



# PLATFORM LABOUR AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE GIG ECONOMY IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the gig economy in India through a sociological lens, analysing how platform-mediated labour reproduces and intensifies existing social hierarchies while creating new forms of precarity. Drawing on recent empirical research, this study explores four key dimensions: algorithmic management as a mechanism of labour control; the intersection of caste, class, and gender in platform work; the precarious working conditions faced by gig workers; and the inadequate policy and legal frameworks governing this sector. The analysis reveals that India's gig economy, rather than democratizing work opportunities, embeds workers within digitally organised informality that leverages pre-existing social stratifications. Algorithmic control mechanisms operate through and reinforce caste and class hierarchies, while gender exclusions limit women's participation and expose them to specific vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these dynamics, intensifying labour commodification and control. This paper argues that understanding platform labour in the Global South requires attention to the ways in which digital technologies intersect with historical patterns of social inequality, migration, and informal labour markets. The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive regulatory frameworks that recognise gig workers' rights and address the structural inequalities embedded in platform capitalism.

**Index Terms** - Gig Economy; Platform Labour; Algorithmic Management; Caste and Class Inequality; Gender and Migration; Precarious Work.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of the gig economy in India represents a significant transformation in labour relations, employment structures, and the organisation of work in the Global South. Platform-based work, encompassing ride-hailing, food delivery, beauty services, and other location-based services, has grown exponentially over the past decade, particularly accelerating during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This growth has been accompanied by claims that digital platforms democratize work opportunities, provide flexibility, and enable entrepreneurship for marginalised populations. However, emerging sociological research challenges these narratives, revealing how platform labour in India reproduces and intensifies existing social hierarchies while creating new forms of precarity and control (Gerber, 2022; Hammer et al., 2022; Nair, 2023). Specifically, scholars have demonstrated how platform labour in India reproduces and intensifies existing social hierarchies, such as those based on caste and gender, while simultaneously generating new forms of precarity, dependency, and algorithmic control (Nair, 2022; Ray & Sam, 2023). India's gig economy operates within a distinctive context characterised by massive informal labour markets, internal migration flows, persistent caste and class stratifications, and gender inequalities (Hammer et al., 2022). Unlike the Global North, where platform work often represents a departure from formal employment, in India, it emerges from and remains embedded within informality (Chintala, 2024; Ray, 2024). This embeddedness shapes how algorithmic

management operates, how workers experience precarity, and how social identities mediate access to and experiences within platform labour markets (Gerber, 2022; Ray & Sam, 2023).

This paper examines the gig economy in India through a sociological framework that foregrounds questions of power, inequality, and social structure. It analyses how digital platforms function not merely as technological intermediaries but as sites where social hierarchies are reproduced, contested, and reconfigured. The analysis is organised around four key themes: algorithmic management and labour control, social stratification in gig work, precarity and working conditions, and policy and legal gaps. Through this examination, the paper contributes to understanding how platform capitalism operates in contexts marked by historical patterns of inequality and informality.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The sociological analysis of platform labour in India requires theoretical frameworks that can account for the intersection of digital technologies, labour relations, and social hierarchies. This study draws on three interconnected theoretical traditions: political economy approaches to labour control, theories of social stratification and intersectionality, and scholarship on informality and precarity in the Global South. Political economy perspectives emphasise how capital-labour relations structure platform work, examining how platforms extract value while minimising obligations to workers (Nair, 2023). Algorithmic management represents a novel form of labour control that operates through data-driven surveillance, performance metrics, and automated decision-making. However, in the Indian context, this technological control intersects with and leverages existing social hierarchies, particularly caste and class distinctions between workers and consumers (Nair, 2023). The concept of "digitally organised informality" captures how platforms formalise certain aspects of work coordination while maintaining workers in informal employment relationships (Ray, 2024). Theories of social stratification and intersectionality illuminate how multiple axes of inequality, caste, class, gender, and migration status, shape workers' experiences and opportunities within platform labour markets. Caste operates as a persistent form of social hierarchy in India, structuring access to resources, social networks, and dignity in work (Chintala, 2024; Nair, 2023; Thorat et al., 2010). Class positions, often intertwined with caste, determine workers' vulnerability to exploitation and their capacity for resistance (Nair, 2023). Gender intersects with these categories to produce specific patterns of exclusion and vulnerability for women in platform work (Bansal & Arora, 2023; Dewan, 2024). The concept of precarity, developed to analyse insecure and contingent labour in contemporary capitalism, takes on particular meanings in the Global South context. For many Indian workers, platform labour represents not a departure from secure employment but a continuation of long-standing informality, now mediated by digital technologies (Chintala, 2024; Ray, 2024). Migration patterns, both rural-to-urban and inter-urban, shape the composition of platform labour forces and workers' strategies for coping with precarity (Katta et al., 2024; Tandon & Rathi, 2024).

