

The Plight of Gig Workers: A Study from Select Districts of West Bengal

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Abstract

The progress of technology has played a crucial role in driving the gig economy, which has been prevalent in advanced nations for thousands of years. However, it has only gained widespread attention in India in recent years. Over time, there has been a significant increase in the utilization of gig workers both in India and abroad due to various factors such as the evolving nature of work, technological advancements, and individual work preferences. It has completely transformed the manner in which people interact in the workplace and has primarily led to a fundamental change in the functioning of our economy. Notwithstanding the remarkable growth of India's gig economy and potential interest to a large section of the workforce little emphasis has been paid to the impediments faced by gig workers. The article makes an effort by examining the working conditions, constraints faced by gig workers in the select districts of West Bengal. The findings revealed that the rapidly expanding gig economy of India may help in mitigating the concern related to unemployment. However, workers in the gig economy face numerous constraints related to meager income, poor working conditions, and lack of leave entitlements. Besides the near absence of safety nets like health insurance, accidental benefits, sick pay, provident fund, gratuity, bonus, maternity benefits, and pensions which bestow to their vulnerabilities. Subsequently, the authors discuss recommendations.

Keywords: Gig economy, Gig workers, Platform workers, Digital gig work, Physical gig work

Introduction

The rise of the so-called "gig economy" is one of the key transformations in the future of work, as digital technologies fundamentally change how people work. The gig economy revolves around gigs, which are temporary or short-term jobs. These gigs can be accessed through online platforms that connect employers and job seekers. We have entered a new work trend as a result of technological advancements and the advent of tech platforms. Even for the simplest jobs, we have become increasingly reliant on gig labor. We rely on gig workers to get us where we need to go, deliver our food, do our housework, and a variety of other duties. We have observed a dramatic increase in the number of gig workers throughout the years. The daily lives of gig workers vary significantly from those of typical employees. People who work in regular jobs have a steady paycheck, a supportive work environment, and stable relationships at work; gig workers do not have these advantages. Many employees see the gig economy as a way to overcome underemployment or unemployment in traditional markets (Huang et al. 2017). The gig economy may be helpful to society because it reduces unemployment and provides opportunity for employees (Chappa et al. 2017). However there are a few downsides as well, during Covid most gig economy workers who became unwell or needed to be isolated had lost their employment and income as a result of their contract. Governments all around the world have struggled to establish a solid safety net for workers in the gig economy that is comparable to that provided to people in traditional employment arrangements. Because of this twofold insecurity, gig economy workers are likely

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to continue working even when they should not because the alternative risks significant income deficits (Lazard Asset Management, 2020).

For decades, a full-time job has been considered a longstanding tradition. However, due to factors such as the increasing size of the workforce each year, digital disruption, and the recent economic downturn, many individuals looking for employment find it challenging to obtain permanent positions (Manyika et al., 2016). This scarcity of permanent jobs has led to a rise in alternative work arrangements, with individuals opting to take on contractual jobs as independent workers, commonly known as "gig workers" or "freelancers". The gig economy in India has accelerated during the last three to four years. Participation in the gig economy has been fueled by a fast-expanding startup ecosystem, Gen Y and Z's unusual work style, the pandemic, and the recent rise of freelance platforms. The gig economy in India is experiencing growth as a result of a significant influx of educated young professionals joining major international freelance platforms. In 2015, India had 15 million gig workers, ranking second globally behind the US, which had 53 million independent contractors (Verma, 2018). The recruitment sector in India attributes the rise of gig work mainly to the goal of enhancing efficiency, fostering innovation, and gaining a competitive edge while minimizing human resource costs. Indian freelancers are mostly entering the gig economy because it offers flexible work hours, the chance to be their own boss, and the freedom to select a job based on their interests and responsibilities. It is interesting to note that 41% of Indian gig workers work in information technology (IT) or jobs closely related to it after being hired by local and international clients (Verma, 2018). Another reason for the development of gig economy is startup companies. India's startup ecosystem has been expanding quickly. Because of the significant expenses involved in hiring full-time employees for start-up ventures, contractual freelancers are employed to handle non-essential responsibilities. Additionally, start-ups are exploring the possibility of engaging skilled technology freelancers (for specific projects) in areas such as engineering, product development, data science, and machine learning to enhance their technological platforms. Nevertheless, in numerous nations, gig platforms offer "bridge employment" opportunities prior to individuals securing permanent positions. The gig economy has become increasingly favored by digital startups as it enables them to compensate contracted workers with lower wages and evade possible legal disputes with employees during periods of economic decline (Friedman, 2014).

