The Digital Transformation?
A study of Ola Auto

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1. INTRODUCTION
Autorickshaws are a ubiquitous part of the public transport system in many cities in India. They are categorized as commercial passenger vehicles by the Motor Vehicles Act (1988) and fall within the purview of the State Transport Department. Autorickshaws perform the role of providing last mile or feeder connectivity, and a door-to-door alternative for private transport (Mani, Pai, & Aggarwal, 2012). The user-groups of the autorickshaws are wide ranging, although typically users belong to the middle/upper-middle economic strata of society (CiSTUP, 2012).

Easy access and availability of affordable mobile phones have led to an increase in the number of mobile-phone based apps, serving a wide array of interests and purposes. Digital cab-hailing is one such service, based on the peer-to-peer (p2p) model2 (Ahmed et al., 2016). While services such as Ola and Uber began as p2p cab hailing apps, some like Ola have begun offering such p2p based ride hailing for autorickshaws as well.

Our interest in this study was piqued by a curiosity to understand the reasons for autorickshaw drivers joining and using these app-based services, given the practice of hailing them off the road has been a part of the daily urban experience for a few decades in India. The paper is structured as follows. In the next section we provide a brief background about autorickshaws in Bangalore, and digital technologies to hail rides. In Section 3 we discuss our method, and in Section 4 we present our findings.

2. BACKGROUND
Autorickshaws in Bangalore
Autorickshaws, or commonly called 'autos', while only 2.7% of all vehicles in Bangalore, accounted for 13% of all trips made in 2008 (CiSTUP, 2012; DULT, 2011). Currently, Bangalore has approximately 125,000 autos operating with permits (authors’ interviews). To work as an auto driver, one has to obtain an autorickshaw driving license, and an autorickshaw permit (CiSTUP, 2012; authors’ interviews). Auto drivers typically belong to the economic margins of society, and hail from Bangalore and its surrounding areas (authors’ interviews; Ahmed et al., 2016; CiSTUP, 2012).

Autorickshaw fares3 are set by the local municipal authority, Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), in consultation with autorickshaw unions, and public representatives, taking into consideration aspects such as consumer price index, inflation, and fuel rates (authors’ interviews). Often, rides aren’t accepted by auto drivers even though it is mandated by law for them to accept all

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2 In peer-to-peer (p2p) cab hailing services, unlike the older model of operation where one request was assigned to one driver, a request is sent out to many drivers in the vicinity. The first one to accept the request gets the ride. Uber is often considered the app that popularised this model globally.
3 The current minimum fare in Bangalore is Rs. 25 (for the first 1.8 kilometres), with an increment of Rs.13 for every kilometre.
ride-requests. Many times, higher fares are demanded of the passengers, or the ride-request refused (CiSTUP, 2012).

Digital Technologies in Transportation

Autos in India are a common mode of intermediate public transport (IPT). The most important technology within autos is the meter. In 2011, the Transport Department and the Regional Transport Office (RTO) in Bangalore mandated that all autos must have a meter with a digital screen, prior to which they used a mechanical meter (CiSTUP, 2012).

With increasing accessibility to phones\(^4\) (mobile and landline) in the recent past there have been several attempts to establish call based hailing of autos. In Bangalore, between 2007 and 2009, one such initiative-Easy Auto, was spearheaded by the drivers of Adarsha Auto Union (CiSTUP, 2012). The idea, according to the managing director of Easy Auto, was “to create a database of registered auto drivers and passengers and use technology to connect the two; thereby benefitting both parties and making auto commuting a hassle free and pleasant experience” (CiSTUP, 2012 pp.131). It followed the aggregator model, in which a passenger could call a centralised number and place a request for an auto. CiSTUP (2012) attributes the failure of this pilot to: lack of a sustainable revenue model; how a trip had to be pre-planned; and Easy Auto not owning the autos but acting as an aggregator.

The concept of an aggregator itself is not a new one. Internet and mobile app based aggregators are but new entrants into the scene offering cab services that can be hailed through an app, acting as digital middlemen (Isaac, 2014). In the recent past, while some app-based autorickshaw-hailing services have succeeded and continue to be offered, others (such as Uber Auto) have been put on hold following failed pilots. A relatively successful service was started by Ola Cabs\(^5\) in 2014 - Ola Auto. It allows auto drivers to register with Ola, and for customers to hail autos through the Ola app. Ola is the platform provider and does not own any autos. Ola Auto has expanded now to 24 cities in India (authors’ interviews). Ahmed et al. (2016) in their study on the work practice of auto drivers using Ola Auto in Bangalore, show how signing up on to Ola Auto does little to reduce the “uncertainty that characterizes an auto driver’s day”, and does not necessarily change their work practice in any significant way.

