

PLATFORMIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDIA'S GIG ECONOMY

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Abstract. In the digital era, work relations are constantly evolving, paving the way for more flexible forms of employment. The gig workforce in India has grown from 2.5 million in 2011-12 to 6.8 million in 2019-20, and is projected to triple by the end of the current decade. Platformization of gig work has blurred the lines between formal and informal work, as firms are leaning towards a blended workforce model. Such forms of digital mediation make freelance and gig work even more convenient for workers, but it also creates new forms of dependencies. The gig economy has generated mass employment but there are growing concerns over job and income instability, often influenced by algorithmic factors. Even organized sectors of the economy are adopting gig based hiring practices, causing an increase in informalization. Since gig work has now become a structural component of the economy, it becomes important to ensure better governance and sustainable integration of innovation with equitable labour practices. This paper reviews the evolution of India's gig economy through descriptive analysis and case studies, examining how technology, digital infrastructure, and post-pandemic work models have accelerated its growth. The paper also analyses popular platform models in the context of low-skilled work. This includes mobility based models and delivery based models. The case studies illustrate the mechanisms through which digital mediation shapes wages, performance, and worker behaviour. It also examines the various challenges, recent trends, policy infrastructure, emerging institutional and policy responses, along with scope for future improvements.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Platformization, Labour Policy, Skill Development.

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§ Manuscript received: 04-11-2025; accepted: 15-12-2025.

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1. Introduction

The term “gig” has its origin in how musicians in the West started getting paid per performance or gig. In today’s economic context, gig work refers to jobs that don’t come under the purview of a conventional employment contract, or “employee-employer relationship”. Gig work has always existed in India in various forms in the informal economy. After the technological advancements of the early 21st century attributed to the 4th Industrial Revolution (smartphones, IoT, artificial intelligence, etc), a specialized form of gig employment, called “platform work” has gained popularity. This is typically a tripartite agreement between service provider, service seeker and the digital intermediary or platform which facilitates the transaction. Platformization, coupled with the Jio explosion of unlimited high-speed LTE data at low prices, changed the landscape of urban informal employment in India.

As the economy grew, growth in employment in the gig sector has consistently been higher than growth in overall employment. As per the 2022 NITI Aayog report on “India’s Booming Gig and Platform Economy”, the gig workforce in India has grown from 2.5 million in 2011-12 to 6.8 million in 2019–20, and is projected to reach 23.5 million by 2029–30, indicating a more than threefold expansion in a decade. The employment elasticity to GDP growth has been greater than 1 during 2011-12 to 2017-18, which means that for every 1% growth in GDP, employment in gig work grew by more than 1%. The elasticity of overall employment was negative for this period, indicating the trend of jobless growth.

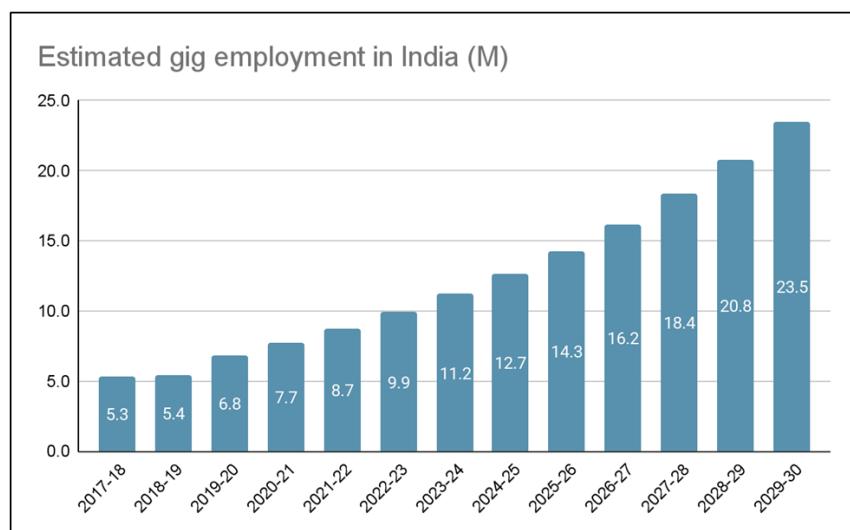


Figure 1. Estimated gig employment in India (M)
(Source: NITI Aayog, 2022. Numbers from 2020-21 onwards are projections)

