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CHALLENGES AND LEGAL PROTECTION OF FOOD DELIVERY GIG WORKERS IN CHENNAI: A SOCIO- ECONOMIC, EMPIRICAL AND STATUTORY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article examines the socio-economic vulnerabilities and legal protection available to food-delivery gig workers in Chennai. Combining doctrinal analysis of India's labour framework with primary survey data from 100 workers engaged on platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Dunzo, Faasos and Domino's, the study focuses on three dimensions of precarity—income instability, lack of social security, and health concerns—and tests whether selected working conditions are associated with job satisfaction. Income instability emerges as the dominant challenge: 59 respondents identified it as significant, compared with 27 reporting health concerns and 14 identifying lack of social security as high-impact. A chi-square test confirms a statistically significant association among the challenge categories and their reported intensity, $\chi^2(2, N = 100) = 14.12, p < .01$. A second test, however, does not establish a significant association between the recorded working-condition categories and job satisfaction, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 3.41, p > .05$. The non-significant result should not be read as evidence that working conditions are unimportant; rather, it suggests that the binary measures used may not capture the cumulative effects of earnings volatility, algorithmic management, fuel costs and limited alternatives. The paper argues that India's emerging recognition of gig and platform workers requires stronger implementation, portable benefits, minimum-earnings safeguards, transparent platform governance and meaningful worker representation.

Keywords: *gig economy; food-delivery workers; platform work; income instability; social security; algorithmic management; Chennai.*

Introduction

Platform-mediated food delivery has altered urban consumption patterns and opened an accessible source of income for workers who may lack formal qualifications or stable employment. The model is often presented as flexible: workers can choose when to log in, accept assignments through an application, and move between platforms. Yet this apparent flexibility coexists with considerable economic and social insecurity. Earnings depend on order density, incentives, penalties, customer ratings, fuel costs, traffic and the operation of opaque allocation systems. In practice, the worker absorbs many of the risks that conventional employment ordinarily distributes between employer and employee.

The problem is especially acute in Chennai. Delivery workers operate in dense traffic, extreme heat, monsoon conditions and rapidly shifting demand. Their work is physically mobile yet technologically supervised. The platform may not issue a conventional appointment letter or describe the worker as an employee, but it can still influence access to orders, incentives, ratings, performance expectations and continued access to the application. This tension between contractual language and practical control lies at the heart of the legal debate.

This study asks three related questions. First, which challenges most strongly affect food-delivery workers in Chennai? Second, how are working conditions associated with job satisfaction in the surveyed sample? Third, to what extent do Indian and Tamil Nadu legal frameworks respond to these vulnerabilities? Empirically, the paper offers a worker-centred reading of survey data rather than treating the gig economy solely as a platform or consumer phenomenon. Legally, it connects the Social Security Code's recognition of gig and platform workers with the continuing absence of comprehensive guarantees relating to minimum earnings, occupational safety, algorithmic accountability and collective representation.

Review of Literature

Zety Shakila Binti Mohd Yusof (2016) observed that e-commerce plays an important role in food delivery services and that service quality must receive greater attention because the platform is highly customer-oriented. The study concluded that e-commerce offers a strong business platform for entrepreneurs who connect restaurants and customers through meal delivery.¹

S. S. Sangle and others (2016) highlighted that features such as delivery options and email notifications on order status improve customer convenience and satisfaction. Their study also

¹Zety Shakila Binti Mohd Yusof, study on e-commerce and food-delivery service quality (2016).

noted that most online meal-delivery systems now operate through mobile applications, allowing customers to track orders through GPS and view estimated delivery times—features that enhance transparency and trust in the service.²

Dr. S. Jain and Z. Ansari (2016) found that online meal delivery services expanded rapidly because of the rising number of working women and the widespread use of smartphones. They noted that online food ordering has become more popular and profitable for restaurants, helping them reduce long queues, improve food management and minimise waste. The study also emphasised that online ordering helps restaurants overcome local competition by reaching customers directly through digital platforms.³

