

# Employee Relations in Gig & Platform Economy: Emergence of Legal Framework in India

**Bighnesh Dash Mohapatra & Chandan Kumar Sahoo**

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*The increasingly digitalizing world requires a regulatory framework at this juncture. Some of the developed countries have taken legislative initiatives for the gig business model or are underway of incorporating the regulatory framework. India has gone an extra mile to club the gig workers under the umbrella of the unorganized sector and attempted towards universal social protection. This paper elucidates the regulatory framework in India comprehending the views of gig workers. The findings revealed the exploitation of platforms, distorted employment relations, negligence of the state and plea for legislative remedies. While the new Labor Codes have instigated groundwork to simplify the provisions, the employment regulation and social security for the burgeoning platform workforce have a long way to go.*

**Bighnesh Dash Mohapatra** (Email: yesitisbighnesh@gmail.com) is Research Scholar & **Chandan Kumar Sahoo** is Professor, School of Management, National Institute of Technology Rourkela 769008, Odisha.

## Introduction

India has caught the global attention as an emerging and vibrant economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; paradoxically the standards and security of employment have been continuously exacerbated. Globally, formal employment has sharply declined over the years as flexible, temporary, and part-time jobs are widely demanded across industries. During the 2000s, temporary jobs saw a new height with the advancement of communication technology, and labor cost reduction enforced by the global financial crisis (Hall, 2010). The term ‘gig’ originally coined by the Jazz musicians in the 1920s, used to perform on a contract basis and shared role. The phrase “gig economy” was coined during the great recession in the USA to explain the scenario of a labor market crowded with temporary agencies, part-time jobs, or freelancers (Brown, 2020). The gig work became a buzzword globally with the spread of freelancing and crowdsourcing companies viz; Upwork, Airbnb, UberLyft, and Amazon Turk (Rachel, 2013; Richardson, 2015; Drahokoupil &

Fabo, 2016). The notion of a gig workforce emerged in between the dichotomy of the individual contractors and traditional employees who are neither legally protected nor officially recognized and collaborated for a bargain at work (Van Dijck et al., 2018). The business model of the platforms replaces the standard employment relations with a triangle worker-platform-customer relationship while empirical evidence across the globe shows hardly any intermediate spaces of regulation for such workers (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Since the gig economy is prolonged as an umbrella construct, the development of a unified theoretical paradigm is challenging with distinct promises and paradoxes (Acquier et al., 2017). The research in the field of the gig economy has reached up to conceptualization of work but hardly any progress concerning employment regulations practice (Alex et al., 2020). At this juncture, as a sizeable portion of the workforce engaged in low paid and on-demand gig work, the existent non-standard employee relation is worth studying.

As a consequence of neoliberalism, industrial relations has changed like never before which releases firms from many labor compliances, transfers the obligations to the individuals in a business process, and condenses the interest of workers for more benefits to consumers and investors (Bray & Underhill, 2009). Long-established taxonomies of employment exclude gig workers, rather consider them as independent contractors while the labor process in the gig economy is more complicated to define

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clearly the employment status (Kennedy, 2014). The expansion of the gig economy is claimed as the product of great recession in the West while considered the collateral effect of high unemployment in the low income countries (De Stefano, 2015). While the gig economy has shaken the enduring employment relations by lessening the scope of decent work, present labor laws are not effective to regulate the diverse business model of the platforms (Hannah & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). Scholars named the platforms as “digital sweatshop” as independent workers are not entitled to get sick leave, overtime, disability, and retirement benefits (Harris & Krueger, 2015). These platforms have a positive effect on overall employment by higher matching efficiency and reducing barriers but have an adverse labor market substitution in the form of quality of employment (Prassl, 2018). Scholars have proposed mainly three alternative paths of the labor law reform suitable for the gig economy, namely, a brand new category of workers between employees and independent contractors rather than rigid division, reformation of the major labor laws through the lens of the gig economy, and drafting of a new mechanism for platform economy and gig workers which seems most feasible (Healy et al., 2017). While some of the driving factors (e.g.,

digitalization, young workforce, demand for work-life flexibility, and rationalization of labor laws) have created a burgeoning public interest in gig works, the power dynamics and structural factors in developing countries are yet to be addressed (Kasliwal, 2020). Later in this study, the rationale of regulatory mechanism for non-standard work arrangements is discussed from the gig workers' perspective in India.

