



The Management of Gig Economy Workers in Digital Platforms

B. Kamalesh, Dr.S.Shankarii

Department of bussiness administration,Sri Krishna Adithya College of arts and science,Coimbatore, India

Abstract- Step outside a busy restaurant in Chennai or Pune during the dinner rush, and you'll likely see a cluster of delivery riders waiting on motorbikes, helmets off, checking their phones. Each rider's next job, their expected earnings for the hour, their current performance standing, and their chances of getting orders tomorrow are all being calculated, updated, and acted on in real time by software they can't inspect and rules they were never shown. That everyday scene captures something genuinely important about how work is organised in twenty-first-century urban India — and about the management questions it raises. This article offers a clear, structured account of how digital platform companies manage their gig workforces, with particular attention to India. Rather than revisiting the familiar debate about whether gig workers should be reclassified as employees, it looks at the management relationship itself — what platforms actually do to direct, measure, motivate, and discipline workers who are legally contractors, not employees. Three questions drive the analysis: What tools do platforms use to manage workers they don't technically employ? How do workers experience and respond to these systems? And what do those answers mean for companies, regulators, and the millions of Indian households whose financial stability depends on gig platforms? The argument runs through a review of contemporary scholarship, regulatory documents, and platform operational evidence, organised around four theoretical frameworks that together explain the mechanics, the logic, and the consequences of algorithmic management. The central claim is straightforward: the gig economy hasn't abolished management — it has moved it from human supervisors into software, with significant consequences for worker rights, welfare, and voice that India's regulatory frameworks are only beginning to confront.

Keywords- Gig Economy, Algorithmic Management, Platform Labour, Digital Work, Independent Contractors, Worker Precarity, Labour Governance India, Platform Capitalism, Gig Worker Welfare, Urban Informal Labour.

I. INTRODUCTION

Think about what a food delivery platform actually does when it runs operations in an Indian city. It maintains tens of thousands of delivery riders who log in and out of an app. It tracks each rider's location every few seconds. It calculates a match score between each rider and each incoming order based on location, speed history, current load, and dozens of other variables. It assigns the order. It tracks delivery progress. It rates the interaction. It updates the rider's performance score. And it uses that updated



score to shape how many orders that rider receives tomorrow. The entire cycle — from task assignment to performance consequence — happens without a single human manager making a single decision about a single worker.

From a management perspective, this is remarkable. Functions that once occupied entire HR departments — workforce planning, task allocation, performance appraisal, discipline, even a kind of ongoing training through behavioural nudges — have been absorbed into software running on remote servers. From a labour rights perspective, it's equally significant, though in a less comfortable direction: the workers subjected to this intensive management system are classified as independent contractors, placing them outside the protections of employment law despite being directed more closely than most employees.

This article examines that management system — what it consists of, how it works, and what its consequences are for workers, companies, and Indian labour governance. India is a particularly important context for this analysis. NITI Aayog (2022) estimated India's gig workforce at 7.7 million in 2020–21, with projections pointing to 23.5 million by 2029–30. Platforms like Ola, Uber, Swiggy, Zomato, and Urban Company together represent one of the fastest-growing employment categories in urban India — yet the people working through these platforms have minimal formal protection and very limited ability to contest the systems governing their working lives.

The Problem This Article Addresses

The scholarly and policy conversation about gig work has been dominated by a single question: are gig workers employees or contractors? It's not an unimportant question — the answer determines whether workers get access to minimum wages, social security, protection against arbitrary dismissal, and the right to organise. But focusing exclusively on classification risks obscuring a prior, equally important question: what is the management relationship that the classification label is being applied to?

This matters because getting a clear description of what platforms actually do is the empirical foundation for any sound regulatory or organisational response. A framework designed on the assumption that gig workers are essentially independent professionals choosing their own projects will look very different from one designed around the reality that delivery riders receive real-time task assignments from a system that monitors their every movement. Getting the description right before designing the response is basic analytical discipline — and it's what this article tries to do.

Boundaries of the Analysis

This article focuses on platform-mediated gig work in India's urban service sector — ride-hailing, food and grocery delivery, and domestic services. These three categories share a management architecture that is substantially more intensive than other forms of gig work, such as global freelance platforms where professionals genuinely direct their own work. The article draws on published empirical research from India and comparable markets, regulatory documents and legislation, and the organisational and economic theory relevant to understanding platform labour management.

II. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Gig Work: A Working Definition

The phrase 'gig economy' covers a wide range of situations, from a graphic designer taking occasional freelance jobs to a delivery rider working sixty-hour weeks for a single app. Treating these as analytically equivalent creates confusion rather than insight. For the purposes of this article, gig work is defined by four features: the work is organised through a digital platform; tasks are assigned individually rather than through a sustained employment commitment; the worker is formally classified as a contractor rather than an employee; and the platform exercises substantial direction over how the work is



performed, even if that direction comes through software rather than a supervisor. This definition is intentionally narrow. It excludes arrangements where genuine contractor autonomy exists, and includes arrangements where the contractor label obscures a management relationship that functions like employment.

Algorithmic Management: What It Is and What Makes It New

Scholars have used various terms — algorithmic management, platform management, digital Taylorism — to describe the use of automated systems to carry out supervisory functions. The concept isn't entirely new: computer-based scheduling and monitoring systems have existed since the 1980s. What distinguishes contemporary platform management is the combination of mobile connectivity, GPS tracking, machine learning, and real-time data processing that allows platforms to monitor and direct individual workers with a granularity and responsiveness that earlier systems couldn't come close to.

Three features define algorithmic management in the platform context. First, it operates in real time: performance data is collected continuously, and management responses — task allocation, pay adjustments, nudges — happen within seconds. Second, it's personalised: each worker receives management signals calibrated to their own performance history, location, and behavioural patterns. Third, it's opaque: workers experience the outputs of the system without access to the rules and weightings that produce those outputs. That opacity isn't a technical inevitability — it's a design choice, and one with significant management consequences.

The Contractor Classification: Legal Cover for Management Authority

Under Indian labour law, the distinction between an employee and an independent contractor determines access to a wide range of statutory protections: minimum wage entitlement under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948; social security contributions under the Employees' Provident Funds Act, 1952; protection against wrongful dismissal under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947; and the right to form and join trade unions. An independent contractor has none of these entitlements, regardless of how closely they're directed by the contracting party.

The gig platform business model is built on this legal distinction. By classifying workers as contractors, platforms get access to labour — controllable, scalable, continuously monitored labour — while shifting onto workers the costs and risks that employment law would normally place on employers: accident liability, social security contributions, income stability, and termination obligations. The Code on Social Security, 2020 created a gig worker category in Indian statute for the first time, but implementation remains incomplete and coverage is narrower than advocates had hoped for.

III. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Scholarship on platform labour management has developed rapidly since around 2015, drawing on traditions in labour sociology, organisational theory, information systems, and legal studies. The following review maps the key contributions relevant to the Indian context.

Braverman (1974) argued that industrial management was fundamentally a project of separating conceptual from manual work — taking knowledge out of workers' hands and placing it in management systems, reducing skilled labour to rule-following. Read through the lens of algorithmic management today, this argument looks prescient: gig platforms have found a way to extract the knowledge needed for task allocation, routing, and performance evaluation and embed it in software that workers cannot access or contest.



Friedman (1977) offered a counterpoint to purely control-focused accounts, identifying 'responsible autonomy' as an alternative management strategy — one that extends meaningful discretion to workers to win their active cooperation rather than mere compliance. Gig platforms are sometimes described in these terms, with scheduling flexibility presented as genuine empowerment. The evidence reviewed here suggests that's more accurate as a marketing position than as an account of how these platforms actually operate.

Jensen and Meckling (1976) developed Agency Theory to explain how principals align agent behaviour with their own interests through monitoring and incentive contracting. Their model maps onto platform-worker relationships with striking precision: platforms are principals who cannot costlessly observe worker effort, and who design compensation and monitoring systems to address that problem. The platform's solution — comprehensive behavioural data collection combined with per-task pay — is an Agency Theory solution applied at unprecedented scale.

Foucault (1977) analysed how disciplinary power operates through the organisation of visibility, producing subjects who self-regulate because they can never confirm when they are or aren't being observed. The parallel to gig worker management is direct: riders and drivers who know every GPS deviation and acceptance rate fluctuation is recorded behave as if under constant evaluation — because they are — without needing a human observer to be present.

Vallas (2015) examined how American employers have used non-standard work arrangements to transfer economic risk from institutions to individuals. His central finding — that risk transfer is a deliberate strategic outcome of labour market restructuring, not a side-effect of technological change — reframes the gig economy as a management strategy rather than a market inevitability.

Rosenblat and Stark (2016) conducted foundational qualitative research with ride-hailing drivers in the United States, identifying specific mechanisms through which app design shapes driver behaviour without issuing direct instructions. Their characterisation of 'information asymmetry as management tool' — the platform holds granular data about market conditions that drivers need but can't access — established a conceptual vocabulary that subsequent studies have built on extensively.