Mark R. Gleim, Catherine M. Johnson and Stephanie J. Lawson (2019), along with the work of Sarah Kaine and Emmanuel Josserand, examined gig-economy workers' perceptions and showed that gig work is shaped by workers' different experiences as sharers and sellers within platform-based systems. Their findings are relevant to food delivery workers because such workers often value flexibility but also face uncertainty in earnings and employment status. More recent studies on gig workers in India report that food delivery workers commonly experience unstable income, lack of social security and limited protection, while also facing customer complaints and other working challenges.⁴

Research Gap

The existing literature reveals several gaps that justify the present study. Most prior research on gig work and food delivery services has focused on customer satisfaction, platform convenience or the general growth of the gig economy, while comparatively little attention has gone to the lived experiences of food delivery workers themselves. There is limited city-specific research on Chennai, particularly with reference to its North and South regions, and few studies examine how factors such as income instability, lack of social security, health and safety concerns and platform pressure affect gig workers' job satisfaction. Flexibility is often highlighted as a benefit of gig work, but the negative aspects of such employment—long working hours, uncertain earnings and the absence of employee-welfare protections—remain underexplored. There is also a shortage of primary, worker-centred data spanning different age

²S. S. Sangle et al., "Online Meal Delivery Systems: A Study of Customer Convenience," *International Journal of Business and Management* 12 (2016).

³Dr. S. Jain and Z. Ansari, study on expansion of online meal delivery services (2016).

⁴Mark R. Gleim, Catherine M. Johnson and Stephanie J. Lawson, study on gig-economy workers' perceptions (2019); Sarah Kaine & Emmanuel Josserand, "The Organisation and Experience of Work in the Gig Economy," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 61, no. 4 (2019): 479–500.

groups and different platforms such as Zomato, Swiggy, Faasos, Dunzo and Domino's. This study attempts to fill these gaps by examining the working conditions, challenges and job satisfaction of food delivery gig workers in Chennai through primary survey data.

Objectives of the Study

The study has three objectives:

- a) To identify the principal challenges faced by food-delivery gig workers, particularly income instability, lack of social security and health concerns.
- b) To examine the relationship between working conditions and job satisfaction.
- c) To assess the adequacy of legal and governmental responses to platform work.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for the empirical analysis:

Hypothesis 1 (H₀₁): There is no statistically significant association among the recorded challenge categories (income instability, lack of social security and health concerns) and the reported intensity of their impact.

Hypothesis 1 (H₁₁): There is a statistically significant association among the recorded challenge categories and the reported intensity of their impact.

Hypothesis 2 (H₀₂): The recorded working-condition categories (reasonable working hours and workplace transparency) are not significantly associated with job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2 (H₁₂): The recorded working-condition categories are significantly associated with job satisfaction.

Methodology

The study adopts a mixed doctrinal and empirical design. The doctrinal component reviews the Code on Social Security, 2020; other labour-code provisions relevant to platform work; state-level initiatives, including those in Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu; and selected judicial and comparative developments. The empirical component uses primary data obtained through a structured questionnaire administered to 100 food-delivery gig workers in Chennai. Respondents were drawn from North and South Chennai and included workers associated with multiple delivery platforms.

The data were analysed through cross-tabulation and chi-square testing. Challenge categories were coded as "high" and "low" impact. For the job-satisfaction analysis, responses were

grouped under the working-condition categories recorded in the original dataset. The analysis is descriptive and exploratory; it does not claim that the sample is statistically representative of all platform workers in Chennai or India. The full questionnaire used for data collection is reproduced in the Appendix at the end of this article.⁵

Limitations of the Study

This study has a few clear limitations. The sample consists of only 100 food-delivery workers from North and South Chennai, so the findings cannot be treated as representative of all gig workers in the city or across India. The research is also limited to food-delivery workers alone and does not include other platform workers such as cab drivers or freelance service providers. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and examined with chi-square tests; the simple high/low and satisfied/not-satisfied categories may not fully reflect the everyday experiences of the respondents. Key details such as age, gender, education, exact working hours, take-home earnings after fuel costs, and the number of workers on each platform were not recorded in depth. Finally, the study is based on a single point in time and does not track changes in income or working conditions over months or years. A larger sample and a longer-term study would help address these gaps.