### **Present Status & Prospects in India**

The magnitude of gig economy transactions is projected to grow by a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17% and amounts to \$455 billion by 2023 as 350 million gig jobs in India by 2025 present a huge work dynamics (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2021). The estimated growth of sharing economy is from \$14 to \$ 335 billion between 2014 and 2025 with a huge young workforce, wide-ranging demand for services, and digital lifestyle in developing countries (Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017). India is the fifth largest country as per the total gig workforce after the USA, China, Brazil, and Japan. An investigation by United Nation Development Program (2019) reported an array of positive countervailing effect of technology while adverse impact on new forms of employment is comprehended in low-income countries. Moreover, the evolution of work from home, digitalization, tech-savvy generation, and virtual transactions collectively sets a positive note to flourish gig platforms. Although algorithmic arrangement in the gig economy tends to offer workers a high level of flexibility,

work diversity, and sharing the mechanisms of controlling personnel are criticized due to lower pay, psychological exhaustion, social insecurity, and institutional separation (Wood et al., 2019). A McKinsey Global Institute survey reported nearly 20 - 30% of the workforce is engaged in some sort of employment in the gig economy. Boston Consultancy Group (2021) reported that the burgeoning gig economy has the potential to generate 90 million jobs and contribute 1.25% to India's Gross Domestic Product in the long run but incongruously these workers lack minimum wages, arbitrary penalization, efficient grievance mechanism, and basic social security presently. ILO (2020) reported India's labor freedom index is 42 while trade and business freedom indexes are 73.4 and 65.6 respectively. This signifies that the monetary and fiscal measures taken by the government have favored the business to excel in contrast to declining labor welfare. Gig work arrangement can be visualized with adequate data on labor market but quantitative specification and classification of tasks and service providers are still grey areas to consider.

### **Evolving Regulatory Landscape**

The existing legal landscape for gig workers and platforms is diverse but comparable to a certain extent. Since the last few decades debate over informality supplemented by the gig economy as many scholars assume this is old wine in a new bottle. As discussed at the G20 Summit (2020), platform economy has been effective to create avenues for formal work accessing new markets, in-

creasing tax revenue, and remote service opportunities in some countries. In the growing discussion between workers and self-employed, the legal framework of EU member states is based on a binary classification accepting two major categories without a third option; i.e., wage employment and self-employment (Gyulavari, 2020). The US Supreme Court stated clearly that where the core work is done following the usual pattern as an employee marking them as an independent contractor shall not prohibit the legislative protection of these workers (Singletary, 2021). The state of California has passed a landmark decision named Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) permitting businesses to apply for exemption from gig employers rather than considering workers as freelancers or individual contractors given that they have missed the scope to negotiate the price, direct communication with customers and increased earning (Thomas et al., 2020). AB5 approved the drivers' plea not to be classified as independent contractors since their work is not tangential but rather centrally regulated by the guidelines of platforms and almost no bargaining power for the fee due to possessing some special skills. The Uber drivers in Canada are now eligible for minimum wage, vacations, and overtime pay as Ontario's Employment Standard Act 2020 has provisions for their mediation and arbitration (Cheselina, 2017). In Italy, Spain, and some other European countries certain occupation specific legal framework has been developed (Daugareil, 2019). The social security of gig workers in France is considered the social responsibility of platforms rather than legal obligations

