

## Gig Workers in Bengaluru: Flexibility, Precarity and Urban Transformation in the Platform Economy

Sushmitha B C<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Sunitha V Ganiger<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor

Department of Studies and Research in Sociology, Tumkur University, Tumkur

### Abstract:

*The rapid expansion of the platform economy in India has transformed labour relations, urban mobility and employment structures, especially in metropolitan cities such as Bengaluru. Gig work, mediated through digital platforms like food delivery, ride-hailing and e-commerce applications, has emerged as a significant source of employment for thousands of workers. While platform companies project gig work as flexible and entrepreneurial, sociological evidence reveals complex realities involving income insecurity, algorithmic control, long working hours and the absence of social protection. This paper examines the socio-economic conditions of gig workers in Bengaluru through a sociological perspective. Drawing upon secondary data, government reports and scholarly studies, the paper analyses the growth of platform labour, the lived experiences of workers and the changing nature of work in urban India. The study argues that gig work represents a new form of informal labour embedded within digital capitalism, where flexibility often coexists with precarity. The paper further discusses gender dimensions, migrant labour participation and emerging policy debates surrounding labour rights and platform regulation in India.*

**Keywords:** *Gig economy, platform labour, Bengaluru, informal sector, digital capitalism, labour precarity*

### Introduction

Over the last decade, Bengaluru has witnessed a major transformation in the nature of urban work. The city, often referred to as the “Silicon Valley of

India,” is not only home to multinational technology companies and start-ups but also to thousands of workers who sustain the platform economy through app-based

**Please cite this article as:** Sushmitha B C and Sunitha V Ganiger. (2026). Gig Workers in Bengaluru: Flexibility, Precarity and Urban Transformation in the Platform Economy. *SRUJANI: Indian Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 5(1), 159–167

labour. Every day across Bengaluru, food delivery workers wait outside restaurants in Indiranagar, ride-hailing drivers navigate Silk Board traffic for hours, and grocery delivery workers move through crowded streets carrying the pressure of time-bound deliveries. Behind the convenience enjoyed by urban consumers lies an expanding workforce whose labour often remains invisible.

The rise of digital platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Ola, Uber, Dunzo and Urban Company has changed the organisation of work in Indian cities (Srnicsek, 2017). These companies present gig work as flexible, independent and entrepreneurial. Advertisements frequently portray platform workers as individuals who “choose their own working hours” and “be their own boss.” However, the everyday experiences of workers reveal a more complicated reality.

For many workers in Bengaluru, gig work is less about flexibility and more about survival (Standing, 2011). Rising unemployment, migration to cities, inflation and the lack of secure formal employment have pushed many young people towards platform-based work. Several workers join delivery and ride-hailing platforms because they require immediate income and comparatively low entry barriers. Yet the same workers often face unstable earnings, long working hours, fuel expenses, customer pressure and constant monitoring through mobile applications.

The COVID-19 pandemic made the importance of gig workers highly visible. During lockdowns, delivery workers became essential to urban life by supplying food, groceries and medicines. While consumers safely remained inside their homes, gig workers continued travelling through the city despite health risks and economic uncertainty. This period exposed both the dependence of urban society on platform workers and the fragile conditions under which they work.

From a sociological perspective, the gig economy raises important questions about labour rights, urban inequality and digital capitalism (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Although technology has modernised the delivery of services, the conditions of workers often resemble older forms of informal labour where security, welfare and dignity remain uncertain.

This paper examines the socio-economic realities of gig workers in Bengaluru using a sociological approach. It analyses the emergence of platform labour, the everyday experiences of workers and the broader structural changes taking place within urban employment in India.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the emergence and growth of gig work in Bengaluru.
2. To analyse the socio-economic conditions of gig workers.
3. To understand the role of digital platforms in shaping labour relations.

4. To examine issues of labour precarity, social security and worker rights.
5. To analyse recent policy responses and labour reforms related to gig workers in India.

### Research Methodology

The present study is based on secondary sources of data. Information has been collected from journal articles, books, government reports, policy papers, International Labour Organization (ILO) publications, NITI Aayog reports, newspaper articles and academic studies related to gig and platform labour in India. The study adopts a sociological and analytical approach to understand the changing nature of labour in Bengaluru's platform economy.

### Conceptual Understanding of Gig Work

The term "gig economy" refers to labour arrangements where workers perform temporary, flexible or task-based jobs facilitated by digital platforms. The concept gained global attention after the rise of app-based companies operating in transportation, delivery, logistics and home services.

According to Woodcock and Graham (2020), platform labour represents a form of digitally mediated work where labour processes are coordinated through algorithms and online applications. Platform companies often portray themselves as technology intermediaries

rather than employers, thereby distancing themselves from labour obligations.

From a sociological perspective, gig work can be understood through the framework of informalisation of labour (De Stefano, 2016). Although platform work appears technologically advanced, it shares several characteristics with informal labour such as lack of job security, absence of written contracts, wage instability and limited social protection.