Legal Framework

1. Recognition under the Code on Social Security, 2020

The Code on Social Security, 2020 marks an important conceptual development by expressly recognising “gig workers” and “platform workers.”⁶ This recognition acknowledges that contemporary work may occur outside the traditional employer–employee relationship. The Code contemplates registration and social-security schemes relating to life and disability cover, accident insurance, health and maternity benefits, and old-age protection. It also provides a statutory basis for requiring aggregators to contribute towards schemes, subject to the framework established by legislation and rules.

Recognition, however, is not equivalent to comprehensive protection. The Code does not automatically confer the full range of rights ordinarily associated with employee status. It does not, by itself, create a universal minimum-earnings guarantee, provide a

⁵Primary survey data collected by the author from 100 food-delivery workers in North and South Chennai, 2024–25. The full questionnaire is reproduced in the Appendix.

⁶Code on Social Security, 2020, s. 2(35) and s. 2(61).

detailed framework for algorithmic decision-making, or establish a complete system of collective bargaining and protection against arbitrary deactivation. Its effectiveness therefore depends on subordinate rules, registration, funding, inter-governmental coordination, awareness and accessible enforcement mechanisms.

2. State-Level Developments

State-level initiatives demonstrate both experimentation and unevenness. Rajasthan's Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023 establishes institutional mechanisms for registration, welfare administration and aggregator participation.⁷ Tamil Nadu has constituted a Platform-Based Gig Workers Welfare Board and announced measures such as accident insurance. Karnataka and Telangana have also moved toward dedicated welfare frameworks. These developments are valuable, but a fragmented state-by-state approach may produce unequal protection and uncertainty for workers who move between platforms or jurisdictions.

3. Judicial and Comparative Context

Litigation concerning gig and platform workers in India has brought constitutional dignity, social security and the substance of platform control into public debate. The proceedings in *Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers v. Union of India* are particularly important because they place the welfare of app-based workers before the Supreme Court.⁸ Comparative authority, including *Uber BV v. Aslam*, illustrates a substance-over-form approach: the legal relationship is assessed by examining the practical degree of control rather than accepting the contractual label without scrutiny.⁹ Comparative reasoning cannot simply be transplanted into India, but it helps identify questions that Indian adjudication may usefully consider, including control over remuneration, access to work, performance measurement, discipline and deactivation.

Empirical Data Analysis and Interpretation

1. Profile of the Dataset

The dataset contains responses from 100 food-delivery gig workers. This sample size permits a clear descriptive comparison of the selected categories, although it is insufficient to support broad generalisations about the entire gig workforce. The

⁷Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023.

⁸*Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers v. Union of India*, W.P. (C) No. 1068 of 2021 (Supreme Court of India).

⁹*Uber BV v. Aslam*, [2021] UKSC 5.

workers were associated with multiple platforms and were drawn from North and South Chennai. The inclusion of more than one platform reduces the risk of treating one company's operating model as representative of the whole sector. At the same time, the study does not report platform-wise distribution, age, gender composition, working hours, tenure, monthly take-home earnings or fuel expenditure. Those variables should be incorporated in future research.

2. Distribution of Principal Challenges

Table 1: Challenges Faced by Food Delivery Gig Workers

Challenge category	High impact	Low impact	Total	High-impact share
Income instability	49	10	59	49% of sample
Lack of social security	5	9	14	5% of sample
Health concerns	16	11	27	16% of sample
Total	70	30	100	—

Source: Primary survey data collected by the researcher.

The descriptive results identify a clear hierarchy of immediate concern. Income instability is the dominant issue: 59 of the 100 respondents identified it as affecting them, and 49 respondents—nearly half of the entire sample—classified its impact as high. This finding is consistent with the economic structure of platform delivery work. Earnings are shaped by fluctuating order volumes, incentive thresholds, commission structures, customer tips, waiting time, cancellations, fuel prices and penalties. A worker may therefore work long hours without being able to predict net income after operating costs.