(Stewart et al., 2017). In Austria, a clear distinction is made between the contract of employment and contract for works, moreover, without a contract, both the parties agree on a statement of conditions which must contain the terms of employment and any changes unfavorable to employees is prohibited. In Uruguay, ride-hailing drivers are required to register with both tax and insurance authorities to get the facility of regular transport along with social security on contributory mode. Slovakia has adopted the "every job counts" approach where employment of all types even self-employment is considered for social security coverage. The UK Labor Force Survey asks individuals to report their employment status (e.g., running own business, manager, or employee in an establishment) which will help for separate tax treatment and frame appropriate legal measures in an open economy (Adam et al., 2017). An intermediate category of workers (called "employee-like person" in Canada and some EU countries) is proposed to be granted bargaining power, employment equity, and rights. The introduction of a mixed category is not free from drawbacks, as an employer may try to force actual workers into this category, and employees of multiple assignments find it difficult to place themselves (Schwab, 2018). Belgium introduced a tax regime for the sharing economy reviewing the labor law arrangement and their mutual consequence for the service providers and operators. Cherry & Aloisi (2016) surveying 27 developing countries, pointed out the need for transparency in platform algorithms and employment relation architecture to protect gig work-

ers. In this section, we have seen the agreement and confrontation between digital platforms and employment regulations by states in different countries.

### **Gig Workers & Indian Judiciary**

Gig work is envisaged as the new avatar of contract labor while providing a playing field to the platform employers. The states should bring certain regulations to deter unfair practices in the informal economy (Aloisi, 2015). As per the Employment Exchange Act 1959, a person employed in any establishment for certain remuneration is an employee while the Minimum Wages Act 1948 requires an individual to be hired and rewarded in the scheduled employment for which the minimum wage is fixed. The judicial interpretation of these definitions often debars a gig worker on account of the non-existing employment relationship. The Supreme Court (Hussainbhai case, 1978) clarified the true test to see the employment relationship, later extended the checklist, namely, appointing authority, who is paying, the extent of control, alternatives available, nature of the entity, and right to reject. The statutory movement to contemplate the well-being of workers beyond formal employment is instigated by the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, 2008 as social security provisions for non-traditional type occupations. As per the recommendation of the Second Labor Commission the government is also assessing the ground for a tripartite mechanism for the interest of platform workers. The Code on Social Security, 2020 defined a gig worker as “a person who participates in

work arrangements and earns from such activities outside of traditional employment relationships” and a platform worker is engaged in work using online platforms. The Government of Karnataka has drafted a policy to ensure decent working conditions and social security for gig workers as continuously grievances are raised by the temporary and casual workers (Balasubramanyam, 2020). In the 2021-22 Union Budget the Finance Minister has acknowledged a portal to accumulate gig and platform workers’ details; hence government can instigate elementary health, economic and social protection along with easy credit financing (Government of India, 2021). After the New Labor Code is in effect, gig workers will be eligible for social security (e.g., health and insurance) benefits under the unorganized worker category. However, gig workers considered under the umbrella of unorganized workers is a reflection of government reluctance to classify them as a part of the formal workforce where employment-based protection is majorly funded by employers. The occupation-specific social security funds will also be established (1-5% of turnover contributed by the aggregators) to offer protection against death, disability, and old-age benefits. In a developing country like India digital platforms can create a comprehensive database of workers’ classification in the gig economy and allied regulatory measures by the government (Mukhopadhyay, 2021). Al-

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though the New Labor Code in India has rightly directed to engross non-standard forms of employment, at this point legal mechanism is way behind to accommodate the new digital age working class.

### **Practices by Platforms**

Since there is no comprehensible law that regulates gig work arrangements platforms are functioning with their own norms. Even though legal protection for gig workers has been initiated by some countries, platforms managed to reorient the human-centered agenda with their customized policies towards a pro-employer perspective and compel the labor market to adopt the technological changes (Nicola, 2019). At the time of registration, only drivers become part of the contract which reduces the likelihood of litigation, like the pre-dispute arbitration clause, preventing participative action lawsuits, and rule of the game set by the platform always in such click wrap agreement (Friedman, 2014). The top crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk was the first to identify the classification challenges of service providers, i.e. turkers who frequently work on-demand and initiated various provisions (e.g., sick leave, vacation pay, and health insurance). Uber as a pioneering firm in this new business model has already started a guaranteed wage program computing the average logged-in time of drivers (Kirven, 2018). Lyft, a ride-hailing company has signed partnership with a freelancer union recently to expedite group health plans, curtail at-will termination, and arbitration cost will bear by the company.