## 3. SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PLATFORM LABOUR

### 3.1 Algorithmic Management and Labour Control

Algorithmic management is a central mechanism by which platforms exercise control over workers while maintaining the fiction that workers are independent contractors (Kellogg et al., 2020; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). In India's gig economy, algorithmic control operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms: task allocation, performance monitoring, pricing determination, and behavioural nudging (Parth & Bathini, 2021). These systems create what scholars have termed "management by algorithm," where automated systems make decisions about work allocation, earnings, and worker status with limited transparency or accountability (Griesbach et al., 2019; Kellogg et al., 2020; Nair, 2023). Research on food delivery and ride-hailing platforms in India reveals how algorithmic systems intensify labour control beyond traditional employment relationships. Workers face constant surveillance through GPS tracking, customer ratings, and performance metrics that determine their access to orders and earning potential (Duggan et al., 2023). The opacity of these algorithms creates uncertainty and anxiety, as workers cannot fully understand or predict how their actions will affect their standing with the platform (Nair, 2023; Parwez, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms intensified algorithmic control ostensibly for consumer safety, implementing stricter monitoring and behavioural requirements that further constrained worker autonomy (Nair, 2023). Critically, algorithmic control in India does not operate in a social vacuum but draws legitimacy from and reinforces existing social hierarchies. The power of algorithms to discipline workers derives partly from caste and class distinctions between workers and consumers (Nair, 2023). Workers, predominantly from lower-caste and lower-class backgrounds, face algorithmic penalties based on consumer complaints that may reflect caste

prejudices or class-based expectations of deference (Chintala, 2024; Nair, 2023). The algorithm thus becomes a mechanism for encoding and enforcing social hierarchies, translating social discrimination into seemingly objective performance metrics (Nair, 2023). The discourse of flexibility and autonomy promoted by platforms disguises these control mechanisms. While workers technically choose when to work, algorithmic incentive structures, surge pricing, and gamification techniques effectively compel them to work long hours under platform-determined conditions (Wood et al., 2019).

### 3.2 Social Stratification: Caste, Class, and Gender in Gig Work

The gig economy in India is fundamentally structured by intersecting systems of social stratification, particularly caste, class, and gender. These hierarchies shape who enters platform work, under what conditions, and with what experiences and outcomes (Nair, 2022, 2023). Rather than creating a level playing field, digital platforms reproduce and sometimes intensify existing inequalities while creating new forms of stratification (Nair, 2022, 2023). Caste operates as a persistent organising principle in platform labour markets. The majority of gig workers in ride-hailing, food delivery, and other location-based services come from lower-caste and Other Backwards Class backgrounds (Chintala, 2024; Nair, 2022, 2023). This demographic composition reflects broader patterns of occupational segregation in India, where lower-caste individuals are disproportionately concentrated in precarious, low-status work (Deshpande, 2011; Thorat et al., 2010). Platform work, despite its digital mediation, remains marked by caste in multiple ways: through workers' social backgrounds, through caste-based discrimination by consumers, and through the reproduction of hierarchical relations between workers and consumers (Nair, 2023). Class intersects with caste to structure platform labour (Nair, 2022; Ray, 2024). Many gig workers are internal migrants from rural areas or smaller cities, seeking economic opportunities in metropolitan centres (Katta et al., 2024; Ray, 2024; Tandon & Rathi, 2024). These workers often lack the social capital, urban networks, and resources that might provide alternatives to platform work or bargaining power within it (Ray, 2024). Migration status compounds vulnerability, as workers far from home communities face housing insecurity, social isolation, and limited access to support systems (Ray, 2024).

