

# The Realities Behind the Rides: Exploring Gig Workers' Lived Experience in Mumbai

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*This research delves into the lived experiences of gig workers in Mumbai, specifically focusing on delivery partners for platforms like Swiggy and Zomato. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were gathered from 182 participants between August 2023 and April 2024. The study highlights the economic, social, and familial factors influencing the choice of gig work and investigates the working conditions faced by these workers. Key findings reveal issues related to sleep quality, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. The study advocates for legal reforms to improve the benefits and protections for gig workers and emphasizes the need for policies that enhance their working conditions and access to mental health resources.*

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## Introduction

India has emerged as the largest global supplier of online labor estimated by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021). The report by NITI Aayog and IBEF highlights the substantial growth potential of the gig economy in India. Currently estimated at 7.7 million workers, this sector is projected to expand significantly, reaching 23.5 million workers by the fiscal year 2029-30. This rapid growth underscores the increasing reliance on gig work as a significant source of employment in India's evolving economic landscape.

The "gig economy" generally refers to "short-term roles occupied by independent contractors" and is frequently marked by a minimal commitment to single employers, informal contract arrangements, and quick turnover between positions (Uzailko, 2016). Flanagan (2017) has described it as "platform-based employment that utilizes digital technology to manage the commissioning, supervision, delivery, and compensation of work

performed on a contingent, piece-work basis". The World Economic Forum (WEF) expands this definition to include all forms of contingent work with limited duration (WEF, 2020). Both the World Bank (2023) and the ILO (2021) concur with this view. In India, a gig worker is defined as someone working "outside the traditional employer-employee relationship," while a platform worker provides services via an online platform. Digital intermediaries or marketplaces connecting service providers and users are classified as "aggregators" under the Information Technology Act (Barik, 2020).

**Gig workers are vulnerable to termination without legal recourse.**

Gig work faces criticism for creating potentially exploitative conditions due to unfair and unsustainable labor practices (Kessler, 2018). Issues such as "sham" contracts arise frequently, allowing platforms to obscure employment status and deny workers basic rights like insurance (Field & Forsey, 2017). Policymakers express concern over the gig economy's effects on individuals and communities, highlighting the necessity of protecting fundamental labor rights (Friedman, 2014; Smith, 2016; Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Gig economy intermediaries often avoid legal responsibilities because they are not registered as employers, and therefore are not required to provide benefits such as health and insurance compensation (De Stefano, 2015). Consequently, gig workers are vulnerable to termination without legal recourse.

## **Delivery Service & Worker Challenges in India**

India's severe unemployment problem has led many young men to rely on delivery jobs in the gig economy. These jobs, offered by startups like Swiggy and Zomato, are appealing due to minimal qualification requirements, such as a driver's license. However, delivery workers face significant challenges, particularly in major cities like Delhi and Mumbai. They endure immense pressure to deliver on time amidst heavy traffic and frequent customer inquiries, often working over 12 hours a day with little time for proper meals.

Classified as 'independent contractors,' these workers do not receive traditional employee benefits and face issues like low pay, unpredictable hours, excessive workloads, and poor mental health. This classification exempts them from labor law protections. Legally, however, delivery workers could potentially be considered 'employees' based on the level of control exerted over them and their integration into the employer's business, as outlined by the Supreme Court (*Workmen of Nilgiri v. Tamil Nadu*)<sup>1</sup>. In the food delivery industry, companies exert significant control by assigning areas and orders, setting fixed delivery rates, and imposing penalties for customer complaints. The supposed flexibility of gig work is limited, especially during peak times, and performance is closely monitored through rating systems.

<sup>1</sup> <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1506370/>

## **Research Gap**

The expanding gig economy in India's delivery service sector poses unexplored challenges and opportunities. It is increasingly constituting a significant portion of both primary employment and secondary, part-time jobs, yet it has garnered relatively limited focus from labor economists. While current research highlights gig workers' issues like low pay and job insecurity, there's a gap in understanding their motivations, sleep behavior, and job satisfaction. Furthermore, there's limited exploration of these factors in the context of Indian cities, which present unique challenges such as traffic congestion and diverse socio-economic conditions., thus shaping a unique work environment for delivery personnel. The present study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the primary motivations that lead individuals to choose delivery work over other forms of employment?
2. How satisfied are delivery workers with their jobs overall, and what factors contribute to their job satisfaction or dissatisfaction?
3. How does the nature of delivery work impact the overall sleep behavior of workers?

By addressing these research questions, the study aims to fill the gaps in understanding the lived experiences of delivery workers in the gig economy. The findings can inform better employment practices, health interventions, and

policy-making to support the growing workforce in India's gig economy.