Foodora, the food delivery company in Austria classifies its manpower as the free employees with basic contracts, employees, and self-employed. In the Global North, there are numerous concerns raised by gig workers demanding their access to labor process and challenging the cartel of platforms with the support of unions (McGaughey, 2018). The Fairwork India Ratings (2020) revealed acute violations of labor standards by the platforms in India. As rated the platforms' compliances, Uber, Swiggy, and Zomato scored 1, Ola, Big Basket, and Amazon scored 2, Dunzo and Grofers managed to score 4 and Urban Company topped with a score of 8 out of 10. Moreover, horizon of this informal economy swings between structured employment norms and traditional unorganized sectors.

### **Research Approach**

We have interacted with 34 logistic partners (i.e, delivery boys and drivers engaged by the platform firms) through 5 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted during the survey in March 2022. Each group consists of 5-8 participants and lasts for 40 minutes to 1 hour to comprehend the views of everyone. The objective is clarified to the participants from the beginning ensuring their confidentiality. The entire discourse of five FGDs in the regional language is recorded earlier in progress into transcription. The sourced data are categorized according to different concepts of employment, regulation and employee relations followed by abductive coding of the phenomenon.

Table 1 Employee Relations in Indian Gig Economy Platforms

	Dunzo	Ekart	OLA	Zomato	Swiggy
Service payment fixed by Size of Workforce ( <i>Approx.</i> )	Consumer services Platform 1,200	Courier service Platform 10,000	Ride sharing Platform 3,000	Food delivery Platform 4,000	Food delivery Platform 6,900
Basic Salary ( <i>Average 1-3 yrs. of experience</i> )	1.6 L.P.A	1.7 L.P.A	2.5 L.P.A	1.6 L.P.A	1.8 L.P.A
Employee relations ( <i>Management claim</i> )	No one to report you are your own boss, Career opportunities for all our partners, Flexible timings with timely incentives.	Productive, flexible, collaborative and fun work culture, Hiring and career growth is considered.	Flexible policies, work environment, Dynamic remuneration and incentives plan, Promote skill and career development.	Medical and accidental insurance to all employees, Paid parental leave, Oblige to the regional labor regulations and beyond.	Financial and psychological support during crisis, Best ease in our HR practices to deliver employee experience always.
Employee relations ( <i>Workers' review</i> )	Allegation against assault and monopoly of platform, No specified and fair allocation of roles & responsibility.	Competitive and stressful workplace, No proper channel to resolve employee grievances, Long working hours, Training and support is merely formalities.	Suffered from poor ratings by the customer even without any fault, Slashing incomes, Black listing on false ground, Payment transparency.	Allegation against pay cuts and monopoly of platforms, frequent lay off by platform, No increment and job security.	Management hardly extend some bonus, recognition, leave even in peak season, Less growth and hectic lifestyle particularly on the field workers.
Demand ( <i>Platform workers</i> )	Basic income and social protection for the workers who engaged with the platform for a defined time and term, Direct cash transfer during the period of occupational injury.	Accommodation and shifting expenses, Reconsideration of incentive and working hours, Transparency in payment, charges and bonus.	Share the maintenance cost of their vehicles, Base minimum fares, Reduction on commission charged, Dialogue with drivers before taking any unilateral decision.	Demand a rise of employment benefits and accidental insurances, Increase pay/ miles travelled and in peak hours, Ease the process of claims and dispute settlement.	Protest demanding a rise in accidental benefits, Periodic computation of variable component of pay, Ease the process of insurance claims.

Source: Authors' compilations

## Analysis

From the direct interaction with a group of logistic partners and drivers, their perception on employee relations and key concerns are recorded. The salient features and HR practices of five leading platform companies portrayed (Table 1). Workers' legitimate rights (e.g., bargaining power, dispute settlement, accidental insurance, and compensation for occupational injury) are not fulfilled while the websites of these companies exhibit harmonious work culture, pay, growth opportunities, and innovative HR policies. Hence, there is an obvious incongruity between management claims and workers' reviews on employee relations. The transcripts of focus group discussions are highlighted in the form of themes and subthemes. The concerns of most of the respondents in each focus group are analogous while some new or contrasting outlook on the given discourse has been added by some respondents.