Gig workers are those who are engaged in hourly or part-time jobs and their job ranges from menial jobs to high profile jobs. A gig worker is defined as "a person who performs labour or participates in a work arrangement and earns money from such activities outside of traditional employer-employee relationships" in the Social Security Code of 2020 [Section 2(35)]. Essentially, being a gig worker entails being someone who seeks flexibility and the ability to alter one's work schedule. Their goal and objective were to avoid being a regular 9-to-5 employee and instead have the freedom and control over their workdays, to be their own boss and have their own independence. However, the bulk of gig workers are not eligible for these benefits. A high degree of autonomy, short-term relationships with consumers, paying per task or service, and being connected and employed through a digital platform are four fundamental characteristics that constitute a gig worker. Gigs come from companies that use digital platforms to provide chances for freelance workers. Even though a gig worker aspires to be self-sufficient, they will want assistance from companies to provide a digital platform that provides gigs and connects workers and customers in order for a gig worker to be successful. A gig worker can work in almost any industry, but they must have the necessary abilities to do various projects. Anyone can work as a gig worker, but not everyone can be a successful gig worker in all situations.

Gig workers might include freelancers, contingent employees, independent contractors, and others. A part-time professor, for example, can be considered a gig worker. Gig workers have a non-standard work arrangement with their employers, and the work is only temporary and must be completed within a certain timeframe. There are two main categories of gig work. The first type is physical gig work, which involves engaging in location-bound activities like driving taxis, delivering food, and cleaning houses. These tasks are typically organized through platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo, Rappi, and Gojek. The second type is digital gig work, which comprises location-independent activities that are centered around digital platforms. Examples include data entry, translation, and web development, which are often managed through platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk, Upwork, and Freelancer (Heeks, 2021). Workers in this field often report that they need to spend a significant portion of their day on these platforms in order to access tasks and maintain the necessary star ratings (Ravenelle, 2019).

In this work, we demonstrate the situation of gig workers in respect of working conditions and constraints faced in two districts of West Bengal. The study is organized as follows. Section 1 presents an in-depth understanding about

gig economy and workers; Section 2 illustrates the literature and examines the significant work done by the researchers in this arena. In Section 3 the objectives of the study had been presented. Section 4 provides details about the methodology. Section 5 covers the socio demographic profile of the gig workers. Section 6 has reflected the working conditions of gig workers. Section 7 described challenges encountered by gig workers which are followed by discussion, suggestions and concluding section.

Review of Literature

A recent study criticized platform work as leading to “selective formalization” of employment, he opined that inequality is a feature rather than a problem in the world of platform labour. Gig workers assume certain elements of formal employment, such as adhering to standardized contracts and having limited negotiation power. However, they are also exposed to the same risks faced by informal workers. (Niels van Doorn, 2021)

Gig work is classified into two forms by Woodcock and Graham (2020) regionally tethered work and cloud work. Work that was geographically tied existed even before the advent of digital platforms and required the presence of individuals in specific geographic areas to accomplish work that was similar to traditional jobs. This is further separated into two categories: (i) employment where workers are visible, such as delivery or taxi drivers; and (ii) jobs where workers are still unseen, such as home-cleaning services. Micro-work and online freelancing are examples of cloud work that are shorter-term and digital in nature. These are short-term jobs that can be done from anywhere in the world, but you'll need an internet connection to do them. Both of these categories of people have their own set of issues. According to Woodcock and Graham (2020), payment mechanisms in the gig economy are opaque, and workers have little control over their work and earnings.

Previous studies have highlighted the downsides of the gig economy in their study. Even Though platform work has made a name in the market and is continuously growing all over the world, it still has its weaknesses in different areas. Vallas and Schor (2020) had brought out how different analysts have brought out different possibilities adding to that they have also shared their own viewpoint. One possibility is that the gig economy will bring out super exploitation, surveillance, and even more powerful corporate rule; another possibility is that states will succeed in establishing meaningful regulation of platforms, balancing worker, citizen, and platform interests. In fact, this vision bears greater resemblance to the current state of affairs in certain European nations, where platforms are being compelled to adhere to existing regulations. Another possibility is that work and social media platforms could intertwine further, fostering conflict and escalating platform instability, which could potentially result in demands for user empowerment. As cooperatives and commons emerge as competitors to capitalist enterprises, a fourth, more forward-thinking prospect emerges wherein platforms are governed and even owned by their users. Lastly, Vallas and Schor propose a fifth alternative, suggesting that platforms should be regarded as a distinct economic structure, distinct from markets, enterprises, and networks, in terms of labor and the future of employment (Vallas and Schor, 2020).

Previous studies looked into the challenges faced by digital workers in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, highlighting issues such as bargaining power, economic policy, security policy, and a lack of opportunities to improve their skills in order to participate more effectively in the global supply chain of gig economy workers (Roy and Shrivastava 2020).

In a study by Flourish Ventures (2020), it was reported that almost 90% of gig workers in India lost their means of income during the pandemic, before the pandemic they easily earned Rs. 25,000 or more per month (Flourish Ventures, 2020). In contrast to that, some studies found that gig workers usually earned less than Rs. 20,000 per month after covering all of their expenses (Medappa et al, 2020; Boston Consulting Group, 2020).

Previous research discovered that the majority of women using the Urban Company platform were content with their employment and the work they obtained through the platform. Platform-based work is easily accessible and does not depend on pre-existing social networks or community memberships (IWWAGE et al., 2020).

