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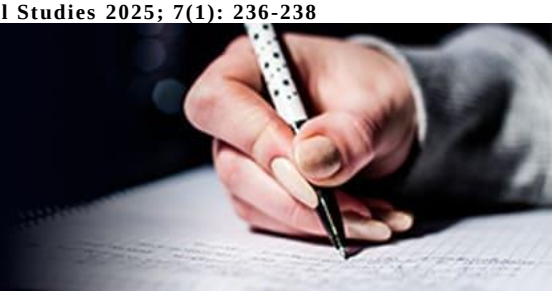

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Platform co-operatives in the age of gig economy: A case study of SEWA cooperative federation

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Abstract
Digitalization and technology have changed the face of India. Emerging technology and AI have had the most impact in the service sector. Many digital platforms have come into service in recent years like Zomato, Uber, Ola, Urban company. Even though gig economy offers the participants a feeling of freedom of work hours and autonomy, it has been wildly criticized for its treatment regarding the employees. Platform cooperativism is a combination of cooperative initiative and digital platforms attempting to provide the benefits of both the entities. Combining the democratic governance in co-operative societies and autonomy of digital platforms is quickly catching up in our country. This paper is a case study of such an initiative located in Gujarat named SEWA co-operative federation on how they make use of digital platform for connectivity and networking.

Keywords: Gig economy, cooperative society, platform Cooperativism

Introduction
Gig economy is characterised by a loosely regulated labour market where the employees are mostly engaged in "gig" work or freelance work. Digital platforms form a crucial element of the gig economy. In India, the gig economy witnessed a rapid growth because of COVID pandemic. Businesses like Zomato, Uber had immense profits. The sudden spike in unemployment due to COVID also contributed to a larger workforce joining the various platform-based service companies. Smartphones and cheap internet allow access to absolutely anyone interested. The gig workers enjoy flexibility over work hours and better pay when compared to the informal sector in India. However, there are certain inherent limitations possessed by the gig economy. The gig workers are not provided with any kind of benefits or protection including a casual leave. The flexibility provided by various platforms are most of the time conditional. The workers must finish certain level within a fixed period. Overall, the gig economy in India presents a promising but complex picture. It offers flexibility and income opportunities, but ensuring worker rights and social security remains crucial. India is a land of well-established co-operative movements, especially in rural area. It has gained momentum after the independence of India. The milk cooperative society in Anand, Gujarat marked a huge success in milk production which was termed as white revolution. India has a dedicated ministry for the growth and development of co-operative movements. Even though many co-operatives play a significant role in the development of the economy they suffer from political interference and bureaucracy.
Platform cooperativism is a newly emerging phenomenon in gig economy. It brings together the cooperatives and the digital platforms together to create a better and democratic working platform for the gig workers. As scholar Trebor Scholz evocatively defines it, "Platform cooperativism is a term that describes technological, cultural, political, and social changes. Platform cooperativism is a rectangle of hope. It's not a concrete utopia; it is an emerging economy." This paper attempts to analyse the possibilities and challenges of platform cooperatives with the help of an example of SEWA federation based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Federation
The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Federation is a trade union of women workers in the informal economy in India. SEWA is known for its efforts to organize and empower women in various sectors such as agriculture, handicrafts, and domestic work.

It is a membership-based organization that focuses on organizing and empowering women workers in the informal economy in India. The membership cost is only five rupees per head. Founded in 1972 by Ela Bhatt, SEWA aims to improve the livelihoods and working conditions of women engaged in a diverse range of informal occupations, including agriculture, handicrafts, domestic work, and street vending. SEWA operates on the principles of self-reliance, solidarity, and collective action, emphasizing the importance of organizing women workers to advocate for their rights and interests. The organization provides various services and support to its members, including access to financial services, healthcare, childcare, skill-building training, and legal assistance. One of SEWA's key contributions is its role in building solidarity among women workers and amplifying their voices in policy debates and decision-making processes. SEWA has successfully advocated for policies and programs that benefit informal workers, including legislation to recognize their rights and provide social protections.

Sewa federation's experiments with digital platforms

SEWA operates through a decentralized structure, with grassroots-level cooperatives and associations representing different sectors and regions. At the national level, the SEWA Federation coordinates and supports the activities of its member organizations, facilitating collective bargaining, capacity building, and networking opportunities. Overall, SEWA Federation plays a crucial role in promoting economic empowerment, social justice, and gender equality for women in the informal economy in India. Through its grassroots organizing, advocacy efforts, and cooperative initiatives, SEWA continues to be a leading voice for the rights and dignity of women workers in India and beyond.

In the wake of digital platform conquering the economy, SEWA have attempted to incorporate emerging technology into its members through various initiatives. They are briefly discussed below. Even though they have inherent flaws, these kind of platform cooperative initiatives have the potential to build the gap between the common people and gig economy by eliminating the inherent capitalistic nature of gig economy.

Beauty services based in Ahmedabad

SEWA federation along with the help of Platform Cooperativism Consortium (PCC) and Inclusive Research Design Centre (IRDC) created a beauty service providing app based in Ahmedabad. The aim of the application was to connect the owner/worker of the beauty service to come to the respective homes of the customers and provide various beauty services like waxing, threading, and others. The objective of this initiative was to bridge the gap between the owners and workers in various prevalent digital platforms like Urban Company and to reduce the disadvantages faced by the workers in such digital platforms.