More than 75% companies in India currently employ 10% of their total employees as gig workers (NITI Aayog, 2022), but this headcount is expected to grow due to MNCs opting for the blended workforce model. Work dynamics, especially in the corporate sector, changed drastically during the pandemic. Working from home which was earlier reserved for extenuating circumstances has now become the norm. Even as we recovered from the pandemic and people started going out of their homes freely, going back to the office did not regress to the old working model. The hybrid work model has been adopted across the globe by firms working in most white collar jobs. Freelance workers can now be seamlessly integrated into this model that enables employees to transcend temporal and spatial limitations to work. Blended workforce is preferred in the light of uncertain market conditions, enabling employers to scale up and down quickly as per changing business needs (Mahato et al., 2021). This is in line with the historical trend of an increase in the number of gig workers every time there is an economic downturn, a phenomenon identified by economic historian Louis Hyman.

The kind of gig work performed and the remuneration for the same may vary greatly depending on the skill level and sector organization. The share of gig workers in the organized sector has also increased now, leading to its informalization. Gig workers are growing in all sectors, and the share of gig workers is also increasing in sectors that were not initially having many gig workers, such as retail, finance and insurance (NITI Aayog, 2022).

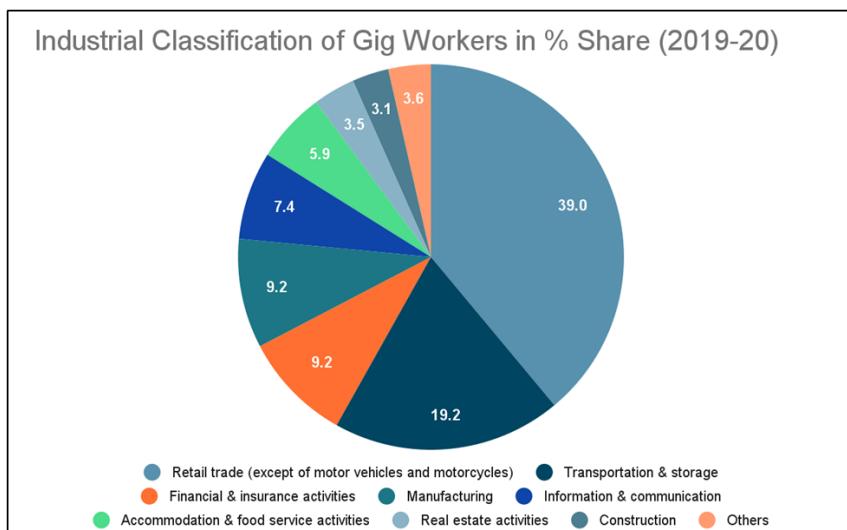


Figure 2. Industrial Classification of Gig Workers in % Share in (2019 - 2020)
Source: NITI Aayog, 2022

This diversification of gig work into all realms may be attributed to the trend of platformization. It is important to review the trajectory of growth and trends that the gig economy of India has witnessed in this context. Based on the type of service provided, there are two major categories of platforms providing low-skill gig employment: ride hailing platforms and food delivery platforms. This paper will be using descriptive analysis and case study approach to highlight innovations and challenges in these two categories.

2. Literature Review

The word “gig economy” first gained recognition around the time of the Great Depression. Platformization of gig work started budding in 2013 and the research around the same has continued since 2015 (Raval, 2020). HCI (human-computer interaction) research looks into the dynamics, objectives, needs, challenges and other nuances of such work. Poor pay for piece-based and crowd-sourced work is highlighted as one of the major concerns.

There are various sub-fields of research within the gig economy, including algorithmic management, crowd work, counter-surveil tools, etc. “Sharing Economy” is now popularly used to describe the system where assets owned by someone, are used by someone else, by renting or borrowing. There is a “digital dis-intermediation” of work and labour in this sharing economy, along with “re-intermediation” of other social actors (Ray, 2024). These two combined constitute the oscillating nature of contemporary gig infrastructure in India.

Surie & Koduganti (2016) provide an ethnographic study of gig workers, offering a contrasting view of platform work in the Indian context, as compared to the precarity narrative. They observed that Indian drivers working for mobility service platforms perceive their job to be giving them more freedom and dignity than previous informal employment or low-paying jobs. This “perceived” autonomy, however, could be because gig work often mimics the nature of self-employment and short-term myopia.

