

10 One gate leads to many doors, a case study of MyGate in India

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Editor note

Mittal's paper argues for why sector transgressions are not just a phenomenon of big tech, but equally present in small platforms. Through an analysis of the MyGate application in 2022, which focuses on community management in residential associations, she demonstrates how the company leverages its dominance in the sector by diversifying its offerings to move from a focus on identity verification to aspects such as payments. In doing so, Mittal argues that much like big tech, these platforms place an emphasis on increasing the services on offer before focusing on profits, and in this particular case, see the road to growth as being shaped by super-app ambitions.

Introduction

Sphere transgression is understood as a foray into a distributional sphere made possible by the advantages or dominance in one sphere (Sharon, 2021). In terms of social digital developments, it can be commonly seen as the power leveraged by a dominant player in one domain to offer services of an entirely new kind. It is an apt way to characterise the ways in which seemingly innocuous innovations are changing the infrastructural landscape across regions, communities, and countries. This essay seeks to show that the phenomenon is not restricted to big tech (understood broadly as GAFAM) alone. To exemplify the claim and enhance the canvas of such transgressions, this paper will outline the case study of one such small yet emergent platform, MyGate. It will explain how MyGate functions, specifically relaying its impact on workers, followed by outlining its role in the pandemic by the state authorities which unveiled its transgressive potential. It will conclude by highlighting how the transgression is now even more apparent due to its super-app ambitions. It is interspersed with snippets of interviews (see appendix below) with domestic workers and administrators across two apartments in Bengaluru along with a developer of the app conducted remotely. It is hoped that this essay will contribute to refine the outlines of the spheres which are transgressed, the ways in which they are transgressed and expand the notion of transgression to include new players.

Walking through MyGate

MyGate is an app launched in 2016, offered by Vivish Technologies Pvt. Ltd. It boasts an 82% market share in the niche segment of community management (Agarwal, 2022), a growing sub type of platforms which provide services surrounding identification and authentication in a bounded area. It is offered in the form of an app interface to residents and administrators of residential complexes. In India, a typical apartment complex comprises of residential buildings, a park, parking spaces for vehicles, and other optional amenities. It is bounded by walls or fences and is manually secured by security guards to form a gated community. Service providers such as domestic workers, car cleaners, and delivery persons are allowed inside the gated communities, through the supply of gate passes and a record of daily entry at the gates (Bal et al., 2017). It is a quasi-public space where they must take an overt action to register their presence and attendance (Lehr, 2019). Apartments being a unit of urban construction necessarily follow the logic which governs the cityscape such as border control, high walls, and CCTVs against perceived internal and external threats. This occurs through a process of citadelisation where such complexes are turned into individual citadels (Lehr, 2019), which are self-sufficient in commerce and comfort for their residents, replete with secure perimeters.

MyGate enables controlled access to public spaces by datafication (Mejias and Couldry, 2019). Traditionally, domestic workers access apartments using a physical ID card issued against a manual check of administrative documents such as Aadhaar card, voter ID card, PAN card, and others. The entry and exit of each domestic worker are recorded at the access points in an apartment by the security guards in a paper register. With the introduction of MyGate, the details of such IDs are filled into the MyGate dashboard to receive a MyGate ID, issued to workers on top of the existing verification. Further, a live photo is captured by the apartment administrator to create a database of domestic workers. Through this process, the workers are automatically placed in a database on the app and connected with employers.

Once the resident-employers download and use the app, they are also placed in a database. Their house details allow an automatic connection of the worker profile to their account such that they get notified of her movements. It functions by notifying and seeking permission from registered residents regarding external visitors.

Implications of identification

As can be observed from the system even before the institution of MyGate, identification of an individual to provide access, surveil, and control is an attendant feature of the way the offline world is constructed (Lehr, 2019). It codes the differences in power and position into an undignified, even if acceptable, norm. The same sequence has spilled over to the online world, using

logins or cookies (Van Dijck and Jacobs, 2020). It has then retraced its way to *onlife* (Floridi, 2015), where the offline world is digitally mediated such that identity is proved, both online and offline. Workers are routinely identified for any gainful employment. This requirement is premised on the need to ensure security and check the movement of people. For example, in 20th century America, identity documents, workers' registration into a database, and telephonic verification were required to be conducted by employers to check illegal immigration into the country (Danburg, 1995). The process of identification on the app involves similar steps with technological upgrades. It starts with the provision of IDs and a photo capture of the worker. The major difference is that these requirements are not stipulated by law in India for domestic work (Shroff and Sinha, 2012). Instead, they occur as a manifestation of how workers are constructed on these apps where a particular type of verification suffices. Further, in the absence of a law which lays down verification requirements for employment, domestic workers have often been relegated to the domain of criminal law, as they can be optionally verified by the police, at the behest of the employer (Sinha, 2022). This creates a system where apps use administrative IDs to provide private IDs to workers, in the form of a MyGate ID. This act of conversion of worker identities to numbers, catalysed by IDs, can be understood as a form of gatekeeping (Jarrahi et al., 2020), which ensures branding of workers and a relationship between the workers and the platform through the allotted number.