Karl Marx's concept of labour exploitation remains relevant in understanding platform capitalism. Gig workers generate value for digital corporations while bearing most occupational risks themselves. Similarly, Guy Standing's concept of the "precarariat" explains how workers in unstable employment experience uncertainty, insecurity and economic vulnerability (Standing, 2011).

### Growth of Gig Economy in India and Bengaluru

India has witnessed rapid growth in the gig economy during the last decade. According to the NITI Aayog report titled *India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy* (2022), India had approximately 7.7 million gig workers in 2020–21, and the number is expected to rise substantially in the coming years. The report estimates that gig workers could constitute nearly 4.1% of India's total workforce by 2030.

Bengaluru has emerged as a major centre for platform-based employment due to several structural factors, including rapid urbanisation, a large youth population, the expansion of digital infrastructure, the presence of technology companies and a strong start-up culture, increasing demand for app-based services, and rising unemployment among educated youth. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the growth of platform work (International Labour Organization, 2021). During lockdown periods, delivery workers played a crucial role in sustaining urban consumption systems, leading to a significant expansion of food delivery, grocery delivery, and logistics services. However, the pandemic also revealed the vulnerability of gig workers, many of whom faced serious health risks, lack of medical insurance, and income insecurity despite being recognised as “essential workers.” Several studies observed that while platform companies gained economically during this period, workers continued to experience growing occupational insecurity and precarious working conditions.

### **Socio-Economic Conditions of Gig Workers**

#### ***Income Insecurity***

One of the most common concerns expressed by gig workers is the uncertainty of income (Rani & Furrer, 2021). Unlike regular salaried employment, platform work does not guarantee stable monthly earnings.

Workers’ incomes depend on multiple factors such as customer demand, incentives, ratings, fuel prices and the number of hours worked.

In Bengaluru, many delivery workers begin their day early in the morning and continue late into the night in order to earn incentive bonuses. Workers frequently report that incentives offered by companies were much higher during the initial years of platform expansion. However, as competition increased and platforms established market control, many workers observed a gradual reduction in payouts.

Informal conversations and interviews reported in several studies reveal that workers often work for 10 to 14 hours daily to maintain a basic level of income. Fuel costs, vehicle maintenance and rising living expenses in Bengaluru further reduce their earnings. Some workers describe feeling trapped in a cycle where longer working hours become necessary simply to maintain financial stability.

#### ***Lack of Social Security***

Although platform companies describe workers as “delivery partners” or “driver partners,” such terminology often excludes them from the legal protections and benefits associated with formal employment. As a result, most gig workers are deprived of essential social security measures such as Provident Fund (PF), paid leave, pension benefits, maternity benefits, health insurance, and accident compensation. The lack of these

protections became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many gig workers continued providing services despite serious health risks and economic uncertainty. This situation highlighted the vulnerability and insecure working conditions faced by gig workers in the platform-based economy.

Several workers in Bengaluru migrated from smaller towns and villages with the hope of earning better incomes in the city. For such workers, even temporary suspension from the platform due to illness, poor ratings or technical issues can create serious financial difficulties.

### ***Long Working Hours and Everyday Stress***

The everyday realities of gig work are physically and mentally demanding. Bengaluru's traffic congestion, especially in areas such as Silk Board, Marathahalli and Whitefield, creates enormous pressure for delivery workers and drivers attempting to complete orders within strict timelines.

Workers are continuously monitored through mobile applications that track speed, location, customer ratings and delivery time, reflecting forms of algorithmic management discussed by Rani and Furrer (2021). Many workers describe this as a form of invisible supervision where "the app becomes the manager."

Customer ratings also significantly affect workers' earnings and future opportunities on the platform. A single

negative review can reduce incentives or lead to temporary suspension. Because of this, workers often feel compelled to tolerate rude customer behaviour and unrealistic delivery expectations.

The pressure to complete more deliveries within shorter periods also increases the risk of road accidents and health issues. Several workers skip meals, delay rest and continue working despite illness because taking a break directly affects their income.

### ***Migration and Urban Survival***

A significant number of gig workers in Bengaluru are migrants from rural Karnataka and other Indian states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Many workers arrive in the city without stable employment opportunities or professional networks.

For these migrants, platform work offers immediate access to income without requiring advanced educational qualifications. However, the city's high cost of living creates additional struggles. Workers often share small rented rooms with multiple people in order to reduce expenses.

Gig work therefore becomes part of a broader urban survival strategy rather than a long-term career choice. While some workers initially join platforms temporarily, many remain trapped in unstable labour conditions due to limited alternatives.

### Gender and Gig Work

The participation of women in Bengaluru's gig economy remains comparatively limited. Safety concerns, household responsibilities and patriarchal social norms influence women's access to platform work.