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## Chaotic Work & Disordered Employment Relations

Ola cabs are the largest mobility platform and its main rival Uber together captured 95% of the market for platform taxis and nearly have 9.5 lakh drivers across India even before the pandemic. The binary employment versus entrepre-

neurship debate is at a nuance stage in India waiting for institutional reformation due to a surge in drivers' protests recently (Surie, 2018). Notably, this hierarchical power dynamics has poised the drivers at bay while OLA and Uber label them as micro-entrepreneur and driver-partner respectively.

What kind of affiliation it is? Prerogative of the platform only works in this modern slavery. We do not have the option to switch companies since the policies are equivalent everywhere. Many lucrative promises while joined (e.g., freedom, flexibility, incentives, and bonus) but gradually the hope goes down. As the operational cost increases, 12 to 16 hours per day invariably on the roads look like a vicious cycle. This demanding and dynamic occupation surely needs government thought. There is no clear status of employment as this independent contracting designation lacks the prerogatives of a proprietor and the protection granted to employees. (FGD: 1)

Since there is almost no human interaction between aggregators and drivers the employee relation is ambiguous without solid legislative mechanism, hence genuine rights of the latter have not been safeguarded.

## Platforms' Exploitation

Two-wheeler is the cheap and sometimes only option looking at the chaos of Indian roads but the ride of 20 miles consistently with an average of 30-40 kilograms on the back gives rise to many musculoskeletal diseases. Although firms

claim flexible timing, medical cover and compensation in emergencies the grievances of logistic boys have often remained unsolved. Thanks to the social media their concerns become viral across the country. We comprehend the exploitation of logistic firms is both explicit (slashed pay for various reasons without conversation) and implicit (e.g., extending zones without consent of the logistic partners). The essence of their discussion is as follows:

We are earning a living from this for the last 3 to 5 years, referred some friends to join too but not enjoying it anymore as the job taking a toll on our health. As if education and experience have no worth in this occupation; we have some fancy names like delivery executives or logistic partner, but only the more you toil more you are supposed to earn. During our orientation, they exhibited so many career opportunities, me, my friends no one got, and who got those? (FGD: 2)

As they are in a third-party relation, logistic partners are supposed to get reasonably fair treatment than delivery boys, tenure-based increment, and some incentives but the growing online shopping of medicines, groceries and growth of these firms has marginally affected the wellbeing of these workers.

### **Food Delivery as a Survival Job**

Demand for delivery personnel is on the rise particularly in food delivery services amid pandemic as the companies such as BigBasket, Swiggy, Zomato, and Deliveroo expanding their manpower to

ensure instant distribution through their hyper local distribution networks. The attractive offerings to consumers in this quick commerce market hardly care for the wellbeing of delivery boys who are at the bottom level supply chain. Most of the companies calculate the pay using a touch point system (2 touch points for every order delivered). However, the platforms often influence the efficiency of the labor process by changing the space when the demand for deliveries surpasses the availability of riders during peak hours or in bad weather. As the findings from the discussion of a group of delivery boys show:

We have to work at a stretch of 6-8 hours per day for the entire month to earn a living (i.e., nearly Rs.25,000). Although we have no control over traffic and extreme heat sometimes encounters warning from the customer service team, low ratings even a pay cut due to a few minutes of late delivery. Whom should we complain...? All are aware but neither employer nor government mind our concerns. Especially after the pandemic, the cost of living in the cities has gone exorbitant; don't know about the future, for now this is our bread and butter. (FGD: 3)

### **Declining Labor Process**

The scholars have recited this shift of enterprise risk to exposed personal risk and increased cost externalities of workers as new forms of exploitation with income volatility of workers while unilateral power to the capital (Bieber & Moggia, 2021). In our study the crux of focus group discussion is as follows:

Thanks to the platforms new opportunities and even more activities in this labor market have been generated but from an individual view, our gain is meagre. We have sometimes struggled to accumulate personal resources even utilizing our dexterity for a deal, the payment is petite if you compare with the yield platform enjoying, even with our counterparts. We are in a nascent labor category but yet our representation is decentralized and this favors the aggregators! (FGD: 4)

The arguments of platforms and third-party agencies that the labor process mediated by the system serves as a positive social transformation are criticized by workers due to the algorithmic management style to cultivate sticky labor and prevent collective voice (Heiland, 2021).