MyGate further requires a worker to be onboarded where the locus of control is completely outside the purview of the worker. The digital control of identification is distributed across the apartment administrator, employer, and employee in unequal ways. MyGate provides a mechanism for explicit consent of domestic workers from whom the data is taken. While its Privacy Policy (2021 version, on file with author) does not secure this data, it requires that a phone number be provided to the domestic worker to which they can give a missed call to consent to the data collection. However, the administrators and the domestic workers interviewed were not aware of this option and none availed themselves of it.

Enhancing inequality

Apartments which use MyGate have mandated the registration of domestic workers on the app where they must go through the entire process outlined earlier. Participant 1 explained that:

It (registration of workers on the app) is compulsory because it is a rule. Just like uniform in a company is important, similarly, MyGate is compulsory. Even if a house is not on the app, it is still required that the domestic worker is on the app because if they don't get an ID card then how can we check the database.

For the second apartment, Participant 2 also corroborated this understanding:

It is compulsory. Because this option only now we're using. The old manual one, we are not using. Everything is recorded in the system right there and one can check it.

This situation makes the conditions for consent of domestic workers redundant. For the residents, on the other hand, registration, use, and access of the app is optional. While the online consent practices outlined earlier indicate the lack of any meaningful choice, it is not to suggest that offline consents are perfect or shorn of any inequity. In fact, the debate is rich about the concerns with epistemological background and effectiveness of informed consent when power differentials cannot be effectively accounted for (O'Connell, 2016). The online and then the mixed reality use of technology, as seen within the app, add new dimensions and layers of complexity to such debates.

The presence of workers on platforms occurs across a spectrum of visibility (Gruszka and Böhm, 2020). Their 'functional visibility' is enhanced, in accordance with the platform demands to serve its ends. At the same time, through the process of sociotechnical obfuscation, they are also rendered largely invisible to customers and each other (Van Doorn, 2017). MyGate overturns the visibilities without the workers being seen (Karuturi, 2019). On the face of it, it has digitised an analogue process, enhancing surveillance. The entry and exit details of the domestic worker are noted by the security guards on the apps. A digital record subsists with the apartment administration and the employer, to the exclusion of the employee alone.

Further, the affordance is only available to residents, in the form of an app. The data of domestic workers is collected by the apartment administrators who put it into a dashboard offered by MyGate to which they have exclusive access (Participant 2). This data is further stored by MyGate on S3 cloud servers provided by AWS (Participant 5). However, the duty to protect it is not attached to MyGate, as noted by the absence of its mention in the Privacy Policy. This can be contrasted to the data of the residents, which they can input on their own into the app. The residents' data is protected by MyGate, according to the Privacy Policy. The absence of an app interface negates the ability of workers to perceive the platform and its functioning, imbalancing the distribution of visibility between the employer and employee (Parijatha, 2020).

MyGate also displays the contact details of the workers prominently for the employer to reach them anytime, as mobile numbers are also collected (Participant 2). Similarly, the design affordance of automatic notification, with a large database of domestic workers, ratings, and reviews which cannot be seen by them, ensures greater opacity in their relationship. There are also granular digital records of entry and exit times and patterns of domestic workers, along with wage records. The increase in information asymmetry works as a key ingredient to widen the power asymmetry between the employer and the employee in platformised workspaces (Kingsley et al., 2015; Jarrahi et al., 2020).

With the use of MyGate in an apartment, the workers enter after they pass through the MyGate app interface used by the security guard at the physical access points or gates. At the sweet spot of the intersection of online and offline, MyGate IDs do not become imperative to grant access to the physical workplaces of apartment complexes. When enquired if a technical glitch on the app, phone, or internet can affect the entry of worker, Participant 3 explained that:

because I have the pass, I can show it and go in.

Participant 2 explained that:

Yes, we allow entry because she has an ID card. And we write all flat numbers. So we have intercom also. So sometimes it's not working. We will call on intercom or through mobile.

MyGate is a relatively new system, having been installed in these apartments during the pandemic (Participants 1, 2). This indicates the trend in its practice where it is used to mark attendance in granular form. Whenever difficult, the apartments can fall back on the legacy system with lesser datafication capabilities to carry out the same functions. However, given the mandate to compulsorily register all workers and nudge residents to register on the app, it suggests a future where the legacy system may be finally relegated to its resting place. In such a case, apartment attendance may follow the path of app-based attendance for daily wage work, a system where the workers lose out wages due to unmarked attendance arising out of myriad technical glitches (Gurmat, 2022; Lalwani, 2022; Nair, 2022).

The technological system of MyGate works in the sphere of identification and authentication in private spaces which was subsequently leveraged for public spaces during the pandemic.

Transgression

India witnessed multiple stages and types of lockdowns since the onset of the pandemic. The concomitant development was the range of policies and technological solutions to combat the crisis. The first phase of the nationwide lockdown witnessed a complete shutting down of services and movement, amounting to the largest lockdown in the world (Chandrashekhara, 2020). Amidst this atmosphere, exceptions were carved out for the production and delivery of essential services such as food items and medicines (Annexure to MHA Order, 2020). Various states issued their own set of policies and measures to ensure that the exception was not misused for wanton movement. One such policy was the issuance of travel permits to authorised personnel such as healthcare workers, and delivery workers through an e-pass system (News Desk, 2020).

