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People as Platforms: Urban Informalities in the Making of Digital Ride-Hailing Platforms in Delhi, India

My dissertation examines the (in)formal actions and spatial politics underlying digital ride-hailing platforms Ola and Uber in Delhi and the National Capital Region (Delhi-NCR) in India. Acknowledging that platforms embed themselves through algorithmic exploitation of informal labour and regulatory arbitrage, my dissertation seeks to reorient critical attention to long-standing, multi-scalar, socio-spatial conflicts over urban development and mobilities of Delhi-NCR, which I argue, are intrinsic to their conjunctural geographies. Based on interviews with Ola and Uber taxi drivers, platform agents, labour collectives, passengers and organisers, and participant observation at key infrastructural digital-urban interfaces, I attempt to understand how ride-hailing platforms are produced by informality and in turn, reproduce as well as introduce newer forms of urban informality in their spatial, economic, and social dimensions. The key question that drives my research is—how do actions and politics of platform architects and labour intersect with fractious articulations of urban development, mobilities and infrastructures in Delhi-NCR? In answering this question, I hope to foreground the role of space and the multiple meanings and identities it generates as a constitutive element of platform capitalism, and contribute to urban and digital geography, critical data and mobility studies.