## **Research Methodology**

This research explores the unique experiences and current perspectives of gig economy workers, with a focus on delivery partners, using a mixed-method approach. Conducted in the Metropolitan City of Mumbai, the study selected this location purposively due to its significant influx of individuals seeking employment opportunities. Utilizing the Convenient Sampling Technique, data was gathered from 182 delivery partners willing to participate, with efforts made to ensure diversity for enhanced generalizability and reliability of findings.

## **Data Collection Tools**

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered face-to-face. The questionnaire comprised two sections: one gathering demographic and personal data, and the other focusing on relevant variables. An interview guide was also utilized to explore delivery partners' lived experiences. Data collection points included Govandi village, Borla, Ghatla, Vashi Naka, Chembur Naka, New Gautam Nagar, Samrat Ashok Nagar, and Baiganwadi.

Sleep behavior was assessed through sleep quality, measured using the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI). The PSQI evaluates overall sleep quality based on parameters like sleep latency, duration, efficiency, disturbances, medication use, and daytime dysfunction. A

global PSQI score exceeding 5 indicates poor sleep quality, with higher scores indicating worse sleep quality. In-depth discussions were held with 23 partners during wait times for orders, providing valuable insights into their experiences. Data collection spanned from August 2023 to April 2024.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software, while qualitative data underwent manual coding due to the nuanced complexity of responses. This process involved identifying codes and themes to extract meaningful insights. An integration of findings from both methods was conducted for a comprehensive analysis.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. Participants received clear explanations of the study's purpose, process, and potential implications. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the assignment of serial codes, protecting their personal information. Participants were assured of their identity protection.

### Socio-economic Characteristics

An in-depth analysis of the demographic and socio-economic attributes of gig economy workers, based on data from 182 partners provides the following results: The age distribution is as: 29.1% are aged 18-24, 23.6% are 25-32, 31.9% are 33-39, and 14.8% are 40 or older. Regarding edu-

cational attainment, 28.6% have completed up to the 10th standard, 47.8% up to the 12th standard, while 23.6% have graduated. Among the 182 partners, only 7 (3.9%) are females. In terms of marital status, 33.5% are unmarried, 62.6% are married, and 3.9% are divorced, separated, or widowed. Out of the 72 partners who migrated, 98.9% did so for job-related reasons, with only 1.1% migrating for educational purposes. Most partners are involved in parcel delivery (73.1%), while a smaller proportion (26.9%) is engaged in courier delivery. The average monthly earning is INR 20768/ with a standard deviation (SD) of INR 2911. Nearly 58 percent of the participants work for all seven days a week.

### Push Factors

*Motivation Driven by Family:* Many respondents emphasized that their primary motivation for undertaking delivery work is driven by their family. Statements like "Family is my why, and delivering is my how" encapsulate this sentiment, illustrating that the responsibility towards their family's well-being is the driving force behind their employment choices. Another respondent shared, "Just seeing my children's smiles is all the motivation I need," reflecting a deep emotional connection and a profound sense of obligation and love that motivates them to work hard.

**Family is my why, and delivering is my how.**

*Support for Education:* Supporting younger siblings' education emerged as

a significant motivation. One respondent stressed, "I have a younger brother in school," emphasizing the importance of financial assistance and encouragement for their sibling's future prospects.

*Social and family obligations:* Cultural and familial obligations also play a crucial role. One respondent mentioned, "I have to arrange my younger sister's wedding," highlighting the responsibility of funding significant family events. This statement underscores the cultural expectations that compel individuals to prioritize their family's needs over personal aspirations.

*Economic Challenges:* Many participants cited economic hardships, such as the shortage of traditional employment options. One respondent stressed the imperative to earn despite the dearth of job opportunities, while another emphasized the necessity of juggling multiple jobs to attain a satisfactory income, underscoring the challenges of low wages and restricted employment avenues. The obligation to support family members financially, particularly through remittances, emerged as a common theme, with several respondents highlighting its crucial role in maintaining their family's financial stability.

*Pragmatic Acceptance:* Despite the challenges associated with delivery work, some respondents find the income generated to be satisfactory. This pragmatic acceptance reflects their acknowledgment of the realities of their situation and the necessity of adapting to their circumstances.

*Balancing Work and Study:* Several respondents discussed their efforts to balance academic pursuits with financial responsibilities. They acknowledged the practicality of working while studying, recognizing the need to earn money alongside their education to cover personal expenses and contribute to educational needs. This dual role of earnings, supporting academic pursuits and family financial needs, reflects a commitment to investing in their future and enhancing career prospects while maintaining a sense of solidarity and support within the family unit.

