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Gig and Platform Work in India: Flexibility, Algorithmic Management and the Emerging Social Security Framework

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Abstract

Digital labour platforms have become a significant source of work in India, spanning delivery, ride-hailing, logistics and home services. NITI Aayog estimated 7.7 million gig workers in 2020-21 and projected 23.5 million by 2029-30. This growth raises questions about earnings, working conditions and social protection for workers outside traditional employment. This paper reviews international and Indian research on platform work and examines India's evolving regulatory response. Using a structured narrative review of peer-reviewed studies, official reports and legislation up to 2026, the paper organises the evidence around three themes: the value of flexibility, the effects of algorithmic management, and the design of social security. The review finds that platform work offers genuine flexibility that workers value, but that earnings are volatile and control is exercised through opaque algorithms. Independent assessments indicate that only two of eleven rated Indian platforms could show that workers earned the local minimum wage after costs, and none recognised a collective body of workers. India's policy response has accelerated: the Code on Social Security, 2020, which formally recognises gig and platform workers and requires aggregators to contribute 1 to 2 per cent of annual turnover to a social security fund, came into force in November 2025, and states such as Rajasthan and Karnataka have enacted their own laws. The paper discusses implications for platforms, policymakers and workers and proposes an agenda for research on earnings measurement, algorithmic transparency, women's participation and the effects of new welfare levies.

Keywords: - Gig Economy, Platform Work, Algorithmic Management, Social Security, India

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital labour platforms has reshaped how many services are delivered and how work is organised. Platforms match customers with workers through mobile applications, set prices and allocate tasks using algorithms, and typically classify workers as independent partners rather than employees. In India, platform work has expanded rapidly in urban areas, providing income opportunities to millions of young workers, many of whom previously worked in the informal sector.

NITI Aayog (2022) estimated that India had 7.7 million gig workers in 2020-21 and projected that this number would reach 23.5 million by 2029-30. Its analysis indicated that about 47 per cent of gig work was in medium-skilled jobs, 22 per cent in high-skilled jobs and 31 per cent in low-skilled jobs. The growth of quick commerce, food delivery and app-based mobility since then has further increased the visibility of platform workers in Indian cities.

This expansion has created a policy dilemma. Platforms argue that flexible, independent work allows people to choose when and how much to work, lowers entry barriers and creates opportunities at scale. Critics point to income volatility, long working hours, safety risks, opaque deactivation practices and the absence of employment benefits. Because platform workers are generally not classified as employees, they have historically fallen outside India's labour protections.

India's response has moved from policy discussion to legislation. The Code on Social Security, 2020 recognised gig and platform workers as distinct categories and provided for aggregator contributions to a social security fund; the Code came

into force on 21 November 2025. Several states have enacted their own laws, beginning with Rajasthan in 2023 and followed by Karnataka in 2025.

This paper addresses the following research question: what does existing research reveal about the benefits and risks of platform work, and how well does India's emerging regulatory framework address them? It contributes by combining international evidence on flexibility and algorithmic management with Indian assessments of working conditions and a review of recent legislation. The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature, Section 3 describes the method, Section 4 presents the findings, Section 5 discusses implications, and Section 6 concludes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Defining platform work

Platform work refers to paid work mediated by a digital platform that connects workers with clients. The International Labour Organization distinguishes between online web-based platforms, where tasks are performed remotely, and location-based platforms, where tasks such as delivery or transport are performed in a specific place (ILO, 2021). Vallas and Schor (2020) argue that platforms constitute a distinctive form of economic organisation: they retain control over pricing, task allocation and performance evaluation while shifting much of the risk and many of the costs of work to the worker.

Platform work is part of a broader growth in alternative work arrangements. Katz and Krueger (2019) document that such arrangements, including independent contracting and on-call work, grew in the United States between 1995 and 2015, although platform work itself accounted for a small share. In India, where informal work has long been the norm, the distinctive feature of platform work is not its informality but the way in which it is managed through technology.

