

# NOT-EQUAL

## EPSRC Network+: Social Justice through the Digital Economy

### Micro Project: Application Form

We are seeking funding proposals from shortlisted candidates for Not Equal's first call for micro projects. For full guidance please see details of the call on the Not Equal [website](#).

Micro research projects can be up to 3 months in length. We expect to fund up to 8 micro research projects of up to £5k (80%FEC) for this first funding call.

Please submit this form before the deadline of **5pm, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2019** to [notequal@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:notequal@ncl.ac.uk).

Applicants will be advised on the outcome of their proposal by the 30<sup>th</sup> May 2019.

GENERAL INFORMATION	
<b>Lead Applicant (PI):</b> Yingqin Zheng <b>Email address:</b> Yingqin.Zheng@rhul.ac.uk <b>Job Title:</b> Senior Lecturer <b>Department:</b> School of Management <b>Organisation:</b> Royal Holloway, University of London	<b>Co-Investigators (names and organisations):</b> <b>Supporting Partner(s):</b> <b>Research Partner:</b> Shyam Krishna – (School of Management, Royal Holloway, University of London – providing In-Kind contribution as PhD Student) <b>Non-Academic Partner:</b> Indian Fishermen Association, Chennai – India (Community and Labour Organisation) <b>Project Title:</b> Between digital platforms and the deep sea - Social justice implications of digital platforms on marginality in coastal south India. <b>Eol Reference Number:</b> NE69

### 1. SUMMARY

*Please provide a summary of your proposed research project (<300 words)*

The project studies gig-workers on food-delivery platforms (called 'riders') to understand fairness implications of digital platforms using a social justice research lens. The research is set in the south Indian city of Chennai focusing on the city's active fishermen community, whose existing marginalisation due to economic uncertainties and risk of work at sea makes gig-work a viable opportunity for employment. The changing the nature of work practices on gig-



work and its impact on livelihoods of these fishermen-turned-riders will be examined to understand the complex social and technological role of digital platforms.

The project's objectives and research questions are:

- To examine fairness of digital platforms and gig-work given existing marginality of workers.
  - o What are the fairness issues faced by marginalised gig workers in terms of technological, cultural, economic and political dimensions?
  - o What are the fairness implications for platform design, policy regulation and workers' association?

The research approaches fairness and its relation to marginalisation through the work of Nancy Fraser on 'abnormal justice'<sup>1</sup>. Such a view posits that social justice is only achieved by parity across dimensions of **cultural recognition**, **economic distribution** and **political representation**, which together form basis for fair participation in a society.

The project intends to study the impacts of digital platforms using 30 semi-structured interviews<sup>2</sup> with fishermen-turned-riders. Further, self-ethnography will be conducted by Shyam Krishna<sup>3</sup> over a period of a 4 weeks by signing up as a rider. This will be used to conduct a direct appraisal of work under digital platforms and impact of algorithmic control on fairness. Photo and video diaries will be used to record the daily experience of being on the road as a rider, interacting with the algorithm, spatial navigation of the city and interaction with customers, as well as participant observation as a member embedded within the rider community.

## 2. HOW DOES YOUR PROPOSAL ALIGN WITH THE THEMES AND OBJECTIVES OF NOT EQUAL?

*Please describe how your proposal helps understand, explore or develop practical responses to social justice issues in the digital economy; and how does your proposal enhance a cross-disciplinary way of working. Please also indicate which of the Not Equal challenge areas your proposal focuses on e.g Algorithmic Social Justice, Digital Security for All and Fairer Futures for Business and Workforce (<500 words).*

Challenge areas: Algorithmic Social Justice, and Fairer Futures for Business and Workforce.

There is an acknowledged over-representation of the socio-economically vulnerable among the gig-worker population<sup>4</sup>, raising concerns of such marginalised groups having their conditions worsened<sup>5</sup> by unfair exploitation. With a clearly competitive market<sup>6</sup> India's home-grown digital platforms and its algorithmic controls are influenced directly by Global North counterparts, even while developing their own unique variations. In such a case, there have been calls for *in situ* studies needed to understand how alterity inherent to Global South<sup>7</sup> play a role in influencing and being influenced by digital platforms. Literature on policy<sup>8</sup> and research<sup>9</sup> highlight this as a need to understand

<sup>1</sup> Fraser N. Abnormal justice. *Critical inquiry*. 2008 Mar;34(3):393-422.

