



Reconceptualizing Challenges and Opportunities for Gig Workers in India: A Conceptual Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Platform Work

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Received: 02.03.2026; Revised: 28.5.2026; Accepted: 29.5.2026

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of the gig economy has posed challenges and opportunities in India's labour (gig) market across transportation, food, and logistics delivery, freelancing, and micro-tasking platforms. With the expansion of the gig economy, India is projected to become one of the leading markets for platform-mediated work worldwide, and concerns regarding precarious employment, algorithmic control, social security, and legal ambiguity persist. Previous scholarly work largely focuses on specific issues such as income instability, lack of social protection, and occupational concerns, but offers limited attention to an integrated conceptual framework for the opportunities and challenges faced by gig workers in India. This conceptual study synthesizes Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed literature published between 2015 and 2026 and reconceptualizes gig work using precarity theory, labour process theory, and the capability approach. The study proposed an Integrated Gig Work Sustainability Framework that explains gig work outcomes as a function of worker attributes, platform governance, institutional support, and market conditions. The study also positions gig work along a continuum from survival-driven precarity to opportunity-driven entrepreneurship, and offers research propositions with implications for future empirical research and promotes inclusive and sustainable gig work in India.

Keywords: Gig Economy • Gig Workers • Platform Work • Challenges & Opportunities • Sustainability

Introduction

Over the last decade, rapid technological advancement and the expansion of digital platforms have significantly transformed the structure of labour markets across the world. Traditional long-term employment arrangements are increasingly being replaced by flexible, on-demand, and platform-mediated forms of work (De Stefano 2016; Srnicek 2017; Koutsimpogiorgos et al 2020). This transformation has given rise to what is commonly known as the “gig economy,” which encompasses a wide range of temporary and task-based employment activities, including ride-hailing, food delivery, logistics, freelancing, household services, and digital micro-tasking

(Vallas & Schor 2020). In India, the expansion of the gig economy has been accelerated by the convergence of demographic, technological, and economic factors such as rising unemployment, a large youth population, rapid smartphone penetration, affordable internet connectivity, and the proliferation of digital labour platforms (NITI Aayog 2022; Fairwork India 2024).

The gig economy in India consists of several distinct segments. The most visible category is location-based platform work, which includes transportation, food delivery, and logistics services operated through platforms such as Ola, Uber, Swiggy, and Zomato (Nair 2022). Another important segment is skill-based freelancing, where workers engage in programming, graphic design, consulting, writing, and related



professional services through platforms such as Upwork and Freelancer.com (Kässi & Lehdonvirta 2018). Household and personal services, including beauty care, repair work, and domestic assistance, are increasingly mediated through digital platforms such as Urban Company. In addition, micro-tasking and data-oriented work, including content moderation, data annotation, and AI-support services, have emerged as growing segments of digital labour markets (Graham et al 2017).

India's labour market is predominantly informal, with a large proportion of workers lacking written contracts, social security, and employment-related benefits (ILO 2021). Within this context, gig work provides relatively easy entry into the labour market and creates flexible earning opportunities for workers with diverse educational and skill backgrounds. For many individuals, platform work serves as a primary source of livelihood, while for others it supplements household income (De Neve et al 2023). According to NITI Aayog (2022), the number of gig workers in India is expected to increase substantially in the coming years, making the sector an important source of employment generation.

Despite its potential benefits, the gig economy also raises concerns regarding income instability, lack of social security, occupational vulnerability, and algorithmic control. Existing research often examines these opportunities and challenges separately. Therefore, there is a growing need for an integrated conceptual understanding of platform-mediated work in India and its implications for inclusive and sustainable development.

