

Pseudo Promises and Sustained Strain: A Study on Gig Workers in Chennai's App-Based Economy

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Abstract:

The gig economy has recently become an important location for jobs in urban India, and Chennai is one of the most gig- activity hubs. Platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, Rapido, and Ola earn their keep by promoting that their work offers flexibility and freedom, but the lived experiences of gig workers often dispute those claims. Many workers report diminishing incentives, demanding hours of work, and no formal protections of any form (such as Provident Fund or health insurance).

Although the topic is receiving more attention, much of the existing literature remains theoretical and few studies have been done that are on-ground (especially in urbanized cities such as Chennai). This study makes up for that absence by exploring the lived experience of gig workers in the Chennai metropolitan area. Using primary data collected through structured questionnaires from food delivery, cab, and bike taxi workers, the study examines how different incentive models impact workers' financial security, physical health, and mental well-being.

Aside from the figures involved, the study describes the lived experiences of gig-workers, which included disrespectful treatment at restaurants, unfair customer complaints that resulted in penalties dictated by algorithms, which in many cases were a financial loss for the worker. By situating the analysis in the local realities, the study identified structural obstacles and provided policy-oriented solutions to improve conditions for platform workers in urban India. The study aims to make substantial contributions to the existing discourse on gig work and the urgent need for equitable labour procedures.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Platform labour, Worker Exploitation, Urban Employment, Labour policy reform.

1. Introduction:

1.1 The Global Rise of the Gig Economy:

In the last ten years, the gig economy has transformed the landscape of work, especially in urban centers around the world. Fueled by mobile apps and digital platforms, it has created a new form of employment one where tasks are performed on demand and workers operate as independent contractors, often without the rights or benefits of traditional employment. From ride-sharing and food delivery to freelance tech and creative services, gig work has become deeply woven into the daily economies of many countries.

At first glance, this model was celebrated as a revolution in labor offering flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurial freedom. For many, particularly those from middle- and lower-income backgrounds, it promised a way to escape rigid 9-to-5 jobs and earn on their own terms. The appeal of choosing one's own hours and working through simple smartphone apps led to a surge in participation across sectors.

But beneath this appealing narrative lies a far more complex reality. The promise of freedom is often undermined by the lack of job security, unpredictable income, and minimal legal protection. With earnings tied to shifting algorithms and performance metrics that workers can neither see nor control, many find themselves trapped in a cycle of uncertainty, overwork, and mental strain. What is sold as flexibility frequently turns out to be instability in disguise.

In truth, the gig economy has resurrected older models of labor control under the veneer of digital progress. While the technologies are new, the structures of dependency where power rests heavily with platform owners and workers bear all the risks echo the exploitative systems of the past. This disconnect between the marketed image of empowerment and the ground-level experience of being uncertain about the job and income has become a focal point in discussions about the future of work worldwide.

1.2 Platform-Mediated Labor in Chennai:

Chennai is a major urban center in southern India and distinctly one of the 'cities of the future' for gig-based, app-mediated work. The sprawling urban infrastructure, middle-class consumption, and demand for home-delivered services have created a plethora of workers engaging through digital platforms. Riders who deliver food or packages and drivers of taxis and bike taxis have recently become a common sight on the roads and include those still calling themselves "Uber" drivers for company with the likes of Swiggy, Zomato, Rapido, Ola, and Uber.

The prospect of flexibility, immediate payments, and low barrier to entry attracts many to this kind of work. For much of Chennai's youth - particularly working class youth - gig work offers an entry level work experience without traditional education or certification. For some it is - at least - a temporary stop gap before a 'real job' while it has become for others a full-time livelihood.

Yet, the rapid growth of this workforce has also brought to light the cracks in the system. Far from being autonomous, workers are often subject to tight algorithmic control, shifting incentive structures, and constant digital surveillance from GPS tracking to performance ratings that directly affect their earnings. The very platforms that promise freedom often end up dictating terms, leaving workers with little say in how their labor is managed.

2. Problem Definition:

While the gig economy claims to be a flexible and empowered way to earn a living, the prevailing lived experiences of platform workers (gig workers) in Chennai tell a much more sobering story. While many of the workers are incentivized to work in this employment, such as high payouts, daily earnings, and referral bonuses, only a handful of workers have access to these benefits. The situation is exacerbated when platforms expand and the incentive structure changes as new workers flock to the platforms. While platforms are vague in their incentive structure, shifts in target performance, which frequently changes, is a daily occurrence and leave the workers with very little control of their time. Personal and family time trump rest, and health take a backseat to the demands of the job, leaving many gig workers reporting work hours between 12 and 18 hours on a daily basis and often not taking a weekly break from work.

