Unravelling the Socio-Economic Dynamics of the Gig Economy in India: A Multifaceted Analysis

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Abstract

India's socio-economic landscape is transforming, driven by demographic changes, economic challenges, and technological advancements. Amid slowing GDP growth, declining labour force participation rates, and rising unemployment, the gig economy has emerged as a pivotal player in addressing the country's employment challenges. Characterised by short-term, project-based work facilitated by digital platforms, the gig economy offers flexible alternatives to traditional jobs and presents new opportunities for income generation and economic inclusion. This paper examines India's gig economy's evolution, socioeconomic drivers, and critical role in reshaping the labour market. Drawing on the concept of "double failure"—where both state and market mechanisms fall short in meeting societal needs—this study situates the rise of gig-based employment within India's broader economic context. By analysing the interplay between economic policies, structural barriers, and the potential of gig work, we provide a nuanced understanding of its implications for economic development and social equity.

Keywords: Gig economy, double failure, labour market, flexible work, digital platforms

Introduction

India is currently at a critical juncture in its economic journey. Despite having one of the world's youngest populations and a demographic dividend expected to persist until 2040, the country faces significant challenges [1]. Declining overall and female labour force participation rates (LFPR) and slowing GDP growth have created a paradox: a growing population of underemployed youth but limited opportunities in traditional sectors [2]. India's GDP growth averaged 8 percent annually from 2004 to 2014, but the subsequent years have seen a marked slowdown, exacerbated by the 2018-2019 recession and the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. These challenges and poor job quality in traditional sectors have deepened unemployment rates and discouraged workers [4].

In this context, a new form of employment is emerging—radically different from conventional wage jobs. The gig economy is rapidly expanding, offering individuals a flexible alternative to traditional employment and becoming a response to the failures of both the state and market-driven economic policies. The gig economy, which thrives on short-term, project-based work facilitated by digital platforms, promises to address key gaps left by the formal job market. By offering entrepreneurial opportunities, supplemental income, and adaptable work schedules, the gig economy offers a promising solution to India's growing employment challenges [5].

This shift to gig-based work is not just a response to economic setbacks but also an opportunity to redefine labour and economic development. As India faces the dual challenge of creating jobs for an expanding workforce while managing economic instability, embracing the gig economy could offer a pathway toward a more inclusive, flexible, and resilient labour market. This paper explores how the gig economy has emerged as a crucial player in India's economic landscape, its potential to drive growth, and the policy frameworks needed to support its continued expansion.

This essay evaluates the gig economy's evolution in India and its concept and context. Our understanding is that a "double failure" led to the rise of the gig economy. According to Aoyama and Parthasarathy [6], "double failure" describes how the market and the government have failed to provide the people with fundamental necessities. Using India as an example, we show how the historical development of policy in the nation has resulted in double failure in today's gig economy.

Contextualising the problem of Unemployment in India

Employment is a cornerstone of development for any society. In India, one of the biggest challenges policymakers face is employment. Creating decent job opportunities outside of the agriculture sector is a critical political and economic issue in the country [7]. Since independence, agriculture has been the country's primary source of employment generation. Even today, 47 percent of the Indian population is employed in agriculture. The contribution of agriculture, on the other hand, to Gross Value Added (at current prices) is only 18.3 percent [8].

Compared to other economies, India's structural transformation has been slow. This is attributed to the low contribution of manufacturing to the GDP and its disappointing performance in employment generation [9]. During structural transformation, employment rapidly grows in the non-agriculture sectors, and labour gets pulled out from the agriculture sector depending on the intensities of the industries' and service sectors' labour. However, the absorption of labour in these sectors has been low. Therefore, even though the contribution of agriculture has decreased in the GDP, the share of the labour force in agriculture hasn't seen a significant decline [10]. The problem was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a reverse migration of people from urban to rural areas [2].

Between 1987 and 2011, India experienced rapid economic development, accompanied by a decrease in employment share in agriculture and an increase in the services and construction sectors. Today, service contributes to about one-third of the employment share in the economy [11] and accounts for 54 percent of the country's Gross Value Added (GVA) [8].