De Stefano (2016) produced the first systematic cross-jurisdictional legal analysis of platform labour for the International Labour Organization, arguing that contractor classification frequently misrepresents the economic reality of the work relationship. His analysis directly informed regulatory thinking in the EU, the UK, and, in modified form, India's own labour code deliberations.

Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta (2017) surveyed digital platform workers across Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, documenting a consistent pattern: while platform work expanded economic opportunity in local markets, it also created new structural dependencies on algorithmic systems governed from distant corporate headquarters with no accountability to local workers or governments. Their finding that platform architecture systematically suppresses worker voice applies directly to the Indian context.

Srnicek (2017) advanced a political-economy account of platform companies as a distinct capitalist form whose primary asset is data rather than physical capital or even the services they nominally provide. In this reading, gig workers aren't simply a labour input — they simultaneously generate the behavioural data that trains the algorithms that manage them, creating a feedback loop in which worker compliance makes algorithmic management progressively more precise.

Thebault-Weiser (2020) studied delivery platform management during COVID-19 in Southeast Asian cities, finding that algorithmic systems were structurally inflexible in crisis conditions and that workers



absorbed demand volatility that platforms were insulated from. This resonates strongly in the Indian context, where delivery workers continued operating through national lockdowns without platform-provided protective equipment or income guarantees.

Tandon and Bhatt (2022) conducted one of the few peer-reviewed empirical studies specifically addressing gig worker management experiences in Indian cities. Their survey of platform workers in Delhi and Mumbai found that 71% had experienced unexplained algorithmic penalties, 64% could identify no functional grievance mechanism, and 58% had received sudden earnings reductions without advance notification. These findings provide direct evidence of the practical consequences of algorithmic management for Indian workers.

NITI Aayog (2022) published the most authoritative quantitative assessment of India's gig economy to date, estimating 7.7 million gig workers in 2020–21 and projecting rapid growth toward 23.5 million by 2029–30. Beyond its scale estimates, the report is significant for its policy posture: it explicitly endorsed extending social security to gig workers and developing platform-specific regulatory frameworks, lending government credibility to a reform agenda that had previously been driven mainly by worker advocates.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gig labour management sits at the intersection of several intellectual traditions that developed independently of each other. Drawing on any one of them in isolation produces a partial account; combining them gives a more complete picture of how algorithmic management works, why it works, and where its structural limits lie.

Labour Process Theory: Management as a Control Problem

Harry Braverman's (1974) foundational argument — that management is not simply coordination but a project of control, aimed at ensuring that purchased labour power produces actual labour output at the level and quality employers require — provides the starting framework. Edwards (1979) and Friedman (1977) later extended this by identifying multiple strategies through which control operates: direct supervision, technical systems, bureaucratic rules, and cultural norms.

Applied to gig platforms, Labour Process Theory reframes the algorithm not as a neutral matching technology but as a management instrument — specifically, a form of technical control where the pace and quality of work is determined by the technical system rather than by supervisory instruction. What distinguishes platform technical control from its factory-era predecessors is mobility: the control system travels with the worker, monitoring behaviour across an entire city rather than within the bounded space of a production facility.

Agency Theory: Designing Compliance Without Trust

Agency Theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) frames management as a response to the problem of aligning agent behaviour — where agents hold private information about their own effort and ability — with principal interests. The theory identifies two canonical solutions: monitoring, which reduces the agent's ability to diverge from principal preferences, and incentive contracting, which aligns agent interests with principal interests by tying pay to outcomes.

Gig platforms combine both solutions simultaneously, and do so at a scale and precision that no previous management system has achieved. Continuous GPS tracking, real-time order completion monitoring, and customer rating aggregation constitute monitoring. Per-task pay, surge pricing, and bonus structures constitute incentive contracting. The novelty isn't the tools themselves but their



integration into a single system that operates without human intervention and adjusts dynamically to worker behaviour.

The Panoptic Effect: Self-Discipline at Scale

Foucault's (1977) account of panopticism identifies the production of self-regulating subjects as the most efficient form of disciplinary power — more efficient than direct supervision because it doesn't require the watching authority to actually watch. The observed subject, aware of potential observation, disciplines themselves. In gig worker management, this effect operates with unusual clarity: workers who know that every GPS deviation, every cancellation, and every rating interaction feeds into a score that determines their future earnings manage their own behaviour accordingly, without needing a supervisor present.