In a separate study, it was observed that workers frequently expressed a desire for automatic savings tools to accumulate savings, along with medical insurance. However, the majority of gig workers in India lack these provisions. Scholars have criticized the current legislation for its limited provision of benefits to platform workers (R. Deshpande, 2020).

A study done in Hyderabad found that the main reasons why gig workers left their previous job were low payment and lack of independence. However, upon transitioning to gig work, they did not observe significant differences compared to their previous employment. The study revealed that gig workers who work 0-8 hours per day earn between Rs. 6000 and Rs. 12000, while those working 8-12 hours per day can earn up to Rs. 25000. Workers who put in more than 12 hours per day have the potential to earn up to Rs. 35000. In addition, the study found that 40% of respondents rated the services provided by field managers or team leaders below 3 out of 5. Furthermore, it was discovered that a majority of gig workers were unaware of the various insurance options available to them (Behera et al., 2019).

From the above studies we find that there are various advantages and disadvantages of the gig economy. From a gig workers perspective sometimes, the pros outweigh the cons and the other times the cons outweigh the pros. However, the researcher has found few research gaps in the above studies. Even Though there is ample research done globally and in India, the researchers could not find any study based in West Bengal. There aren't many studies done during the pandemic, therefore there are not many case studies which highlight the challenges of the gig workers during the pandemic. A few global studies have overlooked the condition of gig workers in third world countries and have solely focused on the condition of gig workers in first world countries.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the working conditions of gig workers in select districts of West Bengal.
- To explore the constraints faced by gig workers.

Methodology

The study was set in urban areas of two districts of West Bengal namely Kolkata and North 24 Parganas. Descriptive research design was used to analyze quantitative data. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents. This study contained structured interview schedule to obtain information from the respondents. The sample size for this study was 112 gig workers. The sample chosen comprised of both physical and digital gig workers in the age group of 18-40 years. Amongst physical gig workers there were cab services, food delivery services, parlour, household services, freelancing etc. While there were data entry operator, translator, web developer, freelancer, graphic designer, freelance writing was a part of digital gig workers was used to collect data for the study. Throughout the data collection process, we adhered to all research ethics, ensuring that respondents were fully informed about the research's objective.. Due consent was taken before recording the interviews.

Results

Section V- Sociodemographic Characteristics

The sociodemographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1. The study revealed that a slightly greater number 38.39% of gig workers belonged to the age group of 26-32 years followed by 30.35% who belonged to 19-25 years and 16.96% of them in the range of 33-39 years. Only 10.7% of them were in the range of 40 years and above. The percentage of gig workers who were in the range of 18 and younger was 3.57%.

Large sections of gig workers i.e. 62.5% were male and 37.5% were female. More males were likely to work in the gig economy in comparison to females.

68.75% of the gig workers hailed from nuclear families and fell in the family size category of less than 4 members or 4 – 5 members, whereas 31.25% of them belonged to joint families and fell in the family size category of 4 – 5 members or more than 5 members.

A sizeable majority i.e., 57.14% of the respondents were graduates. Only a few 8.03% had completed post-graduation. 20.5% of them had completed higher secondary. 13.3% had completed their primary education while only a few of them 0.89% were illiterate. More educated people were gradually becoming a part of the gig economy.

Most of the respondents reported that they were from general caste 56.25% whereas Schedule Tribe were the second largest respondents 20.53% and followed by Schedule Caste 15.17% and only 8.03% of them were OBC.

Majority of the respondents were Hindu 86.6% followed by Muslim 10.7% and those belonging to the Christian faith 2.6%.

A large number 56.25% of the respondents worked in service sector, followed by IT/BPO 21.4%. 13.39% hospitality sector, 5.35% FMCG sector and remaining 3.57% were in other sectors which included e-commerce sector and entertainment sector.

When it comes to the nature of gig work the findings showed that the percentage of platform workers were the highest i.e., 35.7% followed by temporary hires 26.7%, independent contractors were 13.39%, freelancers were 12.5%, project based workers were 9.8%. Only 1.7% of the respondents were part time workers.

68.75% of the respondents were involved in physical gig work meanwhile, 31.25% of the respondents were in digital gig work. Around 20.77% were in household services, 33.7% were in food services, 15.5% were in parlor services, 7.79% were in transport services, 18.18% were in other works, 5.19% were in freelancing. 8.5% were in data entry and 8.5% were translators, 45.7% were web developers, 2.85% were freelancers, 17.14% were graphic designers, 11.4% were freelance writers and 5.7% were in other jobs.

As mentioned, 68.75% of the respondents were physical gig workers and 31.25% of the respondents were in digital gig work. It was also found that 40.25% of the female gig workers were in physical gig work compared to 59.7% of the male gig workers in physical gig work. Whereas in digital gig work 31.4% were female gig workers and 68.57% of the digital gig workers were male. Thus the presence of female gig workers both in digital and physical gig work was comparatively low with respect to male gig workers in physical and digital gig work.

On an average a large sections of gig workers i.e., 45.5% earned a meager monthly income of Rs. 10,000 whereas 10.7% gig workers earned between the ranges of Rs. 10,001 - Rs. 15,000 followed by 5.35% gig workers earned between Rs. 15,001 - Rs. 20,000. While 9.8% of the gig workers earned between Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 25,000 and 7.14% of them earned between Rs. 25,001 to Rs. 30,000. Only 21.4% of gig workers earned a decent salary of over Rs. 30,000 per month.