India is one of the fastest-growing economies and the most populous country in the world after it left China behind in 2023 [12]. India is at a critical juncture with its development, for two-thirds of the Indian population is below 35 [13]. We have the advantage of the demographic dividend. A demographic dividend is that stage in the demographic transition of a country wherein the share of the working-age population is on the rise, accompanied by a decline in the share of the dependent population (under 15 and over 60 years) [2]. Conversely, the labour force comprises people aged 15-59 years looking for work. Therefore, in a country undergoing a demographic transition, one would expect that the labour force participation rate (LFPR) will be on the rise.

However, that is different in the country. While the working-age population is rising, the growth of the labour force (those looking for work) is underwhelming [2]. This, again, is a critical issue faced by the policymakers. For a country passing through a demographic transition and a rising youth population, a dip in the LFPR harms its long-term economic growth. When the working-age population enters the labour force and is unable to secure employment or doesn't look for employment opportunities, the demographic dividend is not fully realised.

Furthermore, for the full realisation of the demographic dividend, there should be an increase in non-farm-related employment opportunities. This is because the labour productivity is higher in both the industrial and service sectors. With higher productivity, the population's income will increase, and it will give rise to higher consumption and savings, leading to an increase in aggregate investment across the country, which in turn will accelerate economic growth.

Double Failure of the Market and the State

States are thought of as the agents of the public interest, while markets are thought of as the agents of private interests. The concept of a "pure" market free from social, political, and cultural factors does not exist, and government interventions are frequently necessary to safeguard the interests of the general public. The adoption of structural adjustment measures by institutions such as the World Bank and IMF in the 1980s, coupled with the advent of neoliberalism supported by prominent figures like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, contributed to the increasing importance of market-based solutions. During this time, global privatisation was widely implemented. According to Prahalad (2002) [14] and Prahalad & Hammond (2002) [15], markets are increasingly seen as superseding the state in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. However, the conventional paradigm distinguishes between states and markets and needs to be updated [16]. Instead of being antagonistic forces, scholars contend that they are becoming more and more intertwined. Although Polanyi (1944) [17] highlighted the reciprocal interaction between markets and the state, it is important to acknowledge the interconnectedness of these two entities. The legitimacy of the capitalist state depends on safeguarding the public interest, which includes promoting the prosperity of the private sector and maintaining the integrity of the market [18]. On the other hand, efficient state regulation is necessary for markets to operate well [19].

Critics have pointed out shortcomings in the state or the market in previous attempts to balance the conflict between states and markets, such as the Keynesian Welfare State of the 1940s through the 1970s. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) were first implemented in state governments in the 1980s due to the 'Washington Consensus,' which promoted 'public sector reform' through reinventing governments' [20]. The goal was to curtail the state's role in maintaining the efficient operation of markets and eradicate corruption and inefficiencies in the public sector. The 'Third Way' appeared as an additional attempt to embrace a mixed-economy strategy later in the 1990s, with the public interest being given priority and the public sector seeking to create synergy [21]. As a counter to Thatcherism, social democrats in the UK promoted an approach to modernise and revitalise the state to increase its administrative efficiency and legitimacy to advance democracy. Nonetheless, there were several issues with the state-directed mixed-economy approach. Its application was complicated by globalisation, and the model frequently depended on a top-down strategy in which the government used deregulation and regulation tools.

According to Mazzucato (2015) [22] and Jessop (2002) [23], the capitalist state is not just about regulating or correcting market imbalances; it also plays various other societal roles. Even in nations like the United States, which are sometimes linked to strongly pro-market ideas, the government has played a significant role in creating markets. In particular, it has encouraged innovation through R&D, offering seed money, and supporting business incubators. Recurring economic crises, however, highlight the market's glaring shortcomings as a form of government. Markets and states are not mutually exclusive but complement one another, giving a choice between imperfect alternatives, as underlined by Wolf (1993) [24].

Instead of interpreting state-market relations in strictly binary terms, we support a strategy that recognises the existence of several intermediary entities while utilising the advantages of both state- and market-led processes. We contend that the "double failure," or situations in which market-led and state-led approaches are unable to address socio-economic problems effectively, is what gave rise to the "gig economy" [25];[26]. We describe these situations as "double failures." Market knowledge gaps and ingrained power dynamics inside the state are the leading causes of this twin failure. It is especially noticeable in areas with limited state capacity and undeveloped markets; the Global South, which has a more significant population of impoverished people and higher poverty rates, is where the effects are most severe [6].

