

## Reimagining urban safety in COVID-19 era urban India

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### Introduction

In November 2020, the Indian branch of the global platform cab provider Uber launched an image campaign called 'Saferforeachother' in response to the ongoing issues on urban mobility posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign showcased various measures implemented by Uber to minimize the risk of getting infected with COVID-19 while taking a ride with an Uber cab. One part of the campaign was a video that presents Uber's measure of installing plastic screens in cabs that isolate bodies of cabdrivers from those of passengers to inhibit pathogens from being transmitted between them. The text that accompanies the video reads "Walls may have tried to stop us in the past, but little did they know that the human spirit is unstoppable. That's why today there's a wall helping us move forward with safety, in Uber Autos. And even when we're on either side of this wall, we're actually #Saferforeachother."

This paradoxical notion of a wall that helps people move is emblematic for the contradictions of applying binary logics of material segregation to a space of dynamic bodily exchanges. To reduce the risk of infection, a space that is characterized by movement and exposure is reimagined as a space of isolation and containment. In this paper, I will discuss the issues that such an attempt creates, as well as various other measures created by platform cab companies that illustrate their contradictory and patchy responses to the pandemic. I argue that these measures are illustrative of larger shifts in the notion of citizenship, not only in the context of the pandemic but also in the proposed contemporary era of intensified human-environment entanglements that is commonly referred to as the Anthropocene. The paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Delhi and Mumbai between June 2019 and March 2021.

### Class relations and conflicts in urban India

Class relations in Indian cities have predominantly been understood in binary categories. Particularly contestations between the middle class and the poor have dominated the literature. It has been pointed out that the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s precipitated the formation of a new, globally connected Indian middle class that indulges in new practices of social distinction (Bourdieu 1984) and lobbies for the reorganization of Indian cities to the demands of its tastes and preferences (Fernandes 2006). This leads to an increase in social polarization

and the exclusion of the poor, as exemplified by the removal of slums, working-class housing and illegal street vendors and the creation of gated elite residential enclaves, theme parks and shopping malls (Baviskar 2020; Brosius 2010; Chatterjee 2004; Ghertner 2011). At the same time, it has been pointed out that the middle classes depend on various services provided by the less affluent who work as household helps, cooks, caretakers, and drivers. Therefore, irrespective of attempts to increasingly segregate urban spaces according to class, Indian cities are the site of enduring entanglements between members of the middle and lower classes (Srivastava 2015). This creates a tense relationship of mutual dependence and suspicion between the rich and the poor.

The platform cab constitutes a unique site to study these contentious and complex class relations. During the early 2010s, companies like the globally operating Uber and its Indian competitor Ola introduced a new way of commuting cities by employing mobile phone app-based technology to connect cabdrivers with passengers. This model proved very successful and has since replaced traditional taxi services in Indian cities to a significant degree. Recent survey-based studies have found that most cabdrivers working for Uber and Ola are lower middle-class and working-class men with a less-than-average educational background – many of whom have migrated from rural hinterlands to the metropolises – while passengers of Uber and Ola are primarily members of the affluent urban middle classes (Annavarapu 2021; Kashyap & Bhatia 2018; Kuttler 2020; Surie & Koduganti 2016). The platform cab therefore can be understood as a mobile space of tense class interaction. While there is a long history of neighborhood-level studies on class-based segregation in urban India (Brosius 2013, Falzon 2004, Waldrop 2004), everyday interactions between members of different classes remain understudied. When relations between the elite and the poor are studied, there is usually a physical distance between these antagonistic groups, as in the case of gated societies and the slow gentrification of neighborhoods. Moreover, in most studies on class relations there is a clear hierarchy at work, as in the case of employers and their domestic workers, security guards or private drivers. However, platform-based cab services like Uber and Ola produce different class interactions that are characterized by a sharing of space and a more ambiguous power relation because the passenger is

the outsider in the driver's cab. Platform cabs therefore present a unique opportunity to study the ways in which middle and lower classes perceive and viscerally interact with each other.

### Atmospheric citizenship

Struggles over citizenship rights in urban India have produced a rift between what Holston has termed formal and substantial citizenship (Holston 2008). While citizenship is formally granted to a vast number of people, only a limited number of these people – usually members of the affluent middle classes and the elite – can claim and express substantial rights based on this formal inclusion. The vast majority of the marginalized and poor who are formal citizens are excluded from this regime of citizenship due to governmental mechanisms, prejudices, discrimination, or lack of access to means of expressing grievances in a judicial arena. This has led to a state in which the middle classes exert an influence over questions of urban citizenship in India that far surpasses their actual numbers (Ghertner 2015, Baviskar 2020). However, this middle-class dominance rests on the ability to assign urban spaces and environments to members of different classes. Struggles over air pollution in Indian cities like Delhi provide a vivid example of how this segregation of urban environments has become increasingly complicated in recent years.