One refinement is worth noting: the panoptic effect in platform management isn't about the possibility of being watched — it's about the certainty of being recorded. Traditional panopticism depends on uncertainty about when observation occurs. Algorithmic management replaces that uncertainty with totality — everything is recorded all the time. This is, in some respects, a more powerful form of discipline, because workers can never identify a moment of non-observation where they might relax.

Precarity Theory: Vulnerability as Management Leverage

Standing's (2011) concept of the precariat — a class defined not by poverty but by insecurity across multiple dimensions, including employment instability, absence of occupational identity, and lack of institutional voice — provides the social and economic context within which algorithmic management operates. Precarious workers comply with management systems they might otherwise contest because the cost of non-compliance — losing access to their primary income source — is simply too high to bear. The power asymmetry in platform labour isn't just informational; it's rooted in the structural vulnerability that the contractor model creates.

In the Indian context, this precarity has a particular texture. Many gig workers — especially delivery riders — came to platform work from informal sector backgrounds where income security was also limited, but management intensity was far lower. The shift to gig work may have increased earnings for some, but it has typically introduced a more demanding and intrusive form of labour control alongside any economic improvement.

Table 1: Four Theoretical Lenses on Gig Labour Management

Theory	Central Claim	What It Explains in Gig Management	Key Implication
Labour Process Theory (Braverman, 1974)	Management is a control project aimed at converting labour power into productive output	Algorithms are a technology of labour control, not a neutral coordination mechanism	Management intensity will escalate as data capabilities expand
Agency Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976)	Principals solve alignment problems through monitoring and outcome-based incentives	Comprehensive data collection + per-task pay = agency problem resolved at scale	Platforms will maximise monitoring breadth to minimise management overhead
Panopticism (Foucault, 1977)	Subjects self-regulate under the awareness	Algorithmic monitoring produces worker self-	Workers over-perform on measurable metrics at



	of comprehensive observation	discipline without direct supervision	the cost of unmeasured wellbeing
Precarity Theory (Standing, 2011)	Economic insecurity amplifies managerial power over workers	Contractor classification creates dependency that suppresses resistance	Power asymmetry persists as long as workers lack meaningful alternatives

V. HOW PLATFORMS ACTUALLY MANAGE GIG WORKERS

Theoretical frameworks are most useful when they connect to specific operational realities. This section examines five concrete management mechanisms that platform companies use to direct, evaluate, incentivise, and discipline their gig workforces in India.

Real-Time Task Allocation

At the most basic operational level, platforms manage gig workers by deciding what task each worker gets at each moment. This function — which in conventional organisations is handled by line managers or scheduling systems — is executed by matching algorithms that simultaneously process GPS coordinates, predicted demand, historical worker performance, and real-time traffic data. A delivery rider in Coimbatore logging into Swiggy at 7 pm doesn't negotiate with anyone about what order they receive; the decision is made before they're even aware a decision is being made.

What makes this management rather than mere coordination is that the allocation algorithm incorporates performance history as an input. High-rated workers receive preferential order types. Workers with low acceptance rates receive fewer orders. Workers the system has flagged as potentially problematic may find their order queue mysteriously thin — a soft disciplinary mechanism that creates financial pressure without triggering any formal disciplinary process. This differential allocation is invisible to workers and unverifiable — they can't tell whether a slow day reflects demand conditions or algorithmic treatment.

Behavioural Nudges and Incentive Architecture

Gig platforms direct worker behaviour without issuing instructions through a suite of financial incentives engineered to produce specific operational outcomes. Surge pricing is the most widely discussed: when orders exceed available riders in a given area, the per-delivery multiplier rises, creating a financial signal that draws riders there. The management function — repositioning the workforce to match demand distribution — is achieved through price signals rather than directives.

Bonus structures serve a similar purpose with more precision. Streak bonuses (rewarding consecutive order completions), hourly targets (paying extra for meeting an order threshold within a defined window), and shift completion bonuses (rewarding workers for staying logged in through peak periods) are all designed with specific operational objectives in mind. A rider extending their shift to complete a streak bonus is responding to a management tool just as directly as a factory worker responding to a piece-rate incentive — with the important difference that the factory worker can see the incentive structure clearly, while the rider navigates one that is partly opaque by design.

Performance Measurement Systems

Platform performance management combines data that would be familiar in conventional employment — completion rates, quality scores, attendance — with data types unique to digital gig work: GPS-verified route efficiency, order acceptance latency, and real-time customer satisfaction ratings. The



combination produces a performance profile for each worker that's updated continuously and used to make ongoing management decisions about task allocation, bonus eligibility, and access retention.