*Limited Job Opportunities:* Many respondents highlighted the lack of promising job opportunities in their hometowns, which compelled them to seek employment elsewhere. This necessity drove them towards delivery work as their primary source of income.

*Impact of Parental Limitations:* Some participants felt restricted by their parent's inability to provide education, which limited their employment options and pushed them toward the gig economy.

*Preference for Higher Income:* Despite the availability of alternative work such as agricultural labor, respondents often prioritized delivery work due to its higher income potential. This preference reflects their economic calculus to improve their standard of living.

*COVID-19 Impact:* The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated employment challenges, pushing many individuals to resort to delivery work for financial survival as other job opportunities dwindled.

*Acknowledgment of Own Limitations:* Many respondents recognized their lack of formal education and vocational skills, which motivated them to engage in delivery work as a means of earning a livelihood. Some viewed delivery work as a part-time option, showing a pragmatic approach to employment and a willingness to explore future possibilities.

### **Pull Factors**

*Flexibility and Freedom:* Many respondents highlighted the significant benefit of flexibility in gig work. Unlike traditional employment, gig work allows individuals to create their own schedules, which is particularly beneficial for those with personal commitments or varying daily routines. The ability to take time off or adjust working hours without needing approval from a supervisor provides a level of autonomy that is highly valued by gig workers. To quote one respondent, “Being a delivery worker allows me to choose my own hours, which is something I couldn’t get with a traditional 9-to-5 job. I value the freedom to set my own schedule. If I need to take a day off for personal reasons or just want to work fewer hours one week, I can do that without needing to ask for permission.”

**Many respondents highlighted the significant benefit of flexibility in gig work.**

*Supplemental Income:* Many respondents emphasized how gig work serves as an additional income source. By working part-time as a delivery

worker, individuals can earn extra money without the need to commit to a second full-time job. This flexibility allows workers to increase their earnings during their free time, such as weekends, thus enhancing their overall financial stability. One respondent noted, “I use my delivery job to supplement my primary income. It gives me the extra cash I need without committing to another full-time job. For example, during weekends, I dedicate more time to deliveries, which significantly boosts my overall earnings for the month.”

*Aspirations for Children:* Aspirations to educate their children were frequently mentioned, reflecting a long-term perspective on improving their family’s socioeconomic status and breaking the cycle of poverty.

*Prioritizing Control Over Schedules:* Younger respondents highlighted the importance of having control over their schedules. Gig work allows them to tailor work hours to fit around other commitments, such as education or family responsibilities. As one respondent explained, “Younger delivery workers, like myself, prefer gig work because it allows us to control our schedules. We don’t want to be tied down by rigid work hours. With gig work, I can adjust my schedule according to my personal preferences and commitments, whether it’s attending classes or spending time with family.”

*Higher Earning Potential with Specialized Skills:* Many respondents noted that specialized skills, such as city knowledge and navigation, can lead to higher

earnings in the gig economy. Workers can capitalize on their expertise to complete more deliveries efficiently, especially during high-demand periods, thus boosting their income beyond what they might earn in a conventional job. One respondent shared, "With my knowledge of the city and quick navigation skills, I can earn more in the gig economy as a delivery worker than I could in a traditional job. It's a major reason why I chose this kind of work."

*Balancing Work and Life:* Respondents highlighted the value of work-life balance that gig work can offer. The flexibility to adjust working hours around personal and family commitments, such as attending important events or appointments, enables individuals to maintain a healthier balance between their professional and personal lives. One respondent emphasized, "As a delivery worker, I appreciate the balance it provides between work and personal life. Unlike conventional jobs that demand fixed hours, gig work allows me to prioritize my family commitments while still earning a decent income. This flexibility is invaluable, especially when I need to attend my child's school events or doctor appointments."

*Exploring Entrepreneurial Opportunities:* Several respondents discussed how gig work can foster entrepreneurial activities. Delivery workers can expand their services beyond traditional tasks, such as offering personalized delivery or errand services, tapping into new markets and increasing their income streams. The gig economy encourages innovation

and allows workers to develop and market their unique services. One respondent remarked, "Delivery work not only provides me with a steady income but also allows me to explore entrepreneurial opportunities. For instance, I've started offering additional services like delivering groceries or running errands for elderly customers. This entrepreneurial spirit is nurtured in the gig economy, where there's room for innovation and creativity."

*Geographical Mobility:* Some respondents highlighted the advantage of geographical mobility in delivery work. Workers can strategically choose locations with higher demand to optimize their earnings, adapting to shifts in demand across different parts of the city. One respondent explained, "One of the advantages of being a delivery worker is the geographical mobility it offers. I can choose to work in different areas of the city depending on where the demand is highest. This flexibility allows me to maximize my earnings by targeting busy neighbourhoods or commercial areas."

