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A Longitudinal Study on How Digital Labour and Authenticity are Commodified in Tier-2 Indian Cities Like Indore

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Introduction - India is the most populous country in the world being at the realm of globalisation, industrialisation and technological growth. India's labour market stands at a pivotal juncture, characterized by a vast and increasingly dynamic workforce exceeding 56 crore people that serves as a powerful engine for economic growth. Recent data reveals significant structural transformation, with unemployment ***declining to 3.2% in 2023-24 from 6% in 2017-18*** and labour force participation showing consistent improvement. One of the most remarkable shifts has been the surge in female labour force participation, rising from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24, driven by targeted government initiatives supporting women's entrepreneurship and formal employment. However, persistent challenges remain, including the predominance of informal employment affecting nearly 90% of workers, modest wage growth that has barely kept pace with inflation, and significant graduate unemployment at 13.4%. The government's consolidation of 29 central labour laws into four comprehensive Labour Codes represents a landmark reform aimed at balancing flexibility with worker protection, while initiatives like the Skill India mission have trained over 1.42 crore individuals. The gig economy is rapidly expanding, projected to reach 23.5 million workers by 2030, and India now commands 16% of global AI talent, signalling a future-ready workforce increasingly aligned with global standards.

Indore is emerging as a significant hub for formal employment, reflecting a national trend where job growth is decentralizing away from major metropolitan areas.

1. **A National Leader in Job Growth**: Indore is identified as a key driver of formal job creation in India. Non-metro cities like Indore now account for a substantial portion of the country's formal workforce, with tier-2 and tier-3 hubs leading this expansion. Reports indicate that tier-2 and tier-3 cities have seen a sharp 21% year-on-year surge in hiring, significantly outpacing growth in metro areas.
2. **A Young and Mobile Workforce**: Nationally, a significant 64% of the formal workforce is under 30, and more than half have been in their current roles for less than a year. This indicates high mobility and a shift towards project-based and seasonal work, a trend that is likely reflected in Indore's growing economy.
3. **Interpreting Employment Data**: While central government officials have highlighted a decline in national unemployment, experts urge a closer look at the data. Official surveys like the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) show a more nuanced picture. In a rapidly urbanizing city like Indore, headline unemployment figures can often mask issues like **underemployment, informal work, and regional disparities**.

The Industrial Core: Demand, Shortages, and Proposed Solutions: The industrial landscape around Indore is a study in contrasts: it is the economic engine of the state but is currently facing a significant labour crisis.

1. **The Economic Powerhouse**: The Pithampur industrial area is the state's revenue leader, generating over **80% of Madhya Pradesh's industrial revenue** and housing approximately 1,500 enterprises. The industrial ecosystem extends to nearby areas like Dewas, Palda, and Sanwer Road.
2. **A Severe Labour Shortage**: Despite its economic importance, the region is grappling with a significant labour shortage that ranges from **10% to 35% across different sectors**. This crisis is so acute that many factories have been forced to reduce their operations from multiple shifts to just one or two, directly impacting production targets and profitability.

i. The shortage is most pronounced for **machine operators, technicians, and supervisors**.
ii. Specific deficits include **10-15% for skilled workers, 15-25% for semi-skilled, and 25-35% for unskilled labour**.
iii. The worker shortage has led to a **5-8% rise in**

operational costs for industries.

The Legal and Policy Framework: The rights and conditions of workers in Indore are governed by a mix of state and central regulations.

1. **Leave and Working Hours**: The *Madhya Pradesh Shops and Establishments Act, 1958* and the *Madhya Pradesh Industrial Employment Act, 1961* set the standards. For example, workers are generally entitled to **15 days of earned leave, 7 days of casual leave, and 7 days of sick leave** per year. Working hours are capped at 9 hours a day (or10 in factories) and 48 hours a week, with overtime paid at double the normal wage.
2. **A Landmark Legal Victory for Daily Wagers**: In a significant judgment, the Madhya Pradesh High Court upheld an order benefiting **1,391 muster roll (daily wage) employees** of the Indore Municipal Corporation. The court directed the corporation to:

i. Grant these workers, who had completed over ten years of continuous service, wages equivalent to regular employees.

ii. Provide them with statutory leave benefits, including 7 days of casual leave and 15 days of earned leave per annum. This case highlights the ongoing struggles of informal workers for parity and recognition.