<sup>2</sup> See section 3 for more details

<sup>3</sup> Shyam Krishna provides in-kind contribution to the project as a research partner in his role as a PhD student. This project will form part of his academic work supervised by the PI.

<sup>4</sup> Balaram B, Warden J, Wallace-Stephens F. Good Gigs: A fairer future for the UK's gig economy. RSA Available at: <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/good-gigs-a-fairer-future-for-the-uks-gig-economy> 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Graham M, Anwar MA. Two Models for a Fairer Sharing Economy. Davidson, N. Finck, M. and Infranca, J.(eds) (2018), *The Cambridge Handbook of the Law of the Sharing Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 2018. 328:340.

<sup>6</sup> Bhattacharya A. Saving India's startups will take more than just a cool app. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/905431/saving-indias-startups-will-take-more-than-just-a-cool-app> 2018 Dec.

<sup>7</sup> Milan S, Treré E. Big Data from the South (s): Beyond Data Universalism. *Television & New Media*. 2019 May;20(4):319-35.

<sup>8</sup> Randolph G. New Opportunities in the Platform Economy: On-ramps to Formalization in the Global South.

<sup>9</sup> Casilli AA. Global Digital Culture | Digital Labor Studies Go Global: Toward a Digital Decolonial Turn. *International Journal of Communication*. 2017 Sep 29;11:21.



digital platforms in relation to prevailing disadvantages like informality<sup>10</sup> and digital exclusion<sup>11</sup>. Taking a cue from this we propose a study set in the city of Chennai in India to directly understand marginality and its relation to digital platforms.

Inspired by an earlier fieldwork by Shyam Krishna, this project centres on the existing marginalisation inherent to Chennai's urban fishing communities to understand how gig-work and digital platforms impact to improve or exacerbate prevailing marginality. Recent protests by riders in Chennai<sup>12</sup> highlighted similar issues, specifically of algorithmically controlled wages and incentives that are falling despite increasing hours of work.

The study explores how digital platforms are entangled with cultural, economic and political aspects of fairness, and its implications for marginalised communities using the framework of "abnormal justice". For instance, marginality among the studied communities in relation to gig-work can be queried both as cultural – due to caste-based nature of traditional fishing occupation, and as economic – due to the dwindling and uncertain income as fishermen. Equally, political aspect can be invoked to understand issues of collective action, voice and representation. Thus, Chennai, beyond the linguistic advantage it provides the researchers, is an interesting site to directly probe gig-work situation in the complex local context of marginality. This also permits a cross-disciplinary understanding of digital platforms and their impact on marginality, especially by drawing on theories and literature from various disciplines including management, communication studies, internet studies and critical data studies, and tested empirically as proposed.

Further given the dearth of detailed qualitative evidence of gig-work in Global South, the study proposes a novel means of self-ethnography which can help triangulate interview data by direct observations. With the project presenting the first-person view of a gig-worker, a critical gap in research is addressed overcoming the opaque nature of practices under commercial digital platforms. Methodologically, this direct experience of algorithmic control of work as a rider is more effective in capturing technical nuances that may not be well established through interviews of marginalised gig-workers. Thus, the direct experience as a rider, juxtaposed with experience of the fishermen-turned-riders, will be used to understand algorithmic control of work, impact of technical artefacts like apps and location-based-services, and effects of prevailing conditions of work. By reflectively combining insights from self-ethnography and engagement with other riders, the research will identify (un)fair-practices resulting from algorithmic control of work and its impact on working conditions, as a pragmatic tool for riders, practitioners, and policy makers.