*Independence and Autonomy:* Respondents emphasized the freedom and autonomy that gig work provides. Without being tied to a single workplace or supervisor, delivery workers can manage their tasks and schedules independently, leading to a greater sense of empowerment and job satisfaction. As one respondent put it, "Working as a delivery worker gives me a sense of independence and autonomy that I didn't have in my previous jobs. I'm not tied to a specific workplace or boss, and I have the freedom to

manage my tasks and time as I see fit. It's empowering to be in control of my work life."

*Opportunity for Skill Development:* Many respondents highlighted the skill development opportunities available in delivery work. Skills such as time management, navigation, and customer service gained through gig work are valuable and transferable, enhancing employability in various future career paths. One respondent mentioned, "Delivery work has provided me with an opportunity to develop valuable skills such as time management, navigation, and customer service. These skills are not only useful in my current role but also transferable to other areas of life and future career opportunities."

*Diverse Work Environment:* Respondents enjoyed the diversity and variety in the work environment of delivery workers. The constant change in delivery locations and interactions with different people make the job dynamic and engaging, preventing monotony. One respondent noted, "One of the things I enjoy about being a delivery worker is the diversity of people and places I encounter daily. Every delivery is a new experience, whether it's delivering food to a bustling office building or a quiet residential neighborhood. It keeps the job interesting and dynamic."

*Flexible Income Potential:* Many respondents were attracted to the flexible income potential of gig work. Workers can adjust their working hours and intensity based on their financial goals

and needs, choosing to work more during high-demand periods to maximize earnings or scale back during slower times. One respondent stated, "What attracted me to delivery work is the potential to earn a flexible income based on my effort and availability. I can choose to work more during peak hours or special events to increase my earnings or scale back during quieter times. This flexibility allows me to adapt my income to my financial needs and goals."

*Opportunity for Personal Growth:* Respondents also highlighted how delivery work fosters personal growth. The challenges and demands of the job encourage workers to develop resourcefulness, resilience, and adaptability, traits that are beneficial for personal development and future career opportunities. One respondent shared, "Working as a delivery worker has allowed me to step out of my comfort zone and challenge myself in new ways. It has pushed me to become more resourceful, resilient, and adaptable, which are valuable traits that contribute to my personal growth and development."

## **Perspectives on the Delivery Service Job**

The analysis of responses from 182 workers reveals several key insights regarding various aspects of their work experience.

*Average Working Hours in a Day:* Table 1 displays the frequency and percentage distribution of participants' av-

average daily working hours. The majority (52.2%) reported working 10 to 12 hours a day, while 36.3% worked 12 to 14 hours, and 4.9% worked more than 14 hours daily, indicating varying degrees of long work hours among participants.

**Table 1 Average Working Hours in a Day**

Working Hours	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative Percent
Less than 10 hours	12	6.6%	6.6%
10-12 hours	95	52.2%	58.8%
12-14 hours	66	36.3%	95.1%
More than 14 hours	9	4.9%	100.0%
Total	182	100.0%	100.0%

*Flexible Working Hours:* Regarding flexible working hours, opinions were divided among workers. While a substantial portion (32.4%) disagreed that their working hours were flexible, a similar percentage (34.6%) moderately agreed, indicating a mixed perception of flexibility in work schedules. Furthermore, the pressure experienced during work was a prevalent concern, with a significant portion (43.4%) of workers moderately agreeing that their work comes with pressure, and a smaller but notable portion (8.2%) strongly agreeing with this statement.

*Sense of Autonomy and Control:* Table 2 illustrates gig workers' perceptions of autonomy and control. A significant portion (40.7%) feel they have very limited autonomy, while the majority (50.0%) perceive moderate independence. This suggests a balance between flexibility and operational constraints. A smaller segment of the respondents, comprising 17 individuals (9.3%), perceive a high level of autonomy and control in their work. This high level of perceived control is less common but is highly valued by those who experience it, as it aligns

closely with the ideals of flexibility and independence that attract many to gig work.

Take the case of Ravi Narayan, who has been delivering food for various platforms over the past two years. He appreciates the ability to choose his working hours to some extent, which allows him to balance his work with family responsibilities. However, Ravi also encounters challenges that limit his sense of complete autonomy. For instance, during peak hours or special promotions, the platform algorithms push him to accept more orders with tighter deadlines, reducing his control over his work pace. Despite these constraints, Ravi finds satisfaction in not being confined to a fixed schedule, which was a significant issue in his previous employment as a store clerk.