Verma, Ilavarasan, and Kar (2020) examine how ride-hailing apps like Uber and Ola are central players in the country’s platform economy. They examined the structural inequalities embedded in these systems due to lack of institutional safeguards for the drivers. The flexibility of work comes with a trade off, and there are asymmetries in control and risk between the firms and workers.

Venkatesh (2023) discusses that the productivity and skill of workers, as defined by the platforms, is very narrow and dependent on platform-specific metrics such as responsiveness and punctuality. It keeps workers in a bid to achieve better performance ratings by

maximizing output, even under precarious conditions.

These studies contribute to the growing body of research critically analysing the unpredictability and vulnerability of gig work that exists beyond the promise of autonomy.

3. Case Studies

3.1. Ride Hailing Platforms. It has been 1.5 decades since the introduction of ride-hailing apps in India, Ola being the first entry in the market in 2010. It was then followed by Uber (2013), Rapido (2015) and BluSmart (2019). The business problem it solved was that of the existing taxi hailing market being disorganized, inconvenient and expensive. Cab aggregators filled a demand gap that was increasing with the rise in disposable incomes of the middle class and increasing number of BPO workers, who travel often during odd hours. Aggregators don't own the taxis, and they hire the drivers as independent contractors, not employees; therefore the legal hassles and liability are less.

Traditionally, aggregators used a commission based model. For example, Uber earns a commission of 20-27% for cabs (Venkatesh & Easaw, 2015). Effective February 2025, it has shifted to a subscription based model for its auto drivers, to keep up with industry trends and maintain competitive advantage. The fare is decided on a demand-supply basis, an example of how algorithmic factors impact the wages of gig workers through ratings, surge pricing, cancellation penalties etc.

While Ola, Uber and Rapido are cases within the classic gig economy model, BluSmart came up with a hybrid model where the fleet was owned by the company instead of owned/rented by the drivers, who were hired to work in fixed shifts and structured pay. So even though BluSmart was a platform-based ride hailing app, providing a similar service as the other competitors, it pushed the boundaries of gig work and highlighted the unpredictability of the platform economy. BluSmart's recent financial scandal and abrupt market exit left its drivers in a sudden state of precarity. This case underscores that even models closer to formal employment can fail to ensure stability if corporate governance falters.

According to Grand View Horizon, the ride hailing services market in India is expected to reach a projected revenue of USD 6.2 billion by 2030. Currently, Rapido holds the supremacy in bike taxis, but the market share for 4-wheeler taxis is still dominated by Uber (50%), followed by Rapido (30%) and remainder by Ola (The Times of India, 2025).

The National e-Governance Division (NeGD), in collaboration with the Ministry of Co-operation, is preparing to launch Bharat Taxi, a first of its kind cooperative ride-hailing

platform. It would allow drivers to become shareholders and empower them with greater control over their work and income. The platform will also eliminate surge pricing, offering commuters affordable and predictable fares (The Times of India, 2025). The pilot is expected to go live by the end of 2025 and if successful, this initiative could potentially change the current landscape of ride-hailing platforms in India.

3.2. Delivery Platforms. BigBasket was the early entrant founded in 2011, providing scheduled grocery deliveries. Zomato started out as a restaurant and menu listing platform and pivoted to delivery in 2015, after the launch of Swiggy in 2014. In 2020 it acquired Blinkit (then Grofers), which is now a key growth segment of their business, focussing on hyper-local quick commerce. Similarly, Swiggy launched Instamart in the same year. These two are now the two direct competitors, together holding more than 90% market share (Paramasivam, 2024).

Zepto was launched in 2021 but quickly made space for itself in the market. It promised 10 minute delivery since its launch and focussed on tech optimization for inventory and delivery. However, recent controversies regarding safety standards in warehouses and dark stores, labor exploitation and algorithmic tactics (hidden costs, forced subscription continuity, basket sneaking and other dark patterns) has brought legal troubles for Zepto, and heightened scrutiny for delivery platforms in general.

Recent reports raised concerns regarding Zepto's treatment of its gig workforce. In Hyderabad, hundreds of Zepto delivery workers launched an indefinite strike demanding fair pay, reasonable working hours, social security, and dignity in work conditions. The Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union has accused the company of exploitative practices, including low delivery pay, lack of basic amenities, and no social security benefits for workers (YourStory, 2025). The movement reflects a broader sense of unrest across the country among platform and gig workers. The concerns include wage suppression, digital surveillance, algorithmic control and job instability (The Indian Express, 2025).