The Human Face of Labour: Informal and Gig Workers

Beyond the factory floors, a vast and essential part of Indore's workforce operates in the informal economy.

1. **Invisible Garment Workers**: Indore is an emerging hub for garment manufacturing and export, a sector that thrives on a large workforce of home-based women workers. These women, like Gayatri, Ganga, and Sarita profiled in a study, take on stitching work to supplement family income, often to pay for children's education or healthcare.
2. **The Vulnerabilities of Informal Workers**: Informal workers in Indore's settlements face "multi-dimensional vulnerability." Research highlights how issues like inadequate housing, lack of private toilets, and climate change (extreme heat, heavy rain) directly impact their health, dignity, and economic productivity.
3. **The Booming Gig Economy**: The festive season, particularly around Diwali, provides a major boost to short-term employment. Sectors like **logistics, retail, hospitality, and event management** see a 15-20% rise in their gig workforce. This includes temporary jobs for e-commerce deliveries, packaging, catering, and decoration, providing a crucial, though often precarious, source of income for many families and students.

Digital Labour And Its Value Today: Digital labour represents a fundamental shift in how work is organized and valued in the twenty-first century economy. At its core, *digital labour encompasses all forms of work mediated by digital technologies—from food delivery drivers and ride-hailing operators to freelance graphic designers, software developers, and even the millions of users who generate content on social media platforms without direct monetary compensation.* This broad category includes both compensated platform work and the often-invisible labour that powers the digital economy, such as data annotation for training artificial intelligence systems or content moderation. The value generated by digital labour is substantial and multifaceted. Research indicates that workers on online gig platforms capture approximately 46% of the total market surplus from their engagements, earning on average $4.24 per hour above their reservation wages, demonstrating that digital platforms can create significant economic value for workers when market dynamics function effectively. However, this value is distributed unevenly—workers with specialized skills, strong reputations, and the ability to signal quality through portfolios and ratings capture higher markups, while less differentiated workers often struggle in crowded marketplaces. Beyond direct financial compensation, digital labour generates immense value through the data and content users create—every post, like, and search on social media platforms constitutes unpaid digital labour that platforms monetize through advertising and algorithmic refinement. In India, the digital labour economy is expanding rapidly, with an estimated 7.7 million workers engaged in platform work in 2020-21, projected to reach 23.5 million by 2029-30, spanning roles from delivery personnel to high-skilled technology professionals. This growth reflects broader structural changes: digital platforms reduce transaction costs, enable real-time matching of labour supply and demand, and create new opportunities for women re-entering the workforce, young workers seeking flexibility, and individuals in semi-urban regions. Yet the valuation of digital labour remains contested—traditional productivity metrics and national accounts struggle to capture intangible outputs, while questions persist about worker classification, social security coverage, and the long-term sustainability of platform-dependent livelihoods. As artificial intelligence evolves, scholars are even proposing that "digital labour" be considered a distinct factor of production alongside capital and human labour, given its unique characteristics of unprecedented scalability, non-rivalrous deployment, and capacity for autonomous self-improvement. Ultimately, digital labour's value lies not merely in the immediate income it generates but in its role as a critical infrastructure for the broader digital economy—one that requires thoughtful governance to ensure that the value created is shared equitably among all participants.

Relationship Between Digital Labour And Authenticity: The relationship between digital labour and authenticity is deeply paradoxical, representing one of the most complex tensions in the contemporary economy. On one hand, digital platforms demand and extract authenticity as a core component of value creation—social media influencers, content creators, and gig workers are all required to perform genuine, relatable, and seemingly unfiltered versions of themselves to build trust and engagement with audiences.