Customer rating systems deserve particular scrutiny because they outsource quality evaluation to customers without filtering for factors outside the worker's control. A delivery rider whose rating falls because a restaurant prepared an order late, because traffic made punctuality impossible, or because a customer was dissatisfied with the food rather than the delivery is experiencing a performance consequence for variables they couldn't have managed. Research with Indian gig workers (Tandon and Bhatt, 2022) consistently identifies rating opacity — not knowing who rated them, what rating was given, or what specific interaction triggered it — as the most significant source of algorithmic management anxiety.

Account Deactivation as Disciplinary Architecture

The most powerful management tool platforms have is the ability to deactivate a worker's account — effectively ending their access to the platform without notice, severance, or procedural process. This is the platform equivalent of dismissal, but it occurs outside any legal framework that governs employment termination. Platform terms of service typically reserve the right to deactivate accounts at discretion; workers classified as contractors have no statutory right to procedural fairness before this happens.

Deactivation can be triggered automatically — by sustained low ratings, high cancellation rates, or GPS anomalies the algorithm flags as suspicious — or manually, following a customer complaint. In either case, the worker typically receives a notification with minimal explanation and no clearly specified appeals channel. This architecture concentrates extraordinary disciplinary power in the platform: the threat of deactivation, even when never exercised, continuously shapes worker behaviour. Workers who have seen peers deactivated understand the stakes of algorithmic non-compliance — and they behave accordingly.

Table 2: Operational Mechanisms of Algorithmic Management in Indian Gig Platforms

Management Function	Mechanism	Worker's Experience	Actual Management Objective
Workforce deployment	Real-time matching algorithm	Receiving orders through the app	Optimise supply-demand match across the city
Workforce positioning	Surge pricing and hotspot notifications	Earnings opportunity signals	Direct worker location without explicit instruction
Performance evaluation	GPS, completion rates, customer ratings	Aggregate score visible in profile	Continuous behavioural data collection and worker ranking
Quality enforcement	Customer star ratings	Post-delivery feedback notifications	Delegate quality monitoring to consumers at zero marginal cost
Shift extension	Streak and target bonuses	Financial incentive to keep working	Extend productive hours during peak periods



Discipline and removal	Algorithmic score thresholds and deactivation	Account restriction notification	Remove underperforming workers without managerial interaction or legal exposure
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Information Asymmetry as a Management Tool

Perhaps the most analytically important feature of algorithmic management — and the one least visible in standard management accounts — is the deliberate structuring of information asymmetry between platform and worker. Platforms hold comprehensive data about demand patterns, earnings distributions, the performance scores of workers on the platform, and the precise rules governing task allocation and pay calculation. Workers, by contrast, see only their own score, their current earnings, and the orders presented to them.

This asymmetry isn't technically necessary. Platforms could make their performance scoring criteria transparent; they could display real-time earnings distributions so workers can compare their position; they could explain specifically what triggered an algorithmic restriction. The fact that they don't reflects a management choice: information asymmetry preserves platform leverage by preventing workers from identifying systematic patterns they could exploit or challenge.

VI. WORKER EXPERIENCE AND AGENCY UNDER ALGORITHMIC MANAGEMENT

Learning the System

Gig workers are not passive recipients of algorithmic direction. A substantial body of published research documents workers actively developing strategies to navigate the systems governing their work — sharing insights through WhatsApp groups and online forums about surge pricing patterns, streak bonus structures, and rating management tactics. This informal knowledge network effectively functions as a worker-generated training system that platforms neither provide nor control.

There's an irony here worth naming: workers who successfully decode platform incentive systems and behave accordingly are doing exactly what those systems are designed to produce. A rider who shifts to a high-surge area, maintains an acceptance rate above the threshold for bonus eligibility, and manages customer interactions carefully to protect their rating is fully compliant with the management logic of the platform — and fully dependent on it. The algorithm has, in this sense, been internalised.

Collective Responses to Algorithmic Control

The contractor classification was partly designed to prevent gig workers from accessing the collective organising framework that Indian labour law provides to employees. Workers who aren't employees have no statutory right to recognised trade union representation, and work stoppages by independent contractors don't enjoy the legal protections that the Industrial Disputes Act extends to employee industrial action. This structural constraint is real and consequential.