Gender constitutes another critical axis of stratification in the gig economy. Women remain significantly underrepresented in most platform labour sectors in India, particularly in ride-hailing and food delivery (Bansal & Arora, 2023; ILO, 2023). This exclusion reflects multiple factors: safety concerns in public spaces, mobility restrictions, domestic care responsibilities, and gendered norms about appropriate work for women (ILO, 2023). Feminist analyses reveal how platform labour markets are structured by masculine norms and assumptions, with the rhetoric of flexibility masking the reality that platforms are designed around male workers' presumed availability and mobility (Acker, 1990; Bansal & Arora, 2023). Where women do participate in platform work, they face specific vulnerabilities and forms of discrimination. Research on beauty work and digital platforms shows how gender intersects with class and caste to shape women workers' experiences (Anwar et al., 2021; Bansal & Arora, 2023). Women gig workers report harassment, safety risks, and gender-based violence, issues that platforms have largely failed to address systematically (Galán, 2024). The feminisation of certain platform labour sectors, such as beauty services, does not necessarily translate into empowerment but may reproduce gendered hierarchies in new digital forms (Anwar et al., 2021; Ghosh et al., 2022).

### 3.3 Precarity and Working Conditions

Precarity defines the lived reality of gig workers in India, encompassing income insecurity, lack of social protections, health and safety risks, and the absence of employment rights. While precarity characterises much informal sector work in India, platform-mediated labour introduces specific forms of insecurity tied to algorithmic management, rating systems, and the contingent nature of task-based work (Chintala, 2024; Ray, 2024). Income precarity represents a fundamental dimension of gig work. Workers face fluctuating earnings dependent on demand patterns, algorithmic task allocation, and platform pricing decisions over which they have no control. The piece-rate nature of platform work means workers must constantly hustle for orders, with no guaranteed minimum income or compensation for waiting time (Chintala, 2024; Nair, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many gig workers experienced dramatic income reductions as demand for non-essential services collapsed, while those in essential services faced increased health risks without corresponding increases in income (Nair, 2023; Ray & Sam, 2023). The absence of social protections intensifies precarity (International Labour Organization, ILO, 2023). Classified as independent contractors rather than employees, gig workers lack access to minimum wages, paid leave, health insurance, retirement

benefits, and other protections associated with formal employment (Fairwork, 2024; International Labour Organization, ILO, 2023). This classification shifts risks and costs onto workers, who must absorb expenses for vehicles, fuel, smartphones, and other work necessities while bearing full responsibility for accidents, illness, or income loss (Chintala, 2024; Fairwork, 2024; Ray, 2024). Health and safety risks constitute another dimension of precarity. Gig workers face occupational hazards, including traffic accidents, physical strain from long hours, and exposure to weather extremes and pollution. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed these vulnerabilities, as platform workers continued working in high-risk conditions with inadequate protective equipment or health support (Nair, 2023; Ray & Sam, 2023). The pandemic amplified processes of labour commodification, as platforms prioritised service continuity and consumer safety over worker well-being (Nair, 2023). Workers develop various strategies to cope with precarity, including reliance on off-platform social networks, collective organising, and diversification across multiple platforms (Ray, 2024; Ray & Sam, 2023). Migrant workers particularly depend on socio-spatial networks of co-ethnic or co-regional communities for housing, information, and mutual support (Ray, 2024; Tandon & Rathi, 2024). However, these coping strategies, while essential for survival, do not address the structural sources of precarity embedded in platform business models and regulatory gaps.

