

Collective Voice and Worker Resistance, Mobilisation among Food Delivery Gig Workers in India

Ms.R.Dharani¹, Dr. S. Jeyalakshmi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Corporate Secretaryship, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore 641-014

²Associate Professor & Head, Department of Corporate Secretaryship, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore 641-014

ABSTRACT

Platform-based food delivery work in India has expanded rapidly over the past decade, yet the workers who sustain it remain formally outside the reach of conventional human resource management (HRM) structures such as grievance committees, works councils, or recognised collective bargaining. This paper examines how, in the absence of institutional voice mechanisms, food delivery gig workers in India have constructed alternative channels of collective voice and resistance from informal peer networks to registered trade unions and coordinated nationwide strikes. Drawing on a documentary and literature-based review of peer-reviewed journals, state and central government articles, and news reports, the paper traces the evolution of worker-led organisations such as the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union and the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers, analyses the December 2025–January 2026 nationwide strike against ultra-fast ‘10-minute delivery’ models as a case of collective mobilisation that produced an observable change in platform practice, and maps the resulting state-level welfare legislation across Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu. It concludes by positioning collective voice and mobilisation propensity an important HRM outcome variable for gig-economy.

Keywords: Gig economy, Human Resource Management, Collective voice, Worker resistance, Algorithmic Management, Food delivery platforms.

1. INTRODUCTION

India's food delivery sector platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Zepto, and Blinkit has become one of the most visible faces of the country's platform economy. The sector's rapid growth has been accompanied by a structural peculiarity that distinguishes it from conventional employment: delivery personnel are engaged as “partners” rather than employees, and the day-to-day functions ordinarily performed by a human resources department like task allocation, performance evaluation, incentive design, and disciplinary action are instead executed by algorithmic systems through the platform's mobile application. This arrangement leaves workers without access to the formal voice mechanisms that HRM theory has traditionally regarded as essential safety valves within organisations, such as grievance redressal committees, works councils, or recognised collective bargaining forums.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a descriptive study, documentary review design rather than a primary survey-based methodology. Evidence was obtained from three categories sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles and systematic reviews on algorithmic management, worker voice, and platform-worker mobilisation; primary legislative and legal-analysis documents, including state Acts, draft Bills, ordinances, and legislative briefs published by PRS Legislative Research and verified reporting from established news organisations and international bodies such as Human Rights Watch, used specifically to reconstruct the chronology and stated demands of the December 2025–January 2026 strike. Sources were triangulated wherever possible.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Algorithmic Management

A substantial body of HRM and organisational behaviour documented how algorithmic management substitutes for, rather than complements, conventional managerial functions on labour platforms (Duggan et al., 2020). Because algorithmic interfaces mediate almost every interaction between the worker and the platform order assignment, rating, penalty, and deactivation of the account that it simultaneously perform the function of management instead of traditional channels. Recent reviews note that platforms' feedback interfaces are frequently proceduralised in ways that restrict meaningful dialogue, effectively suppressing institutionalised voice before it can form (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026).

3.2 Collective Mobilisation

Where formal, employer-employee channels are absent, Hirschman's (1970) classic exit-voice-loyalty framework offers a useful starting point: workers dissatisfied with conditions may exit the platform, exercise some form of voice, or remain loyal despite the grievances. The manipulation of algorithmic rules (for instance, circumventing location or acceptance-rate requirements), subversion through informally shared workarounds, and outright disruption through coordinated actions such as mass log-offs (as reviewed in Kadolkar et al., 2025). Workers have also been shown to build informal digital communities through social media groups and instant messaging networks that function as unofficial, spaces for information sharing, mutual support, and the early coordination of collective action (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026). Cini's (2023) comparative work on platform-worker mobilisation across multiple countries similarly documents a graduated escalation from dispersed, app-based grievance venting to structured, union-backed protest.