Literature Review

Reconceptualizing Gig Work in India

Much of the scholarly work draws on gig work either as a flexible arrangement towards entrepreneurship or an exploitative form of

precarious labour (Wood et al 2019; Lehdonvirta, 2018). However, in India, gig work exists along a continuum drawn by worker motivation, capabilities, and institutional support. Standing 2011, insights *survival gig work* – individuals have few alternative employment options and prioritize immediate income. Spreitzer et al (2017) highlight transitional gig work – serving as a bridge for workers during career change, unemployment, or educational pursuit. Lehdonvirta (2018) proposed *strategic gig work*, which involves workers' participation to gain flexibility, supplement household income, or develop skills. Sen (1999) highlights *entrepreneurial gig work* – when individuals leverage platforms to build personal brands, acquire customers, and expand independent businesses.

Therefore, this continuum acknowledges heterogeneity among workers and suggests that the same platform can generate radically different outcomes depending on individual capabilities, platform governance, and institutional support.

The existing literature highlights substantial challenges faced by gig workers in India. The most persistent concern is income volatility, as earnings are influenced by factors such as fluctuating demand, changing incentive structures, platform commission policies, and dynamic pricing (Wood et al 2019; Ravenelle 2019; Fairwork India 2024). According to the ILO (2021), gig workers do not have access to guaranteed wages, paid leave, retirement benefits, or employer-sponsored health insurance. Choudhary & Shireshi (2020) noted that although the Code on Social Security, 2020 formally recognizes gig work, implementation on the ground level remains limited, and mechanisms for funding & delivery are still evolving. Moreover, delivery workers and drivers are prone to occupational risks, including



road accidents, adverse weather conditions, psychological stress, and long working hours

(Bajwa et al 2018; Apouey et al 2020).

Theoretical Foundations (Table 1)

Table 1: Theoretical Foundation for Challenges and Opportunities for Gig Workers and Challenges Faced by Gig Workers in India

SN	Sources	Theory	Proposition	Relevance to Gig Work in India
1.	Standing (2011); Nair (2022); Choudhary & Shireshi (2022)	Precarity Theory	Standing (2011) introduced the concept of “precariat” to describe a class of workers characterized by unstable employment, income volatility, and lack of labour protections. Thus, the theory highlights the insecurity embedded in platform-mediated work.	In India, precarity stems from the coexistence of platform work and informality, including fluctuations in demand, work-related expenses, and gaps in social protection (Nair 2022), as well as a lack of predictable earnings, legal recognition, and collective bargaining power (Choudhary & Shireshi 2022).
2.	Braverman (1974); Rosenblat & Stark (2016); Gandini (2019); Wood et al. (2019); Duggan et al. (2020)	Labour Process Theory	Labour Process Theory focuses on how management controls labour and extracts value from workers (Braverman 1974; Gandini 2019). Therefore, this theory analyses how power operates within platform-mediated employment.	The autonomy of gig work may conceal sophisticated forms of authority such as algorithms allocate tasks, determine prices, monitor performance, and can deactivate workers based on rates & ratings (Rosenblat & Stark 2016; Duggan et al 2020), often workers have little insight into how algorithms make decision, creating information asymmetries and limit their ability to contest adverse outcomes (Wood et a, 2019).
3.	Sen (1999); Heeks (2017)	Capability Approach	Amartya Sen (1999) evaluates well-being in terms of an individual’s substantive freedoms rather than solely in terms of income gains (Sen, 1991). Thus, theory offers a balanced approach to both the opportunities and limitations.	Gig work may enhance long-term opportunities, income, autonomy, skill development, and human agency (Heeks 2017).
4.	Srnicek (2017); Vallas & Schor (2020)	Platform Capitalism	Digital platforms function as data-driven intermediaries and accumulate power through network effects and technological dominance, such as through data monetization (Srnicek 2017).	In the gig economy, workers supply labour with operational risk, while platforms monetize data and access the market. The theory helps to explain why independent workers face asymmetric relationships (Vallas & Schor 2020).

