

Transcript

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Interviews

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This interview was done as a conversation for Volume VI for Perspectives – JDMC.

Link of the Interview - <https://youtu.be/hNw8OYNAdT8>

RP¹: I am going to be conversing with Dr Gayatri Nair on work, labour and related issues in India. Gayatri Nair is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities in the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi, India. Her research interests lie in urban informal labour with an emphasis on the question of caste, gender and technology. With a focus on political economy, she has published work that interrogates the role of caste and gender in shaping traditional livelihoods and new forms of work, specifically platform-based gig work, also detailing how workers organise. This work has appeared in journals like *Contemporary South Asia*, *Journal of South Asian Development* and the *Sociological Bulletin*. Her recent book is *Set Adrift: Capitalist Transformations in Community Politics Along Mumbai's Shore*, published by Oxford University Press in 2021. Gayatri, I am so happy that you have agreed to this conversation, and I hope our readers benefit from your insights on work.

GN²: It is an absolute pleasure. It's always lovely to have this opportunity to discuss contemporary sociological issues with you, Rituparna.

RP: Your work expands this idea of work beyond formal employment to include gig, informal and domestic labour. So, how do you conceptualise work in contemporary India today?

GN: That's a question that I think any sociologist or anyone interested in the question of labour must actually first formally begin to interrogate, right? I think for a very long time, we have had these two conceptual categories of the formal and the informal that sort of guide our thinking on this. I think I have borrowed quite heavily from Jan Bremen's conceptualisation of this, which is to think of it in a far more fragmented way. So, you don't have neat categories of what constitutes the formal and the informal. And my own perspective on this is to think about

¹ Dr. Rituparna Patgiri, referred to as RP.

² Dr. Gayatri Nair, Referred to as GN.

the relationship between work and life a little bit more closely. So when I would want to understand what questions of work mean, it means that I would have to think about what work experience means, what is the kind of meaning it brings to one's life? What is the degree of security that it offers? Because that is, of course, a primary motive in how people understand what work the role that work plays in their life. And so in that sense, I think of work in this fragmented way of seeing the formal not as a neat category that offers you job security.

It's not like the sort of pinnacle of what we might understand, because that category itself has come to be transformed more recently. You can, I mean, all the IT layoffs that we are hearing about now are like, you know, a pretty stark example of what that means. And similarly, you know, the other side of this would be that insecure work, precarious work also offers opportunities for agency freedom for workers to sort of, you know, move in and out of different kinds of occupations. So neither one can be understood without a relationship to the other. And that's how I broadly approach this question of what work really entails and means in contemporary India. But I think the one thing to keep in mind here is that when we think about India as a whole, we are talking about a workforce that by and large finds itself in a great degree of insecurity around work, right? For the bulk of people in our country, work is by its very nature, insecure and precarious.

RP: You are a sociologist, and I want to know what sociological perspectives contribute to this understanding of work, you know, let's say, differently from economic ones.

GN: If I was to set this apart from mainstream economic understanding of work, right, I think a fundamental departure that sociology offers is to see economic institutions as also firmly embedded within the social, which means that, you know, even in mainstream economics, sure,

you can, you know, encounter ideas around gender and race and its intersection with market opportunities, etc. But I think a sociological perspective is fundamentally about interrogating structures and relations of power, right? And we are not bound by the institutional nature of that power itself. So we can also look at the informal nature of power and power dynamics and relations, and how it plays out. Fundamentally, what it allows one to do is not to think of these as neat and distinct categories.

When I say, you know, work in life, it means that, you know, what the mainstream economic understanding may largely sort of focus on paid economic opportunities, employment, unemployment, how it might get affected by, let's say, social categories of gender, race, caste, so on and so forth. But I think what a sociological perspective allows you to do is two things. One is to set this apart from an institutional dynamic alone. It allows you to think about the informal ways in which power may operate. So you may actually have access to opportunities, right, let's say formally through institutions. But what are the actual social relations and structures which may enable or disable one from actually accessing opportunities? Or let's say even if I am formally included, right, within an institutional framework that has been opened up for me, what is the actual reality of how I participate within those frameworks and within those institutional structures? And I think a sociological perspective by lending itself to an understanding of, say, social meaning, cultural factors, experiences, by being able to incorporate these ideas and these frameworks into our perspectives, it allows you to see it in a slight, in a more, I would perceive it as a more full manner, so that we don't have to sort of disaggregate an individual into their work life and their home life.