The Neoliberal Era and the Rise of the Gig Economy

The shift towards neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with significant changes in the global labour market. In particular, the rise of flexible labour practices, driven by advances in technology and globalisation, led to the growth of non-traditional forms of employment, such as part-time work, temporary contracts, and freelance labour [27]. While these changes were initially seen as part of a broader trend towards greater labour market flexibility and efficiency, they also signalled a shift away from the stable, full-time employment that had been the hallmark of the post-war welfare state.

In the context of this evolving labour market, the gig economy emerged as a viable alternative to traditional forms of employment. The gig economy, characterised by short-term, flexible jobs facilitated by digital platforms, represents a direct response to the failures of both state and market systems. On the one hand, the state's failure to provide adequate social protections and ensure worker job security, particularly in the face of increasing globalisation and technological change, created a void that the gig economy sought to fill [28]. On the other hand, the market's inability to provide stable, well-paying jobs for large segments of the population, especially in developing countries, led to the growth of informal, precarious work as a coping mechanism for those excluded from the formal economy [29].

The gig economy exemplifies the "double failure" of the market and the state in many ways. It emerged partly due to the failures of state-led welfare models, which could not keep pace with the rapid changes brought about by neoliberal economic policies [30]. At the same time, the market's failure to provide stable, well-paying jobs for a growing segment of the global population has led to the proliferation of gig work as a survival strategy. While gig work offers flexibility and independence, it often comes at the cost of job security, fair wages, and basic labour rights [28]. Gig workers, classified as independent contractors rather than employees, are often excluded from benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, and retirement savings, exposing them to economic instability and exploitation [31].

The gig economy, therefore, can be seen as a direct consequence of the failure of both the market and the state to provide meaningful and sustainable solutions to the challenges of modern labour markets. The rise of gig work represents a form of economic adaptation, where workers take on temporary, flexible jobs in response to the lack of stable, full-time employment opportunities.

Gig Economy Defined

The gig economy, described by Heeks (2017) [32], Lehdonvirta (2018) [33], and others, refers to a working model where individuals complete tasks through digital platforms without traditional employment contracts. This model involves consumers (or clients) and producers (or workers) exchanging goods and services via digital infrastructures [34]. Digital platforms act as intermediaries, connecting demand and supply while taking a share of the transaction value [35]. Participants in the gig economy include platform owners, workers (e.g., freelancers, independent contractors, or crowdworkers), and customers (buyers, clients, or requesters) [35].

The gig economy spans both physical and digital realms. Digital gig workers engage in tasks like online freelancing, microwork, and crowdsourcing, while physical gig workers provide location-based services such as delivery, ride-hailing, caregiving, and domestic work [32];[36]. These workers may differ in skill levels and the nature of their tasks, with low-skilled workers more prevalent in location-based services and highly skilled workers in digital gigs [37].

Vallas and Schor (2020) [38] categorise the platform economy into several types: cloud-based consultants, offline workers (e.g., delivery drivers, caregivers), microtask crowdworkers (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk), and content creators like social media influencers. These segments differ in work, skill requirements, and spatial independence [39];[40].

Gig work offers flexibility, allowing workers to control work hours, location, and rates [35]; [41]. It also eliminates traditional job constraints, enabling more significant employment opportunities and career flexibility[42]. For businesses, gig work offers cost savings, scalability, and access to a wide range of on-demand services [43].

However, the gig economy also presents significant challenges for workers. Despite the flexibility, gig jobs often come with low pay, precarious conditions, and a lack of job security and social protection [44];[45]. Many gig workers earn less than traditional workers, face unstable hours, and lack benefits like health insurance or retirement plans [46]. This trend has led to declining worker protections and the erosion of traditional employment norms, leaving workers to bear many associated risks and costs [47]; [48].