### **Plea for Government Intervention**

The current debate on the role of government to regulate the gig economy has explored new possibilities. Research has evolved around four dimensions concerning the platform work and legal framework; i.e., unlike traditional intermediaries, there should be discrete regulation for online platforms bridging the supply of and demand for workers in the gig economy; workers arbitrated by platforms should be regulated differently from regular employees; different regulations for paid and unpaid gig work, and delivering service or labor is different from sharing assets or goods in the gig economy. As they see the role of gov-

ernment to protect their socio-economic rights:

We are only another type of unorganized worker in our country's perspective, hence let us register for different social security schemes and do not prohibit from legislative protection. This precarious nature of work is equal to informal workers, further no government assistance, kinship or social capital is extant in this workspace. All our resistance is for recognition in the eyes of law. We are ready to bargain even to support but will the government do something to regulate the aggregators! (FGD: 5)

**Will the government do something to regulate the aggregators!**

The Supreme Court of India examined the public interest litigation on the ground that the employers claim themselves aggregators merely entering into a partnership agreement and should not take away the legal relationship of employer and employee which echoed in the UK Supreme Court judgement on the Uber case.

### **Limitations & Future Scope**

While interpreting the findings this study has some limitations. Acknowledging the employment relations for gig workers is at a nascent stage we have not preceded for empirical exploration of legislative paradigm. We have only elucidated the rudimentary evolution of the regulatory landscape for the gig economy in different countries rather than a criti-

cal analysis of the different approaches to govern gig employment relations. As a few platform companies were considered the results may not be generalized to the employment relations in the gig economy. Further studies on platform work shall evaluate the employment relations with state as regulator empirically and explore the cross-country comparisons.

### **Discussion**

The growing prospect of the gig economy seeks modification of the existing employment regulations for this new work arrangement to be under the shield of law. From a revenue generation perspective, the state must not encourage self-employment to avoid employment relations and benefits as it cannot be a justified model of entrepreneurship development in the long run (Prassl, 2018). Earlier studies revealed paradoxical employment relations and experience of low grade workers in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts (Bisht et al., 2021). The findings resonate with the contemporary study that marginalized group of workers continue to undergo adverse impact of digital intervention in the Global South as recent governmental policies have failed to address the structural inequalities in the gig economy (Krishna, 2020). As the pandemic has crooked the conventional employment, this is an emblem of the rise in gig employment and supplementary legal framework for budding work practices across different sectors. The flexibility and job satisfaction offered by gig employment should be studied in a continuum to visu-

alize this new form of labor exploitation and vulnerability particularly, in low and middle-income regions (Anwar & Graham, 2021). Our discussion reprises the global scholars' attention on employment grey zones and a new form of governance for the ideal employment relation that is hard to achieve unless broad challenges of regulating platform firms are addressed (Healy et al., 2017; Dieuaide & Azais, 2020). India has appreciated digital innovation and is on the path of building an inclusive employment ecosystem for a new work landscape. Moreover, the results resemble with the findings that although digital work is a double edged sword, platforms portray only the positive outcomes encouraging workers as competitors in the marketplace but give no space for labor movement against their collective struggle (Graham et al., 2017; Alex et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Although some promising effort has been witnessed in the direction of the platform-designed policy and gig workers' mobilization, lack of a robust regulatory framework limits the extent of welfare and employee relations. However, there is enormous scope for empirical research in the future to explore employment relations in this new economy. This paper is an attempt in the direction of

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policy discourse and implications for gig workers and the platform economy. Looking forward the foremost challenge for the gig economy is to uphold the trade-off between the employees' welfare and the revenue model of the platforms. Hence, collaboration among policymakers, platforms, workers, and other third parties in the labor process is required for value distribution and employment relations.

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