

Platforms in Workers' Own Country

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1. Note on Submission

This memo is submitted solely to fulfill the reporting requirements of the India China Institute Student Fellowship. It is not the final scholarly product of the project. The research conducted through the fellowship will be further analyzed and developed into a journal article for submission to an academic journal.

2. Research Question and Argument

This project asks what happens when Uber enters an urban labor market already governed by a left-led government, powerful trade unions, public fare regulation, transport stands, and statutory welfare institutions. I selected Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, because it combines strong labor institutions with high education, digital connectivity, and consumer demand favorable to platform expansion.

The central question is: How do established labor-market institutions shape platform operations, and how does platformization redistribute authority, responsibility, and risk among government, unions, workers, and platform companies? I examine six labor-market functions: entry, work allocation, pricing and remuneration, evaluation, exclusion, and the distribution of responsibility and risk. My preliminary argument is that Kerala's institutions remained strong, but their power did not automatically extend into Uber's infrastructure. Public agencies, welfare funds, unions, and stands continued to govern licenses, welfare access, physical operating spaces, and political representation. Uber retained authority over digital dispatch, pricing calculations, ratings, and account access. The key problem was a bottleneck between institutional power and platform control.

3. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

This study integrates institutionalism, labor-market theory, and research on algorithmic management to explain why a common platform can acquire different forms of authority across cities. Institutionalism shows that common technologies and competitive pressures are mediated by different political, regulatory, and organizational arrangements; platforms therefore enter existing institutional orders rather than institutional vacuums (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Piletić, 2024; Ametowobla & Kirchner, 2025). Yet national comparisons of regulation or contractual status do not fully reveal who governs particular labor-market functions within a city. Internal labor-market and employment-systems research shows that entry, allocation, remuneration, evaluation, and managerial authority were organized through durable rules long before digital platforms emerged, while research on fissured workplaces demonstrates that control over work can be separated from responsibility for employment costs and risks (Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Marsden, 1999; Weil, 2014). Algorithmic-management research explains how platforms implement these functions through registration, automated matching, dynamic pricing, incentives, ratings, performance records, and account deactivation, often combining workers' formal flexibility with substantive platform control (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Kellogg et al., 2020; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021). Bringing these literatures together, I treat platforms as digitally reallocating and concentrating pre-existing labor-market functions rather than inventing them. The analysis therefore compares six functions—entry, work allocation, pricing and remuneration, evaluation, exclusion, and the distribution of responsibility and risk—and asks who sets and enforces their rules, whether workers can understand and contest them, and whether the authority of established institutions travels with those functions when they move into privately controlled platform infrastructure.

4. Fieldwork

I conducted approximately three weeks of qualitative fieldwork in Thiruvananthapuram. More than 45 people participated in individual or group interviews. They included:

- autorickshaw and taxi drivers; stand-based drivers, platform drivers, and drivers combining both sources of work, with at least five participants in each category;
- leaders of established unions and a new driver association;
- unionized and nonunionized stand workers;
- officials responsible for labor and transport administration;
- senior officials and platform researchers at state labor and transport research institutes;
- labor-market, urban-transport, labor-policy, and public-policy scholars.

I contacted Uber and other platform companies but could not secure a company interview during the fieldwork period.

I also repeatedly observed two major shopping malls, three tourist sites, airport and railway areas, and small stands in several residential districts. I recorded queues, bargaining, passenger and driver movements, app pickups, and police responses. Additional materials included driver app screens and payment records, government regulations, organizational documents, photographs, and fieldnotes.

5. Preliminary Findings

1) Institutional access did not become platform control

CITU-linked union leaders and labor figures investigated platform working conditions, convened discussions, brought workers' demands into government, and helped prepare regulatory proposals. One former state-level union leader who had headed a state labor research institution drafted a proposal at the labor minister's request. The proposal reached the labor administration and political leadership but did not become an effective regulatory and enforcement system. When action stalled under an allied government, the relationships providing access also made sustained external pressure difficult.

Kerala's 2024 Motor Vehicle Aggregator Policy required platform licensing, permitted fares between 50 percent below and 50 percent above the government reference fare, and required at least 80 percent of each fare to go to the vehicle owner. Yet Uber's pricing and dispatch systems remained opaque. At one stand, drivers showed an Uber Auto fare of approximately ₹410 while cars on the same route cost ₹288–339. Government and unions influenced licensing and formal fare rules but could not audit dispatch, ratings, or individual account decisions.

2) JTDA filled the mobilization gap

When institutional access failed to produce timely action, the WhatsApp-based Journey Taxi Drivers Association organized public protest. CITU, INTUC, AITUC, and other unions later joined with political connections and formal bargaining channels. JTDA supplied rapid communication, field knowledge, and pressure from below; established unions supplied access to ministries, political parties, and formal negotiations.

Together, they challenged the permitted fare range, demanded enforcement of revenue-sharing provisions, opposed unilateral account deactivation, and requested a local human appeal channel. New and established organizations did not simply compete. They performed different roles in translating workers' grievances into regulatory demands.

3) Platform opacity produced consumer transparency

Uber kept dispatch, incentives, deductions, and account decisions opaque to workers while offering passengers more predictable transactions. At malls and tourist sites, I repeatedly observed passengers bargain with stand drivers and then walk beyond stand boundaries to meet Uber vehicles. Passengers emphasized visible fares, recorded routes, vehicle information, and freedom from bargaining.

For a route that should have cost approximately ₹20 under the regulated meter fare, stand drivers sometimes requested ₹50 or ₹100. Drivers explained that official fares did not cover fuel, waiting, empty return travel, and maintenance. Police sometimes defended stands against outside vehicles while overlooking drivers' failure to use legally required meters.

A professor specializing in labor markets summarized the political consequence: “There is no public empathy.” Accumulated dissatisfaction with existing transport weakened public support for drivers challenging platform opacity and unfairness.

4) Government and labor faced Uber on a different scale

Kerala’s left-led government responded partly through Kerala Savari, a public ride-hailing app offering lower commissions. During my fieldwork, it had not generated the matching density, technical reliability, or consumer use required to compete with Uber.

Government responsibility was divided among labor, transport, police, and information-technology authorities. Ola and Kerala Savari attended some discussions, while Uber repeatedly failed to appear or sent local representatives without decision-making authority. Local unions inferred changes from drivers’ payment screens and declining requests. Uber could refine pricing, incentives, and dispatch using data accumulated across cities worldwide.

6. Contributions, Strengths, and Next Steps

This project makes three contributions. First, it treats platformization as the digital reorganization of existing labor-market functions rather than the creation of an entirely new labor market. Second, it distinguishes strong institutional capacity from effective platform control and examines the conditions under which the former becomes the latter. Third, it uses Kerala as a theory-building case, showing how political access, consumer legitimacy, administrative fragmentation, and unequal access to information shape platform governance.

The study’s main strength is its multi-level evidence. Interviews with drivers, unions, government officials, research institutes, and labor and transport specialists were combined with direct observation of stands, passengers, bargaining, app pickups, and enforcement. The next stage will examine Kerala’s institutional bottlenecks more closely and compare them with cities in South Korea and the United States. The findings will be developed into a journal article.

7. Role of the ICI Student Fellowship

The ICI Student Fellowship made this fieldwork possible. It allowed me to spend three uninterrupted weeks in Kerala conducting interviews, revisiting transport sites, and collecting materials unavailable remotely. I am deeply grateful for the time and freedom to follow the evidence across different levels of the labor market. The fieldwork refined my original question from whether strong institutions constrain Uber to when and how institutional power can be translated into control over platform infrastructure.