In platform-mediated gig work, a significant challenge emerged as an algorithmic control, where digital platforms allocate tasks/projects, monitor performance, calculate compensation, and also enforce disciplinary actions according to ratings and deactivations (Duggan et al 2020; Rosenblat & Stark 2016). Gandian (2019) also highlighted that algorithmic control can constrain worker discretion and create

information asymmetries regarding incentives, pricing, and account suspensions. Therefore, workers often report a “algorithm autonomy” paradox, where flexibility coexists with intensive control & limited bargaining power (Möhlmann & Zalmanson 2017).

A question of legal ambiguity among gig workers persists as platforms shift occupational and social risks onto workers by classifying



them as independent contractors – thereby avoiding obligations related to minimum wages, PF contributions, and employer responsibilities (Aloisi 2016; De Stefano 2016). Lata et al. 2023 and Fairwork India (2024) also noted that platform workers face social inequality – gender, caste, migration, status, education, and digital & financial literacy. Accordingly, workers may face greater vulnerability and have reduced access to opportunities offered by platform work.

However, workers with stronger capabilities and support systems may use this future-of-work opportunity to pursue entrepreneurship, skill development, and upward mobility.

Opportunities for Gig Workers in India

The growth of the Indian gig economy has generated several potential opportunities for gig workers. Graham et al (2017) highlight that the gig economy enhances labour market participation of youth, migrants, and displaced workers to access earnings with minimal formal qualifications (NITI Aayog 2022) and enables them to monetize underutilized assets and skills. Gig work also offers flexibility, which helps the workers to choose schedules and supplement household income (Lehdenvirta 2018). According to NITI Aayog (2022), platform-based transactions enhance digital payment adoption, thereby promoting financial inclusion by integrating gig workers into formal banking services (such as access to credit and insurance products). Moreover, the gig economy can strengthen skill development and entrepreneurial capabilities among gig workers as it can provide exposure to digital literacy and customer service skills (Spreitzer et al 2017), however, platforms can serve as marketplaces that help workers to attract clients, build reputations, and establish independent businesses over time (Sen, 1999; Lehdenvirta 2018). As gig work offers remote

and flexible work arrangements, it may support a greater labour force participation among women, particularly in freelancing and home-based services (Graham et al 2017).

Despite a growing body of literature, existing scholarly research remains fragmented. Some studies focus on labor precarity and regulatory challenges (Nair, 2022; Stewart & Stanford, 2017), while others focus on flexibility, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion (Lehdenvirta 2018; NITI Aayog 2022). Few studies integrate these divergent perspectives into a unified conceptual model. Accordingly, this paper addressed three research objectives:

Objectives

RO1: To examine the principal challenges and opportunities associated with gig work in India.

RO2: To reconceptualize gig work as a continuum ranging from survival-driven precarity to opportunity-driven entrepreneurship.

RO3: To develop an Integrated Gig-work Sustainability Framework and research propositions that can guide future empirical research and policy interventions related to gig workers in India.

To achieve these objectives, this paper proposes an integrated gig work sustainability framework by integrating Precarity Theory (Standing 2011), Labour Process Theory (Gandini 2019), Capability Approach (Sen 1999), and Platform Capitalization (Srnicsek 2017), which conceptualizes gig worker outcomes as the result of interactions among worker attributes, platform architecture, institutional support, and market conditions. Thus, this study highlights the pathway for gig workers either towards inclusive development or into a persistent form of digital precarity.