While the gig economy offers flexibility and new opportunities, it also highlights deeper structural issues in the labour market, particularly the state's and the market's inability to provide sustainable and secure employment. This dual failure has contributed to the rise of precarious work and the expansion of informal labour, a challenge that demands urgent attention.

The Gig Economy in the Global South: A Case Study of India

The double failure of the state and the market is particularly evident in developing economies, such as India, where informal and gig labour constitutes a significant portion of the workforce [49]. The rise of the gig economy in India has been shaped by a combination of factors, including the decline of traditional manufacturing and agriculture, the rise of digital platforms, and the state’s inability to provide social protections for workers in the informal sector [50].

In India, the gig economy has emerged as a response to the growing informalization of the labour market. While the formal sector has struggled to create jobs for the large and growing population, particularly in rural areas, the gig economy has provided a flexible alternative for many workers. Platforms like Uber, Ola, Swiggy, and Zomato have created opportunities for millions of Indians to engage in short-term, flexible work in the transportation and delivery sectors. These platforms, however, operate in a regulatory vacuum, with limited state oversight or protections for workers [51, 52].

Despite the growing importance of the gig economy in India, the state's failure to provide adequate regulation or social protection for gig workers has led to widespread insecurity. Gig workers in India often face low pay, long hours, and a lack of basic benefits such as health insurance or paid leave. At the same time, the market's demand for cheap, flexible labour has incentivised companies to exploit these workers, offering them little job security or legal recourse. The state's inability to regulate the gig economy and provide adequate social protections for these workers further exacerbates the vulnerabilities faced by this segment of the labour force [53, 54, 55].

Moreover, the gig economy in India is characterised by significant regional disparities [56]. While workers in urban areas may benefit from the growth of digital platforms, those in rural areas face more significant challenges in accessing gig work due to limited internet connectivity, a lack of digital literacy, and the persistence of traditional labour market structures. The digital divide in India highlights the uneven nature of economic development and the limitations of both state and market-based solutions in addressing the needs of the country's diverse population [57].

Rise of the Gig Economy and Rethinking the Relationship Between the State, the Market, and the Gig Economy

In recent years, the traditional labour market in India has been undergoing a significant transformation. As the country grapples with unemployment, underemployment, and an increasingly informal job market, a new economic phenomenon is emerging—one that offers flexibility and potential for economic participation but also raises concerns about job security and workers' rights. This is the gig economy, which is fundamentally reshaping the structure of the Indian workforce.

The gig economy has emerged as a response to the double failure of both the state and the market in addressing the socio-economic challenges of the 21st century. The state's failure to provide adequate welfare protections, combined with the market's inability to create stable, well-paying jobs, has resulted in the proliferation of gig work as a coping mechanism for millions worldwide [58]. While the gig economy offers flexibility and independence, it also perpetuates conditions of precarity and insecurity for workers, who are often excluded from the benefits of formal employment [59].

As the gig economy grows, it is essential to rethink the relationship between the state, the market, and labour. The traditional binary view of the state and the market as opposing forces must be replaced with a more nuanced understanding of how these entities interact and shape the economic landscape. The rise of the gig economy calls for new regulatory frameworks that address the challenges of precarious work, ensure fair wages and labour rights, and provide social protections for workers in the digital age [60].

Ultimately, the gig economy highlights the need for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to economic development—one that recognises the limitations of both state and market systems and seeks to create a more equitable and resilient labour market for all.

The Socioeconomic Drivers of the Gig Economy in India

Several factors have contributed to the rise of the gig economy in India. The country's rapidly growing digital infrastructure, increased internet penetration, and smartphone usage have facilitated the rise of online platforms connecting workers and employers. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), internet users in India are expected to reach 900 million by 2025, with a significant portion of this population actively involved in digital economic activities, including gig work (2023).

Additionally, the Indian labour market is marked by high informality, and a significant proportion of the workforce is employed casually, part-time, or temporarily. According to the 2021 Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), around 90 percent of India's labour force is in the informal sector (2021). The rigidity and lack of dynamism in the formal job market and limited job creation in traditional sectors have driven workers to seek alternative employment options such as gig work.

