



Dattopant Thengadi Foundation

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What is Driving the Gig-Workers Towards Protests

Gig workers have been at the forefront protesting against the different firms/platforms they associate with throughout the year. The issue gained a lot of attention throughout the year but it was only in December 2021, when around 50 gig-workers of the Urban Company sat in protest against the proposed seemingly wrongful policy changes of the firm in Delhi outside the firm office. The firm responded by [filing a lawsuit against the leaders of the protesting group](#) after which the protest was called off as the workers fear losing out on livelihood opportunities while dealing with the long procedures of courts.

Though what comprises the gig economy still remains a highly disputed area for both policy makers as well as academics but broadly all people working outside the traditional employer-employee relationship are said to fall within the gig-economy. The [Social Security code - 2020](#) defines a gig worker as “gig worker means a person who performs work or participates in a work arrangement and earns from such activities outside of traditional employer-employee relationship”; which opens it up for all informal workers who technically work outside the formal employer-employee relationship. To be very honest, the gig economy is just the informal economy (refer to graph below) but what we mostly concern ourselves with currently are the online platform mediated gigs that are performed by individuals in exchange for money or other benefits at times. Their number stands at over [1.5 crores in India](#) presently.

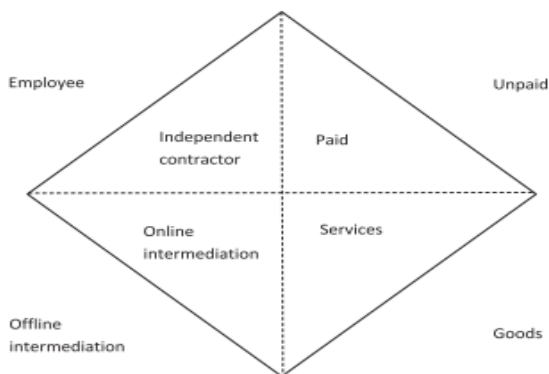


Figure 1: A graphical representation of What makes up the gig economy ([Koutsimpogirgos et al.](#))

Currently the gig workers are not covered by any social security schemes or insurance and if media reports and studies by different unions are to be believed their working conditions are pathetic. A huge proportion of online cab service providers from both Uber and Ola have reported to be working 16-20 hours a day. Zomato and Swiggy delivery 'partners' have reported exploitation along similar lines. They also report unprecedented pay-cuts, long waiting hours and lesser incentives. Urban company 'partners' have reported arbitrary actions of executives against the gig-workers of the firm, the most recent being these 'partners' being asked to offer a 10% discount to customers from their pays.

These workers have been protesting against the policies of these tech firms since long but December was a particularly important month in light of the new developments as the Urban Company filed a lawsuit against its protesting 'partners'. It was a first in the country. Workers' unions filing legal cases against these firms has been a constant phenomenon not only in India but in other countries as well and in some countries the courts have ruled in favour of these workers and has strictly mandated for the firms to treat such workers as employees, whereas in other countries the matter is still subjudice. The firms have been aggressively contesting that the gig workers aren't actually their workman but 'partners' or some other misleading terms. Accepting these 'partners' as workers might result in loss of profits for these firms as workers have legal rights of minimum wages and social security benefits which would need to be paid from the firm's kitty once a firm accepts these 'partners' as workers but the firms tend to forget that these 'partners' are the ones earning the profits for the firm despite however brilliant the idea to setup the firm was and lack of incentives and inhumane treatment of these workers has certainly brew a [winter of discontent](#) among these 'partners'.

Another point of contest has been the Artificial Intelligence based firing/blocking of these partners and most of us might have come across the phenomenon where our uber drivers/delivery executives have specifically asked us to finely rate them/their work and based on such ratings these partners are either offered work or blocked but a [higher rating doesn't mean better earnings/pay](#) but only availability of more opportunities to work.

Social Security code - 2020 has proposed that firms that employ the services of gig-workers will have to allocate 1-2% of their annual turnover or 5% of the wages disbursed to such workers, whichever is lower, to a government administered social security fund. The central and state governments will also contribute to the fund but the implementation of the code is still hung. The government is still busy framing the rules or

perhaps in delaying the same. Meanwhile the patience of the gig-workers is running out and [they have already threatened a large protest](#) which seems quite feasible looking at their numbers and their tech-friendly demeanor which makes the transmission of communication very quick.

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