

Gig Economy at the Margins of Law: Re-evaluating the Legal Status, Rights, and Social Security Framework for Platform Workers in India

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Abstract

The platform economy has transformed perceptions of labor over the last few years across the globe. The rapid growth of online delivery and transportation platforms like Rapido, Ola, Swiggy, DoorDash, Amazon, Blinkit, and Flipkart has added a new layer of complexity to the existing issues. These services tend to be flexible and generate employment for the people at the cost of their social security and basic working rights. Although recognition is given to these gig laborers in the Social Security Code ¹2020, which was not effectively executed at the grassroots level. It is indubitable that the gig economy is pulling India out of the trenches of unemployment and is redefining the employment landscape, but reality is far from it. Gig laborers are constantly facing issues like unfair working hours, irregular income, and no job security. Vulnerabilities intensify during crises such as heatwaves, illness, or accidents, given the nature of this work. Since they are treated like “independent contractors,” not employees, they are treated as per the whims and fancies of the contractee depriving them of the rights given to any other full-time working employee. This paper aims to conduct doctrinal research on the present condition of the newly formed legislature, both the Centre and the state. The research paper will also delve into the attempts made by the government to address the situation and whether they are efficient or not. The study argues that mere recognition without any legislative intervention is violative of the fundamental rights of these gig workers.

Keywords: Gig economy, Gig laborers, platform labor, social security, Indian labor law, precarious working conditions, job security.

Introduction

The notion of employment has seen a huge revolution in the 21st century, with the rise of digital platforms, which facilitate “doorstep delivery,” “delivery within 10 minutes,” and “one-click service,” which have now become the new normal, all thanks to the exponential growth of gig labor. As per NITI Aayog’s report published in June 2022, the number of gig and platform workers in the country was 7.7 million in 2020-21 and is projected to rise to 23.5 million by 2029-2030². The e-Shram portal registered 3.37 lakh gig

¹ (Code, The Code on Social Security, 2020)

² (Pathak, 2024)

workers, amongst which Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal have the highest registration³. The gig economy is considered time-efficient and flexible, driven by digital platforms that connect the unconventional labour force with clients and businesses⁴. The gig economy is prevalent in nearly all sectors, including transportation services, delivery services, and logistics services. These services are expected to create 90 million jobs and contribute 1.25% of India's GDP by 2030⁵. The platform economy was estimated at \$ 556.7 billion in 2024⁶, which will further increase to USD 646.77 billion in 2025⁷, eventually reaching a whopping \$2146.87 billion by 2033⁸. In recent years, the platform economy has grown exponentially, providing a source of employment for numerous people. The workers in the platform economy play a crucial role in sustaining urban economies and ensuring last-minute delivery services. Still, the workers are treated miserably by the employers.

This research intends to examine whether the existing laws protect the rights of gig workers effectively or not, and if not, what measures can be taken to ensure the dignity of labor. This research also aims to do a comparative analysis of Indian laws with international legal standards to give a structured solution to the issue at hand.

Who qualifies as a Gig Worker?

The term “gig economy” was coined during the Great Recession. It was designed to include people (educated or uneducated) to take on multiple temporary jobs, mostly as freelancers⁹. According to Merriam-Webster, a gig worker is “an individual working as a freelancer or engaged in a temporary and independent contract to fulfill service sector roles is known as gig worker.”¹⁰ Under Indian Law, the concept of a gig worker was recognized through the Code of Social Security 2020, where section 2(35) of this code describes a gig worker as “*a person who executes work or partakes in a work arrangement and earns from such events outside of an obsolete employer-employee relationship.*”¹¹ After this definition, various state governments took inspiration from it and included this in their statutes, especially catering to gig workers, such as Rajasthan, which permitted the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act¹², 2023, being the first one to initiate such provisions, following which Karnataka enacted the Karnataka Gig Workers (Conditions of Service and Welfare) Bill¹³, 2025¹⁴.