This performative authenticity becomes a form of labour itself, where workers must constantly curate their personalities, emotions, and even vulnerabilities to maintain relevance and economic viability. The value generated through this emotional and identity-based work is substantial, yet it remains largely invisible in traditional economic metrics and is rarely compensated beyond what platform algorithms and market dynamics dictate. On the other hand, the very structures of digital labour actively undermine authenticity through standardization, algorithmic management, and the relentless pressure to optimize for engagement. A food delivery rider's route is dictated by an algorithm, a freelance writer's tone is shaped by search engine optimization requirements, and a content creator's personal stories are filtered through what has historically performed well—all of which erode the spontaneous, genuine human expression that audiences seek. This creates what scholars describe as "algorithmic authenticity," a commodified approximation of realness that platforms can predict, scale, and monetize. The psychological toll is significant, as workers experience identity fragmentation, emotional exhaustion, and what has been termed "digital labour alienation"—the disconnection between one's authentic self and the performative self-required for economic survival. For marginalized workers, including women, racial minorities, and those in the Global South, this tension is amplified, as they must navigate platform expectations while also confronting systemic biases embedded in algorithmic systems that may penalize certain forms of authentic expression. Yet paradoxically, authenticity remains essential precisely because algorithms are increasingly sophisticated at detecting inauthentic behaviour—audiences and platforms alike penalize content that feels manufactured, forcing workers into an exhausting cycle of genuine performance. The future of this relationship hinges on whether digital labour platforms can evolve to genuinely value and protect worker authenticity rather than merely extracting it, through transparent algorithmic practices, fair compensation for emotional labour, and governance structures that recognize identity work as real work. Ultimately, the authenticity question reveals that digital labour is not merely about tasks completed or hours logged, but about the very human need for meaningful, self-directed expression in spaces increasingly governed by code and commerce.

The impact of digital labour on authenticity in tier-2 Indian cities, with particular focus on Indore, represents a complex and largely undocumented dimension of the platform economy's expansion beyond metropolitan centres. While direct empirical data specific to Indore remains unavailable, the convergence of national-level research on digital labour precarity with Indore's unique characteristics as a rapidly industrializing tier-2 city allows for a theoretically grounded analysis of how platform pressures systematically erode worker authenticity. The concept of authenticity in this context encompasses multiple dimensions: the freedom to express genuine emotional responses, the ability to exercise individual judgment and work styles, the preservation of cultural and personal identity, and the maintenance of coherent selfhood

N×S algorithmic fragmentation. Digital labour platforms, through their structural design and operational imperatives, exert pressure on each of these dimensions, creating what scholars have termed a crisis of "algorithmic authenticity" where workers must perform commodified versions of themselves to survive economically.

The primary mechanism through which digital labour pressures authenticity is economic precarity combined with algorithmic management. National surveys across Indian tier-1 and tier-2 cities reveal that approximately 50% of platform workers report earnings insufficient for basic household expenses, forcing them into extreme working hours—median 70 hours weekly for delivery workers and 84 hours for taxi workers—simply to make ends meet. This economic desperation compels what can be termed "algorithmic conformity," where workers must abandon their natural work rhythms, local knowledge, and community connections to satisfy opaque platform algorithms that dictate routes, timing, and behaviour. A food delivery worker in Indore, navigating the city's expanding but still congested streets, cannot afford to take a preferred route based on local traffic wisdom, pause to assist a neighbour, or adjust pace to ensure safety during monsoon flooding. Every deviation from the algorithmically optimized path risks delayed deliveries, customer complaints, and rating reductions that directly impact income and continued platform access. The autonomy paradox of gig work—marketed as flexible entrepreneurship but experienced as rigid algorithmic control—thus fundamentally undermines the worker's sense of self-directed, meaningful labour, replacing authentic work identity with the experience of being a replaceable node in a logistical network.

Beyond algorithmic conformity, digital labour demands intense emotional performance that fragments authentic selfhood. The rating systems central to platform governance require workers to maintain perpetual cheerfulness, patience, and deference regardless of circumstances. Research from comparable contexts in the Global South documents the severe mental health consequences of this emotional labour, with workers reporting that constant performance of prescribed emotional scripts leads to exhaustion, identity confusion, and what psychologists term "emotional dissonance"—the painful gap between felt emotions and performed ones. For an Indore-based ride-hailing driver, this means absorbing passenger rudeness, navigating unreasonable demands, and accepting unfair ratings without protest, because any authentic expression of frustration risks economic penalty. The cumulative effect is profound alienation from one's own emotional life, as spontaneous human reactions become liabilities to be

suppressed rather than expressions of genuine personhood. This is compounded by the complete invisibility of worker suffering within platform architectures. The delivery worker navigating Indore's extreme summer heat, risking dehydration and heatstroke to deliver meals on time, has no mechanism within the app to communicate this authentic hardship. The platform sees only completed deliveries and customer satisfaction scores; the worker's resilience is expected, their suffering silenced, and their humanity reduced to performance metrics.