2.2. The value of flexibility

A central argument for platform work is flexibility. Hall and Krueger (2018) find that Uber drivers in the United States valued the ability to set their own schedules and that many drove part time alongside other work. Chen et al. (2019) estimate that Uber drivers gained substantial surplus from the ability to adjust their working hours in real time, earning more than twice the surplus they would obtain under less flexible arrangements.

Flexibility does not guarantee equal outcomes, however. Studying over a million rideshare drivers, Cook et al. (2021) find a gender earnings gap of about 7 per cent even on a platform with gender-blind pay formulas, explained by differences in experience, driving speed and choices of where and when to work. This suggests that flexible platforms can reproduce earnings gaps through workers' constraints and choices rather than explicit discrimination.

2.3. Algorithmic management and control

Platforms coordinate large numbers of workers using algorithms that assign tasks, set prices, evaluate performance and impose penalties. Kellogg et al. (2020) describe this as a new contested terrain of control, in which algorithms direct, evaluate and discipline workers more comprehensively than traditional supervision. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) show that Uber drivers faced significant information asymmetries, as the platform controlled information about fares and destinations and used incentives and ratings to shape behaviour.

Wood et al. (2019), studying remote gig workers in Asia and Africa, find that algorithmic control coexisted with high levels of formal autonomy, but that workers also experienced low pay, social isolation, overwork and sleep deprivation. Their findings capture the central tension of platform work: workers enjoy flexibility in principle, but economic pressure and algorithmic incentives often limit their practical choices.

2.4. Research gap

The international literature offers robust evidence on flexibility and algorithmic management, mainly from the United States and Europe. Evidence on Indian platform workers is growing but relies heavily on independent assessments and policy reports rather than large-scale academic studies. Moreover, India's new legal framework has not yet been examined in light of this evidence. This review seeks to bring these strands together.

III. METHODS

The study adopts a structured narrative review design, combining peer-reviewed research with official reports, independent assessments and legislation. This design is appropriate because the relevant evidence spans economics, management, sociology and law, and because much of the Indian evidence is found in policy and practitioner sources.

3.1. Sources and selection

Academic studies were identified through Google Scholar, RePEc/IDEAS and SSRN using combinations of the terms "gig economy", "platform work", "algorithmic management", "flexible work", "Uber drivers", "social security" and "India". Official and policy sources included NITI Aayog's 2022 policy brief, the ILO's 2021 flagship report, the Fairwork India ratings and Union Budget documents. Legal sources included the Code on Social Security, 2020, its commencement notification and rules, and state legislation from Rajasthan and Karnataka. Studies were included if they (a) analysed platform or alternative work arrangements using quantitative or qualitative evidence; (b) appeared in peer-reviewed journals or official and recognised independent publications; and (c) were relevant to the Indian context. Selection was purposive, prioritising large-sample studies and systematic assessments.

3.2. Analysis

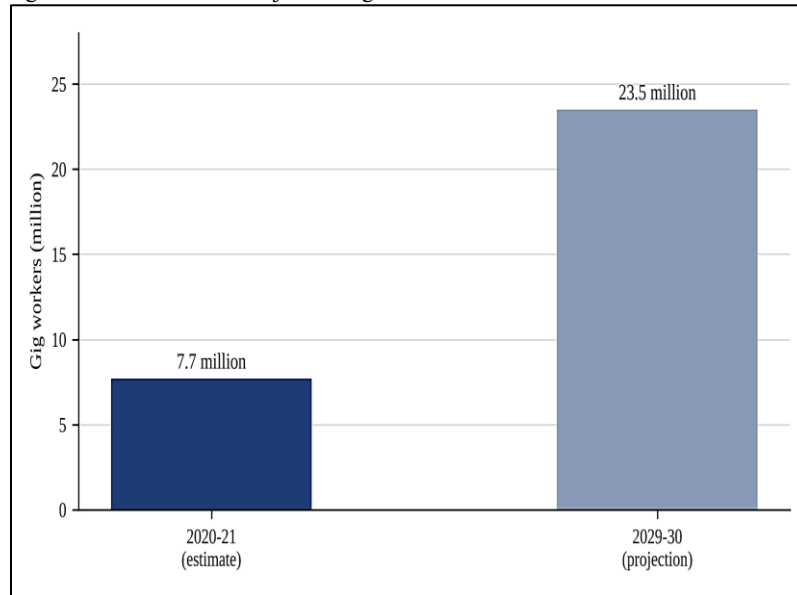
Studies were coded by setting, data, method and principal findings and grouped into themes. Legislation was analysed chronologically to trace the evolution of the regulatory framework. Because the study relies entirely on published material, no primary data were collected and ethical approval was not required.