In contrast, Shabina's experience sheds light on the challenges faced by gig workers. Initially drawn to the advertised flexibility of gig work to accommodate her family responsibilities, she soon found herself constrained by strict deadlines and pressure from the platform's

algorithm. Balancing work with urgent family matters became a dilemma, highlighting lack of control over her schedule. Safety concerns further compound her sense of limited autonomy, as navigating unfamiliar and potentially unsafe areas leaves her feeling vulnerable. Despite voicing her concerns to the platform, Shabina feels helpless, underscoring the disconnect between gig workers' expectations and the realities of their working conditions.

*Respect During Work:* Respect during work was another area of interest, with a sizable portion of workers (36.3%) feeling neutral about the level of respect they received. However, a significant proportion (28.6%) moderately disagreed that there is respect during work, suggesting room for improvement in fostering a respectful work environment. Shyam, a delivery partner finds that while most customers are courteous, there are instances of disrespectful behavior that

**Table 2 Perspectives of Respondents on Various Aspects of Delivery Service Work**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Flexible Working Hours	Moderately Disagree	59	32.4
	Neutral	45	24.7
	Moderately Agree	63	34.6
	Strongly Agree	15	8.2
Pressure during Work	Moderately Disagree	47	25.8
	Neutral	41	22.5
	Moderately Agree	79	43.4
	Strongly Agree	15	8.2
Respect during Work	Strongly Disagree	2	1.1
	Moderately Disagree	52	28.6
	Neutral	66	36.3
	Moderately Agree	47	25.8
	Strongly Agree	15	8.2
Autonomy in Job	Limited	74	40.7
	Moderate	91	50.0
	High	17	9.3
Satisfaction with Earnings	Highly Unsatisfied	6	3.3
	Moderately Unsatisfied	35	19.2
	Neutral	28	15.4
	Moderately Satisfied	106	58.2
	Highly Satisfied	7	3.8
Growth during Work	Very Limited	59	32.4
	Limited	81	44.5
	Moderate	36	19.8
	High	6	3.3
Family Time Satisfaction	Highly Unsatisfied	77	42.3
	Moderately Unsatisfied	16	8.8
	Neutral	22	12.1
	Moderately Satisfied	62	34.1
	Highly Satisfied	5	2.7

can be demoralizing. “Most days, people are polite and thank me for their deliveries, but there are times when I face rudeness or impatience, especially during peak hours. It’s something you just have to brush off and keep going.” Conversely, Meena, who works in the same field, often feels disrespected during her job. She shares her frustrations about how some customers and even restaurant staff treat her. “There are times when I feel like I’m not valued. Customers sometimes speak rudely, and some restaurant workers act like we’re a nuisance. It affects my morale and makes me question if this job is worth it.”

**I’m constantly worried about the future and how I’ll support my kids. It’s stressful.**

*Satisfaction with Earnings:* The majority of workers (58.2%) are moderately satisfied with their salary, indicating a general acceptance of their income despite the challenges. However, a significant portion (19.2%) is moderately unsatisfied, and a small percentage (3.3%) is highly unsatisfied, highlighting that financial strain remains an issue for some. Ganesh acknowledges the income he earns is not high, but it’s sufficient to meet his current needs. “I know it’s not a lot, but for now, it’s enough to cover my expenses and save a little. The job market is tough, and this is what’s available, so I make the best of it.” In stark contrast, Kiran said, he struggles to make ends meet and feels the financial strain acutely. “The money I earn is barely enough to pay rent and buy groceries. I’m

constantly worried about the future and how I’ll support my kids. It’s stressful.”

*Growth Perception:* When considering growth opportunities during work, a substantial portion (44.5%) perceived limited growth, with an additional 32.4% feeling that growth opportunities were minimal. Only a small fraction (3.3%) believed their roles had high growth potential, indicating a prevalent perception of stagnation or limited advancement prospects. “Many workers, like Raj, feel trapped in their roles with minimal prospects for advancement. Raj, who has been delivering for three years, says, ‘I feel my growth here is very limited. There’s not much room for moving up or learning new skills.’ This sentiment is echoed by the majority, who see little opportunity for professional development.”

*Family Time Satisfaction:* Regarding family time satisfaction, a significant portion of workers (42.3%) reported being highly unsatisfied with the time spent with their families post-working hours, highlighting the challenges in achieving a satisfactory work-life balance. Additionally, while a sizable proportion (34.1%) expressed moderate satisfaction with family time, only a minority (2.7%) reported being highly satisfied (Table 2).