### 3.4 Policy and Legal Gaps for Gig Workers

India's regulatory framework for gig and platform work remains incomplete and fragmented, with significant gaps in social protection, labour rights, and mechanisms to address the power asymmetry between platforms and workers (International Labour Organisation). This regulatory gap reflects both the relatively recent emergence of platform-mediated work and longstanding difficulties in extending comprehensive labour and social-protection rights to India's large informal workforce (International Labour Organization, 2023b, 2024). The fundamental legal ambiguity concerns worker classification. Platform companies generally structure gig work as a contractual relationship outside the traditional employer, such as an employee relationship, creating uncertainty over the applicability of conventional labour protections (Code on Social Security, 2020, 2020; Sangani, 2020). This classification has historically excluded workers from many employment-based protections, including statutory minimum wage and collective-bargaining frameworks, while social security protection remained dependent on the schemes contemplated under the Code on Social Security, 2020 (Sangani, 2020). While Rajasthan enacted the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023, and Karnataka circulated a Draft Platform-Based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Bill in 2024, India still lacked a comprehensive and fully operational national framework governing the employment relationship and labour rights of platform workers.

Social security represents a critical policy gap. The vast majority of gig workers lack health insurance, accident coverage, or retirement benefits (Govt. of India, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2023b). While the Indian government has introduced some schemes aimed at informal sector workers, coverage remains limited, and implementation is weak (Pillai et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these gaps, as many gig workers had no safety net when income collapsed or when they fell ill (Nair, 2023; Ray & Sam, 2023). The absence of collective bargaining rights and mechanisms for worker voice constitutes another significant gap (Parthasarathy et al., 2023). Platforms retain substantial unilateral control over pay rates, working conditions, and algorithmic management, while workers generally lack institutionalised mechanisms to participate in or negotiate these decisions collectively (Chintala, 2024; Parthasarathy et al., 2023). While gig-worker collectives and unions have emerged and organised strikes and protests, platform workers lack a clear statutory framework that obliges platforms to recognise these organisations and engage in collective bargaining (Chintala, 2023; Parthasarathy et al., 2023; The Industrial Relations Code, 2020, 2020). Research on worker resistance reveals both the potential for collective action and the significant barriers workers face in organising across fragmented, algorithmically mediated workforces (Chintala, 2023). Addressing these policy gaps requires comprehensive regulatory reform that recognises the distinctive nature of platform work while ensuring fundamental labour rights and protections. This includes clarifying worker status, extending social security coverage, regulating algorithmic management practices, and enabling collective representation (ILO, 2021). However, policy development must also attend to the specific context of the Global South, where platform work intersects with existing informality, migration patterns, and social hierarchies (Chintala, 2024; ILO, 2021; Tandon & Rathi, 2024).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The sociological analysis of India's gig economy reveals how platform capitalism operates in contexts marked by historical patterns of inequality, informality, and social hierarchy. Several key insights emerge from this examination that have broader implications for understanding digital labour in the Global South. First, the gig economy in India does not represent a radical departure from existing labour relations but rather a digital reconfiguration of long-standing patterns of informal, precarious work. The concept of "digitally organised informality" captures this continuity-within-change, highlighting how platforms formalise certain coordination functions while maintaining workers in informal employment relationships (Chintala, 2024; Ray, 2024). This challenges narratives of platform work as inherently innovative or transformative, revealing instead how digital technologies can reproduce and intensify existing inequalities (Nair, 2022; A. Ray, 2024). Second, algorithmic management in India operates through and reinforces social hierarchies, particularly caste and class distinctions (Nair, 2023). The power of algorithms to control workers derives not only from technological capabilities but from their embeddedness in social relations marked by inequality (Nair, 2023; Rilinger, 2024). This finding suggests that understanding algorithmic management requires attention to the social contexts in which it operates, rather than treating it as a purely technical phenomenon (Nair, 2023; Rilinger, 2024). The legitimacy and effectiveness of algorithmic control depend on pre-existing power relations that algorithms encode and enforce (Nair, 2023; Rilinger, 2024). Third, the intersection of multiple forms of stratification - caste, class, gender, and migration status - produces distinctive patterns of vulnerability and exclusion in platform labour markets. Women's underrepresentation in gig work reflects not individual choices but structural barriers rooted in gendered norms, safety concerns, and care responsibilities (Bansal & Arora, 2023; Nair, 2022). The concentration of migrant workers in platform labour and their specific vulnerabilities highlight how spatial inequalities and mobility patterns shape the gig economy (Katta et al., 2024; A. Ray, 2024; Tandon & Rath, 2024). An intersectional analysis reveals how platform work is structured by multiple, overlapping systems of inequality that cannot be understood in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989; Nair, 2022; Parthasarathy et al., 2023). Fourth, the COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a critical juncture that amplified existing dynamics in the gig economy while revealing its fundamental contradictions (De Neve et al., 2023; Nair, 2023). The crisis intensified labour control, deepened precarity, and exposed the inadequacy of existing social protections (De Neve et al., 2023; Nair, 2023; R. Ray & Sam, 2023). However, it also catalysed worker organising and public attention to gig workers' conditions, creating potential openings for regulatory reform and collective action (Hussain, 2023; Medappa, 2023; Nair, 2023). Finally, the policy and legal gaps surrounding gig work in India reflect broader challenges of labour regulation in contexts of informality and rapid technological change. Addressing these gaps requires not simply extending existing labour law frameworks but developing new regulatory approaches appropriate to platform-mediated work (International Labour Organization, ILO, 2023; Parthasarathy et al., 2023). This includes attention to algorithmic transparency and accountability, portable social protections, and mechanisms for worker voice and collective representation (International Labour Organization, ILO, 2023; Parthasarathy et al., 2023).