Ghertner argues that increasing concerns over air pollution in India's capital city of Delhi have led to a new quality of struggles over citizenship by putting a new type of body at the centre of these struggles, the 'citizen body'. This new type of body, he argues, is different from the individual body that underpinned previous citizenship struggles in that it does not neatly map onto social collectives – like the poor or the middle classes – but transcends these by putting categories such as body parts, intensities of life and population categories at its center (Ghertner 2020: 136). Since atmospheric pollution cannot be confined to certain spaces of the city, it affects all members of Delhi's population and therefore must be tackled collectively. This releases liberatory potentialities because due to the encompassing quality of polluted air the category of life starts to transcend social differences. At the same time, struggles over environmental destruction are informed by an enduring desire of the privileged classes to translate concerns over the collective good into the protection of private interests. Ghertner states that "segregated atmospheres, while meteorologically impossible, remain alive in the sociotechnical imaginary of the city's elite" (Ghertner 2020: 155). Therefore, he sees the liberatory potentialities of atmospheric citizenship being compromised by attempts to segregate atmospheres according to social divisions based on class, religion, and caste.

### Exclusive and inclusive potential of COVID-19

This tension between socially inclusive and exclusive forms of citizenship also characterizes the governing of platform cabs in times of COVID-19. Since cabdrivers and passengers breathe the same air during the taxi ride, their bodies are atmospherically linked. Therefore, Uber and Ola must ensure the health of cabdrivers to reduce the risk of infection for passengers and convince them that the business model of platform cabs is safe even in times of COVID-19. At the same time, Uber and Ola implement measures aimed at segregating the atmospheric space inside the cab by installing plastic screens between drivers' and passengers' seats inside cabs, as described earlier. These contradictory developments demonstrate a tension between universalist and particularized notions of life that inform attempts at adapting the platform cab model to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and contested class relations in Indian cities.

In late 2020, drivers of Uber and Ola cabs were asked by the companies to install plastic screens in their vehicles in an attempt to isolate the bodies of drivers and passengers from each other and to thereby reduce the risk of pathogens like the COVID-19 virus being transmitted between them. The costs for the installation of these screens were borne by the companies. Many cabdrivers took advantage of this option, either because they believed that this would reduce the risk of getting infected or because it would make their vehicle appear safe in the eyes of passengers. As I have outlined in the introduction, Uber and Ola advertised the plastic screens widely as a viable measure to reduce the risk of getting infected with COVID-19 while taking a ride in a platform cab.

However, cabdrivers soon experienced various problems with these plastic screens. Platform cabdrivers often spend 12 to 14 hours per day driving their vehicles and felt uncomfortable sitting inside a 'plastic cell' for such a long time. When taking a break, they were unable to put their seat into a sleeping position to take a nap – as many drivers use to do during work breaks – with the screen being tightly wrapped around it. An even bigger problem emerged in the hot summer months of 2021. For example, when temperatures in Delhi rose to more than 40 degrees, sitting inside a plastic screen became unbearable for drivers and those who had not already done so earlier started removing the screens from their vehicles. In November 2021, a regular user of Uber and Ola told me that plastic screens were hardly to be seen in platform cabs anymore.



*Fig. 2: Plastic screen installed in an Uber cab in Delhi (Photo: P. Holwitt 2021)*

Plastic screens constituted a regulatory attempt at segregating the atmospheric space inside the platform cab. As such, this measure stressed the exclusive potential of atmospheric citizenship by ostensibly creating a safe space for middle-class passengers inside the cab and isolating them from the potentially harmful body of the lower-class driver. However, at the same time, Uber and Ola also developed other measures to counter the threat of the pandemic that point to a more inclusive vision of citizenship. For example, Uber assisted its cabdrivers to get enrolled for the vaccination program of the Indian government and provided them with free sanitization kits and face masks during the nationwide lockdown from March to May 2020. Although these measures can be understood as a rather fatalistic acknowledgement that the health of cabdrivers is a precondition for the health of passengers – and I am not saying that this reading is wrong – they nonetheless show that Uber and Ola were forced to recognize a link between the bodies of cabdrivers and passengers. These measures do not constitute an attempt at isolating the bodies of cabdrivers from the bodies of passengers to wall off the elite from the plight of the poor, as in the case of plastic screens. Instead, they represent a realization that the shared space of the platform cab ties the health of drivers and the health of passengers to each other in times of COVID-19.

This coevolution of exclusive and inclusive attempts at reducing the risk of infection demonstrates the contradictory logics inherent to the rise of atmospheric citizenship in times of the Anthropocene and COVID-19. Measures aimed at guaranteeing safe urban transport in times of a pervasive viral threat in some ways exacerbate and in other ways subvert existing social inequalities in urban India. However, we need to consider another aspect in a discussion about the consequences of the pandemic on the platform cab industry and this is the redistribution of risk between drivers and passengers.