42.85% of the male gig workers earned less than Rs. 10,000, whereas 50% of the female gig workers earned less than Rs. 10,000. 8.5% of the male gig workers earned between Rs. 10,001 - Rs. 15,000, in comparison 14.28% of the female gig workers earned between Rs. 10,001 - Rs. 15,000. 4.28% of the male gig workers earned between Rs. 15,001 - Rs. 20,000, whereas 7.14% of the female gig workers earned between Rs. 15,001 - Rs. 20,000. 5.71% of the male gig workers earned between Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 25,000, compared to that 16.6% of the female gig workers earned between Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 25,000. 11.4% of the male gig workers earned between Rs. 25,001 - Rs. 30,000 but none of the female gig workers earned between this ranges. However, 11.9% of the female gig workers earned more than Rs. 30,000, whereas 27.14% of the male gig workers earned more than Rs. 30,000. While 42.85% of the male gig workers earned less than Rs. 10,000, 50% of the female gig workers earned less than Rs. 10,000. Similarly, more percentage of male gig workers earned more than Rs. 30,000 compared to the percentage of female gig workers.

Majority 82.14% of the gig workers hailed from urban areas and the remaining 17.85% were from rural areas. A considerable 74.1% of the respondents stated that they did not have any history of migration while 25.8% of the respondents had a history of migration.

Table 1- Sociodemographic Characteristics

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age		
<18	4	3.57
19-25	34	30.35
26-32	43	38.39
33-39	19	16.96
40 and above	12	10.71
Gender		
Male	70	62.5
Female	42	37.5
Family Type		
Nuclear	77	68.75
Joint	35	31.25
Family Size		
Less than 4	38	33.9
4-5	40	35.7
More than 5	34	30.3
Education		
Primary	15	13.3
Higher Secondary	23	20.5
Graduation	64	57.14
Post-graduation	9	8.03
Other	1	0.89
Caste		
General	63	56.25
SC	17	15.17
ST	23	20.53
OBC	9	8.03
Religion		
Hindu	97	86.6
Muslim	12	10.7

Christian	3	2.6
Other	0	0
Sector		
Hospitality	6	13.39
FMCG-pharma sector	4	5.35
IT / BPO sector	24	21.4
Service sector	63	56.25
Manufacturing sector	0	0
Any other	15	3.57
Type of Gig Work		
Project based worker	11	9.8
Platform worker	40	35.7
Temporary hires	30	26.7
Part time workers	2	1.7
Independent contractors	15	13.39
Freelance	14	12.5
Nature of Gig Work		
Physical Gig Work	77	68.75
Digital Gig Work	35	31.25
Nature of Physical Gig Work		
Cab Services	6	7.79
Food Delivery Services	26	33.7
Parlor	11	15.5
Household Services	16	20.77
Freelancing	4	5.19
Others: Caretaker, decorator, HR, package delivery, tutor	14	18.18
Gender distribution in Physical gig work		
Male	46	59.7

Female	31	40.25
Nature of Digital Work		
Data entry	3	8.5
Translator	3	8.5
Web developer	16	45.7
Freelancer	1	2.85
Graphic designer	6	17.14
Freelance writing	4	11.4
Any Other: Online tutor, Trainer	2	5.7
Gender distribution in Digital work		
Male	24	68.7
Female	11	31.4
Monthly Income		
<10,000	51	45.5
10001-15000	12	10.7
15001-20000	6	5.35
20001-25000	11	9.8
25001-30000	8	7.14
>30000	24	21.4
Income by Male Gig Workers		
<10,000	30	42.85
10001-15000	6	8.5
15001-20000	3	4.28
20001-25000	4	5.71
25001-30000	8	11.4
>30000	19	27.14
Income by Female Gig Workers		
<10,000	21	50
10001-15000	6	14.28
15001-20000	3	7.14
20001-25000	7	16.6

25001-30000	0	0
>30000	5	11.9
Area of Residence		
Rural	20	17.85
Urban	92	82.14
Semi urban	0	0
History of Migration		
Yes	29	25.89
No	83	74.1

Section VI - Working Conditions of Gig Workers

Table 2 shows the working conditions of gig workers. Majority of the respondents 41.07% reported that they had been working for less than 5 years followed by 39.2% of them having 6 to 10 years of experience. While 12.5% had 11 to 15 years of experience and only 7.17% had been working for over 15 years.

With respect to working hours 35.7% of the respondents reported working for 8 hours. A sizable majority (41.9%) identified to be working for 9 - 10 hours followed by 10.7% of gig workers who worked for more than 10 hours. Only 11.6% worked for less than 8 hours. It was also found, 35.7% of both male and female gig workers worked for 8 hours. However, 42.8% of the male gig workers worked for 9 to 10 hours, whereas 40.4% of the female gig workers worked for 9 to 10 hours. 14.2% of male gig workers worked for more than 10 hours whereas only 4.7% females worked for more than 10 hours. 7.14% male gig workers worked for less than 8 hours compared to 19.04% female gig workers worked for less than 8 hours.