There is a lack of HR support and other social security measures for contract staff (Livemint, 2025). This is an example of how gig workers don't get to avail the same employee benefits and treatment as full time employees (FTEs). This excludes them from the very digital system they are deeply integrated into.

Zomato launched a Co-pilot program in August 2024, wherein the company promoted 4 delivery partners as full time employees. They received product based inputs from the workers, such as voice prompts on delivery partner app, virtual complaint box, inflatable cushions inside delivery bags, and other features to improve the experience for users as

well as delivery partners. Such experiments indicate a growing interest in hybrid models that blend the autonomy of gig work with partial formalization. The program had positive outcomes for the organisation but the impact on the selected gig workers and their career trajectory remains unknown.

According to Mordor Intelligence, India's quick commerce industry is projected to reach a market size of USD 4.35 billion by 2030, underscoring the need to ensure that the sector's rapid expansion is accompanied by fair labor practices, social protection mechanisms, and equitable value distribution between platforms and workers.

4. Challenges

Despite the immense job creation that has been enabled through gig work and platformization, this structure posits its own challenges, especially for the workers. Apart from availability and access to mobile internet, digital literacy is a basic prerequisite for a person to gain employment as a gig worker.

Since gig workers are on full-time payroll of the company, they are not entitled to employment benefits enjoyed by FTEs (Baddireddy, 2023). There are fewer contractual obligations on part of employers; in fact they avoid calling gig workers "employees" and use words such as "independent contractors" and "partners", as this allows them to abstain from certain legal accountability. There is also a consistent temp-vs-permanent salary gap, with logistics roles showing up to 9.7% higher wages for permanent staff, and BFSI showing a 11.3% difference (TeamLease Services, 2024). This reflects a dual employment structure where gig or temp workers often serve as cost-efficient labour, but with trade-offs in job security and long-term benefits.

Specifically in the context of platform workers, there is a huge dependence of their employment on algorithmic factors. Especially on service aggregator apps, performance/productivity measurement is done based on ratings and feedback, which can impact their work and shift allocation, along with the compensation received. The inherent unpredictability of earnings and shifts in gig work, combined with such algorithmic management, makes it even more vulnerable.

Furthermore, these workers are not provided with a scope of capability development or career progression within the organization. Upskilling, even though an important prerequisite for keeping up with the pace of platform technology, is not provided institutionally (Mahato et al., 2021). They don't have a continuing relationship with their managers or stakeholders responsible for their performance evaluation.

For policymakers also, the gig economy is a quantitative complexity. Worker estimation is difficult due to the possibility of multiple simultaneous contracts.

Despite the challenges, there are some noted benefits of gig work to both employers and employees. Workers face low entry barriers as employers are free from a lot of legal obligations unlike with the FTEs. Occupational mobility is higher as one is not bound to a particular employer and can even hold multiple positions at the same time. Firms benefit by getting cheaper and flexible labour, with the opportunity of scaling up and down quickly. Even for the formal sector companies, gig workers offer convenient hiring options. It takes less time to hire a freelancer from a digital marketplace than recruiting through the traditional method (Ai Group, 2016). The benefits to employers often outweigh those to workers, reinforcing asymmetries of power.

5. Recent Trends

Almost half of the current gig work is in medium skilled jobs, 31% in low skilled and only 22% in high skilled (NITI Aayog, 2022). It is predicted that the domination of medium skilled jobs will gradually shrink and higher share would be concentrated in either low or high skilled jobs.

After AI enabled automation, “taskification” is the next logical track. It breaks down projects with a wide scope into small piecemeal jobs that can be assigned to freelancers. This kind of work is not currently seen within low skill jobs but with the support of proper gig infrastructure low skilled workers can also be integrated into the task chains.

Algorithmic management helps platforms reduce costs and improve service delivery. Workers are mapped to tasks based on skill, availability and location. Platforms also use sophisticated algorithms to run dynamic pricing and incentive structures. Real time market fluctuations are incorporated into these models to optimize resource allocation.