Health concerns affected 27 respondents, including 16 who reported a high impact. For delivery workers, health risk includes road accidents, fatigue, heat exposure, rain, air pollution, musculoskeletal strain, insufficient rest and the psychological pressure associated with delivery deadlines. The fact that health concerns rank below income instability may reflect a rational survival priority: workers may continue working despite physical risks because taking time off immediately reduces earnings.

Lack of social security was reported by 14 respondents, with only five reporting a high impact. This apparently low figure requires careful interpretation. It does not establish that social security is unimportant. Rather, it may indicate limited awareness of available schemes, weak expectations that benefits will be received, or a preference for

immediate income over uncertain long-term protection. Respondents may also understand “social security” as a distant policy concept rather than as concrete needs such as accident insurance, medical reimbursement or income support during temporary incapacity. The result therefore points to an awareness and accessibility gap, not necessarily to the absence of vulnerability.

The three challenges should not be treated as isolated variables. Income instability can encourage longer working hours, which increases fatigue and accident exposure. An accident can interrupt earnings, generate medical expenses and deepen debt. The absence of social security magnifies the consequences of both unstable income and health risk. Platform precarity is produced by the interaction of economic uncertainty, physical exposure and institutional weakness.

3. Chi-Square Test: Challenge Intensity

A chi-square test examined whether the distribution of high- and low-impact responses differed across the three challenge categories. The reported statistic is $\chi^2 = 14.12$, with 2 degrees of freedom. The critical values are 5.99 at the 5% level and 9.21 at the 1% level. Because 14.12 exceeds both critical values, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is rejected at both levels. The pattern of responses is not evenly distributed: income instability is disproportionately prominent in the sample.

The statistical result does not prove that income instability causes health concerns or lack of social security, nor does it establish a causal relationship between the challenges. It shows that the observed distribution is unlikely to be explained by random variation alone under the stated null model. The substantive interpretation comes from the cross-tabulation: the largest concentration of high-impact responses is located in the income-instability category, followed by health concerns, while social-security concerns receive the fewest high-impact responses.

4. Job Satisfaction and Working Conditions

Table 2: Job Satisfaction and Working Conditions

Job satisfaction	Reasonable working hours	Workplace transparency	Total
Satisfied	24	14	38
Not satisfied	46	16	62
Total	70	30	100

Source: Primary survey data collected by the researcher.

Overall, 62 respondents were not satisfied, while 38 were satisfied. Dissatisfaction is therefore the majority experience in the sample. The reported chi-square statistic is $\chi^2 = 3.41$, with 1 degree of freedom. Since 3.41 is below the critical value of 3.84 at the 5% level, the null hypothesis (H_{02}) is not rejected. The study does not establish a significant association between the recorded working-condition categories and job satisfaction at the 5% level.

This finding must not be misread as evidence that working conditions do not matter. Statistical non-significance may reflect the limited sample size and the broad binary coding of the variables. The table also combines distinct concepts—reasonable hours and transparency—that may influence satisfaction differently. Job satisfaction is likely shaped by variables not included in the test, including net earnings after fuel costs, incentive changes, customer treatment, accident experience, platform deactivation, family responsibilities and the absence of alternative work. Workers may report dissatisfaction yet continue in the occupation because they lack better alternatives.

The table nevertheless yields an important sociological insight. Flexibility does not necessarily equal autonomy. A worker may technically choose when to log in but feel economically compelled to work during peak periods, accept undesirable assignments or remain online for extended hours to meet household expenses. This can be described as “constrained flexibility”: formal choice exists, but material circumstances narrow the choices that are realistically available.

5. Integrated Interpretation

Taken together, the two tests reveal a form of hidden precarity. Income instability is clearly the most visible immediate challenge, but the low reported impact of social-security concerns should not be used to justify limited protection. Workers often evaluate employment through present cash flow. Long-term risks become salient only after an accident, illness, family emergency or loss of platform access. The legal system must therefore protect workers not only according to what they currently report as their highest concern, but also according to the structural risks built into the work arrangement.