Integrated Gig-work Sustainability Framework



The proposed gig work sustainability framework (Fig 1) explains how gig work outcomes in India are shaped by the interplay of multidisciplinary factors. The framework views gig work and its consequences as shaped by the interplay among worker attributes, platform architecture & governance, institutional support, and market conditions (Wood et al 2019; Vallas & Schor 2020). *Worker factors* are the primary component of the framework, including skills, education, digital literacy, motivation, financial resilience, and socio-demographic factors. Prior literature suggests that workers with strong backgrounds (e.g., capabilities and resources) can convert platform participation into stable earnings, skill development, and entrepreneurial opportunities (Sen 1999; Lehdonvirta 2018). However, workers in precarious conditions may engage in platform work primarily for subsistence, thereby increasing their vulnerability to such conditions (Standing 2011; Nair 2022). The second component of the framework is *platform architecture & management*, including algorithmic management, pricing systems, ratings, incentive structure, and term of engagement (Rosenblat & Stark 2016; Duggan et al 2020). Although these mechanisms can enhance efficiency, conversely, they may also intensify control and create information asymmetries that reduce worker autonomy (Gandini 2019; Zhao et al 2025). The third component is *institutional factors*, which encompasses legal recognitions, social security provisions, policy enforcement, and collective representation. As regulatory support plays a moderating role in determining whether platform work leads to decent employment or deepens insecurity (Stewart & Stanford 2017; Choudhary & Shireshi 2022). An important step in India is

recognition of gig workers under the Code of Social Security (2020), but implementation remains a major concern (NITI Aayog 2022). Finally, *market factors* are the last component of the framework, such as consumer demand, platform competition, economic cycles, and technological infrastructure. These external conditions affect task availability, pricing dynamics, and income potential (Schwellnus et al 2019; Rao et al 2025).

These four components shape the *gig work experience*, including task allocation, earnings, performance monitoring, onboarding, ratings, and customer feedback. The gig work experience determines whether workers perceive platform work as fair, flexible, and developmental or as unstable and exploitative (Möhlmann & Zalmanson 2017; Fairwork India 2024). The framework identifies *gig work outcomes* in four categories: economic outcomes (economic security), capability outcomes (career advancement), well-being outcomes (physical and mental health), and social outcomes (agency & inclusion) (Bajwa et al 2018; Heeks 2017). Ultimately, these outcomes lead to *sustainable and decent gig work*, encompasses economic security, expanded capabilities, fairness, and resilience (ILO 2021; Sen 1999).

Comprehensively, the framework integrates Precarity Theory, Labour Process Theory, Capability Approach, and Platform Capitalism to provide a holistic approach to gig work outcomes in India. It offers a theoretical model for future empirical testing and policy design to transform gig work from a precarious livelihood strategy into a way forward towards inclusive and sustainable development.

Methodology



This study adopts a conceptual research design grounded in a thematic literature review methodology to synthesize and evaluate existing knowledge on the challenges and opportunities associated with gig workers in India. The literature search was conducted using two major indexed databases, i.e., Scopus and Web of Science; thus, relevant studies were identified using combinations of keywords including “gig

economy”, “platform work”, “gig workers”, “India”, “algorithmic management”, “social security”, and “precarious employment”. Additionally, searches include related terms such as “digital labour platforms”, “on-demand work”, and “platform economy” to ensure comprehensive coverage of the study (De Stefano 2016; Koutsimpogiorgos et al 2020).