IV. RESULTS

4.1. Scale and composition of platform work

Figure 1 shows NITI Aayog's estimate and projection of the size of India's gig workforce. The projected tripling of the workforce over the decade implies that the design of social protection for platform workers will affect a large and growing share of urban employment.

Figure 1: Estimated and Projected Gig Workforce in India



Source: NITI Aayog (2022). Figures in million workers.

4.2. Synthesis of evidence on platform work

Table 1 summarises the principal studies and assessments reviewed. Three patterns emerge. First, workers value flexibility, and this value is economically significant. Second, platforms exercise substantial control through algorithms, often with limited transparency. Third, independent assessments in India indicate that basic standards of pay and representation are frequently unmet.

Table 1. Synthesis of Selected Studies and Assessments on Platform Work

Study	Setting and data	Principal finding
Rosenblat & Stark (2016)	United States; Uber driver interviews and forums	Platform controls information and shapes behaviour through incentives and ratings
Hall & Krueger (2018)	United States; Uber driver surveys and administrative data	Drivers value schedule flexibility; many work part time
Chen et al. (2019)	United States; Uber driver hours data	Real-time flexibility yields substantial surplus for drivers
Wood et al. (2019)	Asia and Africa; remote gig worker interviews and survey	Formal autonomy coexists with low pay, overwork and algorithmic control
Cook et al. (2021)	United States; over a million rideshare drivers	Gender earnings gap of about 7% despite gender-blind pay
NITI Aayog (2022)	India; workforce estimates and projections	7.7 million gig workers in 2020-21, projected 23.5 million by 2029-30
Fairwork (2024)	India; assessment of 11 platforms	Only two platforms met the minimum wage threshold after costs; none met fair representation

Source: Compiled by the author(s).

4.3. Working conditions in India

The Fairwork India ratings provide the most systematic assessment of working conditions on Indian platforms. In its 2024 assessment of 11 platforms against ten principles covering pay, conditions, contracts, management and representation, Fairwork (2024) found that the highest-scoring platforms received 6 out of 10 points, while the lowest received 1. Only two platforms could show that workers earned at least the local minimum wage after work-related costs, and none could show that workers earned a living wage. Seven platforms provided safety equipment and training, five provided accident insurance and seven had grievance mechanisms. No platform was awarded the point for fair representation, as none showed willingness to recognise a collective body of workers.

4.4. Evolution of the regulatory framework

Table 2 traces the main regulatory milestones. India's approach combines a national framework under the Code on Social Security with state legislation that imposes welfare levies on platforms.