Majority of the respondents i.e. 40.1% reported that they got their salary on monthly basis. 30.3% of them received their salary on a weekly basis and 29.4% of them received on a daily basis.

A slightly higher number i.e. 75.8% reported that they did not have any provision for incentives. Whereas, only 24.1% of the gig workers received incentives for the work they underwent.

The study had brought to surface that 70.5% of gig workers primarily worked every day including Sundays. Only 29.4% of them had a weekly off.

It was found that 70.5% of the gig workers did not have any leave entitlements whereas 29.4% did receive leave entitlements. In this regard digital gig workers had more leave entitlements than their counterparts. Around 87% of the physical gig workers admitted that they had no leave entitlements while only 12.9% of the physical gig workers said that they had leave entitlements. Compared to that 65.7% of the digital gig workers stated that they had leave entitlements, while 34.2% said that they did not have any leave entitlements. When it came to nature of leave entitlements only 0.89% of the respondents got casual leave; however, 11.6% got both casual leave and sick leave. The percentage of people who got only sick leave was 16.9%.

The study revealed to a great extent i.e. 91.07% had reported that there were hardly any safety nets like health insurance, accidental benefits, employees' provident fund, gratuity, maternity benefit and pension etc. except bonus and sick pay. Around 5.35% of the sample population received both bonus and sick pay. Only 3.57% of gig workers receive a bonus.

Table 2- Working Conditions of Gig Workers

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Duration of Working		
< 5 years	46	41.07
6 - 10 years	44	39.2
11-15 years	14	12.5
>15 years	8	7.17
Working Hours		
8 hours	40	35.7
9- 10 hours	47	41.9
More than 10 hours	12	10.7
Less than 8 hours	13	11.6
Distribution of Working Hours of Male Gig Workers		
8 hours	25	35.7
9- 10 hours	30	42.8
More than 10 hours	10	14.2
Less than 8 hours	5	7.14
Distribution of Working Hours of Female Gig Workers		
8 hours	15	35.7
9- 10 hours	17	40.4
More than 10 hours	2	4.7
Less than 8 hours	8	19.04
Nature of Payment of Wages		
Monthly basis	45	40.1
weekly basis	34	30.3
Daily Basis	33	29.4
Provision of Incentives		
Yes	27	24.1
No	85	75.8
Weekly Holidays		

Yes	33	29.4
No	79	70.5
Leave Entitlements		
Yes	33	29.4
No	79	70.5
Leave entitlement of Physical Gig Workers		
Yes	10	12.9
No	63	87
Leave Entitlement of Digital Gig Workers		
Yes	23	65.7
No	12	34.2
Nature of Leave Entitlements		
CL	1	0.89
EL	0	0
Medical Leave/Sick leave	13	11.6
Sick leave	19	16.9
Any other, please specify	0	0
None of the above	79	70.5
Other Entitlements		
Health Insurance/Employees State Insurance	0	0
Accidental benefits	0	0
Sick Pay	6	5.35
Employees' Provident Fund	0	0
Bonus	4	3.57
Gratuity	0	0
Maternity Benefit	0	0
Pension	0	0
None of the above	102	91.07

Section VII - Challenges Faced by Gig Workers

Table 3 highlights the constraints encountered by gig workers. A slightly higher number i.e.22.3% stated low salary as their biggest challenge at workplace followed by 4.4% of the respondents who chose low salary and rude clients as their biggest challenge.6.25% of the respondents had chosen low salary and long working hours as major challenges while 3.57% had chosen low salary, long working hours and absence of leave as challenges.5.35% had chosen low salary and absence of leave. 4.4% had chosen low salary and rude clients.6.25% had chosen low salary and rude behavior of the employer. 7.14% had chosen long working hours as a challenge and 7.14% had chosen rude employers as a challenge. The remaining 31.25% had chosen other issues which included irregularity of work, too much work pressure, uncertainty of work etc. as vital challenges at the workplace. It was only 3.5% who did not face any challenges at workplace.

Among male gig workers 20% chose low salary as a major challenge, 17.14% chose low salary, long working hours and absence of leave as challenges, 12.85% chose rude clients as challenges, 11.42% chose rude behavior of employers as a challenge, 2.85% faced irregular work as a challenge, another 5.71% said that too much work pressure was a challenge for them, 2.85% of the male respondents faced no issues and the highest percentage of male gig workers i.e. 27.14% of the male gig workers faced uncertainty of work as the biggest challenge. Whereas among female gig workers, majority i.e.,40.47% of them found low salary as a challenge, 4.76% found long working hours as a challenge, 16.66% found rude clients as a challenge, another 4.76% of the female respondents found poor sanitation as a challenge, same percentage of women gig workers, i.e., 4.76% found rude employers and irregular work as a challenge, 26.19% stated uncertainty of work as a challenge and 2.38% did not face any issues.