But we can see them more holistically to try and understand what would be how they engage, you know, in the family, in the world, in paid work, let's say outside, what is the dynamics between the unpaid work that they do, the domestic work that they do at home and that paid work outside or lack of paid work outside. So I think these are how a sociological perspective can contribute, right, bringing in these dimensions that tend to be sort of laid out or kept out of mainstream economic models and frameworks. So your work on gig workers talks about the insecurity that they face, and we also see a lot happening in the current, you know, let's say, public sphere discussions on gig workers and their rights.

RP: How do we think about this precarity and the structural natures of it?

GN: That's a really important question for our current times, because if we want to understand how and why gig work has expanded to the degree that it has today, a lot of this comes down to structural questions, right? I think one of the most significant drivers of that has been what has been happening with jobs and employment in the last decade or so, right? For years, of course, in India, you know, we've been for many, many decades, right? We've been talking about jobless growth as a feature of the Indian economy, right? And I think part of what that sets up is that we think of any job as being a valuable job to have. I think this has become particularly stark more recently around, I see this a lot in social media discourse today around gig work as well, where, you know, every time workers are organising to demand better conditions, you'll find a lot of social media commentators talking about the fact that, you know, at least you have a job and the comparison should be with the fact that you can have no job at all. And so any job is better than no job at all. I think that's a false choice to present. But it is precisely the structural imperative that pushes people into seeking any kind of work, right?

Because being unemployed is not an option, really. Again, we've been talking about informality and insecurity being pretty much the, you know, nature of work that is broadly available. So when you are comparing it with, I guess, other forms of work which are also similarly insecure, similarly precarious, this becomes another addition to it. But I think another major factor to keep in mind is that, actually, we have seen rising unemployment in the last few years, which means even those narrow job opportunities that did exist before are declining. And because being out of work is not really an option for most people, we don't have welfare systems that are so strong as to sustain you through long periods of unemployment, you find that a lot of people are going into any form of work being available.

Let's face it, you know, gig work is a very quick and easily available form of work to do, right? A lot of times in my interviews during the pandemic, when I was talking to people, because I encountered a large number of gig workers who had very different occupations, say, two months before, three months before they joined. School teachers, you know, web designers, right, who were coming into gig work because they had lost their jobs during the pandemic. So most of them were telling me about how they could basically sign on to gig work within a matter of hours, right? So, in terms of accessing a job, if that is your most immediate need, it is one of the quickest things that is actually available. This is the structural context in which a lot of people are moving towards gig work. We shouldn't, therefore, read it as something that is necessarily a free choice, right? It is, you know, it's something that you are choosing as the lesser of evils versus the fact of complete unemployment, which, you know, who knows how long that would last as well. So it's important to kind of bear that in mind.

I would just close with saying one thing, which is that in countries like ours where insecurity is prevalent, where, you know, unemployment is prevalent, this idea that any job is a good job, right, it's all the more important to question that in our context, because, of course, a lot of exploitative work gets passed off as being a valuable job just because it is offering you something. But I think it's imperative to say that we can raise the bar a bit higher and also demand that jobs that are being created are of a certain decent quality. And I am using decent drawing from the ILO definition of decent work, that we can have a bare minimum that we understand as being the marker of a good job. That's not a bar that we should be compromising on. It's interesting because you talked about the pandemic, you know, and you also looked at intensification of control over labour through the algorithms that, you know, the basically platform economy can exercise. And we were talking about the social identities of the, you know, margins and that which gets exploited.

RP: How do caste and class intersect with algorithmic management in shaping some of these experiences for the gig workers?

GN: The work that I had done was basically to look at what was happening to workers during the pandemic. And that really gave me this insight into how this was a period when algorithmic management was expanding, you know, in platform, location-based platform work, again, driven by these structural imperatives. You had a larger number of people coming onto platforms.

I think that allowed for a certain kind of ability on the part of platforms to be able to expand on this control without too much pushback at that time, knowing that there was a lack of

alternative jobs that people could move to. So that was a sort of ground feature of how labour control expands. But the way in which we can think of how it coincides with social identities, right, is a very particular kind of manifestation that it takes across different kinds of platforms. My work also looks at, you know, different kinds of sectors. So in each sector, you'll see this operating in a slightly different way. But essentially, when we're thinking about how control of labour is framed, right, it is undeniable that the relationship as it is conceived between a platform and a worker is a hierarchical one.