The emergence of gig work also coincides with India’s growing youth population, representing both an opportunity and a challenge. The younger demographic is highly tech-savvy, increasingly seeking flexible work arrangements that align with their lifestyle preferences [61]. Gig platforms offer the chance to earn while maintaining the freedom to pursue other interests, including education, personal projects, or entrepreneurial ventures.

Impact on Employment and Workforce Participation

The gig economy is fundamentally reshaping India's employment landscape. In 2020, a report by the NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India) projected that gig and platform-based workers in India could grow to 23.5 million by 2029-30, from 7.7 million in 2020. This increase represents a significant shift in work in India, with gig employment expected to become a mainstream form of labour engagement.

The rise of the gig economy presents a unique solution to underemployment and labour force participation, particularly among marginalised groups such as women, students, retirees, and those with caregiving responsibilities [62]. Gig work allows these individuals to engage in paid labour without the constraints of traditional work hours or physical workplaces [31]. For example, women restricted by societal norms or lacking access to formal jobs can benefit from flexible, remote gig opportunities, thereby improving their financial independence and social mobility [63].

The gig economy also presents opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation, as individuals can start their own businesses or work as freelancers, tapping into niche markets and specialised skills [64]. Expanding platform-based work creates a more dynamic and diverse labour market, enabling businesses to access a pool of highly skilled, on-demand talent previously challenging to tap into.

However, despite its potential benefits, the gig economy in India is not without its challenges. The absence of a formal regulatory framework leaves gig workers vulnerable to exploitation. Many gig workers lack basic rights and protections, such as healthcare, retirement benefits, paid leave, and job security [65]. These workers are typically classified as independent contractors rather than employees, which means they are not entitled to the same protections under Indian labour laws. As a result, gig workers often face income instability, inadequate social security, and limited access to healthcare or workers' compensation.

Challenges and Regulatory Gaps

While the gig economy offers a new avenue for income generation, it also highlights critical gaps in India's labour laws and social protection systems [66]. The government has slowly adapted to the changing nature of work, and gig workers remain excluded mainly from traditional labour protections. For instance, the absence of laws that govern minimum wages, working hours, and social security benefits for gig workers puts them at a significant disadvantage compared to workers in formal employment [65].

The lack of clear definitions and frameworks for gig work in existing labour legislation further complicates the issue. The absence of a social safety net for gig workers means that many are left vulnerable during economic downturns, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected informal and gig workers due to lockdowns and the closure of various sectors. The government's recent moves towards creating a national employment policy and extending social security benefits to gig workers signal a step in the right direction. However, the need for comprehensive and enforceable regulation remains urgent [67].

Promoting the gig economy is crucial in fostering economic dynamism and flexibility. Individuals gain supplemental income, entrepreneurship, and skill development opportunities by encouraging gig work. This flexible labour market allows for quick adaptation to changing economic conditions, enhancing overall resilience. Moreover, the gig economy promotes innovation, enabling businesses to access a diverse pool of specialised talents and services on demand. This fosters competition and efficiency, driving productivity gains across various sectors. Additionally, the gig economy can facilitate labour force participation, especially for marginalised groups such as students, retirees, and those with caregiving responsibilities, thus promoting inclusivity and socioeconomic mobility. Overall, embracing and supporting the gig economy can lead to a more adaptable, innovative, and inclusive economic landscape.

Conclusion: A New Frontier for Work

The emergence of the gig economy is unique in that it is straddling rather than being restricted to either growth- or redistribution-oriented policies. It challenges the assumption about the inevitability of rising inequality with economic growth while acknowledging the importance of growth. In the context of the Global South, it has the potential to break the developmental impasse.

The rise of the gig economy in India is a response to the country's structural economic challenges and changing workforce dynamics. While it presents new opportunities for income generation, innovation, and workforce participation, it also brings many challenges, including job insecurity, inadequate social protection, and regulatory gaps. To fully realise the potential of the gig economy, India must address these challenges by crafting policies that balance flexibility with protection for workers. Only with the right regulatory framework can India ensure that the gig economy contributes positively to economic growth and social equity, providing opportunities for all population segments.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this research paper. All affiliations, financial or personal relationships, or competing interests that could influence the interpretation or presentation of the research findings have been fully disclosed and addressed.

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