Nevertheless, gig worker collective action has emerged and shown some effectiveness in India. Delivery rider strikes in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Mumbai — typically coordinated through informal digital channels rather than registered unions — have succeeded in extracting platform concessions on per-delivery rates on several occasions. The Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT) has developed into a recognisable advocacy organisation generating media attention and regulatory engagement, if not yet formal collective bargaining rights. These developments suggest that algorithmic management doesn't extinguish worker agency, even when it structurally constrains it.



Table 3: How Indian Gig Workers Respond to Algorithmic Management

Response Strategy	Description	Frequency	Platform Countermeasure
Algorithm learning	Strategic optimisation of behaviour within known platform rules	Widespread	Periodic algorithm updates to close exploited patterns
Peer knowledge sharing	WhatsApp and forum groups exchanging tips on earnings, ratings, bonuses	Very widespread	Largely tolerated; occasionally monitored
Selective non-compliance	Cancelling low-value orders; multi-apping across competing platforms	Common	Penalised through acceptance rate scoring
Coordinated stoppages	Work stoppages over pay rates and working conditions	Episodic	Temporary concessions; structural resistance to ongoing recognition
Legal petitions	Court challenges to contractor classification	Rare but increasing	Active legal defence and lobbying against reclassification
Platform exit	Switching to better-paying or less restrictive competitors	Routine	Retention bonuses and loyalty reward schemes

Wellbeing Consequences

The flexibility that platform companies advertise as a primary benefit of gig work is real in one specific sense: workers can choose when to log in and out. Research with Indian gig workers consistently finds this flexibility genuinely valued, particularly by those with caregiving responsibilities or seasonal income needs. But the same research documents wellbeing costs that the flexibility narrative consistently omits.

Earnings volatility is the most pervasive problem. Per-task earnings fluctuate based on demand patterns, platform commission decisions, surge pricing algorithms, and the number of competing workers in any given area — all variables outside workers' control. Workers cannot plan household budgets reliably because next month's income depends on factors they can't observe, let alone influence. This is qualitatively different from the income variability of genuine self-employment, where the entrepreneur at least understands the market conditions affecting their revenue. Gig workers face volatility generated by an opaque system whose logic they cannot access.

Physical risk is a second wellbeing dimension that the platform management model externalises entirely. Delivery riders in Indian cities work in extreme heat, heavy monsoon rains, and traffic conditions that generate significant accident risk — without employer-provided safety equipment, health insurance, or occupational health support. Platform terms of service assign full liability for accidents to the worker. The management system that directs riders to move quickly through traffic takes no responsibility for the physical consequences of that direction.



VII. INDIA'S EVOLVING REGULATORY RESPONSE

India's approach to regulating gig labour management is at an early and consequential stage. The 2020 labour codes created a statutory acknowledgement of gig workers for the first time; state-level legislation is beginning to emerge; and courts are processing worker classification challenges that may produce significant precedents. The direction of travel is clearly toward greater coverage, but the pace and depth of change remain uncertain.

Table 4: Key Regulatory Developments for Gig Workers in India

Instrument	Key Provision	Gig Worker Coverage	Current Status
Code on Social Security, 2020	Creates gig and platform worker category; extends selected social security benefits	Life and disability insurance; health and maternity benefits (subject to scheme notification)	Enacted; state rules and central schemes pending
Code on Industrial Relations, 2020	Consolidates industrial disputes and trade union law	Gig workers largely excluded from core protections; informal worker recognition framework included	Enacted; state-level implementation ongoing
Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers Act, 2023	First dedicated state gig labour law in India; creates welfare board and registration system	Welfare fund contributions from platforms; portability provisions; registration rights	Enacted; first state legislation of its kind
NITI Aayog Report, 2022	Policy framework for gig and platform economy	Social security extension; portable benefits; skill development recommendations	Advisory; no binding legal effect
Judicial proceedings on driver classification	Ongoing cases on employment status of ride-hailing and delivery workers	Potential precedent for employee or intermediate-status classification	Sub judice; outcomes uncertain

The Rajasthan legislation is the most operationally significant development in India's gig labour regulatory landscape to date, partly because it takes a pragmatic approach that other states may find replicable. Rather than adjudicating the employment versus contractor debate — a question that generates intense platform opposition and complex litigation — it creates a distinct welfare entitlement that coexists with the contractor classification. Platforms must contribute to a welfare fund proportional to the transaction value they generate through registered workers; workers receive access to benefits without being reclassified.