The application was developed with the help of active input of the participants. They installed safety measures like a panic button so that it would alert the nearby police station as well as two of their friends in the nearby locality in case of emergencies. The app also had a GPS feature to track the movement of the service providers and access is given to the co-op manager. By allowing the service providers in the development of the application was a crucial step in actively listening to the workers. They are becoming a part of planning and getting a space for negotiation for their conditions and demands and thus make them empowered. This is quite lacking in the established application available in the market. The cooperation also agreed to take a minimum share of the profit to cover the administrative expenses, thus allowing the workers to have a major share of their pay. Unfortunately, the project was shut down because of a rise in complaints and dissatisfaction among customers.

Helpers near me in Delhi

"Helpers Near Me" is a pilot initiative launched by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Federation. It aims to address the challenges faced by informal workers, particularly domestic workers, in finding work and accessing benefits and protections. Domestic work is a significant source of employment for many women in India, but it often lacks formal recognition and is characterized by low wages, long hours, and a lack of social security.

The "Helpers Near Me" platform leverages technology to connect domestic workers with potential employers, helping to streamline the hiring process and ensure fair wages and working conditions. The platform may include features such as job listings, profiles of workers, ratings and reviews, and tools for scheduling and payment. By facilitating direct connections between domestic workers and employers, the "Helpers Near Me" initiative aims to empower workers to negotiate better terms of employment and access essential benefits such as healthcare and social security. Additionally, the platform may provide resources and support services to help workers improve their skills, advocate for their rights, and access legal assistance if needed.

Overall, the "Helpers Near Me" initiative reflects SEWA's broader mission of organizing and advocating for the rights and welfare of women workers in the informal economy. By harnessing the power of technology and collective action, the initiative seeks to create more equitable and dignified working conditions for domestic workers in India.

Kalakruti

Kalakruti is another SEWA Federation initiative for self-employed women. SEWA Kalakruti is a marketing and sales platform for women artisans. It also supports women artisans through various capacity building programs for their skill-building in various crafts and further ensuring their economic empowerment. "SEWA Kalakruti was established in 1992 to shadow light on the artisans and their collectives by facilitating their direct access to job work. It now aims to make their handicrafts cooperatives self-reliant and sustainable by marketing and selling their products directly to consumers."("Worker-Led Alternatives," n.d.)

"The women artisans at SEWA Kalakruti specialize in the traditional crafts of block printing, patch work-applique, badla and embroidery. The artisans are parts of various local clusters of artisans who are chindi (quilt) makers, weavers, painters, etc based in different parts of Gujarat. Together, they produce a variety of contemporary products ranging from home decor to utility to garments. The handcrafted products are designed and sampled by experienced designers, undergo a strict quality check process and are packed in eco-friendly packaging."(Home, n.d.)

While a specific "Kalakruti Digital Platform" may not have been launched or documented, SEWA's broader initiatives in supporting women artisans and promoting their craft-

based businesses could include elements of digitalization to enhance market access, economic empowerment, and cultural preservation efforts. They make use of Amazon Saheli and Government E-Market for selling their products. Unfortunately, except for Kalakruti, the rest of the initiatives are not functional due to several reasons.

Discussion

Gig economy is a combination of capitalistic markets and technology. Even though it claims to provide a certain level of autonomy in term of work hours and payment, the workers suffer from poor treatment and no social security benefits. The people who don't have smartphones are effectively deprived from participating in the gig economy. Thus, it contributes to increasing division of rural-urban divide. Basically, digital platforms are companies who are looking for cheap labour without providing any social security benefits to its employees. Cooperative societies on the other hand are entities which are highly democratic in nature. However, they are technologically poor, often mismanaged and doesn't have enough capital and investment to integrate with the technological demands.

Initiatives of SEWA federation aims to bridge the gap between digital platforms and cooperatives. It helps in bringing in a human element to the gig economy. The way the beauty services application was developed is a good example for the same. The owners/workers are given opportunities to ask for their demands in the development of the application. They are included in the process of negotiating the implementation process. It gives them much more autonomy rather than the imaginary freedom offered by the digital platforms. The cooperative members become partners in the process unlike the digital platforms who name their participants 'partners' and never involve them in any decision-making process. Digital illiteracy among the members and the low level of investments are the main hurdles faced by the cooperative societies. The utilisation of digital platforms into their working operations, the cooperative societies gain access to a greater number of customers thereby increasing their revenue. Cooperative societies need promotion and marketing to establish themselves in the economy. The suggestions for developing a working platform cooperative are given below.

Conclusion-A way ahead

The paper delved into the psyche of platform cooperative movement with the help of initiatives undertaken by SEWA federation based in Ahmedabad. The platform cooperative movement is at its infant stage in India. It is an optimistic initiative in developing democratic technology. However, most of such initiatives are not becoming successful. The following are some suggestions to help the growth of platform cooperative in India.

1. In India, startups cannot be registered as cooperatives. By facilitating the registration of a startup as a cooperative will help them to receive government support and other incentives. This can also contribute to an increased number of cooperatives in urban areas.
2. Majority of the cooperatives are based in rural area where a smart phone is still considered a luxury. Providing access to digital literacy in the rural parts of India can boost the development of platform cooperatives and bridge the technological gap between rural and urban India.
3. Women in rural area have lesser access to smartphones when compared to men. If subsidies can be allotted to buy smartphones for self-employed women will increase their options in having a smartphone.
4. The corporates must set aside a part of their profit as corporate social responsibility. Such funds can only be utilised in the eligible sectors of the economy, for instance, education, women empowerment etc. if we can include the creation of digital platforms for cooperatives as a part of corporate social responsibility of corporates, it will benefit the cooperatives to develop various platforms for themselves without any cost and help the corporates to use up their corporate social responsibility fund in an effective manner.
5. Promotion and marketing of the platform cooperatives through various channels like as social media, email newsletters, and influencer partnerships. This increases visibility for artisans and helps attract potential customers to the platform.

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