Women workers are more visible in sectors such as beauty services, domestic assistance and online freelancing rather than ride-hailing or food delivery. Platforms such as Urban Company have increased opportunities for women workers in beauty and wellness services.

However, women gig workers continue to face several challenges:

- Gender-based discrimination
- Lack of workplace safety
- Absence of maternity protection
- Income inequality
- Double burden of paid and unpaid labour

Feminist sociological perspectives highlight how platform capitalism often reproduces existing gender inequalities rather than eliminating them (Woodcock, 2021).

### Algorithmic Control and Digital Surveillance

One of the defining features of platform labour is algorithmic management. Unlike traditional workplaces with direct supervisors, gig workers are managed through mobile applications and automated systems.

Algorithms determine:

- Task allocation
- Incentive structures
- Route optimisation
- Performance evaluation
- Customer ratings
- Account suspension

This creates a new form of digital surveillance where workers remain constantly monitored. Scholars argue that algorithmic management reduces worker autonomy despite the rhetoric of flexibility (Rani & Furrer, 2021).

Workers often lack transparency regarding how algorithms function. Sudden reductions in incentives or account deactivations can occur without clear explanations. Thus, technology functions not only as a medium of work but also as an instrument of labour control.

### Trade Unions and Collective Resistance

In recent years, gig workers in Bengaluru and other Indian cities have increasingly organised protests and collective movements against declining wages and unfair platform practices.

Organisations such as:

- Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT)
- Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union (TGPWU)
- All India Gig Workers Union; have raised concerns regarding labour rights, fair wages and social protection.

Bengaluru has witnessed protests by delivery workers and ride-hailing drivers demanding:

- Better incentives
- Fuel compensation
- Insurance coverage
- Transparent algorithms
- Recognition as workers

These developments indicate the emergence of new forms of labour consciousness within the digital economy.

### **Government Policies and Legal Developments**

The Indian government has gradually begun recognising gig and platform workers within labour policy frameworks.

The Code on Social Security, 2020 introduced definitions for gig workers and platform workers. The legislation proposed welfare measures including:

- Life and disability cover
- Health benefits
- Old-age protection
- Skill development initiatives

Additionally, Karnataka became one of the first states to discuss welfare measures specifically for gig workers.

However, policy implementation remains limited. Major challenges include:

- Ambiguous employment classification
- Lack of employer accountability
- Weak enforcement mechanisms
- Data transparency issues

Labour scholars argue that stronger legal frameworks are required to regulate platform companies and ensure worker protection (Aloisi, 2016).

### **Sociological Analysis**

From a sociological perspective, the gig economy reflects broader transformations associated with neoliberal capitalism, urbanisation and technological change.

The platform economy promotes the ideology of entrepreneurship and flexibility (Zwick, 2018). Workers are encouraged to view themselves as independent entrepreneurs rather than employees. However, in practice, many workers experience conditions similar to informal labour.

The gig economy also demonstrates the expansion of precarious labour in urban India (Standing, 2011). Traditional employer-employee relationships are increasingly replaced by temporary and fragmented forms of work.

Bengaluru represents a contradiction of contemporary urban development. While the city symbolises technological modernity and digital innovation, it simultaneously depends on a large workforce engaged in insecure labour.

Platform workers occupy an essential but socially invisible position within urban economies. Their labour sustains everyday urban life, yet they remain excluded from many forms of social protection and labour rights.

## Conclusion

The growth of gig work in Bengaluru reflects both the opportunities and inequalities created by the digital economy. App-based platforms have undoubtedly generated employment for thousands of people, particularly migrants, unemployed youth and workers searching for immediate income opportunities. At the same time, the everyday realities of gig work reveal that flexibility often comes at the cost of security and stability.

The experiences of delivery workers, drivers and service providers in Bengaluru demonstrate that technology alone does not improve labour conditions. Instead, digital platforms have created new forms of informal labour where workers continue to face uncertain incomes, long working hours and limited access to welfare protections.

The sociological importance of gig work lies in understanding how modern urban economies depend upon invisible labour. The convenience enjoyed by consumers through food delivery, ride-hailing and instant commerce is sustained by workers who navigate traffic, weather conditions and economic pressure on a daily basis.

Bengaluru presents a striking contradiction. On one side, the city symbolises innovation, start-up culture and technological growth. On the other side, it relies heavily on workers whose labour remains insecure and undervalued. The platform economy therefore

represents not only a technological transformation but also a social and economic restructuring of labour.

There is an urgent need for stronger labour protections, social security measures and transparent platform policies for gig workers in India. Welfare schemes, accident insurance, fair wages and recognition of workers' rights are essential if the future of work is to become more equitable.

Ultimately, the condition of gig workers raises a larger sociological question about the direction of modern urban society: whether technological progress will continue to deepen labour insecurity or whether it can be shaped in ways that prioritise dignity, justice and human well-being

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