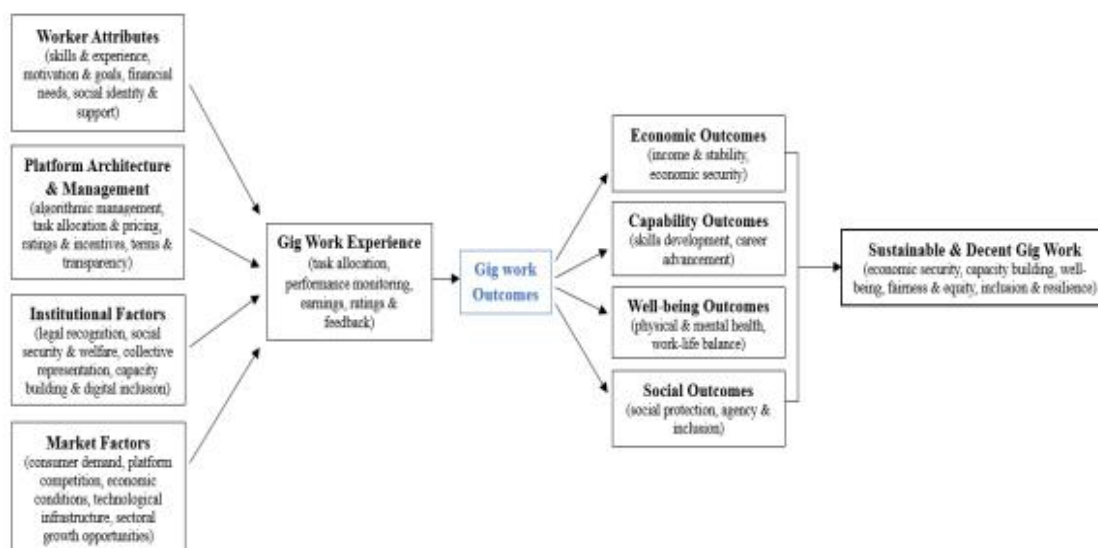


Fig 1: Integrated Gig-work Sustainability Framework

To ensure relevance and academic rigor, specific inclusion criteria have been applied. First, only high-quality peer-reviewed articles, indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, and seminal theoretical works and policy reports were considered (e.g., Sen 1999; Standing 2011; NITI Aayog 2022). Second, the review primarily focused on scholars published between 2015 and 2026, a period that witnessed rapid scholarly growth in gig work and digital labour platforms. Finally, conceptual, empirical, bibliometric, and policy-oriented studies were addressed to capture the multidimensional nature of gig economy (Raachandran & Kulandai 2025).

The selected literature was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach related to challenges and opportunities experienced by gig workers through the lenses of Precarity Theory, Labour Process Theory, Capability Approach, and Platform Capitalism (Gandini 2019; Srnicek 2017). Based on this synthesis, the study develops an integrated gig-work sustainability framework that provides a foundation for future empirical investigation and policy development in the field of gig workers.

Observations and Discussion

This conceptual study reconceptualizes the challenges and opportunities associated for gig workers in India by integrating existing literature into a unified conceptual framework.



The findings suggest that the gig work is best understood as a dynamic and heterogeneous work arrangement whose outcomes are influenced by the interaction of worker attributes, platform control, institutional support, and market factors rather than by platform work alone (Vallas & Schor 2020; Wood et al 2019). A central contribution of this paper is that it extends prior scholarship those limit around to framing gig work either as a form of labour exploitation or as a source of autonomy and flexibility (Standing 2011; Lehdonvirta 2018), moreover, this study also argues that in India, gig work should be viewed along a continuum (from survival-driven to opportunity-driven entrepreneurship). For workers with limited education, low digital & financial literacy, and financial needs, gig work often serves as a subsistence strategy due to economic volatility and weak bargaining power (Nair 2022). Conversely, workers with strong capabilities and resources may leverage the platform to build capital, develop skills, and pursue entrepreneurial opportunities (Sen 1999; Spreitzer et al 2017).

The discussion also reinforces the relevance of multiple theoretical perspectives; Precarity Theory explains the vulnerabilities embedded in gig work, as Standing (2011) indicates that income instability, lack of social security, and legal status uncertainty remain acute in India due to the predominance of informal work and limited welfare security among gig workers (Choudhary & Shireshi 2022; NITI Aayog 2022). However, the findings suggest that precarity is not inevitable, it depends on institutional safeguards and worker capabilities. Labour Process Theory further explains how control is exercised in digital labour markets. As gig work is characterized by flexibility and autonomy, platforms govern workers through algorithmic control that allocates tasks, determines compensation, and monitors