3.3 Worker Voice as an Emerging HRM

A 2025 systematic review in the Human Resource Management Journal consolidates this literature into three broad streams of platform-worker voice research: workers limited access to institutional voice and representation structures; workers' construction of novel, informal voice channels to counter algorithmic silencing; and the emergence of collective voice expressed through organised resistance and mobilisation (Dasgupta, 2025). This third stream collective voice as mobilisation is the least developed empirically, particularly outside the Global North, and is the primary focus of this paper. It also connects naturally to two theoretical anchors already established in Indian gig-work HRM scholarship: organisational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987), under which perceived unfairness in algorithmic pay and penalty systems functions as a proximate trigger for mobilisation; and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), under which a shared occupational identity as “delivery partners” subjected to a common set of algorithmic pressures provides the psychological basis for collective action. A pluralistic, stakeholder-inclusive

reading of HRM one that treats the state as an active participant in the employment relationship rather than a distant regulator has also been proposed as the appropriate frame for platform-based gig work (Cooke, 2026; Freeman, 1984)

4. RESEARCH GAP

Existing reviews note that platform work remains mostly concentrated in the Global North, even though gig work is predominantly performed by workers in the Global South, and that subcategory specific studies of ride-hailing and food delivery obscure commonalities in worker experience across skill levels (as reviewed in Zhang, 2025). India-specific empirical accounts of union formation, strike dynamics, and the resulting legislative response particularly at the level of individual states such as Tamil Nadu remains comparatively less comparing to the other states of the country's gig workforce. Furthermore, standard HRM survey instruments used in Indian gig-work research, including questionnaires structured around policy awareness and career outcomes, but rarely states “voice behaviour” or “collective mobilisation propensity” as measurable constructs.

5. OBJECTIVES

1. To trace the institutional evolution of collective voice among Indian food delivery gig workers.
2. To map the resulting regulatory response across Indian states.
3. To treat collective voice as measurable HRM outcome variables.

6. COLLECTIVE VOICE AND WORKER RESISTANCE, MOBILISATION

6.1 The landscape of Collective Voice among Indian Food Delivery Gig workers

The most consequential development in Indian gig-worker collective voice has been the formation of independent, worker-led unions operating outside any platform's limits. The Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union (TGPWU), founded in 2021, was established specifically to help workers claim the benefits nominally available to them under the central Code on Social Security, 2020 and today represents workers across mobility platforms (Uber, Ola, Rapido), logistics platforms (Dunzo, Delhivery, Flipkart), and food delivery platforms (Zomato, Swiggy) (TGPWU, 2026). TGPWU is affiliated with the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT), a national coordinating body that has emerged as the principal negotiations between gig workers and both platform companies and government, including through a seat on a government committee on platform-worker regulation. Alongside TGPWU and IFAT, several other organisations have become active in the food delivery sector specifically, including the Gig and Platform Service Workers Union (GIPSWU), the United Food Delivery Partners' Union (UFDPU) in Karnataka, and the Karnataka App-Based Workers' Union. These unions perform functions that mirror, in an external and adversarial form, several classic internal HRM functions such as grievance escalation (particularly around arbitrary account deactivation and ID blocking), dispute resolution over unpaid or delayed earnings (“wage theft”), and policy advocacy, including direct submission of drafting suggestions to state labour departments (Siasat Daily, 2026).

Collective Mobilisation Against Ultra-Fast Delivery Models

DATE	EVENT	PARTICIPATION
Nov–Dec 2025	Rising worker complaints over safety risk, algorithmic	Individual workers; informal networks

	penalties, and ID blocking linked to 10–15-minute delivery targets	
Dec 25, 2025	First coordinated nationwide strike day called by IFAT, TGPWU, and Karnataka App-Based Workers' Union	IFAT, TGPWU, Karnataka App-Based Workers' Union
Dec 31, 2025	Second, larger strike day timed to New Year's Eve peak demand; over 200,000 workers reported to have participated across major cities	IFAT and affiliated unions; GIPSWU also called for member non-participation
Late Dec 2025–early Jan 2026	Platforms offer inflated incentives (5–6x normal) and report record order volumes; founder pushback on exploitation narrative	Zomato/Blinkit management
Jan 13, 2026	Union Labour Ministry convenes meeting with Blinkit, Zepto, Zomato, and Swiggy	Ministry of Labour and Employment, platform companies
Mid-Jan 2026	Blinkit removes '10-minute delivery' claim from branding.	Blinkit; other quick-commerce platforms

6.2 Regulatory responses: From Worker Mobilisation to State Legislation

A distinctive feature of the Indian case is that worker mobilisation has not merely prompted government attention after the fact that unions have in several instances participated directly in drafting the legislative response, blurring the line between protest and policy co-production. This section surveys the resulting state-level legal architecture, which has emerged in various states during the absence of a functioning central framework.