Similar to Polanyi’s (1944) description of the Great Transformation brought by the Industrial revolution, information communication technologies are heralded to bring about the digital revolution by acting as the basis of social organisation and resource distribution (Castells, 1997). However, not only is the use of technology shaped by the context of its use (Bijker, 1997), technology also acts as an amplifier of prevailing structures and practices (Toyama, 2011). What role, then, are technologies like Ola Auto playing in the context of the autorickshaw sector in cities like Bangalore, where autos have always occupied a significant role?

We explore how the emergence of p2p apps like Ola is affecting perceptions of auto drivers. To delve deeper into this, we present from the perspective of the auto driver, their perceptions towards fellow auto drivers and IPT providers; and the practices of hailing rides and accessing of passengers.


\(^5\) Ola Cabs is owned by the company ANI Technologies Private Limited, and began operations in December of 2010 as a telephone and Internet based cab hailing and aggregating service. Currently present in over 100 cities in India, Ola Cabs is one of the largest cab aggregators in India. See the about page for more details: https://www.olacabs.com/info/about_us, last accessed on 10th June 2016.
3. METHOD

In this paper, we answer the following questions:

- What is undergoing a transformation? What role is played by the Ola Auto?
- How has the introduction of Ola Auto changed the way auto drivers and passengers interact in hailing the auto?

In order to answer the above questions, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with respondents within the autorickshaw sector (n=55), who represented diverse interests. Our interview respondents included auto drivers (n=28), representatives of Auto Unions (n=3), and a representative from Ola (n=1). We also conducted four focus group discussions at different autorickshaw stands along the same Outer Ring Road corridor. Table 1 presents details about the respondents.

In each of these interviews we sought to understand the respondent’s take on auto drivers within the transport system in the city; the Ola Auto app; and peer-to-peer ride sharing technologies. In order to capture different experiences and voices, we classified auto drivers as Ola users, non Ola users, drivers who had dropped out of Ola, Ola Premium users and Ola non-Premium users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews with</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Location of auto stand for the FGDs</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ola Auto Premium drivers</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Popular shopping mall in North East Bangalore</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ola Auto non-Premium drivers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Ola auto drivers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Semi-residential area in the outskirts of Bangalore</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives from Unions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Opposite a major software services company</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative from Ola</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Major intersection in the South of Bangalore</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of respondents</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Total number of respondents across four FGDs</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Interview and FGD respondents

The interviews were conducted primarily around popular spots of Ola Auto to make sure that the respondents had either heard or used Ola Auto themselves. Areas such as Koramangala, Bellandur, BTM Layout, Sarjapur Road, Marathahalli etc., along one stretch of the Outer Ring Road in Bangalore, (the IT/BT corridor as it is colloquially known) are commonly perceived by auto drivers to be good locations to use Ola Auto. We chose auto drivers in these locations, by hailing an auto using the app. Prior to beginning the interview, we informed the respondents about the objective and purpose of the interview, and got their verbal consent. We audio-recorded the interviews when the respondents consented to it, and in other cases we took elaborate field notes. The interviews were conducted in Kannada or Hindi with the respondent choosing the language they were comfortable with.

The data used in writing the paper are the recordings, transcriptions, and field notes from each interview. In the article, we use the term “auto drivers” to mean autorickshaw drivers; a request for a ride as a “ride-request”. We interviewed Mr. Manjunath and Mr. Kempegowda, office bearers of
Adarsha Auto and Taxi Union, and Mr. Raghu who is the Secretary of ARDU-CITU\(^6\). Here, we term responses from them as responses of auto unions. We interviewed Mr. Nitesh Prakash, Senior Director of Operations at Ola Cabs. Responses from Mr. Nitesh of Ola have been termed as responses of Ola. With this as the backdrop, we now present the findings from our research.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

What is undergoing a transformation? What role is played by the Ola Auto? In this paper, we primarily focus on the auto hailing process, from the perspective of the auto driver. Figure 1 shows the entire process of using the Ola Auto app, both from the passenger’s perspective as well as the driver’s perspective, from requesting a ride to completion of the ride.