“Prakash, a father of two kids, shared his struggle with balancing work and family life. ‘I am highly unsatisfied with the time I get to spend with my children,’ she said. ‘The long hours and unpredictable schedules make it nearly impossible to be present for important fam-

ily moments.’ Prakash’s experience is common among delivery workers, with over half expressing dissatisfaction with their family time.”

*Sleep Behaviour:* Table 3 and Fig. 1 illustrate the distribution of PSQI composite scores among surveyed respondents, highlighting the prevalence of varying sleep quality levels. Scores range

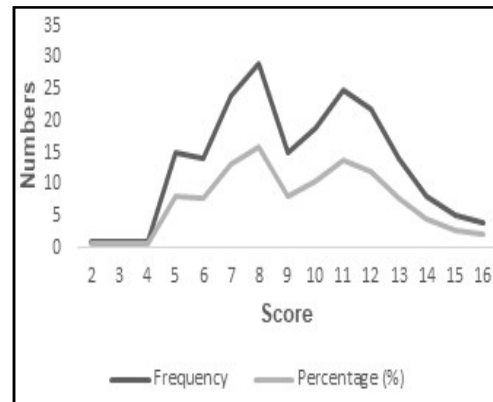
from 0 to 21, with higher scores indicating poorer sleep quality. The analysis shows that only 1.5% of participants reported good sleep quality. Conversely, 50.5% experienced mild sleep disturbances (scores 5-10), indicating significant but not severe disruptions. Notably, 47.8% reported moderate to severe sleep disturbances (scores 11-16), highlighting a major concern regarding sleep quality among delivery partners.

**Table 3 PSQI Composite Score Details**

Score	Frequency	Percentage (%)
2	1	0.5
3	1	0.5
4	1	0.5
5	15	8.2
6	14	7.7
7	24	13.2
8	29	15.9
9	15	8.2
10	19	10.4
11	25	13.7
12	22	12.1
13	14	7.7
14	8	4.4
15	5	2.7
16	4	2.2

Suresh, a 28-year-old delivery worker from Mumbai, shared his experience regarding sleep quality. “I usually work 12 to 14 hours a day, and by the time I get home, I am completely exhausted. However, I still find it difficult to fall asleep because my mind is constantly racing, thinking about the deliveries I need to make the next day and worrying about potential delays and customer complaints. On most nights, I barely get 4 to 5 hours of sleep, and it’s never uninterrupted. I wake up feeling tired and irritable, which affects my performance at

**Fig. 1 PSQI Composite Score Details**



work. It’s a vicious cycle that I can’t seem to break out of. I wish there was a way to balance my work and get proper rest.” Suresh’s narrative illustrates the significant sleep disturbances faced by delivery workers, highlighting the urgent need for effective interventions to improve their sleep quality and overall well-being.

**Discussion**

Viewed through a functionalist lens, the research elucidates the intricate socio-economic dynamics within the delivery partner sector. The phenomenon

of escalating unemployment has impelled numerous individuals to explore the gig economy as an alternative means of earning income (Schneider & Enste, 2013). Furthermore, younger cohorts, frequently lacking traditional job qualifications, are increasingly attracted to gig work as a last resort due to challenges in securing full-time employment (CIPD, 2017; Sinek, 2016). Our study corroborates these findings, emphasizing compelling factors that drive individuals towards gig work amidst rising unemployment rates. In this context, gig employment emerges as a pragmatic solution amid a scarcity of conventional job opportunities. Particularly salient among younger demographics lacking experience or pursuing higher education, gig work offers appealing features such as flexibility, immediate income, and minimal entry barriers compared to traditional employment avenues. From a functionalist perspective, the gig economy serves as a crucial component in labor market equilibrium, providing employment opportunities for individuals who may otherwise face marginalization due to lower educational attainment or a need for flexible work arrangements.

**Gig employment emerges as a pragmatic solution amid a scarcity of conventional job opportunities.**

The study found that the decision to pursue delivery service roles is influenced by a complex interplay of coercive and enticing factors. Familial obligations, economic challenges, and limited job opportunities drive individuals towards gig

work. However, the gig economy also offers appealing benefits that attract individuals. Unlike traditional employment, gig work provides flexibility and freedom, serving as a supplementary income source for some (Huws et al., 2016). This flexibility is particularly valued by younger generations who prioritise control over their schedules (Smola & Sutton, 2016). Additionally, the gig economy presents higher earning potential for those with specialized skills (Kauffman, 2015). These factors align with human capital theory (Becker, 1964), where individuals invest in gig work for experience and income. Nonetheless, while gig work offers autonomy, it often fails to meet workers' needs for competence and relatedness, leading to dissatisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Structural functionalism suggests that individuals may turn to gig work due to familial obligations, economic constraints, and limited employment opportunities, fulfilling necessary roles within the economy to maintain societal stability (Merton, 1957; Parson, 1951). Conversely, conflict theory highlights how structural inequalities in income, education, and employment opportunities push marginalized individuals into precarious work arrangements like delivery service roles, emphasizing the importance of advocating for workers' rights (Marx, 1867). These workers lack conventional status markers and job security, navigating varied educational backgrounds yet compelled to engage in gig work due to limited employment prospects. This underscores pervasive issues of social stratification aggravated by bureaucratic

platforms dictating gig work, limiting worker autonomy and perpetuating dependence and diminished social standing.