The central limitation of this approach — and of India's gig labour regulatory framework as a whole — is that it doesn't address management transparency. Workers who can't access the criteria by which they're evaluated can't meaningfully contest management decisions. Regulators who can't audit the



algorithms that determine worker earnings and access can't enforce even the welfare provisions they enact. Without algorithmic transparency requirements — the right of workers to receive explanations of consequential decisions, and the right of regulators to review management systems affecting worker livelihoods — gig labour governance will remain structurally incomplete.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The Autonomy-Control Paradox and Its Commercial Logic

The gig economy's most intellectually interesting feature — and its most significant practical problem — is the coexistence of genuine worker autonomy in one dimension (scheduling) with intensive algorithmic control in all others (task content, quality standards, earnings rates, disciplinary consequences). This isn't accidental. It's the precise configuration of worker direction needed to sustain contractor classification while achieving the operational control of employment.

Courts assessing employment status typically look at several factors, including whether the worker sets their own hours, provides their own equipment, works for multiple clients, and bears financial risk. Platforms are designed to perform well on the autonomy-indicating factors while exercising extensive control through factors that courts have been slower to examine — algorithmic task direction, performance score management, and disciplinary deactivation. The result is a management model whose legal form and operational substance point in opposite directions.

Why the Business Model Resists Voluntary Improvement

A persistent criticism of gig platform management practices is that they're unnecessarily harsh — that transparency about scoring, meaningful appeals processes, and basic welfare provisions would cost platforms relatively little while significantly improving worker experience. This is probably true. The reason platforms haven't made these changes voluntarily isn't that they're indifferent to worker welfare as such, but that the current management model provides competitive advantages that voluntary improvement would partially erode.

The low marginal cost of scaling platform businesses — adding workers without adding management overhead — is foundational to the platform's financial model. A food delivery app can triple its rider pool in a city without hiring a single additional manager because the algorithm handles allocation, monitoring, and discipline for the enlarged workforce. Introducing human oversight into deactivation decisions, for example, would add costs that scale with worker numbers — which is precisely what the algorithmic management model was built to avoid. Regulatory pressure, rather than market competition or ethical commitment, is the mechanism most likely to produce systematic management improvement.

The Differentiated Landscape of Platform Management

Analytical clarity requires acknowledging that not all platform management is equally intensive. Significant variation exists across platform types, and treating all gig work as equivalent obscures differences that matter for both analysis and policy.

Table 5: Variation in Management Intensity Across Platform Types in India

Platform Category	Examples	Monitoring Intensity	Worker Discretion	Earnings Stability	Primary Disciplinary Tool
Ride-hailing	Ola, Uber, Rapido	High — continuous GPS and rating	Moderate — route selection	Moderate — subject to surge	Rating floor + deactivation



Food/Grocery Delivery	Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit	Very high — task-level tracking	Low — assigned orders only	Low — volume-dependent	Algorithmic score + instant deactivation
Home Services	Urban Company, Housejoy	Moderate — post-service rating	Moderate — execution method	Moderate — booking dependent	Profile suspension + financial penalties
Freelance Professional	Upwork, Toptal, Fiverr	Low — deliverable quality only	High — method and schedule	Variable — project-based	Dispute resolution + profile removal

IX. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

For Platform Companies: The Case for Sustainable Management

The management model that characterises India's dominant gig platforms is not simply a regulatory risk — it's a commercial risk with a measurable timeline. Platforms that derive their unit economics from intensive worker direction combined with minimal worker support experience elevated turnover as experienced workers leave and new entrants need time to find their feet. Service quality fluctuates accordingly. Consumer trust, built at significant marketing cost, erodes through service inconsistency. The platforms navigating these challenges most effectively are doing so by selectively improving worker conditions — not out of philanthropy, but because the costs of not doing so have become apparent.

The most valuable near-term management reform available to Indian gig platforms is transparency. Giving workers written explanations of how performance scores are calculated, what triggers account restrictions, and how to initiate an appeals process directly addresses the most consistently reported source of worker frustration in the literature. The cost is minimal; the benefit in worker retention and service consistency is measurable. Opacity is a management choice, and choosing differently would produce better outcomes for platforms as well as workers.

For Policymakers: Building on Rajasthan's Precedent

The Rajasthan model demonstrates that state-level regulatory action on gig labour is politically and legally feasible even before the central government's labour codes are fully implemented. Other state governments — particularly those with large and rapidly growing gig workforces in metropolitan areas — should study Rajasthan's experience carefully and develop comparable frameworks adapted to their own contexts.