State	Instrument	Union/Worker involvement in drafting
Rajasthan	Registration and Welfare Act (2023)	Limited, first-mover model law
Karnataka	Social Security and Welfare Act/Ordinance (2025)	Consultative, contested post-enactment
Telangana	Platform-Based Gig Workers Bill (2026)	Direct, TGPWU submitted clause-level amendments
Bihar / Jharkhand	Welfare-board laws (2024–2025)	Varied, some joint union–NGO comments submitted
Tamil Nadu	Platform-Based Gig Workers' Welfare Board (administrative) + Manual Workers Act extension	Administrative, department-led; welfare-board rather than standalone Act

6.3 HRM Implications: Positioning Collective Voice as an Outcome Variable

Platform companies in India maintain internal support mechanisms that resemble quasi-HR systems, including helplines, in-app grievance redressal tools, and field-level support personnel. These systems are structured to address worker concerns in a formal and compliance-driven manner. However, a distinction exists between these internal channels and external mechanisms such as union-led interventions. Internal systems primarily resolve individual grievances, such as payment discrepancies or penalties. In contrast, broader organizational or policy-level changes such as the rollback of the 10-minute delivery model have not emerged through these channels. This indicates that platform HRM currently functions at an individual grievance resolution level, whereas collective and structural changes are driven externally through unions and government involvement. This division of roles presents a significant area for future empirical research in platform HRM.

Collective Voice and Mobilisation construct could usefully extend existing policy-awareness and career-outcome sections. Analysing the awareness of and membership in a gig-worker union, or coordinated app log-off, relative trust in platform-provided grievance channels versus union-mediated escalation; perceived efficacy of collective action in changing platform practice; and attitude toward state welfare-board registration. Framing such items around organisational justice perceptions (Greenberg, 1987) and occupational identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) would allow the construct to be tested as both an outcome of perceived algorithmic unfairness and a predictor of policy-awareness and career-sustainability outcomes already covered elsewhere in Indian gig-work HRM instruments.

7. DISCUSSION

The evidence presented in this paper offers a perspective that differs somewhat from the more cautious conclusions commonly found in the gig economy resistance literature. Much of this literature highlights the structural limitations of platform workers' bargaining power as the gig workers are geographically dispersed, easily replaceable, and often excluded from formal collective bargaining frameworks. As a result, collective action is typically viewed as sporadic and more symbolic than impactful (Frontiers in Sociology, 2026).

In contrast, the case of food delivery workers in India demonstrates that, under specific conditions, collective action can lead to tangible outcomes. Factors such as the presence of a coordinating national federation (IFAT), established state-level union infrastructure (TGPWU), a clearly defined and safety-related issue (the 10-minute delivery model), and active involvement from the government contributed to rapid and meaningful changes in platform practices. Notably, the state played an active role not merely as a regulator but as a facilitator in the negotiation process, aligning with the pluralistic and stakeholder-oriented model of platform HRM governance discussed in recent studies (Cooke, 2026).

For instance, Karnataka's legislation, which provides relatively strong support for collective worker voice through provisions such as task refusal, is currently under legal challenge by platform companies. Meanwhile, Tamil Nadu's welfare-board approach, although practical, does not carry the same statutory strength as the legislative frameworks introduced in Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Telangana. This variation suggests that collective voice within the Indian food delivery sector is still evolving within a dynamic and contested regulatory landscape. Rather than representing a stable or fully institutionalised system, it reflects an ongoing process of negotiation between workers, platforms, and the state.

8. CONCLUSION

Food delivery gig workers in India largely operate outside the scope of traditional HRM voice mechanisms. However, the period examined in this review shows a clear progression in how worker voice has developed over the period of time. This evolution can be seen from informal peer coordination to the formation of registered unions such as TGPWU and IFAT followed by coordinated nationwide strikes, and eventually to direct union involvement in shaping state-level welfare legislation. The strike against ultra-fast delivery models is a notable example where this emerging collective voice led to a tangible change in platform practices. This outcome was achieved through sustained worker mobilisation, supported by government intervention.