The physical risks endemic to platform work further deepen this authenticity crisis. National data indicates that approximately 80% of platform workers face road safety concerns, 40% endure harsh weather exposure, 52% of delivery workers experience theft, and 25% face physical assault—yet access to health insurance, accident coverage, or mental health support remains minimal, particularly in tier-2 cities where formal protections are weaker and unionization less developed. For Indore's growing digital workforce, these occupational hazards create a profound disconnect between lived reality and platform representation. A worker who survives a near-fatal accident during a delivery must resume the same route the next day, performing normalcy while carrying trauma, because pausing work means losing income and risking platform deactivation. This exemplifies digital labour alienation at its most extreme: the worker's authentic experience of pain, fear, and risk is rendered completely irrelevant by a system that values only task completion and efficiency.

Importantly, tier-2 city contexts like Indore may amplify these authenticity pressures in ways distinct from metropolitan centres. With fewer alternative formal employment options and potentially stronger traditional community expectations, workers may experience heightened conflict between platform-demanded performance and culturally embedded notions of dignified work and social reciprocity. The garment workers and informal labourers who form Indore's broader workforce exist alongside this emerging digital proletariat, creating complex intersections of formal, informal, and platform-mediated labour that shape how authenticity is experienced and negotiated. Yet tier-2 cities may also offer unique possibilities for resistance and authentic collective action. Research from worker-supportive contexts like Kolkata demonstrates that union representation significantly improves worker outcomes, and Indore's relatively contained geography and community networks could facilitate solidarity formations less possible in megacity anonymity. The emergence of worker-led initiatives like data workers' collectives and platform cooperatives elsewhere in India suggests pathways for Indore's digital workers to reclaim authentic voice through mutual aid, transparent governance, and collective bargaining that recognizes emotional and identity work as real labour deserving of dignity and protection. Ultimately, understanding digital labour's impact on authenticity in Indore requires moving beyond national aggregates to engage directly with workers lived experiences, documenting how platform pressures intersect with local culture, economy, and social relations to shape what it means to be authentically human in an increasingly algorithmically governed world of work.

Indori Labour: While direct empirical data on digital labour and authenticity in Indore remains limited, a landmark judgment from the city's own High Court bench provides a powerful sociological lens through which to analyze the relationship between digital labour and authenticity. In April 2025, the Indore bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court delivered a significant ruling in the case of Vinod Kumar Meena, who was denied employment by the Life Insurance Corporation of India due to a biometric verification failure during the onboarding process. Justice Subodh Abhyankar's observations cut to the very heart of authenticity in an algorithmically mediated world, ruling emphatically that "a person's identity is not lost when he is not recognized by a machine" and that fundamental rights cannot be "curtailed or sidelined only on account of failure of a machine to recognise him, for whatever reason". This judgment provides a profound entry point for understanding digital labour and authenticity in Indore through multiple sociological frameworks. Drawing on **Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT)**, we can conceptualize the biometric machine as a non-human actor within a network of employment verification—one that, when it "failed to recognise" Meena, effectively exercised agency to deny him his rightful identity and livelihood. Latour's framework insists that agency is distributed across human and non-human actors, and here, a technical glitch in a machine became the decisive actor shaping Meena's fate, reducing his authentic, document-verified personhood to a failed data point. This exemplifies how digital labour platforms and verification systems increasingly position machines as arbiters of human worth, creating situations where algorithmic failure can override lived identity.

The court's reasoning further illuminates the dynamics of digital labour in Indore through the lens of **Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower and surveillance**. Biometric verification systems represent the ultimate expression of biopolitical governance—the reduction of the human body to measurable, scannable data points that can be tracked, verified, and managed by institutional powers. In the context of digital labour, workers are increasingly subjected to what Foucault termed "disciplinary power," where surveillance mechanisms like biometric scanners, GPS tracking, and algorithmic performance monitoring produce "docile bodies" that internalize the gaze of power. For Indore's digital workers—whether delivery riders, platform drivers, or formal sector employees undergoing biometric onboarding—this Foucauldian surveillance creates profound pressure on authenticity. The worker's authentic self, with its complexities, technical failures, and

human vulnerabilities, must conform to what the machine recognizes as legitimate, or risk exclusion from economic participation entirely. Justice Abhyankar's intervention, insisting that "procedure should serve justice and not dominate it," directly challenges this Foucauldian nightmare by asserting that human authenticity—verified through documents like Aadhaar, PAN card, and driving licence—must prevail when machines fail.