Despite the allure of setting one's schedule, delivery partners grapple with prolonged work hours and meager remuneration, perpetuating a cycle of economic vulnerability and exploitation. The juxtaposition of an average monthly earning of INR 20,768 with the demands of protracted work hours underscores the systemic inequities within the gig economy, where workers often find themselves relegated to disposable resources rather than valued contributors to the workforce. This systematic exploitation not only undermines the socio-economic well-being of delivery partners but also exacerbates existing class disparities, further marginalizing vulnerable segments of the population. The gig economy's reliance on cheap labor perpetuates a cycle of inequality, wherein individuals are trapped in low-paying, unstable jobs with limited avenues for upward mobility. As such, addressing the structural inequities within the gig economy is imperative to foster a more inclusive and equitable labor market, where all workers are afforded dignity, fair compensation, and opportunities for socioeconomic advancement.

The challenges faced by workers can be further understood through theories such as labor process theory, which examines power dynamics within capitalist systems shaping work processes and relationships (Braverman, 1974; Woodcock & Graham, 2020). There is the interplay between demanding workloads, limited

autonomy and heightened stress levels experienced by delivery workers (Karasek, 1979; Benach et al., 2000).

Moreover, poor sleep quality among delivery partners underscores the adverse health effects of gig work, which can be analyzed using the Health Belief Model. This model suggests that gig workers may prioritize earning income over sleep health due to economic pressures and job insecurity (Glanz & Bishop, 2010). Additionally, concepts like social determinants of health emphasize how precarious work conditions and economic pressures negatively impact health, linking chronic job-related stress to sleep disturbances and overall health decline.

Building upon the findings and theoretical insights derived from the experiences of delivery workers in the gig economy, a novel model emerges viz. the Gig Economy Duality. Gig Economy Duality refers to the intricate coexistence of two ostensibly antithetical elements within the gig economy: the autonomy afforded to workers in managing their schedules and tasks, and the pervasive insecurity resulting from unstable income, lack of benefits, and precarious employment conditions. This duality encapsulates the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of gig work, revealing deeper structural issues and power imbalances. The Gig Duality Model, derived from foundational theories such as Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Conflict Theory (Marx, 1867), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Labor Process Theory (Braverman, 1974), and the Health Belief Model (Glanz &

Bishop, 2010), offers a nuanced understanding of gig work.

Human Capital Theory acknowledges gig work's role in immediate income generation but highlights its limitations in fostering skill development and career advancement. Conflict Theory reveals the exploitation embedded in the gig economy, where platform owners profit disproportionately while undervaluing gig workers' labor, exacerbating economic and social inequalities. Self-determination theory exposes the disconnect between gig work's autonomy and workers' intrinsic needs, leading to dissatisfaction and disengagement. Labor process theory elucidates how algorithmic management diminishes worker empowerment by prioritizing efficiency over autonomy. Lastly, the Health Belief Model underscores how economic pressures drive gig workers to prioritize income over health, exacerbated by the lack of occupational protections. Together, these theories unveil the complex interplay of economic, social, and psychological factors shaping the experiences of gig workers within the Gig Duality Model.

The proposed model encompasses the following components:

### **I. Autonomy:**

- *Flexible Scheduling and Workload Management:* Gig workers are endowed with the latitude to dictate their working hours and choose their assignments, facilitating a personalized work-life balance. This au-

tonomy, however, is frequently circumscribed by the availability of tasks and fluctuating demand, creating an illusion of freedom.

- *Control Over Work Environment:* The capacity to select and manage tasks fosters a semblance of independence and empowerment, particularly attractive to diverse demographics such as students, caregivers, and individuals seeking supplementary income.
- *Deceptive Flexibility:* Despite the surface-level flexibility, workers often face implicit pressures from platform algorithms and market dynamics that dictate peak working hours and high-demand periods, thereby constraining true autonomy.