Table 2. Evolution of Social Security Provisions for Gig and Platform Workers in India

Date	Instrument	Key provisions
2020	Code on Social Security, 2020 (Parliament)	Defines gig and platform workers; provides for schemes, a social security fund and aggregator contributions of 1–2% of annual turnover, capped at 5% of payments to workers
July 2023	Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act	First state law; registration of workers and a welfare fee on platform transactions
February 2025	Union Budget 2025-26	Identity cards, e-Shram registration and PM-JAY health coverage for about 1 crore platform workers
2025	Karnataka Platform-Based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Act	Welfare fund financed by a fee of 1–5% of worker payouts, initially set at 1%
21 November 2025	Commencement of the four labour codes	Code on Social Security, including gig and platform worker provisions, comes into force
May 2026	Social Security (Central) Rules, 2026	Operational rules, including eligibility based on 90 days with one aggregator or 120 days across aggregators

Source: Compiled by the author(s) from Government of India (2020), Government of Rajasthan (2023), Ministry of Labour and Employment (2025), Government of Karnataka (2025) and secondary legal analyses of the 2025 commencement and 2026 rules.

The regulatory approach has also faced legal contestation. Platforms challenged the Karnataka Act before the High Court, which in 2026 declined to stay its implementation while the challenge remains pending.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that platform work in India embodies the same tension documented internationally: flexibility that workers value, combined with algorithmic control and economic insecurity. The evidence from Hall and Krueger (2018) and Chen et al. (2019) cautions against regulation that eliminates flexibility, since this would remove a real benefit. At the same time, the Fairwork (2024) findings indicate that many Indian platform workers do not reliably earn the minimum wage after costs, and that mechanisms for collective voice are largely absent.

India's regulatory model is distinctive. Rather than reclassifying platform workers as employees, as some jurisdictions have attempted, it extends social security through a contributory fund financed by aggregators and through state welfare boards. This approach preserves the independent status of workers and much of their flexibility, while creating a channel for benefits such as accident insurance, health coverage and old-age support. It aligns with NITI Aayog's (2022) recommendation to develop social security through collaboration between platforms and government.

Several design questions remain. First, the coexistence of central and state levies raises the risk of overlapping obligations and administrative complexity for platforms operating nationally. Second, eligibility thresholds based on days of engagement may exclude workers who work intermittently or across many platforms. Third, social security contributions address income risks but do not resolve concerns about algorithmic management, such as opaque pay calculations and deactivation. Kellogg et al. (2020) and Rosenblat and Stark (2016) suggest that transparency obligations and fair appeal processes are needed alongside financial protections. Fourth, the gender evidence from Cook et al. (2021) indicates that flexibility alone may not ensure equal outcomes, which is relevant as platforms seek to expand women's participation.

For platforms, the implications include the need to strengthen earnings transparency, safety measures and grievance systems, which also influence worker retention and reputation. For policymakers, priorities include harmonising central and state requirements, building the data infrastructure needed to register workers and deliver benefits, and considering standards for algorithmic transparency. For workers and their associations, the new framework creates formal recognition that may support collective representation.

The review has limitations. Much of the academic evidence comes from ride-hailing in the United States, which may not reflect conditions in Indian delivery and home services. Indian evidence relies heavily on independent assessments with limited samples of platforms. The legislation reviewed is recent, and its effects have not yet been evaluated. Finally, as a narrative review, the study involves judgement in selecting and interpreting evidence.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed research and policy on gig and platform work in India. It finds that platform work provides valued flexibility and a large number of income opportunities, but that earnings are often inadequate after costs, control is exercised through opaque algorithms, and collective representation is weak. India has responded with a social security framework that recognises platform workers and finances benefits through aggregator contributions, now in force nationally and supplemented by state laws.

Several areas merit further research. First, studies using platform or worker-reported data could measure net hourly earnings after costs across cities and services. Second, research could evaluate the effects of the Code on Social Security and state welfare levies on worker welfare, platform prices and employment. Third, studies of algorithmic management in India could examine how incentive structures, ratings and deactivation affect working hours and safety. Fourth, research on women's participation could identify barriers and the design features that support inclusion. Fifth, comparative work could assess how India's contributory model performs relative to reclassification approaches elsewhere. Addressing these questions would help ensure that the growth of platform work translates into decent work for India's expanding urban workforce.

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