For HRM research on India's platform economy, this indicates that collective voice and the ability of gig workers to mobilise should be treated as important and measurable outcomes in their own right. Rather than being viewed only as a secondary aspect of industrial relations, these factors deserve an attention alongside commonly studied individual-level variables such as job satisfaction and turnover intention. As state-level policies such as Tamil Nadu's welfare-board model continue to evolve, examine how collective voice interacts with policy awareness and long-term career sustainability presents a valuable and underexplored direction for future research in the growing Indian gig economy.

REFERENCES

1. Al Jazeera. (2026, January 28). India curbs 'grocery under 10 minutes'. But riders must still fatally race.
2. Business Standard. (2026, July 8). Karnataka gig workers act: What the law says and why it's contested.
3. Cini, L. (2023). Resisting algorithmic control: Understanding the rise and variety of platform worker mobilisations. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 38(1), 125–144.
4. Cooke, F. L. (2026). Spotlighting platform-based gig work research: Toward a common good approach and implications for research in China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*. Advance online publication.
5. Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas. (2023, August 30). Rajasthan passes Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023. India Corporate Law Blog.
6. Dasgupta, S. (2025). A systematic review on worker voice in the platform economy: The constitution of a grassroots voice mechanism. *Human Resource Management Journal*. Advance online publication.
7. Deccan Herald. (2025, March 14). Subsidy of Rs 20k each to gig workers: Tamil Nadu budget.
8. Deccan Herald. (2026a, January 1). Zomato founder Deepinder Goyal pushes back on gig worker strike calls, defends 10-minute delivery model.
9. Deccan Herald. (2026b, January 15). Workers' union urges all quick commerce firms to withdraw 10-minute deliveries.
10. Duggan, J., Sherman, U., Carbery, R., & McDonnell, A. (2020). Algorithmic management and app-work in the gig economy: A research agenda for employment relations and HRM. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(1), 114–132.
11. Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Pitman.
12. *Frontiers in Psychology*. (2026). Voice in the algorithmic era: How perceived algorithmic control influences gig workers' voice behaviour.

13. *Frontiers in Sociology*. (2026). Algorithmic management in the global gig economy: An interdisciplinary systematic literature review and critical discourse analysis.
14. Greenberg, J. (1987). A taxonomy of organizational justice theories. *Academy of Management Review*, 12(1), 9–22.
15. Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Harvard University Press.
16. *International Journal of Legal Review*. (2025). The impact of labour on gig work in Tamil Nadu. *International Journal of Legal Review*, 5(4), 576–579.
17. JSA. (2025, December). JSA Prism: Karnataka Platform Based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Act — employment law update.
18. Kadolkar, I., et al. (2025). Algorithmic management in the gig economy: A systematic review and research integration. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Advance online publication.
19. *News on Air*. (2026, January 13). Major delivery aggregators agree to remove 10-minute delivery deadline after government's intervention.
20. PRS Legislative Research. (2026a). The Karnataka Platform Based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Bill, 2025 — Legislative Brief.
21. PRS Legislative Research. (2026b). The Draft Telangana Gig and Platform Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Bill, 2025 — Legislative Brief.
22. Sarkar, A. R. (2026, January 1). Why Indian gig workers are on strike on New Year's Eve over '10-minute deliveries'. *The Independent*.
23. *Siasat Daily*. (2026, March 24). Welcome, but fix these: Gig workers' union seeks changes to Telangana's bill.
24. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
25. Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union. (2026). About TGPWU. <https://tgpuw.org/about-tgpuw/>
26. TNPSC Thervu Pettagam. (n.d.). Welfare board for gig workers.
27. Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. (2025). Reimagining platform work.
28. *Yahoo News*. (2026, January). India reportedly tells quick-commerce firms to drop 10-minute delivery promise.
29. Zhang, Y. (2025). The rise of algorithmic management and implications for work and organisations. *New Technology, Work and Employment*. Advance online publication.