The title of “independent worker” is largely a façade; in reality, these individuals are financially tied to their contractors, who cannot negotiate certain exploitative terms and are therefore at their mercy regarding ratings, commission fees, and punitive measures. According to the case of the *Indian Federation of App-based Workers*¹⁵ v. *the Union of India*¹⁶ The Supreme Court classified gig workers as “unorganized

³ (patal, 2025)

⁴ (Nikos Koutsimpogiorgos, 2020)

⁵ (Jahangir, 2025)

⁶ (Srinivas, 2025)

⁷ (Srinivas, 2025)

⁸ (Market Research Report , 2025)

⁹ (The Gig Economy, 2009)

¹⁰ (Definition of Gig worker , 2009)

¹¹ (The Code of Social Security, 2020)

¹² (IOE, 2023)

¹³ (Keerthana)

¹⁴ (Welfare Measures for Gig Workers in India: A Doctrinal Study on Perspectives And Implementation)

¹⁵ (Gupta, 2025)

¹⁶ (Gupta, 2025)

workers.¹⁷” It gave them benefits like provident funds and health insurance under the Social Security Code 2008, but it still failed to address the rights of these workers. These workers cannot be called gig workers, as they are not fully independent and remain dependent on the company under which they are managed. In *Kavita v. Uber* (2022, Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission), an Uber driver was sued over a service issue, prompting scrutiny of the driver's classification¹⁸. The commission held that the app was liable for the driver's¹⁹ wrongdoing since the driver was in control of the app, but it still did not reclassify the driver as an employee. Although the nature of the work is that of an employee, the companies and the legislature term them as partners or independent workers, directly or indirectly.

Rights and Social Security Framework under the Labor Code

One of the most important assets for economic development is labor. To make it easier to govern the workforce. Indian labor laws have been unified into four codes: the 2019 code on wages²⁰, and the 2020 codes governing industrial relations²¹, Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions²² and Social Security²³. The codes enable workers to have easy access to social security²⁴. The reason these codes were introduced was to simplify compliance with multiple laws and streamline authority across different labor laws. The Code of Wages Act 2019 consolidates the following existing laws, such as, *the Payment of Wages*²⁵ Act²⁶, 1936; *The Minimum Wages*²⁷ Act²⁸, 1948; *The Payment of Bonus*²⁹ Act³⁰, 1965; and *the Equal Remuneration*³¹ Act³², 1976. Objectives of this act are to compile and simplify the provisions related to employees' wages. It brings gender equality in employment, universal minimum wages, and overtime compensation. Additionally, the act introduces a central “floor wage” mandate, requiring the private sector and state governments to adhere to a minimum baseline fixed by the union government. *The Industrial Relations Code*³³, 2020, amalgamates and simplifies *the Indian Trade Unions*³⁴ (Amendment) Act, *the Employment (Standing Orders)*³⁵ Act, 1946, and *the Industrial Disputes Act*³⁶, 1947. It streamlines trade-union-related laws, employment conditions in undertakings and industrial establishments, and the resolution of such disputes. It introduces Fixed-term employment³⁷, re-skilling funds, expands the definition of worker, enables electronic record-keeping, and makes it easy to access tribunals. *The Code*

¹⁷ (Chaudhary A. , 2025)

¹⁸ (Kavita S. Sharma v. Uber India Systems Pvt. Ltd., 2022)

¹⁹ (Kaur, Introduction to Labour and Industrial Laws, 2022)

²⁰ (Code, The Code of Wages, 2019)

²¹ (Code, The Industrial Relations Code , 2020)

²² (Jakka, 2026)

²³ (Code, The Code on Social Security, 2020)

²⁴ (patal, 2025)

²⁵ (Urban Company Limited, 2025)

²⁶ (India G. o., The Payment of Wages Act, 1965)

²⁷ (Urban Company Limited, 2025)

²⁸ (India G. O., 1948)

²⁹ (Urban Company Limited, 2025)

³⁰ (India P. o., Payment of Bonus Act , 1965)

³¹ (Urban Company Limited, 2025)

³² (India G. o., Equal Remuneration Act, 1976)

³³ (Code, The Industrial Relations Code , 2020)

³⁴ (India P. o., Indian Trade Unions (Amendment) Act, 1947, 1956)

³⁵ (India T. I., 2025)