#### **Redistribution of risk among cabdrivers and passengers**

Social divisions have been a major factor in the story of platform cabs in India. Since their introduction to India's urban transport systems during the early

2010s, platform cab services have been at the center of controversies over the safety of passengers. The main focus of these debates is the safety of female passengers. In 2014, the case of an Uber cabdriver in Delhi who raped a female passenger led to public outrage and caused the temporary ban of Uber in the Indian capital (Sharma 2014). Although Uber and Ola were quickly allowed to continue their services in the city, this event tarnished the image of the companies in a lasting manner. Platform cab drivers were collectively framed as sexual predators by the Indian media (Annavarapu 2021) and the companies were accused of turning a blind eye to the safety of its female passengers.

Another cause for concern over passengers' safety are the vast class differences between drivers and passengers. In 2017, Indian news media widely reported the case of an Uber cabdriver who had kidnapped his male passenger and demanded a ransom from his relatives (Bhardwaj & Raju 2017). This case connected to established concerns over the threat posed by poor male rural-to-urban migrants to the educated urban middle classes. As Srivastava (2015) has noted, the figure of the dangerous 'backward' villager coming to the city and engaging in criminal activities has informed the Indian middle classes' anxieties over urban safety for a long time.

Cases like these prompted Uber and Ola to implement various measures to ensure the safety of passengers. Both companies started conducting background checks of their cabdrivers' legal records and implemented a new feature in their apps that enables passengers to share their live location during their ride with friends and relatives. Additionally, safety became a keyword in public image campaigns of Uber and Ola who struggled to counter the middle classes' lack of trust in their business model. The basic assumption underlying these measures of platform cab services was that it was the passenger who took a risk when travelling with a platform cab. It was uniformly understood that the driver was the potential threat, and that the passenger was the potential victim inside the vehicle.

However, since the outbreak of COVID-19 in India, this boundary between perpetrators and victims gets increasingly blurred. Now, passengers also constitute a threat to the safety of cabdrivers who are forced to expose their bodies to the danger of contracting the disease from their passengers to earn a living. The failure of attempts at segregating the atmospheric space inside the platform cab – such as the installation of plastic screens – only underscores the fundamental linking of drivers' and passengers' bodies. This raises the question whose safety matters in times of COVID-19.

Interactions between cabdrivers and passengers are affected by this fundamental redistribution of risk in many ways. Some cabdrivers accuse passengers of violating sanitization and distancing measures during

rides. One of my interlocutors from Mumbai reported that he had witnessed an altercation between two of his neighbors and the Uber driver who had dropped them at their building. The cabdriver loudly complained that the passengers would endanger his health because they did not wear their face masks properly. The passengers were taken aback by these accusations. They did not expect a cabdriver to consider a passenger to be a potential threat to his health. When I spoke to the passengers some months later, they accused platform cabdrivers of refusing to get vaccinated and of not properly observing distancing and sanitization rules. At the same time, several platform cabdrivers I am in contact with have stopped driving for Uber and Ola. Most of them state that the high risk of getting infected by passengers, coupled with Uber's and Ola's cuts in incentives, constitutes an unfeasible situation where their concern over their health outweighs the financial benefits of working in the platform cab industry. Others have shifted to other jobs or continue driving for Uber and Ola only due to a lack of other options. These examples show that discussions about safe urban transport need to be reviewed in times of COVID-19. The atmospheric linking of drivers' and passengers' bodies inside the platform cab renders both parties vulnerable to the risk of infection. This redistribution of risk sits uneasily with the established separation between victims and perpetrators based on class and gender differences in the platform cab industry.

### Conclusion

The inclusive and exclusive potential of atmospheric citizenship studied by Ghertner in the context of air pollution in Delhi can also be observed in the field of platform cabs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Uber's and Ola's attempts at segregating the atmospheric space inside the platform cab by installing plastic screens replicated the logic of established practices of fencing off the bodies of the poor and the elite in residential spaces of Indian cities. However, these practices of spatial segregation proved to be unfeasible in the context of the platform cab and the highly mobile COVID-19 virus. More inclusive attempts at reducing the risk of infection during a ride in a platform cab have been developed but so far, their implementation does not live up to the companies' promises.

At the same time, the pandemic has led to a fundamental redistribution of risk in the platform cab industry. Since cabdrivers are forced to expose their bodies to those of passengers in order to make a living, they risk getting infected with COVID-19. Irrespective of these changes, established figures of passengers-as-victims and cabdrivers-as-perpetrators still inform common perceptions of urban transport in India. In this sense, notions of safety based on class and gender differences do not neatly map onto a biomedically informed notion of safety that dominates discussions about urban transport in the times of COVID-19.

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