65.17% of the gig workers reported having Grievance Redressal Mechanism at their workplace for dispute settlements. Whereas 34.8% reported, not having adequate forums like Grievance Redressal Mechanism for settlement of disputes.

There were two forms of Grievance Redressal Mechanisms noticed as 31.25% of the gig workers reported for Helpline numbers of the company and 33.92% of them shared that grievances were addressed by HR Personnel. But 34.8% shared that there were hardly any grievance redressal mechanisms at their workplace.

52.6% had stated that they had an Internal Complaints Committee at their workplace. 43.7% had stated that they did not have any Internal Complaints Committee at their workplace. And 3.5% of the respondents were not aware of the Internal Complaints Committee and its role.

The study also identified that there was hardly any presence of trade union irrespective of any sector.

Table 3-Challenges Faced by Gig Workers

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Challenges Faced		
Low salary	25	22.3
Long Working Hours	8	7.14
Low salary and Rude Clients	5	4.4
Low Salary and Long Working Hours	7	6.25
Low Salary, Long Working Hours Absence of Leave Entitlements	4	3.57
Low Salary and absence of leave	6	5.35

Low Salary and Rude Behaviour of Customers/Clients	3	2.67
Low Salary and Rude behavior of employers	7	6.25
Rude Behaviour of Supervisor/Employer	8	7.14
Any Other	35	31.25
No Issues	4	3.5
Challenges among Male Gig Workers		
Low Salary	14	20
Low Salary, Long Working Hours and Absence of Leave	12	17.14
Rude clients	9	12.85
Rude Behavior of Employers	8	11.42
Irregular Work	2	2.85
Too much Work Pressure	4	5.71
Uncertainty of Work	19	27.14
No issues	2	2.85
Challenges among Female Gig Workers		
Low Salary	17	40.47
Long Working Hours	2	4.76
Rude Clients	7	16.66
Poor Sanitation	2	4.76
Rude employers and Irregular Work	2	4.76
Uncertainty of Work	11	26.19
No Issues	1	2.38
Grievance Redressal Mechanism at Workplace		
Yes	73	65.17%
No	39	34.8%
Nature of Grievance Redressal Mechanism		
Helpline numbers of Companies	35	31.25%
HR Personnel	38	33.92%

None of the above	39	34.8%
Presence of Internal Complaints Committee at the Workplace		
Yes	59	52.6%
No	49	43.7%
Not aware of Internal Complaints Committee	4	3.5%
Presence of Trade Union		
Yes	0	0
No	112	100

Discussion

This study investigated the working conditions of gig workers and constraints faced by them in select districts of West Bengal with a sample of 112 gig workers. Now the authors will discuss key findings with a focus for implications on policy formulation.

It was evident from the findings that the gig economy comparatively has a young workforce. There are a number of factors behind more young people found in the gig economy like there are no barriers in the gig economy (Assocham, 2020; Boston Consulting Group, 2020). Gig economy also provides flexibility in terms of work schedule and timings of the gig workers (ILO, 2016). Many employees see gig economy labor as a way to overcome underemployment or unemployment in traditional markets (Huang et al. 2017; Chappa et al 2017)

The findings of the study have well established the prevalence of gender inequality and stereotype in terms of male domination and gendered occupational segregation in the gig economy. For physical gig work the companies often preferred to employ women for beautician, household services whilst men tend to find employment in transport and delivery services. In case of digital gig work most women are employed in jobs like data entry, graphic design, web development etc. similarly most male digital gig workers are employed in jobs like web developer, graphic design, translator etc. Most digital gig workers are involved in web development; however, the number of female web developers is much lower than male developers. This segregation can be attributed to various factors. For instance, customers tend to be less inclined to select women for tasks and roles that are stereotypically associated with masculinity. Additionally, the specific times and hours that women are willing and able to work, such as weekends and nights, may contribute to this segregation. Many women may have childcare responsibilities during these periods or express concerns about their personal safety. Employers need to take steps to address these issues that may dissuade women from specific jobs through protection of the identity of gender of workers from customers to avoid bias, addressing issues like safety risks.

In an interesting but unexpected finding that most of the gig workers were graduates and a few of them were also completed post-graduation. Recent data shows the unemployment rate in India is 7.8%; and in West Bengal it is 5.2% (CMIE June, 2022). The highest levels of joblessness are among educated urban youth. Over the years factors like reduction in domestic consumption, flatlined industrial growth, lower private investments, and pandemic have struck drivers of employment. As a consequence, inadequate job opportunities are pushing large sections of educated people to undertake jobs in the gig economy.

Despite the positive employment-related features ushered into the lives of many unemployed persons; the gig economy has also brought distinct areas of concern. Low earnings are the norm for gig workers. Presently, there is a lack of transparency regarding how gig workers' wages are determined. For instance, Swiggy, a food delivery platform, classifies delivery workers' earnings into three categories: pay per order, surge pay, and incentives. Additionally, another significant factor influencing earnings is the commission charged by most platforms for each

task (such as delivery, trip, or haircut), which can range from 10 to 35 percent. To ensure that minimum wage calculations are flexible based on factors like state, development zone, industry, occupation, and skill level, there is an urgent need for comprehensive data on earnings and payment structures, which can be provided by platforms. Worker unions have called for the linking of minimum wages to the number of hours worked per day, taking into account various time-related factors such as waiting time, commuting, and the total time required to complete shifts. While these considerations may be intricate, they play a vital role in establishing fair wages for gig workers (Sekheran, Abhishek, TOI, 2022).