If the precarious situation was not enough, the complete absence of employment protections imposed on a majority of workers is disconcerting. Most workers do not enjoy employment contracts, job security, or

any social protections like the Provident Fund or health insurance. An entire account of precarious employment is produced with unstable earnings, high levels of risk, and no long-term financial security out of reach..

Additionally, workers are subjected to unfair penalties and unjust treatment. Several delivery personnel report incidents of false customer complaints such as claiming non-delivery even after receiving the food forcing them to bear the cost. Others face disrespect from restaurants, delayed order processing, and exploitative behaviors that directly affect their ratings and payouts. Since most platforms offer no formal dispute mechanism, these issues go unaddressed, further reinforcing the power imbalance between the worker, the platform, and the customer.

These pseudo promises of independence, flexibility, and financial stability are often tools of control, pushing workers into unsustainable, high-pressure environments without any of the protections typically offered in traditional employment models.

3. Research Gap and Study Rationale

Despite the growing body of literature on the gig economy, a significant portion of existing research remains conceptual or focused on Western economies. Studies from the Indian context are limited, and even fewer provide region-specific insights grounded in the lived experiences of platform-based workers. More critically, there is a lack of empirical data capturing the voices of gig workers in metropolitan regions such as Chennai, where platform-based labor has seen exponential growth.

While several theoretical studies have explored issues related to incentive structures, algorithmic control, and labor flexibility, they often fail to document the psychological and financial burden experienced by workers in real-world settings. In particular, there is little to no scholarly attention on issues such as:

- Disrespect and mistreatment by restaurants and customers,
- False customer complaints leading to monetary penalties,
- Emotional exhaustion from extended working hours,
- And the absence of formal mechanisms to contest unfair treatment.

This study seeks to address these critical gaps by collecting primary data directly from gig workers operating in Chennai. Through structured questionnaires and data analysis, the research aims to uncover the hidden pressures within the gig ecosystem and propose practical, policy-level recommendations tailored to India's urban labor environment. The data collected will be analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation.

4. Research Methodology:

4.1 Research Design:

This study adopts a descriptive research design with a mixed-method approach to explore the working conditions, challenges, and incentive structures experienced by gig workers in Chennai's app-based economy. The descriptive design is appropriate as it allows for the collection of detailed information about the current status of gig work without manipulating any variables.

The study combines both quantitative and qualitative elements:

- The quantitative component captures measurable data such as hours worked, frequency of customer complaints, and access to social protection.
- The qualitative component explores workers' lived experiences through open-ended feedback, offering deeper insights into emotional, social, and psychological challenges.

This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the issue, blending statistical patterns with personal narratives to capture the realities behind the platform-driven labor model.

4.2 Population and Sample:

The target population for this study consists of gig economy workers operating in Chennai, particularly those affiliated with app-based platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, Ola, and Rapido. These include food delivery agents, bike taxi drivers, and ride-hailing service providers.

A non-probability sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling, will be used. This approach is appropriate given the nature of the study, where respondents must meet a specific criterion i.e., actively working as platform-based gig workers in Chennai.

The proposed sample size ranges between 50 respondents, depending on accessibility and field constraints. This sample is expected to offer rich insights through both structured questions and open-ended feedback, capturing a realistic snapshot of the gig economy in an urban Indian setting.

Efforts will be made to ensure diversity in terms of:

- Type of platform (delivery vs transport)
- Working hours
- Income levels
- Experience in gig work

4.3 Data Collection Tool

The primary data for this study will be collected using a structured questionnaire designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative information from gig workers in Chennai. The questionnaire consists of both closed-ended and open-ended questions, enabling the collection of statistical data alongside personal narratives and lived experiences.

5. Data Analysis Methods

In order to address the lived experiences of gig workers in Chennai, we employed descriptive statistical methods on primary data that was collected from 50 respondents in this study. The first part of the analysis was to calculate the frequency and percentage distribution of responses to key variables such as satisfaction with pay, experience with reducing income, and perceived pressure to meet daily/weekly targets. These measures helped us identify broad patterns within the group. For example, 84% of the participants shared a clear experience with reduced earnings, and 44% were very unhappy with their current earnings level.

We also analyzed responses that dealt with initial onboarding benefits, i.e. sign up bonuses and early incentives, and compared those responses vs. participants' observations regarding whether the platforms followed through on the early promises. These comparisons provided an understanding of how they were set up to understand the initial expectations vs. what actually played out.