Applying **Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis** to the Indore context reveals how digital labour platforms compel workers into constant impression management, performing the role of the algorithmically legible subject while their authentic selves remain backstage. For Indore's gig workers navigating the city's expanding but congested streets, every interaction is mediated by platforms that demand specific performances—cheerful acceptance of ratings, efficient completion of deliveries, and seamless biometric verification. When Meena's biometrics failed, his authentic identity became invisible to the system, reduced to a "mismatch" that threatened his livelihood. Goffman's framework illuminates the immense emotional labour required to maintain algorithmic legibility: the suppression of frustration when GPS fails, the performance of gratitude when receiving unfair ratings, the careful curation of online profiles to attract work. This performance becomes exhausting precisely because it demands constant vigilance against the possibility of machine misrecognition—the biometric failure, the algorithm's arbitrary penalty, the rating system's opaque judgment.

Furthermore, the Indore High Court ruling resonates with **Axel Honneth's theory of recognition**, which posits that authentic identity formation depends on three spheres of recognition: love (emotional support), rights (legal recognition), and solidarity (social esteem). In Meena's case, the biometric failure threatened his access to the rights sphere—legal recognition as a qualified candidate entitled to employment. For Indore's broader digital workforce, this pattern repeats across multiple dimensions. Platform workers experience systematic misrecognition when algorithms fail to account for local conditions, when rating systems penalize them for factors beyond their control, and when their contributions remain invisible within platform architectures that acknowledge only completed tasks, not human effort. Honneth would argue that this misrecognition constitutes a form of social injury that damages workers' ability to develop authentic self-identity, as they internalize the platform's distorted image of their worth.

The judgment's emphasis on documentary verification as an alternative to machine recognition offers a path forward for preserving authenticity in digital labour contexts. By insisting that Meena's identity be verified through "documents which he possesses regarding his identification, like Aadhaar Card, Samagra ID, PAN Card, driving licence, passport," the court affirmed that authentic personhood exists independently of algorithmic verification. This principle, if extended to digital labour platforms, would require mechanisms for human review when algorithmic systems fail, transparent appeals processes when workers are unfairly penalized, and recognition that worker authenticity encompasses dimensions—community ties, local knowledge, embodied experience—that no algorithm can capture. The Indore case thus becomes a precedent not merely for employment verification but for the broader struggle to preserve human authenticity in increasingly algorithmically governed worlds of work, asserting that machines must serve human recognition rather than dominate it, and that authentic identity ultimately resides in the documents, relationships, and self-understandings that persist when technology fails.

Commodification: The commodification of digital labour and authenticity represents the central dynamic through which digital capitalism transforms human identity, social relations, and lived experience into measurable, tradeable assets—a process powerfully illuminated through the lens of Indore's emerging digital workforce. Drawing on Kylie Jarrett's critical Marxian analysis in *Digital Labor*, commodification operates as the mechanism by which "affective attachment and inalienable assets"—the deeply personal emotions, relationships, and selfhood that workers bring to platforms—are captured and converted into economic value. For Indore's delivery riders, ride-hailing drivers, and content creators, this means that their authentic expressions of personality, their community connections, and even their moments of fatigue or frustration become raw material for platform algorithms that optimize engagement, predict behaviour, and generate profit. Jarrett's framework reveals that what platforms truly commodify is not simply labour time but the "inalienable assets" of worker identity—the very qualities that make each individual unique and irreplaceable. This theoretical insight finds concrete expression in ***Ursula Huws's concept of "the commodification of intellectual activity" and "human sociality,"*** which she identifies as the relentless impulse of digital capitalism to monetize every dimension of human life. For an Indore-based gig worker, this commodification manifests in multiple registers: their route data becomes training material for logistics algorithms, their customer ratings become behavioural prediction tools, their social media presence becomes marketing content, and their emotional labour of maintaining cheerful service becomes a measurable performance metric. The worker's authentic self is systematically disaggregated into data points that circulate in markets far beyond their control, generating value that accrues to platform shareholders while workers receive only precarious wages.

