

Title of your paper: Locating ‘informality’ in the iconic taxi service of city of Mumbai: new transgressions and challenges to the “national structure” of urban governance.

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Locating ‘informality’ in the iconic taxi service of city of Mumbai: new transgressions and challenges to the “national structure” of urban governance.

Informality as a concept evolved from studies done on cities of Latin American, African and South Asian countries. These studies critiqued the conceptual binary of the formal and informal sector deployed to study economy and understand societies in terms of their labour and housing. With this paradigm shift informal sector was not to be understood as an exclusive domain of the poor, unskilled, migrant populations and not as hypergrowth and pathology. The shift led scholars to argue for “hybrid arrangements” as also think of economic activities that take place in a city on a continuum where formal and informal are two extreme (ideal) categories. However, many studies after this shift continued to study urban poor, rural migrants to cities, unprotected, unorganized labour as informal actors in the city. Ananya Roy in her conceptualization makes a distinct shift where she understands informality as a mode of urbanization, as a mode of urban planning, as negotiability of value and chiefly as “de-regulation” as against its commonly perceived association with “unregulated”. De-regulation implied that informality is calculated informality, a strategic tool in the hands of the state that allows for a constant shifting of boundaries of legal and illegal. She noted informality is as much (or even more) a domain of state as that of the urban poor.

I wish to extend the work on informality, raise questions so as to nuance it’s understanding through a detailed explication and analysis of a ‘typical’ case of century old system of metered taxis that still operates in Mumbai as key ‘public service’ and city’s public transport infrastructure. What makes it ‘typical’ or unique? There is a complex, constant and multi-layered interplay of formal systems and informal networks and relationships in the everyday working of this system. Metered run taxis since their inception have had a formal organization and structure that regulates, monitors and controls the taxis and its drivers. An equally crucial role is played by the informal networks and relationships that characterize this public service. These are key in inducting new drivers, in their learning of the city, socialization with its systems and expanse and are also (informal/ subtle/ tacit) regulators of the conduct and practices of taxi-men to an extent that it has resulted in development of a certain culture or ethos of taxi-driving in city that derives both from its formal and informal elements. Informal networks that go back many generations and to drivers’ villages are shock- absorbers for these migrant men as taxi drivers in a sector that is unique in a manner that none of the social,

medical and financial benefits of being organized as a system or as an organization accrue to them unlike other 'public service' oriented urban transport systems in the city. Their livelihoods stand unprotected and vulnerable at all times and more so at present.

Presently, the taxi drivers as well as the entire 'public service' system of individually-run metered taxis is threatened of obsolescence from ride-hailing apps or taxi aggregators (Ola Cabs and Uber) who function through 'surge- pricing' and not on 'public service' model. They started in a regulatory vacuum, were primarily self-regulated and function in an informal space through a formal organization. They violate 'level-playing field' principle to their utmost advantage and to the disadvantage of public, regulators and taxi sector. I argue in the paper that these are the new "transgressors" in the city, city's new informals- the technocratic elite who are powered by an extremely mobile global finance, rapidly forming global alliances with deep pockets. They wield different bargaining power and hence exercise a distinct 'informality'. They have monopolistic goals. It is interesting to see how in common perception these activities are seen as "disruption" aimed at better choices for public in the name of greater security and transparency. However, day to day operations and the story of their growth stands for opacity and escaping answerability at micro and macro levels. They challenge the conception of informality that operated as an accommodative tool, which aimed to make space within the given system. This informality is on its way to making a public service and a class of workers associated with it obsolete. This is a complex intertwining of global finance, global alliances, national-legal infrastructure and locally embedded labour that requires a new vocabulary for its comprehension for governance to respond to it aptly.

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