It has been noticed that most digital gig workers offered more salary than physical gig workers. Physical labor has always been disparaged when compared to other forms of labor. It is no surprise in the gig economy too it is treated the same. Digital gig workers are paid more because companies believe that intellect is more important than physical labor. Companies fail to understand physical labor is also essential for a company especially for platform-based companies.

Gig economy is primarily an urban paradox in India so far; nevertheless, it holds a prominent prospective for expansion in rural areas. But factors like low digital literacy, mobile ownership and internet usage are detrimental for fostering the growth of the gig economy in rural areas.

Low wages compel the gig workers to put in long work hours usually in order to take back subsistence wages. On an average, gig workers are found working around 9-10 hours on a daily basis including Sundays and can earn their bare minimum wage only if they do not take any leave throughout the month. These long working hours open the gateway for companies to have large pool of workers at all times and also low wages facilitate the companies to provide services at low prices to the consumers (PUDR, 2021). Long Working hours have detrimental effects on disturbed meal routines and may also lead to other health issues like body ache etc. In this study it was found, male gig workers work for long hours compared to female gig workers. For a very meagre income these gig workers and spending most of their time on work, neither can they afford leisure time nor luxury. Sometimes our basic needs become a luxury for them. But this scenario does not apply to all gig workers, some gig workers do earn well, but most gig workers, especially the physical ones, face a very hard time at their workplace as well as their day to day lives.

A significant number of gig workers had to spend long hours on the job to earn incentives to be capable of making their existence a bit more satisfactory.

The study pointed out that gig workers did not get work-related health benefits or sick leave which further escalates their vulnerability. The findings show that the gig economy offers none of the benefits that regular jobs deliver-- weekly offs, leave, especially paid sick leave, limit on working hours, overtime etc. In this way companies fail to provide decent working conditions. Most gig workers don't have any provision for incentives. Only a few gig works have provision for incentives. NITI Aayog has proposed fiscal incentives to draw the women workforce into gig economy. But so far it has not been implemented by any company.

The status of gig workers in contemporary times is inferior because they are willfully excluded from labor rights. This is done by clever evasion and mis-classification – by rejecting to recognize workers as workers. Since they are not considered as or called workers, they automatically are not entitled to any of the rights entitled by laborers like weekly off, paid leave etc. The companies take no liability for the workers. To make matters worse most companies did not provide any employment benefits such as insurance, maternity benefit, accidental benefits, provident fund, gratuity, pension etc., except incentives. The resource of social security schemes for gig workers heavily relies on the collaboration of the union government and state governments, and in some cases, aggregators. This elevates apprehension about financing of these schemes, given the center and state may keep tossing the ball in each other's court and not taking any accountability. Aggregators may also feel inconvenience about having financial burden which eat into their profits.

A considerable number of gig workers did not have a grievance redressal mechanism. Thereupon, companies cannot thrive without putting their workers' rights on the back burner. It should be the key focus area to avoid attrition in the gig economy in the remote future.

Another astonishing finding was the missing internal complaints committee at the workplace. The urge of a safe working environment for female workers engaged in the gig economy persists. Normally they did not report any

sexual harassment in fear of losing their job. This apparently works as one of the essential grounds for the declining female labor force and also it dampens the spirit of half of India's population to contribute to the economy.

Primarily workers association and trade unions have been instrumental to improve pay and decent working conditions. Since the implementation of liberalization, there has been a noticeable trend among companies to significantly reduce their direct and permanent workforce while increasingly relying on informal arrangements or contracting when it comes to hiring workers. Hence these workers are helpless to unionize to revamp their bargaining power. Absence of trade union would be a hurdle in the dialogue between such groups and platforms covering issues such as low salary, long working hours, weekly off, paid leave, maternity benefit, health insurance, social security during old age for their wellbeing.

Suggestions:

According to an ASSOCHAM report it is predicted that the gig economy in India will generate 350 million jobs soon. Therefore, it is crucial to protect the rights of these workers, because they too would directly contribute to the economy of the country just like traditional workers. Government should make laws which would provide occupational safety to the gig workers as well as decent working conditions to them. Though the Labour Code 2020 was passed with the intention of wellbeing of the gig workers to ensure minimum wages, social security and the occupational safety, health and working conditions that gig workers irrespective of their status enjoy the benefits of labor laws the government must give due effect to the Code immediately.

It is imperative for the Indian Government to recognize gig workers as employees, granting them essential benefits such as PF and ESI. The Code on Social Security Bill, 2020 acknowledges platform workers and gig workers as novel occupational categories, thereby entitling platform workers to various welfare measures including life and disability coverage, old age protection, maternity benefits, provident fund, and employment injury benefits.

