



India's Gig Workers: Life at the Mercy of 'Platforms' & 'Algorithms'

Gig work in India remains a distressing tale of long work hours, isolation and stagnant careers.

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OPINION

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[India's gig workforce](#) is growing rapidly. According to a 2021 report by BCG & Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, our gig economy is poised for 300% growth in three to four years, with 90 million gig workers (henceforth 'giggers') expected by 2031. As many as 135 million Indian jobs were lost

during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), accentuating the [demand for gigs](#). Add to this 4 million employable youth entering the workforce annually, and it is easy to see why gigs seem attractive to millennials and 'zoomers'.

Giggers with technical and/or abstraction skills (like IT professionals) belong to the 'skilled' category, while those like Uber drivers are termed 'unskilled'. [Perceived 'autonomy'](#) attracts giggers: workers choose their pace by picking micro-fragments of work called 'gigs' from different organisations and delivering them based on contractual requirements. But while boundary-less careers seem exciting, long-term psychological and socio-economic implications of gigs require scrutiny, given how the fragmented nature of this world of work disrupts conventional economic structures.

Snapshot

- Beyond just employees and contractors, 'gig work' introduces additional complexity via a triadic work relationship between the employer, the algorithmic platform, and an on-demand workforce.
- With algorithms taking over the HR manager's role, giggers become peripheral to the platform, managed to virtual anonymity using a low-commitment, 'arms-length' approach.
- Gig structures hardly allow for the need for human connection to be fulfilled; relationships are created and terminated rapidly, affording no time to generate loyalty and trust.
- Lack of professional development results in frustration when giggers seek traditional employment. An intellectually stagnant workforce may constitute a social liability.

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Disrupting the Employee-Contractor Dynamic

Organisations have always differentiated between employees and contractors. Gigs introduce additional complexity via a triadic work relationship between the employer, the algorithmic platform, and an on-demand workforce.

Clients and giggers remain dependent on the intermediary platform, tilting the power balance in its favour and limiting giggers' bargaining power. Instead of partnering with platforms to offer services, giggers, especially when unskilled, work at the mercy of algorithms and clients.

This business model offers cheap ways for employers to digitally organise workers because they no longer need to place individuals on payroll and offer decent salaries, a safe work environment, and benefits. Giggers thus become outsiders [who may be paid less than contractors](#) while experiencing no benefits, growth opportunities or career trajectories, further accentuating economic inequality. According to labour scholars, decent work has four constituents: governments creating jobs with potential for development, protection of workers' rights, an opportunity for social dialogue and work that is safe, healthy, compensated, and balanced.

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How do giggers fare? The expectation to be always 'on' means that giggers work long hours. Due to a lack of organisational affiliation, they receive no social or regulatory protections. With algorithms taking over the HR manager's role, giggers become peripheral to the platform, managed to virtual anonymity using a [low-commitment, 'arms-length' approach](#). There is little union representation and collective voice. Incidents of food delivery workers being injured in accidents abound, and yet, they receive no insurance benefits from the platform. This has raised academic and policy debates around the need to improve the job and life quality of giggers.

Isolation, Loneliness, Frustration

Humans are evolutionally hardwired to connect with others. John Bowlby (1907-1990), a psychoanalyst, argued in his famous *'Attachment Theory'* that the need for connection is primordial. It starts in infancy and continues in adulthood. Other work motivation theorists argue that our desire for 'relatedness', or forming meaningful bonds in the workplace, is a fundamental human need. But gig structures hardly allow for this need to be fulfilled; relationships are created and terminated rapidly, affording no time to generate loyalty and trust. The triadic nature of the work relationship means that employer-employee dyads are replaced by a dynamic exchange among multiple stakeholders constantly monitored by the platform.



These relationships thus take on a transactional nature as they are commodified and economic.

Online delivery of work eliminates the possibility of in-person meetings that are key to sharing grievances, demonstrating vulnerability, and building deep relationships. Research suggests that the lack of meaningful work relationships results in loneliness, frustration, emotional oscillation, and poor well-being.

Some giggers aim to transcend this by building and participating in online communities using social media platforms. However, the blur between friends and colleagues in online spaces leaves giggers suspicious of online relationships.

Research suggests that while these platforms may offer peer support to manage common work problems, relationships built solely online are superficial and may not meet giggers' need for meaningful professional connections.

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When Career Progress Remains a Dream

Hyper-flexibility raises unique challenges for giggers seeking progressive roles. Scholars still debate what constitutes a gig 'career': in an ideal world, embedded autonomy among giggers would facilitate crafting kaleidoscopic careers aligned with individual aspirations. However, self-employment and social security have an uneasy relationship. Gig work is precarious given the seasonal demand for services and uncertain income generation. This leaves limited opportunity to engage in progressive planning and career development.

In the absence of mentoring, temporal attachment, and switching costs across organisational boundaries, giggers rarely find sustainable, profitable work like what is offered to employees. Lack of professional development results in more frustration when giggers seek traditional employment. An intellectually stagnant workforce lagging behind in technological and business changes may constitute a social liability.

Why Many are Turning to 'Algoactivism'

In India, we are seeing policy changes enabling giggers to be active contributors to economic development. The Code for Social Security 2020 is a step in the right direction, although the policy needs clarity on the nature of protection offered to giggers. Giggers are demonstrating individual and collective resistance to algorithmic surveillance through a range of techniques termed 'algoactivism'. This may include logging off from the platform to ignore its instructions or conducting wildcat strikes to protest against unfavourable policies.



Platforms, now cognisant of giggers' need for professional relationships and career development, are offering options: UberWorks allows drivers to connect with local businesses for work, while Deliveroo riding academy offers mentoring and online courses. Although these efforts attempt to address giggers' occupational concerns, the key consideration, of precarity, remains unaddressed.

Policymakers must continue focusing on giggers' lived experiences to ensure that they address foundational challenges arising in this new, dynamic world of work.

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