In addition to the simple statistics, we incorporated a sentiment-weighted inference model to analyze workers' intentions to change platforms or leave the gig economy. Using weights for strongly negative responses, particularly around stress, financial burden, or support, we calculated the likelihood that the respondent was actually seeking better job options.

Finally, our quantitative findings were joined with a broader narrative that represented workers' realities. We essentially captured the "hard numbers" with a contextual interpretation, making a mixed-methods analysis that identified both the breadth of the issue and the actual human experiences.

6. Limitations of the Study

While this study sheds light on important aspects of gig workers' experiences in Chennai, several limitations should be acknowledged.

The first limitation of this study is that it is based on a relatively small sample size of 50 respondents. While this is a sufficiently sized sample for a focused analysis, it does not allow for representations of the broad range of platform-based workers throughout the city of Chennai. In addition, respondents were selected through purposive sampling which, while useful for identifying certain groups, prevents broader analysis of the gig workforce.

As already noted, and a second limitation, is this study's geographic scope. While the study examined the labour of platform-based workers exclusively in the Chennai metropolitan area, it is unlikely to capture any regional qualities that differ as a result of the unique infrastructure, regulation, and socio-economic dynamics of other cities, and rural areas.

There is a further limitation as this study depended upon self-reported data, which carries with it some biases. Respondents may have made honest mistakes by misreporting or underreporting their experiences, particularly while recalling events that were either meaningful or emotionally negative. Although the study conducted both data collection and continued contact in a manner that would encourage honest responses, the selective nature of recall cannot be ignored.

Lastly, the study did not incorporate longitudinal tracking and follow-up interviews, mainly due to limited time and financial resources, and longer-term engagement with respondents may have informed the study in the ways living through one's experiences, and perceiving them across time as they expended their contributions to an employer, was an important element in identifying its processes.

Despite these limitations, this research offers a valuable snapshot of the gig economy at a local level. It provides a foundation for further inquiry and opens the door for broader policy discussions aimed at improving conditions for platform workers in India.

7. Findings:

This study shows a clear problem in Chennai's gig economy. Even though many gig workers are unhappy with their pay, working conditions, and broken promises, most of them still keep working for companies like Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, Ola, and Rapido.

About 84% of the workers said they feel pressure to work very long hours more than a normal full-time job just to meet the targets set by the apps. The same number also said that their earnings have gone down, even though they are working as hard or harder than before. Many workers said the joining bonuses and rewards they were promised were never given or were reduced later.

More than 80% of the workers said they are not happy with how they are paid. But even with all this dissatisfaction, only 10% said they were planning to leave their current job and find a better one.

The main reason they stay is because of the freedom these jobs seem to offer. Many workers like that they can choose when to work and don't have to follow a fixed schedule. This feeling of freedom keeps them in the job, even when they are stressed or not earning enough.

The study shows a big problem: workers know they are being treated unfairly, but they stay because they don't have many better options that offer the same flexibility. The so-called "freedom" they are promised is not always real, but it's enough to keep them in a tough and uncertain job.

8. Conclusion:

This study raises contradictions in Chennai's app-based gig economy. While flexibility and freedom are often the language of platforms and the app-based gig economy, the reality for app-based gig workers paints a very different picture. App based gig workers have experienced shrinking incentives, longer hours, a lack of protections, and earnings dependent on opaque algorithmic systems, leading to the expected contradiction. 84% of respondents reported decreased income and longer hours, over 80% were unhappy with the pay structure, and every respondent except one was experiencing work dissatisfaction, yet most of them remained engaged with the platform model. Workers are not remaining engaged because they are satisfied, but likely due to necessity. Gig work provides perceived flexibility, near-daily payouts, and accessible short-run engagement and entry points, making it one of the only viable options for work seekers with few options in the formal market.

What emerges is a disturbing paradox. Most apps that dominate the gig economy herald autonomy, while remaining paradoxically in control through vapid use of constant, shifting incentives and fining algorithmic oversight. This illusion of choice traps workers, usually at the expense of their own health, security, and future earnings potential.

The findings from this localized study in Chennai have broader implications for how we understand digital labor in India. As platform-based work continues to grow, there is an urgent need for policy interventions that move beyond surface-level fixes. Workers need access to health coverage, transparent payment systems, grievance redressal mechanisms, and basic labor protections that acknowledge their contribution to the urban economy.

Ultimately, this research calls for a reimagining of what labor rights should look like in the digital age. Autonomy must not become a cover for unchecked precarity. If the gig economy is to truly empower, it must be rebuilt around fairness, dignity, and accountability.

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