### 3. NON-ACADEMIC PARTNERS

*Please explain how your non-academic partners will engage with the project e.g. in-kind time, use of facilities, etc. (<150 words).*

The project works with fishermen's labour and social rights associations<sup>13</sup> with Indian Fishermen Association (IFA) as the lead non-academic partner, providing contribution of in-kind time and by use of facility over two phases:

1. In the first phase, recruitment of 30 interview subjects from within the fishing community will be undertaken with partner support. The partners will issue a call for riders' as participants both formally and informally among their members who mainly hail from the fishermen community. The partner will also support use of local facilities for interviews to be conducted.
2. In the second phase, after the research project is completed, partner will support in communication of research finding within the fishing community (through organising meeting of leaders and riders), political

<sup>10</sup> Valente E, Patrus R, Córdova Guimarães R. Sharing economy: becoming an Uber driver in a developing country. *Revista de Gestão*. 2019 Mar. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Graham M. Digital Economies at Global Margins. 2019 Jan. 47:51

<sup>12</sup> Thozhilalar Koodam. Swiggy Workers are the Latest Victims of the Incentive Trap. Available at: <https://tnlabour.in/featured/7701?fbclid=IwAR0iil-vCHBxUY3z97a0Z7TuMfyceUEOTNizRK6O0atrUhOq3QzLLU9wxNE> 2018 Dec

<sup>13</sup> This includes Indian Fishermen Association (IFA) whose leader is the direct contact of this project, and with in-principle agreements with the leaders of Meenavargal Makkal Munnani (MMM - Fishermen People's Front) which acts as the umbrella organisation of all fishermen associations. Further both IFA and MMM will help work with informal leadership councils which are the self-governance body in each fishing hamlet in Chennai.



and other organisations working on labour rights, and in engaging with vernacular (Tamil language) media for dissemination.

#### 4. DELIVERABLES AND SOCIAL IMPACT

*Explain the outcomes and deliverables of your project as well as the expected social impact. Please ensure this answer is suitable for a lay audience (<300 words).*

##### **1: Report on (un)fair-practices**

*Audience: Gig-workers and Labour Associations.*

*Impact:*

The research aims to identify and understand (un)fair-practices that gig-workers face due to changing nature of work under digital platforms. The project will provide as a report, a write-up of (un)fair-practices in both English and Tamil (local language in Chennai). By engaging through this with gig-workers, the project hopes to help navigate issues faced by them due to technology and working conditions.

The project also would provide the research report to be used by community and labour association leaders as a declaration of issues when they engage with state and political institutions like police and government ministries on subject of rights. This the project hopes will generate a conversation on fairness that can directly help in on-going efforts to claim rights under digital platforms like protests by riders, or collective engagement by rider groups and labour associations.

##### **2: Blog and Academic Paper**

*Audience: Technology practitioners and Academic community.*

*Impact:*

The direct experience of being a rider, presented as a blog<sup>14</sup> will help the technology practitioners and academic community understand challenges from a gig-worker's perspective. This the project hopes will practically demonstrate and encourage considering fairness as a parameter in designing processes and technologies on digital platforms. The project's further aim to disseminate such research findings and its theoretical contributions as a paper aimed for presentation at a conference initially and after as a journal publication.

Thus, the research seeks to influence how fairness can be sought by platforms and workers alike and will also address the role state can play in achieving an environment for fair digital participation in the society – especially in the absence of strong labour or data protection prevailing in India.

<sup>14</sup> See section 6 also for further details.



## 5. WORK PLAN

Please outline the work-plan for your proposed research project (<200 words).

Activity	Week												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
Liaison with Local Collaborators													
Recruitment of Participants													
Interviews													
Transcription													
Preliminary analysis of interview data													
Purchase of Vehicle													
Vehicle registration													
Signing up as rider													
Trial run as rider													
Regular work as rider (with one week as buffer)													
Blogging (aim for minimum two entries in a week) and Social Media Engagement													
Mid project review													
Collation of photo and video diaries													
Collation of location data from phone													
Preliminary analysis of self-ethnography data													
Liaison with Local Collaborators for follow up communications													
Newspaper experiential editorial - drafting and publication													
Outreach activity - Engagement with labour association													
Project close and planning for future engagement													

## 6. HOW WILL YOU COMMUNICATE THE FINDINGS OF YOUR RESEARCH TO THE PUBLIC?

Please outline your dissemination plans e.g events, networking with local support groups, creating vlogs, writing blogs, etc. (<200 words).