But what platforms also algorithmically establish is a hierarchical relationship between the consumer and the worker who is providing the service. Right. And what gets baked into this is an existing sort of social hierarchy of caste identity, where there is a presumption that the person providing you a service is coming from a lower caste position compared to the person who is receiving a service, who assumes is, you know, one assumes is of a higher caste service. This is an assumption I am seeing on the part of both the platforms, as well as on the part of the consumers themselves. Right. So the way it would emerge is, for instance, in the particular, you know, a very good example, I think, of this is to look at how, you know, hygiene and health, right, which became the sort of major concern during the period of the pandemic, gets organised into the algorithm and gets baked into the algorithmic practises on different platforms.

So during that period, it was very common for us to see a sort of icon once you have, let's say, ordered something on an app, right? You see an icon of the worker moving towards you and, you know, moving towards your home. And very often there would be a small bubble next to them which gave a temperature, their body temperature, right, because of course, fever was the symptom of having COVID. And so this was used as a marker by platforms to talk about the

quality of service that they are providing. What I found very interesting and, you know, what of course workers were also constantly pointing to is that through a set of different practises, right. But this, I think, embodies it very clearly. You are setting this up in a way to suggest that workers have, you know, are potential carriers of disease and infection, but consumers themselves are not, because nobody was asking consumers to, you know, put forward their own body temperatures and make sure that they are also not endangering the life of the workers.

So it sets it up as a relation where one is like a potent body, you know, who can carry infection and disease to your home, and they should, you know, be accepting of whatever comes their way via the consumer. So it's a very clear hierarchical relationship that sets up, and I think also plays into these ideas about, you know, who carries disease, who, you know, whose body is hygienic and who maintains hygiene and who doesn't, right, by running these constant temperature checks. So that's one way of doing it.

But the other way, which I found very interesting and came up in a lot of interviews that I was having at that time, was that so many consumers were so concerned with their own health and safety, right, in the same kind of vein as this temperature check, that they would subject workers coming into their homes. They still want the services, right? So you're inviting workers into your home, but they would, you know, make them endure all kinds of practises that they felt were, you know, important to their safety. So, you know, sometimes sort of drenching them in sanitiser in winter, right, and then making them perform services after that, while being sort of wet from all of this, the way in which they would engage them.

You can see this very, very clearly in home services, where someone enters the home, and where are they allowed to be inside the home? Are they allowed to sit? Are they not allowed to sit? Irrespective of the kind of service that is actually being performed. And here, what becomes important about the algorithm is that there is no way for the algorithm to capture any of this practise, right? So, any of the discrimination that a worker faces, there is no way for a worker to report it, per se, because even the grievance redressal process has been automated at this time. So you get given a set number of options, right, within which this is not one of them.

Those automated practises make it harder and harder for workers to actually report cases where they are enduring this form of discrimination. The other very stark way in which it came out was a certain degree of, I think, disposability that was, you know, a marker of the worker's body as being disposable. Of course, through the fact that, you know, you can receive, you can, you know, probably get infected in contact with the consumer, because one doesn't know how safe the consumer has been.

But also, you know, in, for instance, taxi drivers bringing up the fact that they would be, you know, their services would be booked. And then at the end of the ride, when they were dropping someone off, they would, you know, some just as they're getting out of the car, indicate to them that, look, I'm actually COVID positive and you better do take care of yourself and, you know, get tested, et cetera. So they were saying that, you know, it was almost like our lives were not valuable at all.

And there was no way in which this could be accounted for in terms of our own safety. So I think this, you know, shows how a certain caste class dynamic comes to be inbuilt in terms of

setting a hierarchical relationship up, which the algorithm also takes as a given. So it's far from being neutral, actually.

Yeah, I think that's a popular misconception to think that technology is neutral. So in the present times, we see that these delivery workers were able to get the platform economy and the companies to take the 10-minute delivery, you know, away. So, how do you understand organised labour movements and strategies that may emerge amongst India's gig workers, which will challenge this platform governance? I think that's been one of the most interesting developments to observe, you know, as it's been unfolding, because a lot of the early, particularly the early scholarship and platform work, you know, when it was coming out in 2015, 16, around that time, the assumption was pretty much globally that workers are going to be not as organised compared to, you know, more traditional sectors of work, because there is no central workplace, which was often seen as the most important factor in workers coming together and being able to organise, right.

And then the processes also sort of set them apart. So I think it's been fascinating to observe how, across the world and in India in particular, gig workers have been able to organise themselves very strongly. And what has been particularly remarkable here is that I think that they are going back to the idea of unions.