³⁶ (The role of compliance officer- a comparison of US, UK and German Law and Practice , 2017)

³⁷ (Government, 2025)

on *Social Security 2020* consolidates nine social security acts³⁸, which aim to expand the coverage of employee state insurance across India. It has included gig and platform workers and has incorporated “aggregator,” “gig worker,” and “platform worker. Introduced gratuity for fixed-term employees after one year of constant service. *The Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code*³⁹ 2020 unifies thirteen central acts and introduces a broader definition of migrant workers. The statute has made it obligatory for the employees to get free annual checkups. The act establishes safety committees for establishments where there are more than five hundred workers. Furthermore, the act mandates the creation of a social security fund dedicated to unorganized sector workers.

Challenges and Lacunae in the Current Statutory Framework

Employment Exchange Act 1959⁴⁰ offers a broad definition of an “employee,” covering anyone working or employed in exchange for remuneration. Though the Minimum Wages Act 1948⁴¹ mandates that income be paid in a secure, scheduled manner, which does not apply to gig workers because their relationship is outside the traditional boss-employee model. Pertaining to Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers v. Union of India⁴² A petition was filed in the Supreme Court under Article 32 of the Constitution, seeking to officially classify gig workers under the Unorganized Workers Security Act, 2008⁴³. Until now, they were not recognised under any statutes, but the new codes recognised these workers and provided them with social security, health, disability, life, and maternity insurance. These perks are mostly unclear and limited. Even though platform workers are tightly controlled by their employers in setting prices, monitoring their performance, and enforcing tax schedules, the lack of stringent laws tailored to their working conditions creates a major gap, leaving these workers vulnerable.

Women in the workplace have always been prone to exploitation and discrimination. Though provisions like the POSH Act and Vishakha guidelines are there to protect women, there is hardly any provision that explicitly protects the rights of women against any kind of workplace harassment. Also, the lack of creche facility, maternity leaves, and fringe benefits has proved that women in the gig industry are discriminated against by women working in other industries, infringing on their Article 14 of the Constitution.

The report published by Niti Ayog has made it clear that a substantial number of people are involved in the gig industry, either as executives or in logistics. Despite it having a workforce like any other industry, it hardly treats its employees like employees, and the lack of security, be it mental or financial, is challenging as well as frustrating for the people working in this industry. Gig workers can be taken into consideration if one wants to make extra income on the side, but one cannot fully rely on gig work for stability. This leaves them in a vulnerable position, unable to secure a safe future for themselves, as they are busy catering to their day-to-day needs with what they have.

Furthermore, the shortcomings of the legislation have compounded their hardships. While the code on social security officially recognizes gig workers, it does not yet propose a comprehensive remedy for the same. Primarily, there is a lack of bargaining power and monetary benefits for the gig workers, and this statute also fails to address the funding scheme for these social security schemes, whether these securities will be funded by a cut from workers' salaries, or the company will be making separate funds for such

³⁸ (Government, 2025)

³⁹ (Jakka, 2026)

⁴⁰ (The Employment Exchanges Act, 1959)

⁴¹ (Minimum Wages Act, 1948)

⁴² (Chaudhary A. , 2025)

⁴³ (THE UNORGANISED WORKERS' SOCIAL SECURITY ACT, 2008)

welfare programs, or the government is going to take it upon itself to fund such initiatives. ⁴⁴Lastly, a dedicated redressal forum is required, specifically curated for these gig laborers, so that they can approach it rather than going to time-consuming labor courts⁴⁵.

Next on the list is the *Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers Act*⁴⁶, 2023, which is a state-level initiative that provides a redressal mechanism catering to the concerns of “aggregators” and digital intermediaries between the consumer, the employer, and the employee. It also makes it mandatory to register employees, gig workers, and aggregators and imposes on aggregators the obligation to share data on their employees and working conditions. Though this act imposes penalties that extend to 50 lakh rupees in some cases, there are no rules passed to enable the implementation of the act. There is another piece of state legislation passed, which caters to gig workers, which is the *Karnataka Gig Workers (Conditions of Service Welfare) Bill, 2024*⁴⁷. The Act very aptly covers all the definitions related to the gig industry. Section 12⁴⁸ This statute ensures that the gig worker enters a fair contract, and in the dialects mentioned in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution⁴⁹ of India⁵⁰, including the regional language of Karnataka. The bill focuses on increasing transparency by including measures such as audits and establishing grounds for termination. But there is no provision mandating compensation for gig workers in cases of death, disability, or loss of pay caused during work.