The commodification of authenticity operates through what scholars identify as "algorithmic authenticity"—a manufactured approximation of genuine human expression

that platforms can predict, scale, and monetize. Research on "Algorithmic Authenticity" demonstrates that under the algorithmic flows of digital capitalism, authenticity itself becomes subject to variation, iteration, and outside influence, transformed from an intrinsic quality of personhood into a performative strategy for economic survival. For Indore's digital workers, this means that the pressure to appear authentic—to generate relatable content, to display genuine emotion in customer interactions, to cultivate a coherent online identity—becomes another form of unpaid labour. The worker must constantly perform authenticity while knowing that this performance is being captured, analysed, and fed back to them as algorithmic recommendations for how to be more "authentically" engaging. This creates a profound paradox: the more successfully a worker performs authenticity, the more completely their genuine self becomes alienated, transformed into a commodity that the platform can package and sell. The digital labour of authenticity production becomes what Chinese scholars term passive working time-free time that is transformed into labour time through the endless requisitioning of mental productivity . When Indore's workers scroll through social media in their leisure hours, they are simultaneously training recommendation algorithms; when they share personal stories with customers, they are generating content that platforms repurpose; when they build community with fellow workers, they are creating social networks that platforms can map and monetize. Every authentic moment becomes a commodity.

The Indore High Court's landmark judgment in the Vinod Kumar Meena case provides a crucial jurisprudential counterpoint to this commodification dynamic. Justice Subodh Abhyankar's ruling that "a person's identity is not lost when he is not recognized by a machine" and that fundamental rights cannot be "curtailed or sidelined only on account of failure of a machine to recognise him" asserts the priority of authentic human identity over algorithmic verification systems. This judgment implicitly challenges the commodification logic by insisting that identity precedes and exceeds its machine-readable representations. Where digital capitalism seeks to reduce workers to data points—biometric scans, rating scores, behavioural profiles—the court affirms that authentic personhood persists beyond algorithmic capture. This resonates with what critical scholars identify as the need to resist the "commoditization of communication" and to imagine platforms transformed into public utilities accountable to democratic rather than profit-driven logics. For Indore's digital workers, this legal precedent offers a language of resistance: the assertion that their authentic selves cannot be fully commodified, that something of who they are remains inalienable even as platforms extract value from every dimension of their lives. The judgment's insistence on documentary verification—Aadhaar, PAN card, driving licence—as alternatives to machine recognition suggests pathways for preserving authentic identity within systems increasingly dominated by algorithmic governance.

The commodification of authenticity extends beyond individual workers to encompass entire communities and cultural formations. Research on "immaterial labour" and "non-material labour" demonstrates that digital platforms extract value not only from explicit work but from the entire fabric of social life—the knowledge, relationships, and cultural practices that constitute community. For Indore, a city with rich cultural traditions and strong community networks, this means that local knowledge—the best routes through congested neighbourhoods, the timing of festivals that surge delivery demand, the social connections that enable trust-based transactions—becomes data that platforms harvest and monetize. The worker's embeddedness in community, their authentic belonging to place, becomes another asset to be commodified. This represents what scholars term the "colonization of library infrastructure" extended to social infrastructure—the transformation of collectively generated knowledge into privately owned algorithmic assets. When an Indore delivery worker navigates using local knowledge that no GPS can capture, that knowledge becomes training data for the next generation of mapping algorithms. When a worker's reputation in their neighbourhood enables faster customer trust, that social capital becomes a predictor that platforms incorporate into rating systems. The authentic life of the community becomes raw material for platform accumulation.

The psychological consequences of this commodification are severe and increasingly documented. Chinese research on digital capitalism's spiritual consequencesidentifies endless mental burnout and dissipation of the meaning of existence as the human costs of transforming free time into labour time and authentic expression into commodified performance. For Indore's workers, this manifests as the exhaustion of constantly performing authenticity, the anxiety of algorithmic evaluation, and the erosion of coherent selfhood under the pressure of platform demands. The worker who must maintain cheerful service while absorbing customer abuse, who must cultivate an engaging online presence while struggling to make ends meet, who must navigate algorithmic penalties while preserving some sense of genuine identity—this worker experiences the commodification of authenticity as existential fragmentation. Yet within this landscape, resistance emerges. Worker collectives, unionization efforts, and legal challenges like the Indore High Court case represent what Jarrett identifies as "struggle"—the capacity of digital labourers to resist the iniquities and inequalities of their working environments. The demand for platforms to recognize worker authenticity not as a resource to be extracted but as a dignity to be protected constitutes the core political challenge of our time:

how to build digital economies that genuinely value human identity rather than merely commodifying it.