So you can see a continuing relevance of the, you know, the organisational form itself of unions in terms of their ability to lobby with the government. And I think what has stood out is that, you know, it seems like a two pronged strategy, because in the initial days, pretty much what was happening in India, in contrast to what was happening with platform workers organising

in other contexts, was that in a lot of other countries, Europe, US, etc., there was the emphasis was largely on getting recognition as being a worker, right. And this is not something that was, you know, seen in the early period of platform workers organising in the Indian context.

There was a lot of push around questions of social security, which, in fact, has translated into social security bills coming out. So it again is a testament to the strength of organising of workers and organisations and the importance of the questions of workers being able to lobby with the government and be able to exert some influence in terms of public policy and law. But I think the other important factor here is that they have been addressing this question of labour conditions. that is something that we see, again, more strongly in the recent 10 minute delivery, you know, the removal of the 10 minute delivery time frame, because in terms of taking direct action, as we may understand it, right, protests, strikes, etc., here, the concern has largely been around asking platforms to take responsibility over actual conditions of work, the hours of work, the payments that they receive, the time in which they actually have to work, discrimination that they encounter, questions of safety, right, so on and so forth. And I think this has been one of the first significant victories in that sense around questions of labour conditions, because this is something that platforms have really steered clear of to take, to really assume a responsibility that they are not willing to because they claim that they are not employers, so they bear no responsibility over these factors. So it is a significant victory of platform worker organising to be able to have gotten this.

I remember a journalist sort of speaking to me when this was happening, and they were asking at that time, the 10-minute window had not been removed. And they were asking, you know, should this be read as a victory or a loss. And I was saying that the fact that this has become a

part of public conversation, precisely by platform workers coming together and on social media publicising some of this, has made a case for how this is actually a significant win. So I think bringing labour conditions to the forefront has been the main challenge, but now also a main success of how platform workers have organised.

RP: Moving on to, you know, another kind of conversation on, you know, work that you have done, how can we think about care, emotional labour, and invisible work within the broader labour framework?

GN: I think the way that I have done this is to lean on the social reproduction framework, which sort of allows one to think of this. When you do not set work in life up as completely distinct categories, but you see them as blurred, you know, the boundaries are fairly blurred. And, you know, one cannot think of how one gets, you know, from the starting point of how do you get ready to go to work? And what does it take for you to be right, ready in that sense to be able to go to work? You realise how much labour goes on, goes into bringing you to that point itself. That's where these questions of care, work, emotional labour, you know, domestic work, etc., all become very, very significant. So, in terms of thinking of it as a form of social reproduction, I think then you can see that there is this conceptualisation can allow you to understand what is the role of this work that often gets invisibilized in producing, you know, the worker who is ready to go out and engage in paid work outside the home, etc.

But it also helps you think about what the interrelationships between those are, right? What is the way in which for me to be able to to be able to go outside and, let's say, do a day of if I'm a platform work? If I have to do a day of platform work, what is the way in which I engage in

that as a woman? And what is the way in which I engage in that as a man? What is the way in which I engage in that, as a, you know, let's say, upper-class salaried professional versus the way in which I may engage in it as a domestic worker, right? And whose labour are we really leaning on? So I think a lot of this has to do with visibilizing what tends to be invisibilized and what doesn't even get to be constituted as a form of work, right? I think it has taken us a fairly long period of time to establish these as categories of analysis, not just description, right? To say that one can think about how care work and domestic work need to be considered as distinct analytical categories and how that contributes to our understanding of labour has been something that, you know, feminist and social reproductive analysis has been contributing towards. And I think that's a very, very, for scholars in labour, I think it's important to be very attentive to those connections that actually exist and the particular role of gender. But again, it's important to think about how gender intersects with questions of class, how it intersects with questions of caste.

One work that I had done sometime before was to look at how, you know, women who come from, let's say, middle to upper-class households, households where you hire domestic labour, right? In those households, how do we understand the question of domestic and care work? Because there is a certain outsourcing of labour that is happening onto other workers, right? But these other women. And so across these categories of class, what are the commonalities of gender that may define their contribution to domestic and care work, both in their own household settings and external household settings? But also in terms of class, what would be the kind of distinctions that it really produces, right? Like, what does it allow a salaried woman to maybe end up doing? How does she sort of expand her domain outside of the family and the home in a way that may not be entirely available to the domestic worker who's also engaging in paid work outside, but may not be able to do so similarly?

RP: In your work on the fishing communities, what does livelihood reveal about the politics of work and resistance among informal workers?