The Jobs and Salaries Primer report (2024) by TeamLease Services highlights recent trends in gig and platform based work in various industries such as Retail, Logistics, Consumer Durables and BFSI (Banking, Financial Services, and Insurance). There is a rising demand in these industries for high flexibility work, reflected by the growth in average salaries and premium payouts. The retail sector witnessed a 8.4% y-o-y salary growth, followed by 5.2% in consumer durables, 5.1% in BFSI and 4.9% in logistics. Remuneration is linked to output, performance or geography. High demand roles in these sectors include delivery associates, customer onboarding executives, field sales agents.

These trends of automation and taskification, performance-linked compensation structures, flexible work models and digital mediation are rapidly transforming the traditional job landscape.

6. Policy Infrastructure

Public-private partnerships are important to fill the skill gap on the supply side of the gig economy. A development within the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship's (MSDE) monthly report (September 2024) is the launch of the Swiggy Skills Initiative, a program specifically designed to train food-delivery and quick commerce workers on the Swiggy platform. It assesses and certifies individuals who have acquired skills through informal or on-the-job learning, rather than formal education or structured training. According to MSDE's Annual Report 2023-24, RPL enrolled over 13 lakh candidates in the previous year. These are some of the very few examples where public skilling initiatives directly benefit platform-based gig workers.

The Ministry had also launched the Skill India Digital (SID) platform, which has 16.31+ million registrations as of October, 2025. It is an entire ecosystem for upskilling, learning, certifications and employment opportunities.

The Ministry of Labour & Employment launched the e-Shram portal in August 2021. It is a centralized national database for unorganized workers. It witnessed 300+ million registrations by the end of 2024 (Press Information Bureau, 2024). Each user gets a Universal Account Number (UAN), which enables them to access welfare schemes such as insurance, pensions and skilling programs. Highest participation is from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, across 400+ occupations.

These are some of the very few examples where public skilling initiatives and digital infrastructure directly benefit informal workers, including platform-based gig workers.

7. Recommendations

Monitoring/feedback Platforms: A parallel network of platforms to monitor service aggregators can help gig workers make more informed decisions. Two examples of this are Turkopticon and (now defunct) Dynamo, both created to help workers rate and take collective action towards 'task requesters' or vendors, specifically for MTurk (Amazon Mechanical Turk). MTurk is an online platform created by Amazon where companies (called requesters) post small tasks that people (turkers) can complete for money.

Worker Integration: Organizations can provide incentives for and enable performance improvement by maintaining a dynamic of worker metrics such as task completion percentage, ratings, two-way feedback etc (Mahato et al., 2021). Better performance can further be incentivized by offering rewards and benefits similar to FTEs (Liu et al., 2020).

Collaboration Platforms: Digital collaboration platforms help align employees across different geographies and roles. Management of blended workforces can be streamlined by using a framework focussed around collaboration, openness toward person-organization fit, career growth opportunities, learning, incentives and performance management (Mahato et al., 2021).

Balanced Approach: Platforms should create a balance between business outcomes and worker satisfaction. Algorithms that enable skill-task mapping, dynamic pricing and real-time feedback should be implemented in a transparent manner, with adequate orientation given to gig workers on how such metrics are determined, thus giving them more control over work.

Worker Well-being: Firms can modify platform design that provides more worker autonomy, focusing on worker pain points and increasing motivation. Transparent management practices such as predictable scheduling can help neutralise the unpredictability of income in gig work.

Conclusion The steady increase of gig-based employment in India hints towards a structural shift and informalization of jobs. Blended workforce models are replacing traditional work ecosystems, calling for a nuanced analysis of economic impact, especially on the labour market. Even as gig work presents workers with higher flexibility, it comes at a cost of job and income instability. Technological factors often worsen the precarity involved in gig work, as their compensation is linked to performance-driven metrics determined by algorithms.

Platform apps use intelligent analytics for not just operational efficiency, but worker management and resource allocation as well. Consumer convenience provided by platformization has fueled investment growth in this sector. But there is also a parallel movement of resistance against unfair practices and governance, especially by gig workers.

Government intervention becomes necessary to balance the efficiency of gig models with equitable sustainability. The policy infrastructure has been improving, with major initiatives around skilling and career support. Collaborative solutions that acknowledge and

improve the conditions of gig workers can go a long way in ensuring that the positive impacts of such models can be maximized, while eliminating the adverse factors.

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