Job satisfaction is an incomplete indicator of labour welfare. A worker may express satisfaction because the work is accessible, flexible or preferable to unemployment, while still experiencing low earnings and significant risks. Conversely, a worker may be dissatisfied but remain dependent on the platform. Future studies should measure job quality through a multidimensional index that includes net hourly earnings, hours

logged, waiting time, fuel and maintenance costs, accident history, insurance access, deactivation experience, grievance outcomes and perceived algorithmic fairness.

Discussion: From Contractual Flexibility to Substantive Protection

The empirical findings expose a gap between the legal language of independence and the economic reality of dependence. A delivery worker may be formally described as a partner, but the platform can shape the conditions under which the worker receives tasks, earns incentives, maintains ratings and remains connected to the application. This does not automatically resolve the legal classification question, but it demonstrates why contractual terminology should not be the sole basis for determining rights.

The Code on Social Security is a necessary first step because it recognises gig and platform workers as categories requiring public intervention. Its weakness lies in the distance between recognition and enforceability. Registration may be ineffective if workers do not know how to register, if registration is not portable, or if benefits are unavailable when needed. Welfare schemes may also fail if platform contributions are uncertain, if multiple authorities share responsibility without coordination, or if workers lack an accessible grievance mechanism.

Tamil Nadu's welfare initiatives are important for Chennai because they create a state-level institutional point of contact. Nevertheless, welfare measures should be integrated with stronger rights relating to minimum earnings, safety, collective voice, data access and protection against arbitrary deactivation. A welfare-board model should not become a substitute for fair remuneration or a mechanism that leaves the underlying employment relationship untouched.

Suggestions:

1. Establish enforceable minimum-earnings standards. Minimum earnings should be calculated after accounting for reasonable fuel, maintenance, communication and insurance costs. A nominal per-delivery payment may conceal an inadequate net hourly wage.
2. Create portable and automatic social security. Benefits should follow workers across platforms through a unified identification system. Registration should be assisted, free, multilingual and available through physical facilitation centres as well as digital portals.
3. Require algorithmic transparency and human review. Platforms should disclose the

principal factors used for order allocation, incentive calculation, penalties, ratings and deactivation. Workers should receive reasons for adverse decisions and have access to a timely human appeal.

4. Strengthen occupational safety. Platforms should contribute to accident insurance, provide safety training and protective equipment, recognise rest periods and develop emergency assistance systems. Safety obligations should apply irrespective of whether the worker is labelled an employee, contractor or partner.
5. Protect collective representation. Gig workers should be able to form associations, communicate collectively and participate in consultations concerning commissions, incentives, safety and welfare schemes without retaliation or deactivation.
6. Improve data collection and research quality. Future Chennai studies should use stratified sampling across platforms and zones, report demographic and economic variables, separate gross income from net income, and publish the questionnaire and coding method. A longitudinal design would show how incentives, fuel prices, seasonal demand and regulatory interventions affect worker welfare over time.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that food-delivery gig work in Chennai is characterised by a contradiction: the work is accessible and formally flexible, yet materially insecure. Among the 100 surveyed workers, income instability is the dominant reported challenge, affecting 59 respondents and producing the largest concentration of high-impact responses. Health concerns affect 27 respondents, while 14 identify lack of social security as an impact. The first chi-square result, $\chi^2(2, N = 100) = 14.12, p < .01$, confirms that the pattern of challenge intensity is statistically uneven. Income instability is not merely one difficulty among many; it is the organising condition through which other risks become more severe.

The second analysis shows that 62 respondents are dissatisfied, but the reported association between the recorded working-condition categories and job satisfaction is not statistically significant at the 5% level, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 3.41, p > .05$. This result is best understood as a limitation of the measured relationship rather than as proof that working conditions are satisfactory. Job satisfaction may be shaped by a wider constellation of factors—net earnings, algorithmic control, fuel expenses, customer behaviour, accident exposure, platform discipline and the absence of alternative work. The evidence therefore supports a more careful conclusion: dissatisfaction is widespread, but the selected binary measure of working conditions does not

adequately explain its distribution.

The legal framework has begun to recognise the existence of gig and platform workers, but recognition without enforceable and accessible rights remains incomplete. The Social Security Code and state welfare initiatives can provide an institutional foundation, yet they must be supported by portable benefits, adequate funding, transparent administration, minimum-earnings protection, occupational safety obligations and collective representation. The law should also examine the substance of platform control rather than relying exclusively on labels such as “partner” or “independent contractor.”