GN: One important factor to keep in mind is questions of identity and a certain kind of social and cultural identity that gets associated with engaging in a particular form of work, especially if that form of work has been generational. In this case, the work that I have done in the fisheries, this is a caste-based occupation that has been performed generationally over a period of time. The most significant factor there was this question of a cultural identity around what it means to be a fisher and what it means to participate in fishing. A social identity in terms of the role in the largest city, in terms of whether a city has an imagination for livelihoods, especially those that have been carried on for centuries over a period of time. Do you actually have room to imagine it as being a part of the city? And that was the background for trying to understand this question of resistance and how one really encounters changes in the form of work yourself. What has stood out for me there has been this question that, I mean, of course, identity is not again a stable sort of category, that the embodiment of that identity can also shift and change, and how people think about it would shift and change over a period of time, in response to broader social changes that are also happening. But I think what it most particularly highlighted was the fact that when you have broader conditions within which livelihoods, occupations or social changes, broadly speaking, are essentially happening, and there is someone who falls on the margins of that change, whose interests are not being really factored into how the change really unfolds.

There is someone who falls on the margins of that change, right, whose interests are not being really factored into how the change really unfolds. In those scenarios, identity can likely come to be mobilised in a certain sort of particular kinds of ways. And I think what the work in the fisheries really allowed me to see was that there were two very distinct ways in which identity could be incorporated, there was a model of identity incorporation into resistance, which was built on a notion of wider solidarities and trying to think about marginalisation as not singularly affecting a single, you know, one community, but in relationship to many other communities. There was another way in which it was being understood as a form of marginalisation that was happening to one community. And the response to which was to come off as better compared to other communities. So it's again, setting it up in terms of a hierarchy rather than a solidarity.

So I think the point to think about here is that the processes of change will always have, given how they are structurally set up, some winners and some who are constituted as being on the margins, and the politics around the margins is not predefined, right? And it can, it is open to multiple interpretations, and it is open to multiple possibilities. And it really comes down to questions of how communities begin to configure this idea of an identity for themselves. You know, how can research on work inform labour rights, activism and policy, especially, let's say, for marginalised groups? Is there any possibility that you see? Absolutely see possibility one, because I don't think we should assume that there's a distinction between the research, or who does the research and who is in the community.

You can see a lot of this happening within the work around fisheries. Also, there are many young scholars who come from the community itself, who are also using their research to sort of rethink about, you know, how community politics is organised, how community activism or

labour activism around these questions is organised. So that's one way I see this in platform work. Also, increasingly, there are a lot of research partnerships that we have between workers, worker unions, worker organisations, etc. So one is not seeing these as distinct categories. But the other way I see this is to think about the fact that a lot of work on labour, right, because it's also, at some level, a mapping exercise of what is really going on, and then being able to interrogate it, it has a very significant role to actually play in policy formulation. Because you can see changes unfold, you can see what the experience of it is. And you can therefore directly have certain insight to offer in terms of how new policies around, let's say, regulation can be shaped. So there is no stark boundary, again, between these fields. Increasingly, as a larger field in the discipline, we are questioning these kinds of relationships in terms of the relationship between the researcher and the subject. And we're rethinking it and not, you know, typically extractive ways as it once used to be, but perhaps in more productive ways that they could actually come together. In labour, I think labour studies in particular, this has, you know, that we have a roadmap for this happening because we see a lot of collaboration taking place.

RP: Last question, Gayatri, as we reach the end of the conversation, what pressing concerns about labour and work need more scholarly attention in the near future?

GN: Yeah. I think, in particular, we need to pay attention to shifts that are happening technologically, of course. But also, I would say that we need to read against the grain a little bit here, not assume that all new technology and of course, I'm particularly referring to AI here, where we assume that these new shifts are going to bring in large scale transformations, I think it would be good, you know, as any scholar to enter this with a sceptical mind and begin by posing certain questions to it. So that's one thing to not maybe just assume that technological

shift leads to change, and to interrogate that closely. But the other major factor, which I feel requires closer attention, is this question of workers organising. There has been a lot of transformation and change in how workers organise more recently. And I think we need to pay closer attention to how they organise, what are the forms of organisation happen? How does that respond to the larger social and political context that we find ourselves in? There's been some recent work on this, you know, Ernesto Noronha's work comes to mind here, but there has not been a lot more. There's a lot more scope here to actually rethink this question from both the larger social movements perspective, to take that forward, but also in terms of thinking about, you know, labour organising, and to pay closer attention to the dynamics within labour organising as they're emerging today.

RP: Thank you so much for this very insightful conversation and for sharing your expertise.