### **II. Insecurity:**

- *Income Volatility:* Gig workers contend with erratic earnings influenced by variable demand, algorithmic changes, and competition. This income instability undermines financial security and exacerbates economic vulnerability.
- *Absence of Traditional Benefits:* The lack of access to employment benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, and retirement plans exposes workers to significant risks and heightens their precarious status.
- *Job Instability and Vulnerability:* The inherent nature of gig work results in episodic employment, with periods of unemployment or underemployment becoming a recurrent

challenge. This instability further compounds economic and social insecurities.

### III. Economic Pressure:

- *Sustained Income Necessity:* The imperative to secure sufficient earnings to meet basic living expenses drives workers to engage in prolonged working hours, often at the expense of personal health and well-being.
- *Adverse Health Outcomes:* The relentless economic pressures contribute to stress, burnout, and a spectrum of health issues, including sleep disturbances and chronic stress-related conditions, which are exacerbated by the lack of occupational health protections.

### IV. Structural Inequality:

- *Exacerbation of Social and Economic Disparities:* The gig economy disproportionately affects marginalized groups, deepening existing social and economic inequalities. Barriers to traditional employment perpetuate a cycle of low-paying, unstable jobs, restricting upward mobility.
- *Reinforcement of Social Stratification:* Gig workers often lack the status and job security associated with traditional employment, reinforcing social stratification and limiting opportunities for long-term career advancement.

### V. Autonomy vs. Exploitation:

- *Illusion of Independence:* While gig work ostensibly provides autonomy, it often masks a deeper dependency on platform algorithms and market conditions. Workers are subject to the whims of algorithmic management, which dictates availability and earnings potential.
- *Exploitation of Labor:* The gig economy's structural design prioritizes platform profits over worker welfare, leading to a disproportionate extraction of value from workers' labor. This exploitation manifests in low wages, lack of benefits, and limited worker protections.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from policymakers, platforms, and worker advocates to create a more equitable and sustainable gig economy, where workers can enjoy the benefits of flexibility without sacrificing stability, dignity, and well-being.

### Implications

The implications of the findings on delivery service employment reverberate across multiple spheres, from labor rights advocacy to public policy and organizational practices. Advocates for labor rights are prompted to intensify efforts in safeguarding the well-being of gig economy workers, particularly delivery partners. This involves rallying for regulations that ensure fair wages, reasonable working hours, and job security, while also demanding transparency from platform companies about their algorithms

and labor practices. Policymakers are urged to enact legislation tailored to address the distinctive challenges faced by gig workers, encompassing regulations on working hours, access to benefits, and mechanisms for dispute resolution. Concurrently, platform companies are encouraged to instigate changes to enhance working conditions, such as providing flexible scheduling and fair compensation structures. Public awareness campaigns are deemed essential to educate consumers about gig economy realities and empower workers to advocate for their rights. Moreover, ongoing research and monitoring are imperative to track trends and assess policy impacts. Ultimately, a collaborative approach involving government, industry, civil society, and academia is essential to forge a more equitable and sustainable future for gig economy workers, including delivery partners.

### **Limitations**

The study provides valuable insights into delivery service workers' experiences but has limitations affecting its generalizability and robustness. The sample may not fully represent all delivery workers, as it might disproportionately include certain demographic groups or regions. If focused on a specific city or platform, findings may not reflect the experiences of workers in other locations or platforms. Self-reported data from surveys or interviews may be biased due to social desirability or memory recall issues. Qualitative data interpretation is subjective and can vary among researchers. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to all delivery service

workers or other gig economy occupations.

### **Future Research Directions**

Future research should aim to broaden the geographic scope to include various cities and regions across India, compare experiences across different gig platforms, and conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of gig work on economic stability and well-being. Incorporating objective data collection methods to track working hours and earnings, studying the effects of policies on gig economy conditions, and investigating the mental health implications of gig work are also crucial. Comparative analysis with gig workers in other countries and engaging workers in participatory research to highlight their perspectives will further enhance the robustness and applicability of future research, ultimately contributing to better policies and working conditions for gig workers.

### **Conclusion**

The research provides a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted experiences of gig workers in Mumbai. The data reveal a significant reliance on gig work due to economic necessity, familial responsibilities, and the lack of traditional employment opportunities. Despite the flexibility and autonomy associated with gig work, delivery partners face substantial challenges, including poor sleep quality, job insecurity, and inadequate labor protections. The study calls for a re-evaluation of the legal status of gig workers to ensure they receive appropriate

benefits and protections. Moreover, it advocates for the implementation of policies that support the well-being of gig workers through improved working conditions and access to mental health resources. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing the quality of life for gig workers and ensuring the sustainability of the gig economy in India.

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