Interpreting the Law: The Role of the Judiciary

The Apex Court applies three tests to establish whether an individual’s legal status is that of an employee or an independent contractor. The three tests for determining this relation are the control test, the integration test⁵¹, and the multi-factor test⁵². This question is necessary for the court to decide, as many companies tend to misclassify their employees as independent contractors. In *Swapan Das Gupta v. First Labour Court of West Bengal, 1975 Lab IC 202*⁵³, the court clarified a foundational legal standard; the burden of proof inherently falls on the individual contending that an employer-employee relationship exists⁵⁴.

The Control test assesses the existence and extent of an employer’s supervisory authority over a worker’s day-to-day actions. When determining whether an employer-employee relationship exists, several key factors are examined. These include the employer’s involvement in selecting and engaging the worker, the payment of wages, the authority to dismiss the employee, and the degree of control exercised over the individual’s work and conduct. This principle was established in *Yewens v. Noakes*⁵⁵ and upheld by the Supreme Court⁵⁶ in precedents like *Dharangadhra Chemical Works Ltd. v. State of Saurashtra*.⁵⁷ This case concerned agarias workers, specialized laborers engaged in seasonal salt production using rainwater on

⁴⁴ (Code, The Code on Social Security, 2020)

⁴⁵ (Shekhar, 2020)

⁴⁶ (India P. o., The Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare Act, 2023)

⁴⁷ (Welfare Measures for Gig Workers in India: A Doctrinal Study on Perspectives And Implementation)

⁴⁸ (Welfare Measures for Gig Workers in India: A Doctrinal Study on Perspectives And Implementation)

⁴⁹ (Secretariat P. A., 2025)

⁵¹ (Chaudhary, 2026)

⁵² (Murlidhar, 2023, p. 29)

⁵³ (Swapan Das Gupta v. First Labour Court of West Bengal (1975) Lab. IC 202)

⁵⁴ (Swapan Das Gupta v. First Labour Court of West Bengal (1975) Lab. IC 202)

⁵⁵ (Yewens v. Noakes (1880) 6 QBD 530)

⁵⁶ (Kaur, 2021)

⁵⁷ (Patidar)

leased land. The dispute arose when the company that hired them called these workers independent contractors. At the same time, the state contended that they very much came under workman status under the Industrial Disputes Act.⁵⁸ The court opined that agarias were workmen on the ground that the employer had the right to control the method in which the work was performed, rather than the work itself. This case established that practical control and supervision define the employee-employer relationship, even in non-traditional or seasonal labor.

The next test is the Integration Test, which also determines the same thing as the control test. This test was first provided in the matter of *Steven, Johnson, and Harrison v. Macdonald & Evans (1952)*⁵⁹ where Lord Danning stated, a key factor between an employee and an independent contractor is the extent to which the worker is integrated into the employer's business, for instance, by using the company's tools and resources, wearing the uniform or participating in internal meeting and activities This yardstick was used in *Balwant Rai Saluja v. Air India Ltd. (2014)*⁶⁰ and recently in the *General Manager, U.P Cooperative Bank Ltd. v. Achey Lal and Anr. (2025)*⁶¹ The ruling confirmed that identifying the characteristics of the relationship requires the simultaneous application of both the integration and control tests. Another test, which was opined in a 1967 U.K case, *Reddy Mixed Concrete (Southeast) Ltd. v. Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance*⁶². The multifactor test, in which Justice MacKenna outlined various key conditions for an employer-employee relationship, including a contract to provide services, some degree of control applied by the owner, and the employer's right to suspend and hire. To reach a just conclusion regarding a worker's legal status, adjudicators rely on the multiple-factor test. This framework naturally brings the reality of the employment relationship to light, making it uncommon for courts to have to look behind the written contract to uncover deceptive, exploitative practices⁶³.