In Karnataka, the partner chosen to build this system, through sheer opaqueness, was MyGate. It allowed the creation of a remote technological bridge. The organisation which sought travel permits for its employees would send their details to be vetted and authorised by the police through the KSP Clear Pass app. Once done, the specific employees could download the app and seek evidence of authorization which was issued by the police. A QR code was generated which was then scanned by police on the ground, if required (Chitturi, 2020).

In its most bare form, MyGate creates a bridge between parties for authorisation, after identification. This allowed the app to move beyond the confines and boundaries of an apartment. As explained by one of the developers, MyGate's modularity can be gauged from its design endeavour to capture all access points, temporary or permanent, using QR code-based apps (Participant 5). While the idea of digital passes is laudable to enhance the speed of a process in an emergency, it seems that the supply of this technology created its own demand. This is because the solution was envisaged around the technological architecture already offered by a private company.

This development came under some scrutiny as it was revealed that the app is also mandating collection of Aadhaar details, which is not permitted unless it is offered voluntarily or it is stipulated by law (Agrawal, 2020). This specific form of transgression is one where MyGate is interacting with the state through an opaque partnership, using its technological infrastructure to expand to multiple use cases offered as a pro-bono service (ET Government, 2020; Solano et al., 2022). This encourages and strengthens platformisation through creation of boundary resources, specifically seen in the form of such partnerships (van Doorn et al., 2021).

Increasing partnerships

The affordance of the MyGate app and its omnipresence across apartments has been leveraged to expand the portfolio of services and use cases as is evident from the commerce option and resident payment services added into the app (Ganguly, 2021).

The boundary resource of the worker registration system has been captured to receive greater access to apartments so that the platformised and commercial services can then be targeted to residents. A similar strategy was used by Google in the past, to launch e-commerce services in India by leveraging its subscriber base of the Gmail service (Thomas, 2019). Each apartment thus represents a closed system where MyGate is competing with other community management platforms like NoBrokerHood and JioGate (Mitter, 2019) to get access to as many residential complexes as possible. This indicates its focus on expansion and increase of scope of activities, rather than profits, in the launch phase. This is accompanied by the strategy to gain network effects as it is made compulsory across apartments for domestic workers to register on the app,

with an option given to residents to use the app. It is also attempting to control digitised resources beyond the scope of the firm with datafication of extant mediation (Gawer, 2021).

MyGate is an example of emergent supply chain platforms (Gawer, 2014) which enter into contractual relationships with other parties in the supply chain to offer their services. This is a strategy of intimacy used by small platforms to create boundary resources. It involves close collaboration with developers, users, and complementors during an extended period throughout the development process, in contrast to an arm's length interaction with other players (Islind et al., 2016). While the app is provided for free, it uses typical financialisation methods for a startup such as venture funds and acquisitions (Chen and Qiu, 2019) along with charging users a direct fee (Ghezzi and Cavallo, 2020).

The offshoots of a super-app can be seen here. Super-apps or ecosystem creation within an app is an example of sector transgression at an infrastructural and architectural level. It is also an example of sector and scope creep, built on datafication at scale of one service which results in 'market making' (Darmawan, 2021).

MyGate is but one example of the many platforms in this area. These changes portend subtle but grave impacts on marginalised populations and increased comfort for the privileged sections, stretching the existential divide of extant inequality. Their banality potentially legitimises the transgressions, as observed here from community management to movement management to e-commerce service provision.

Conclusion

A germ of an idea such as 'community management' takes root and spreads, into public service delivery as well as to e-commerce. In MyGate's journey of such offerings, there are some noticeable parameters which can perhaps make it one of the many case studies of platformisation in India and elsewhere. First is the absence of legitimate controls, by law or politics, as these platforms armour up the convenience of the comfortable ones. While criticality, scholarship, and action take their own time, the pace of the technology is marked by a second factor, the changing pace of technology production itself. This is a form of digital production which transcends the material logistics of general manufacturing. These production patterns are increasingly being highlighted with the hope to shape regulatory attention (Balayn, Gürses, 2024).

These developments portend lessons for every other region to view and assess their unique manifestation of the global digital infrastructure. The ability of MyGate to transgress spheres is tethered to big tech very directly. It is not a firm they own or invest in but it literally and figuratively stands on the shoulders of such giants. Each technological manoeuvre that MyGate managed, ranging from separate databases for residents and workers to creation of

technological bridges to provision of QR codes was due to its ability to interact with the cloud service provider, AWS, remotely and constantly. If dug deeper, it might be unearthed that it used the available digital building blocks, an aspect which remained hidden from view, during the fieldwork and beyond.

Appendix

Table of interview participants

Participant type	De-identified reference
Apartment administrators	Participant 1, 2
Domestic workers	Participant 3, 4
Developer	Participant 5

The screenshots of the app interfaces for every step are on file with the author.

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