Dissemination	Audience	Details
Outreach and Networking	Gig-workers (food-delivery and ride-hailing) and Labour Organisations	Network with riders, community leaders, and local organisation to communicate research finding and create awareness. Attend labour association meeting of ride-hailing app workers (based on Shyam Krishna's existing local networks) to discuss synergies on the issue of social justice.

Articles (in English and Tamil).	Digital-platform consumers.	Reaching urban middle class who form the bulk of readership for local newspapers targeted, and consumers of digital platforms. Article will be published on newspapers' online portals for wider reach. In-principle informal agreements exists for 2 planned articles with a prominent English daily predicated on editorial quality check and approval. - Experiential editorial recalling 'a day in the life of a gig-worker'. - Article on the urban and spatial nature of food delivery apps based on possible mapping and visualised data.
Blog.	Policy makers, Academic community and technology practitioners.	A blog detailing technical and theoretical aspects of digital platforms including with use of interactive data where possible. This will feature the photo and video recordings done as part of the self-ethnography component.
Social Media (in English and Tamil).	Gig-workers, Academic community and technology practitioners.	Publicising interesting snippets from self-ethnography experience and other research output.

## 7. EXISTING FUNDING

*Will any existing funding be used for this project (e.g PhD funding)?*

Shyam Krishna is receiving a PhD scholarship from RHUL (3 years fee waiver) and eligible to apply for a limited amount of funding to present at conferences.

## 8. BUDGET BREAKDOWN

*Please provide a detailed budget breakdown and justification for your budget, e.g. salary grade, point, duration and %FTE; specified journeys or conferences; identified items and quantities of consumables (<200 words).*

Item	Justification	Cost Type	Cost (approx. £1 = INR86)
Vehicle – Scooter	A vehicle registered and with proper documentation in the name of the researcher is needed for application to all platforms.	Non-Staff Costs: Facilities/Equipment	£800
Vehicle – Registration and Insurance		Non-Staff Costs: Facilities/Equipment	£50
Smartphone	To use as a rider during self-ethnography – recording photo and video diaries, capture GPS data, record interaction with digital	Non-Staff Costs: Facilities/Equipment	£220

	platform algorithms, and possible online communities for riders.		
Air Travel	Researcher return ticket from London to Chennai	Non-Staff Costs: Travel	£550
Lodging	Researcher stay for 3 months at £700 per month	Non-Staff Costs: Travel	£2,100
Boarding	Researcher sustenance at £175 per month	Non-Staff Costs: Travel	£525
Research Participants Incentive	Incentivising participation at approx. £5 total for 4 hours loss of pay during interviews (30 participants)	Non-Staff Costs: Consumables	£150
		Total	£4,395

## 9. TOTAL PROJECT COST

Please list in GBP under the headings - Overall cost, Staff, Travel and Other

	Directly incurred costs (80%)	Directly incurred costs (100%)
Staff	£212	£265
Non-Staff Costs: Consumables	£120	£150
Non-Staff Costs: Facilities/Equipment	£856	£1,070
Non-Staff Costs: Travel	£2,540	£3,175
Non-Staff Costs: Estates (RA's only)		
Non-Staff Costs: Indirect (RA's only)		
<b>Overall Cost*</b>	<b>Total Not Equal Funding Requested: £3,728</b>	<b>Total for information only: £4,660</b>

### Directly Incurred Posts

Role	Post	Start Date	Period on Project (months)	% of Full Time	Scale	Increment Date	Basic Starting Salary	Super-Annuation and NI (£)	Total cost on grant-80% FEC (£)	Total cost on grant-100% FEC (£)

\*Please note that you are able to claim for RA time and RA relevant FTE related costs, PI/Co-I time and other non-staff costs. You are not able to claim for FTE related costs attributed to PI/Co-I time.

## Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this application and related call for proposals, please contact [notequal@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:notequal@ncl.ac.uk) or Kate Kelly (Not Equal Project Manager) on 0191 2088268.



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