy over their labour — in most forms of labour including care work. Thus, this paper will clarify the regulatory framework around platform cooperatives in India with a sound understanding of socio-economic challenges. It will provide plausible solutions that can drive policy-level changes arguing for a feminist data economy. It will contribute to the feminist discourse by attempting to cement platform cooperativism as an achievable alternative in the Indian scenario, giving more autonomy and control to workers over their labour.

Objectives

    a. Analysis of existing platform cooperatives models and their interaction with mainstream policy in India

    b. Identification and analysis of key socio-economic hurdles to the establishment and functioning of Platform cooperatives in India

    c. Identification and analysis of key regulatory challenges to the establishment and functioning of platform cooperatives in India

    d. Identification of viable policy solutions rooted in feminist theory to harmonize these challenges.

Research Questions

1. Could platform cooperatives be a feminist answer to the challenges of worker exploitation as platformisation of the economy continues in India?
2. What are the major socio-economic challenges to the establishment and functioning of platform cooperatives in India?
3. What are the regulatory hurdles to establishing platform cooperatives in India?
4. How to create a Policy environment that facilitates effective utilisation and the ultimate success of platform cooperatives in India?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, this study proposes a qualitative research methodology involving a literature review of the existing research on platform cooperatives in India and abroad and relevant grey literature. Interviews with participants who have designed and implemented platform cooperatives, individuals involved in platform work through these cooperatives, other relevant stakeholders such as government officials, civil rights activists who have used, studied, or been involved with them, customers of the platform cooperatives, platform workers unions, Software as a Service community, trainers, journalists, volunteers and industrial investors involved with platform cooperatives will be interviewed. Further, quantitative data around platform cooperatives in the world and their functioning would be analysed.

Along with this, a desk review will also be carried out to analyse notifications, bills, legislations, tenders, and news articles surrounding the cooperative movement and possible hindrances to platform cooperatives. An analysis of relevant grey literature relating to platform cooperativism to establish its possibility as a feminist solution to exploitative platformisation will also be undertaken. Further, the idea of platform optimism will be engaged with, critically looking at platform cooperativism as a viable solution. The paper is currently under the research phase, where stakeholder interactions and analysis of regulations is under progress.