A sustainable gig economy cannot be built by transferring commercial risk entirely to workers. For Chennai’s delivery workers, dignity requires more than the ability to log in and accept a task. It requires predictable and fair remuneration, protection against preventable injury, meaningful access to social security, reasons and remedies when platform decisions affect livelihood, and a voice in the rules that govern their work. The appropriate policy objective is not to eliminate platform work, but to ensure that technological flexibility is matched by legal accountability and social protection.

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Survey Questionnaire

Structured Questionnaire administered to Food Delivery Gig Workers in Chennai

This questionnaire was designed and administered by the researcher to collect primary data from 100 food-delivery gig workers operating in North and South Chennai. Participation was voluntary and responses were kept confidential. The instrument focused on socio-demographic background, challenges faced, working conditions and job satisfaction.

Section A: Socio-Demographic Profile

1. Age group:

- (a) Below 20 years (b) 20–30 years (c) 31–40 years (d) Above 40 years

2. Gender:

- (a) Male (b) Female (c) Other

3. Educational qualification:

- (a) Below 10th (b) 10th / 12th pass (c) Graduate (d) Post-graduate / Professional

4. Platform(s) you currently work with (you may select more than one):

- (a) Swiggy (b) Zomato (c) Dunzo (d) Faasos (e) Domino's (f) Others (please specify)

5. Area of operation in Chennai:

- (a) North Chennai (b) South Chennai (c) Both / Other zones

6. Approximate number of hours worked per day:

- (a) Less than 6 hours (b) 6–8 hours (c) 8–10 hours (d) More than 10 hours

7. Approximate monthly net earnings (after fuel and other expenses):

- (a) Below ₹10,000 (b) ₹10,000–15,000 (c) ₹15,001–20,000 (d) Above ₹20,000

Section B: Challenges Faced

8. To what extent does income instability affect you?

- (a) High impact (b) Low impact (c) Not affected

9. To what extent does lack of social security (insurance, pension, maternity benefits, etc.) affect you?

(a) High impact (b) Low impact (c) Not affected

10. To what extent do health and safety concerns (accidents, fatigue, heat, pollution, etc.) affect you?

(a) High impact (b) Low impact (c) Not affected

11. Which of the following is the most significant challenge you face in your work?

(a) Income instability (b) Lack of social security (c) Health and safety concerns

12. Have you ever experienced a road accident or near-miss while delivering orders?

(a) Yes (b) No

13. Are you currently covered under any accident insurance or social-security scheme?

(a) Yes (platform-provided) (b) Yes (self-purchased / government scheme) (c) No

Section C: Working Conditions and Job Satisfaction

14. Do you consider your working hours to be reasonable?

(a) Yes (b) No

15. Do you find the platform's rules, incentives and order allocation transparent?

(a) Yes (b) No

16. Overall, how satisfied are you with your present work as a food-delivery gig worker?

(a) Satisfied (b) Not satisfied

17. What is the main reason for your level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction? (Open-ended)

18. Have you ever faced deactivation or temporary suspension of your account by the platform?

(a) Yes (b) No

19. If yes, were you given a clear reason and an opportunity to appeal?

(a) Yes (b) No (c) Not applicable

Section D: Legal Awareness and Suggestions

20. Are you aware of the Code on Social Security, 2020 or any state welfare board for gig workers?

(a) Yes, fully aware (b) Heard of it but not clear (c) Not aware

21. What support or protection would you most like to receive from the government or platforms? (You may select more than one)

(a) Minimum guaranteed earnings (b) Accident insurance (c) Health coverage

(d) Pension / old-age protection (e) Transparent order allocation (f) Protection against arbitrary deactivation

(g) Others (please specify) _____

22. Any additional comments or suggestions:

***Note:** The questionnaire was administered in person or through a short structured interaction. Responses were coded for the purpose of cross-tabulation and chi-square analysis as reported in the main text. Individual identities of respondents have been kept confidential.*