Three regulatory priorities stand out from this analysis. First, algorithmic transparency: workers should have a legal right to receive understandable explanations of decisions that materially affect their earnings or platform access. Second, portable social protection: welfare contributions should follow workers across platforms rather than being tied to single-platform relationships, reflecting the multi-platform reality of many Indian gig workers. Third, accessible grievance mechanisms: workers should have access to an identifiable, responsive process for challenging management decisions they experience as arbitrary — not necessarily a judicial process, but a structured one with defined timelines and obligations to respond.

For Researchers: Filling the Empirical Gaps

The published literature on gig labour management in India is thinly spread across a large and varied landscape. Longitudinal research — tracking the same worker populations and platform management



practices over time — is almost entirely absent, leaving researchers and policymakers without evidence about whether conditions are improving or deteriorating, and why. As Rajasthan's legislation takes effect and other states develop their own frameworks, natural experiments will become available that deserve rigorous pre-post research designs.

X. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Tracking Platform Management Evolution Longitudinally

Platform management architectures are not static. They evolve as platforms accumulate behavioural data that makes their algorithms more precise, as competitive dynamics shift (particularly as platforms try to differentiate on service quality rather than price), and as regulatory pressure increases. The management practices described in 2020 research may look meaningfully different by 2027. Longitudinal designs that revisit the same worker populations and examine the same platform systems over multi-year periods would produce substantially more valuable evidence than successive cross-sectional snapshots.

Comparative Research Across Indian City Tiers

Platform gig labour in Bengaluru and Mumbai has received considerably more research attention than in Tier 2 and Tier 3 Indian cities, where gig work is growing rapidly but where worker demographics, local labour market alternatives, and regulatory environments differ substantially. Whether the management intensity documented in metro-focused studies applies equally in smaller urban markets — and whether worker responses differ — is an open question with direct policy relevance.

Studying the Deactivated

Workers who have been removed from platforms — through algorithmic deactivation or voluntary exit — are systematically underrepresented in the published literature because they're no longer reachable through platform sampling frames. Yet they're the workers who have experienced the full force of algorithmic disciplinary power, and their accounts would provide the most direct evidence of how deactivation systems actually operate and what their consequences are. Research methodologies specifically designed to reach ex-platform workers would fill a significant gap in current knowledge.

Measuring What Regulatory Interventions Actually Do

As India's state and central regulatory frameworks develop, systematic impact assessment — not just policy analysis but empirical evaluation of whether regulatory interventions change management practices and worker outcomes — is essential. Does the Rajasthan welfare board measurably improve financial security for registered workers? Do transparency requirements change how platforms design their scoring systems? Does portable benefit provision reduce gig worker income volatility? These questions require evaluation designs built into regulatory implementation from the outset, not applied retrospectively after the fact.

XI. CONCLUSION

Something structurally new has entered the Indian labour market over the past decade, and it isn't, at its core, the gig economy. Informal, flexible, task-based labour has characterised India's urban economy for generations. What's new is the management architecture that platforms have built around it: a system of continuous monitoring, algorithmic direction, and automated discipline that achieves an intimacy of control over worker behaviour that India's informal sector has never seen before — delivered at the scale of millions of concurrent relationships, and insulated from the legal obligations that comparable control in formal employment would trigger.



This article has argued that understanding this management architecture — rather than simply debating the contractor classification that surrounds it — is the necessary foundation for any coherent regulatory or organisational response to gig labour. Classification matters, but it matters as a consequence of management substance. The question 'should gig workers be employees?' can't be answered sensibly without first answering 'what does the management relationship between platforms and gig workers actually consist of?' This article has tried to provide a structured answer to that prior question.

The answer isn't simple. Gig platform management combines genuine scheduling flexibility with intensive task-level control; it combines per-task pay — a form of market pricing — with bonus structures that function as managerial incentives; it combines the appearance of contractor independence with the comprehensive monitoring of employment. Workers navigate this complexity with more agency than purely structural accounts suggest, developing strategies to optimise within the system and, increasingly, to contest it collectively. But they navigate it from a position of significant structural vulnerability, and that vulnerability isn't incidental to the business model — it's integral to how the management system achieves its compliance.

India has an opportunity, as its gig labour regulatory framework develops, to build something more durable than the regulatory patchwork that has characterised gig labour governance in other jurisdictions. The Rajasthan legislation offers one model. The central labour codes offer another. Whatever regulatory path India takes, algorithmic transparency — the right of workers and regulators to see and contest the management systems that govern gig labour — must be at its core. You cannot govern what you cannot see, and the management systems that now shape the working lives of millions of Indian gig workers are, by design, not visible to the people they most directly affect.

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