Government must ensure social security for all gig workers to secure the right of workers for health insurance, pension, gratuity, maternity benefit etc. A system would be regulated for the contributions obtained from employers and gig workers. The Government can grant necessary funds for the contribution of gig workers from impoverished sections.

Provisions to be made so that the workers engaged in physical/digital gig work access Employee State Insurance Corporation. Through a small endowment, the benefit of free treatment to be made available under hospitals and dispensaries of Employee State Insurance Corporation.

All gig workers must also have access to the benefit of pension scheme (EPFO). In fact, in 2022 the central board of Employees Provident Fund Organization is trying to explore the possibilities of formulating a universal pension scheme for the self-employed and the gig workers (Economic Times, 2022). But it might be a rough road since the Employees Provident Fund Organization is finding it difficult to give out a minimum pension of Rs, 3000 per month because of the low contribution to the Employees Pension Scheme.

Government can create a social security fund specifically for gig workers, so that comprehensive social security is provided to them. The Code of Social Security 2020 has proposed a social security fund for the gig workers where the contribution of the companies will be collected.

There are many gig workers who are engaged on fixed terms. In this case they should get the same social security benefits as permanent employees. These gig workers work for years and years without any social security in the same company, therefore, the government must make companies legally obliged to provide social security benefits to these workers.

The Government must create a national database of gig workers through registration on Portal which would provide an impetus in framing policies for them.

Steps should be taken with regard to written contract agreements, which distinctly framework all the terms and conditions of work between the employer and the gig worker.

Companies should establish a strong system for addressing grievances in order to resolve issues faced by gig workers effectively. Sufficient steps should be taken to handle complaints related to different work-related matters, such as mistreatment, sexual harassment, and more. It should be obligatory for employers to form an Internal Complaints Committee.

Female gig workers should also be able to avail paid Maternity leave under the Maternity Benefit Amendment Act (2017). Along with maternity benefits obligatory, free annual health check-up of the gig workers to be provided by the employers. Under the Code of Social Security, 2020 gig workers are supposed to get health and maternity benefits, but the problem is they have not been implemented yet.

Companies can initiate counseling, mentoring and skill development mechanisms to support the gig workers. This would not only benefit the gig workers but also the company as a whole, because such measures would result in efficient and productive employees.

Women participation should be encouraged in the gig economy, for this the government should intervene and come up with policies which would escalate the number of women in gig economy. Recently NITI Aayog proposed fiscal incentives for women in order to increase their participation in the gig economy (The Indian Express, 2022). Given that gender equality and the economic empowerment of women are important policy goals in India, the gig economy has the potential to generate suitable and productive employment opportunities, thus enhancing the well-being of women. It is necessary to take into account women's experience in the gig economy and also understand the factor which acts as barriers in terms of accessing the platform. Gig economy should be more inclusive; to eliminate the gender gap.

To ensure gig workers are prepared for the future, it is crucial to initiate and enhance skills-based programs tailored to their needs. Such steps can help them to consider mobility into better pathways of employment. Basic IT skills and English fluency will aid in the creation of jobs in the global economy. India is striving in this direction with its 'Skill India' programs. In addition to training programs, raising awareness through workshops and marketing can encourage potential workers to upskill or reskill to meet the demands of changing technology requirements. Potential workers can be given basic infrastructure such as computers and internet access, as well as basic training on how to register and get paid on online platforms

Formation of Trade Union is crucial for gig workers. The AIGWU, which stands for the All India Gig Workers Union, is an association of gig workers in India. This union is connected with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions. This Trade union consists of mainly gig workers who are in food delivery. This trade union was formed in 2020 after the workers protested against pay reduction during the Covid.

Conclusion:

The gig economy will continue to develop at a rapid pace in the coming days. Its 'prosperity' is not entrenched on any technological innovation but on age-old exploitation of labor. The study confirms that most of the gig workers continue to work in exceptionally perilous situations with low wages, long working hours, absence of social security measures, leave entitlements, trade union etc. The state is somehow abetting the companies, passively and actively, by failing to hold them accountable for the fair and decent working conditions. Ever since India has moved towards a largely informalized economy, it is alarming that labor laws fail to evolve adequately to respond to gig workers' interests and rights. Unquestionably, the gig economy is a positive step in reducing unemployment, it offers many opportunities and there is a great scope for women workforce in the gig economy. However, there are many great challenges which must be subdued. Women participation in the gig economy must be increased, the lack of safety nets in this economy is alarming and should be addressed by the government and most importantly the companies who hire gig workers must also consider the welfare of the gig workers. It is evident why companies hire gig workers; they want to cut their cost but also want a plethora of talent on demand. This way the companies also ensure less obligation towards them, but that should not be the case. A gig worker also deserves the same benefits as a traditional employee. It is time the government as well as the corporates rethink for the betterment of their gig workers.

Avenues for further research

There was a dearth of literature pertaining to gig workers and gig economy. The sample size was limited and other districts of West Bengal could not be covered. More empirical corroboration is needed to frame policies and action, and to fully discern how gig work fits into the wider labor market, to recognize women's experiences.

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