These assessments are instrumental in ascertaining an individual's exact employment status, specifically distinguishing an employee from a gig worker. If these gig platforms control every or even certain aspects of their work and how they do it, then they certainly meet the criteria of an employer, and they can't call their employees "independent contractors" or "partners."

Expanding the Vision for Gig Workers

The report made by Niti Ayog provides a nuanced outlook on the challenges of this tech-driven economy, i.e., the platform economy. The report encourages either officially recognizing gig workers as employees or defining their roles in a manner that accounts for the dynamic nature of work. The report emphasizes the safety and welfare of platform workers and proposes a minimum wage floor, safety nets, and health insurance. So that they can support themselves and feel secure in their jobs. The report also promotes gender sensitivity and proposes menstrual leave, maternity benefits, and creche facilities. States like Karnataka and Rajasthan have implemented policies for platform workers. Karnataka has recognized gig workers as employees, drafted policies to protect them, and introduced a life and accident insurance scheme for approximately 2.3 lakh workers.⁶⁴ Rajasthan has also implemented a similar framework for gig workers, which introduces a redressal mechanism that caters to the needs of "aggregators." The report

⁵⁸ (The role of compliance officer- a comparison of US, UK and German Law and Practice , 2017)

⁵⁹ (Stevenson, Jordan, and Harrison Ltd. v. MacDonald & Evans (1952) 1 TLR 101)

⁶⁰ (Jakka N. B.)

⁶¹ (General Manager, U.P. Cooperative Bank Ltd. v. Achey Lal & Anr. 2025 INSC 1175)

⁶² (Mr. Howard waters v. the Mote Cricket Club)

⁶³ (Hussainbhai, Calicut v. Alath Factory Tozhilai Union (1978) SCC (4) 257)

⁶⁴ (Express, 2025)

also makes it necessary to register employees, gig workers, and aggregators, and imposes an obligation to share data on the employees and the working conditions that they are in. Despite these initiatives, there is still no comprehensive national law. A unified legal framework would clearly define gig workers, covering roles from delivery partners to freelancers. The report recommends innovative financing mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships and fintech-based microinsurance, to improve social protection for workers⁶⁵. It also ensures that economic growth does not take over worker welfare⁶⁶. The report stresses government outreach programs, digital literacy programs, and legal aid to enable workers to understand their rights⁶⁷. Programs such as Start-up India could offer tax incentives and initial support to platforms that adopt worker-friendly practices⁶⁸. Furthermore, revenue-sharing incentives could be directed toward companies that demonstrate robust worker protections⁶⁹.

It also provides simplification for enrollment procedures with language support to encourage workers' access to welfare programs. Through collective action, the gig economy can become more stable, inclusive, and sustainable, which will further benefit the platform workers.

Conclusion

While we celebrate digital growth, capitalism, and economic progress, and the success of an economy that accounts for 1.25% of GDP, we should not ignore the clear bias shown by the many strikes and stories of powerless gig workers. Even though new laws like the Code on Social Security⁷⁰ 2020 have been passed, the steps taken by the Rajasthan and Karnataka governments are important moves by legislators; ensuring that gig workers are safe, healthy, and treated fairly in all respects requires teamwork among platform owners, workers, and the government. The government must not only formulate but also implement clear rules that address the primary challenge of balancing workers' benefits. Many individuals are engaging in gig work as their primary means of earning a living. Globally, nations such as the US, UK, and Brazil have seen legal movements pushing to definitively classify the gig workforce as independent contractors. In stark contrast, India operates without comprehensive grassroots legislation to protect and address the specific grievances of this evolving labor sector. The proposed bills appear insufficient, under-researched, and hastily formed, failing to include the best interests of the gig workers. The legislation should be comprehensive, balanced, and thought through, including legal protections, social security, and equitable labor practices⁷¹. These reforms would help create a fairer environment for gig workers in India.

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⁶⁵ (Datwani, 2023)

⁶⁶ (Banerjee, 2025)

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⁶⁹ (Dangi, 2025)

⁷⁰ (Code, The Code on Social Security, 2020)

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