performance through ratings and deactivation mechanisms (Rosenblat & Stark 2016; Duggan et al 2020). This is called a condition of “controlled autonomy,” i.e., opaque managerial oversight (Gandini 2019). Thus, these findings challenge the assumption that equates flexibility with empowerment and underscore the need for greater algorithmic transparency. The Capability Approach emphasizes whether gig work expands workers’ substantive freedoms and long-term opportunities (Sen 1999). The finding suggests that gig participation can promote financial inclusion, skill development, and entry to labour market, particularly for youth, migrants, and women (NITI Aayog 2022; Graham et al 2017). However, gig participation may provide income without enhancing broader capabilities. The concept of Platform Capitalism emphasizes that platforms create values through data monetization and externalization of labour costs to workers (Srnicek 2017). As a result, this perspective highlights the structural power asymmetries in platform-mediated work and reinforces the need for regulatory & security intervention (Zwick 2018).

Beyond theoretical insights, the Integrated Gig-work Sustainability Framework proposes that sustainable gig work emerges when supportive institutions moderate the asymmetries inherent in platform governance and when gig workers possess strong and sufficient capabilities to benefit from available opportunities. By incorporating challenges and opportunities for gig workers and explicitly recognizing worker heterogeneity, the framework extends prior scholarly work and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding gig work outcomes in India (Rao et al 2025; Ramachandran & Kulandai 2025). Therefore, this conceptual proposition provides a foundation for designing policies that promote inclusive and sustainable platform-based work.



Research Propositions and Managerial Implications

The findings proposed research propositions that translate the unified theoretical framework into testable relationships for future empirical studies. Firstly, digital literacy strengthens the relationship between platform participation and earnings stability, as workers with strong technological capability optimize task selection, navigate applications, and manage multiple income opportunities (Sen 1999; Lehdonvirta 2018). Second proposition suggests that algorithmic transparency can reduce precarity and improve worker trust by minimizing uncertain pricing, ratings, and deactivation decisions (Rosenblat & Stark 2016; Duggan et al 2020). Third, social security access can strengthen the positive effects of gig work on well-being (Standing, 2011; ILO 2021). Proposition four argues that worker collectivization can enhance bargaining power and fairness by enabling agency voice and representation (Stewart & Stanford, 2017; Fairwork India 2024). Fifth, financial inclusion mediates the relationship between gig participation and long-term economic mobility by converting digital earnings histories into access to formal banking services (e.g., credit, insurance, and savings products) (NITI Aayog 2022). Sixth proposition suggests that gender and caste can moderate access to opportunities and exposure to risks (Lata et al 2023; Nair 2022).

The propositions generate important policy implications with respect to gig workers: the government should implement the Code on Social Security, 2020, on the ground level, portable benefits systems, and mandate standards for algorithmic transparency (Choudhary & Shireshi 2022). Platforms should provide accident and health insurance, a fair dispute redressal system, policies to improve earnings transparency, and promote collective

bargaining power and legal literacy. Financial institutions can design credit and insurance products for unstable earners (Graham et al 2017; NITI Aayog 2022; Fairwork India 2024). Therefore, these measures together can transform gig work into a more inclusive and sustainable form of employment.

Conclusion

The gig economy in India represents the “future of work” that simultaneously creates opportunities for labour market inclusion (particularly for youth, migrants, and women) in the form of diverse access to income, flexibility, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurial opportunities (NITI Aayog 2022; Graham et al 2017), while gig economy also exposes vulnerabilities for workers such as income volatility, limited social security, algorithmic control, and lack of legal recognition that reinforce conditions for digital precarity (Standing 2011; Duggan et al 2020). Moreover, whether gig work becomes a pathway to economic empowerment or a trap of insecurity depends on the interaction of worker capabilities, platform architecture, institutional support, and market dynamics (Sen 1999; Wood et al 2019)

Therefore, future research should empirically test the integrated gig-work sustainability framework across different sectors and examine how digital & financial literacy, gender, caste, and social insecurity influence gig worker outcomes in India (Lata et al 2023; Rao et al 2025). This study offers a holistic approach by proposing an integrated framework to improve the future of work and provides a foundation for evidence-based policy and managerial interventions in India.

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