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the gig economy in India through a sociological lens, analysing how platform labour intersects with social hierarchies, produces precarity, and operates within inadequate regulatory frameworks (Nair, 2022, 2023; A. Ray, 2024). The analysis reveals that India's gig economy, far from democratizing work opportunities, embeds workers within digitally organised informality that leverages and intensifies existing inequalities of caste, class, and gender (A. Ray, 2024). Algorithmic management operates as a mechanism of labour control that is socially embedded and, in the Indian context, can draw on and reinforce caste and class hierarchies among workers, consumers, and platforms (Chintala, 2024; Nair, 2023). The precarious conditions faced by gig workers, such as income insecurity, lack of social protections, and health and safety risks, reflect both the platform business model and the broader context of informality in India's labour markets (A. Ray, 2024). Women's unequal participation in platform work and the concentration of migrant workers in particular platform occupations further demonstrate how gender, migration, class, and spatial inequalities shape access to and experiences of gig work (Nair, 2022; A. Ray, 2024). The policy and legal gaps surrounding platform labour pose a critical challenge that requires comprehensive regulatory reform.

The ILO's work in India identifies employment status, adequate pay, working-time regulation, occupational safety and health, employment protection, algorithmic transparency, and social protection as interconnected regulatory concerns. Such reform must recognise gig workers' claims to fair remuneration, social protection,

safe working conditions, and effective worker voice while accounting for the distinctive conditions of India's largely informal labour market. Understanding platform labour in India and the broader Global South requires moving beyond technological determinism to examine how digital platforms are embedded in and shaped by social relations of power and inequality (Nair, 2023; Ray, 2024). The gig economy does not exist in a social vacuum but operates through and reproduces existing hierarchies while creating new forms of precarity and control (Nair, 2023; Ray, 2024). Addressing the challenges faced by gig workers requires not only regulatory reform but broader social transformation that confronts the structural inequalities of caste, class, gender, and geography that platform capitalism exploits and intensifies. Future research should continue to examine how platform labour evolves in the Global South, attending to workers' resistance strategies, the development of regulatory frameworks, and the ongoing intersections of digital technologies with social hierarchies (Chintala, 2023; A. Ray, 2024). Such sustained sociological analysis is necessary to develop forms of digital work that expand workers' substantive opportunities and protections rather than reproduce historically entrenched patterns of exploitation and inequality.

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