Conclusion: The relationship between digital labour and authenticity represents one of the most profound and unresolved tensions of our contemporary moment—a struggle that plays out daily in the lives of millions of workers across India's tier-2 cities, from the delivery riders navigating Bengaluru's congested streets to the platform workers of Indore whose authentic selves remain illegible to the very algorithms that govern their livelihoods. This analysis has traced the multiple dimensions of this tension: the economic precarity that compels algorithmic conformity, the emotional labour demanded by rating systems, the physical risks rendered invisible by platform architectures, and the systematic commodification of identity itself. Drawing on sociological frameworks from Bourdieu's fields of symbolic capital to Foucault's biopolitical governance, from Goffman's dramaturgical performance to Honneth's theory of recognition, we have illuminated how digital platforms simultaneously depend upon and systematically erode the authentic selfhood of workers. The Indore High Court's landmark judgment—affirming that "a person's identity is not lost when he is not recognized by a machine"—stands as a powerful jurisprudential counterpoint to the reduction of human worth to algorithmic legibility, asserting that authentic personhood persists beyond and exceeds its machine-readable representations.

Yet the struggle for authenticity in digital labour is far from resolved. The commodification of identity proceeds apace, with platforms continuously developing new techniques for capturing and monetizing what Jarrett's Marxian analysis identifies as the inalienable assets of worker subjectivity—their emotional expressions, community connections, local knowledge, and even moments of fatigue and frustration, all transformed into measurable metrics and tradeable data points. The psychological toll is evident in the exhaustion, anxiety, and fragmentation experienced by workers who must constantly perform authenticity while knowing this performance generates value that accrues elsewhere. Workers describe the system with resigned clarity: "If you slow down, you lose money. If you rush, you risk your life. Either way, the app wins." This encapsulates the existential predicament of digital labour—the impossible choice between economic survival and authentic selfhood, between performing algorithmically prescribed roles and preserving some sense of genuine identity.

The path forward requires nothing less than a fundamental reimagining of digital labour's relationship to authenticity. This demands platform governance that genuinely values worker identity rather than merely extracting it—transparent algorithms subject to meaningful appeal, fair compensation for emotional labour, comprehensive mental health support, and formal recognition that identity work is real work deserving of dignity and protection. It requires legal frameworks that, following the Indore High Court's lead, insist on human review when algorithmic systems fail and affirm that authentic identity, verified through documents and community recognition, must prevail when machines misrecognize. It requires worker organizing that reclaims collective authenticity through solidarity, unionization, and platform cooperatives owned and governed by workers themselves. The Karnataka government's ordinance establishing social security for gig workers represents an important step, demonstrating that formal recognition of platform labour relationships is possible and that worker protections can be encoded into law. Yet such measures must be deepened and expanded, ensuring they address not only material conditions but also the psychological and existential dimensions of authenticity erosion.

Ultimately, this struggle requires a fundamental cultural shift in how we understand value itself—moving beyond metrics that capture only what can be counted, toward recognition that the most valuable dimensions of human labour are precisely those that resist quantification: the care, creativity, connection, and authentic presence that workers bring to every interaction. The future of digital labour will be determined by whether these dimensions of authenticity can be preserved, protected, and valued, or whether they will be finally and completely commodified into oblivion. Will platforms evolve to recognize that a delivery rider's local knowledge, a driver's community connections, and a content creator's genuine expression are not simply resources to be extracted but human capacities to be honoured? Will legal systems consistently affirm, as the Indore High Court did, that human identity precedes and exceeds algorithmic verification? Will workers find ways to organize that preserve collective authenticity while challenging platform power? These questions remain unanswered, their resolution contingent on struggles unfolding in Indore and countless other cities across the Global South. What is certain is that the outcome of these struggles will shape not only the future of work but the very possibility of authentic human existence in an increasingly algorithmically governed world. The preservation of authenticity in digital labour is thus not merely an economic or legal question but a deeply human one—a question about what kind of beings we wish to become and what kind of world we wish to inhabit.

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