![Figure 1 Process of hailing an Ola Auto (authors’ interviews)](image)

\(^6\) While Bangalore has multiple autorickshaw unions, ARDU-CITU and Adarsha Auto and Taxi Union are the only ones registered as trade unions.
To understand the transformation it is imperative to look at why auto drivers are joining the Ola Auto app, especially given the process of hailing an auto ride off the road has remained unchanged for a few decades.

Auto drivers reported two primary motivations for joining Ola, firstly an expected increase in number of rides undertaken in a day; and a reduction in “rounding time”. Rounding is where auto drivers go from one location to another, looking for a passenger (Ahmed et al., 2016). With Ola Auto, while they still need to travel a distance (maximum of 2 kilometres) to pick up a passenger, they argue that this is more fruitful as they are assured of a passenger and a consequent fare at the end of this endeavour. This decrease in “rounding time” helps them reduce sunk costs (consuming fuel in driving along the roads waiting to be hailed) thus making more efficient use of their time (rather than waiting for a passenger). The use of the app is in these cases is leading auto drivers to relook at elements that are central to their work, such as rides and rounding time.

Ola is also shaping the way auto drivers look at other providers of IPT such as cabs. An oft-repeated refrain was about how cabs under the Ola platform (and other aggregators) have been receiving a different regulatory treatment as opposed to auto drivers. Some cabs currently ply at rates which are almost half of the auto fare or the government mandated minimum cab fare. As explained by Mr. Manjunath of Adarsha Union

“Autos need a colour, drivers need uniform, they have rules ... there is a meter. None of the taxi drivers have uniform, or any of this. There are so many conditions for autos. ... We protested recently asking why there are one set of rules for us and another for them.”

Further, respondents shared how cabs are able to negotiate the permit system which is not the case with autos. Some auto drivers argue that these factors give cab drivers an unfair advantage which is beginning to increasingly affect the earning opportunities of auto drivers on and off the platform. This is leading to an increasingly common perception that cabs and autos are competitors, rather than a complementary set of IPT options, especially given the mismatch in the fares of the two.

Thus while shifting and transforming of these perceptions may take time, we see that the uptake of Ola Auto is seemingly leading to a rethink of the prevailing perceptions about the number of daily rides, rounding time, and fellow IPT.

How is this transformation taking place? How has the introduction of Ola Auto changed the way auto drivers and passengers interact in hailing the auto?

To understand how this transformation is taking place, it is necessary to understand what aspects of an auto driver’s daily practice is being influenced or affected by using the Ola Auto app. We focus on how auto drivers and passengers interact in hailing the auto and how this is undergoing a change with the use of the app. We delve further into the ideas of Ola Premium; and the right to the passenger to elaborate these aspects.

**Ola Premium**

Ola Premium is a paid-feature recently introduced by Ola for its auto drivers. Its primary feature is that it automatically allots a ride to the nearest Premium driver. As Ola explained, these drivers are given preferential treatment in being allotted rides, and only in the absence of Premium drivers within a 2 kilometre radius, the ride-request gets shared with non-Premium drivers. Initially, Ola Premium was a service available by-invite to select auto drivers. Due to popular demand the option of shifting to Ola Premium has been available to all drivers in the app, as reported by multiple auto drivers and

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7 Ola Premium is available on a weekly fee of Rs.90, paid by the auto driver to Ola.
confirmed by Ola. The rationale for introducing Ola Premium, according to Ola, was to enhance the value of Ola to its driver-partners, as it improves the chances of an auto driver receiving a ride request, and hence getting more rides, and consequently more earnings. As an auto driver said

“It automatically allots duties, which means we only have two seconds waiting now, since we immediately get another duty”.

18 out of the 24 Ola Auto drivers we interviewed were either currently or previously Ola Premium drivers. Some of the auto drivers who had opted out of the Premium service reported that the automatic allotment of rides in Premium created constant pressure on them; and did not give them a choice in selecting destinations that suited them. As one of the drivers, who drives primarily along the Outer Ring Road between Silk Board and Marathahalli, recalled:

“People are not willing to wait here. They expect us to pick them up within two minutes of the booking, and with Premium it used to accept all the bookings. With the traffic on this road, how is it possible to reach anywhere in two minutes? I got a lot of cancellations because of this, and it created a lot of pressure. So I gave it up.”

Non-Premium drivers on the other hand, felt that with the introduction of Premium, they received fewer ride requests. Hence, even within Ola drivers, there is an urgent need being felt to shift to Ola Premium, in the process affecting the way auto drivers interact and engage with the platform itself.

Ola Premium poses peculiar challenges to both non-Premium and Premium drivers. While the Motor Vehicles Act (1988) states that all ride-requests should be accepted, prevalent practice in Bangalore (and a number of other cities) is that the auto driver decides whether or not to accept a ride based on destination according to his convenience (CiSTUP, 2012; authors’ interviews), perception of traffic conditions. However, this innovation of Ola, while within the legal boundaries, places constraints on the kinds of choices a driver can make, and raises the costs of cancelling a ride (as declining a ride would negatively affect their rating, and would also make it difficult for the driver to meet the daily target for number of rides).

Right to the Passenger
Ola Auto replicates the on-ground ride-seeking process. The passenger enters details of intended destination along with their pick up location, which is then shared with the auto driver to accept or reject the ride (in case of non-Premium drivers). In Ola Auto, rides are allotted on first-come-first serve basis, with Premium drivers enjoying the first preference.

However, typically at auto-stands or on roads, the practice among auto drivers is to queue up behind other waiting autos, giving the ones who are ahead of them in the queue the first chance to the passenger (authors’ interviews). Some drivers, particularly ones who are not enrolled in Ola, reported that with the entry of Ola Auto, given that rides are booked by passengers through an app, the passenger is picked up by a driver not the first in the queue. As an auto driver discusses:

“We have been standing in the queue here since 2 PM. It is now 5 PM. We don’t get many rides in the afternoons anyway. Now in the evening also, we have to be lucky to get a passenger. That’s why we stand at the entrance of this mall and ask courteously if people want a ride. But all that is no use when people book an Ola, and an Ola auto comes to pick them up .... How is this fair, tell me?”
Who, then, enjoys the first right to the passenger? In following the p2p model; and preferential allotment of rides to Premium drivers, the Ola Auto app doesn’t follow the same set of rules, thus changing the way auto drivers access passengers. Not only was this “not the right thing to do”, according to non-Ola auto drivers, some also argued that this had a very direct consequence on their earnings as they now had to spend longer times waiting for passengers.

These examples demonstrate how the entry of Ola and its use is affecting the prevailing practices and norms amongst auto drivers. While some of these have a more direct economic impact such as preferential treatment of Premium drivers, others involve the questions of justness and fairness. With the increasing uptake of Ola Premium (according to Ola) one is forced to ask what it means for the auto driver and his ability to make choices. Further, the choice to be on Ola or otherwise (including Premium) has a consequence on fellow-providers of the same service, in terms of who gets the first right to the passenger.

5. CONCLUSION
In this paper, we explore the nature of the changes taking place with the use of apps like Ola Auto. We present our study on how the uptake and use of Ola Auto has affected how passengers and auto drivers interact. Based on interviews and focus group discussions with 51 auto drivers, 3 members of auto unions and one representative from Ola, we presented how prevailing practices of hailing an auto, and the norms around the first right to the passenger are being affected currently by the use of a platform like Ola Auto.

Within the larger question of transformation, we argue that while certain perceptions and practices are being affected, it remains to be seen what the introduction of this technology means in the longer run. Similar to Ahmed et al. (2016), we too see that the auto drivers’ daily routines are not shifting with the introduction of Ola Auto. However, Ola Auto has certainly led to the emergence of new sites and topics of conversation. It challenges prevailing practices, at the same time reifying current shared norms. Technology enacts itself within a context, in the process being shaped and shaping the social context around it. This study brings to light some of the changes and influences to perceptions (towards rounding time; cab drivers) and practices (accepting of ride-requests; right to the passenger) that are being brought about by the uptake of Ola Auto. However, for apps like Ola Auto to be seen as transformative, they would need to play a decisive role in shaping perceptions and practices of those on and off the platform; and sustaining them over time.

In presenting this work to the larger audience at the workshop, we seek to situate our study of Ola Auto and its effects on auto drivers within the larger transformation that Bangalore is undergoing.

6. REFERENCES


CiSTUP. (2012). A Study of the Autorickshaw Sector in Bangalore City - Suggestions for Improved Governance. IISc.
Acknowledgements
This paper is based on the study looking at moral economies in the use of digital apps like Ola Auto, and will be presented at the 28th Annual Conference of the Society for Advancement of Socioeconomics (SASE), in June 2016.

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