
ANALYSING THE CURRENT SITUATION OF GIG WORKERS IN INDIA THROUGH MARX'S THEORY OF ALIENATION

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ABSTRACT

Platform-based businesses, including food delivery and quick-commerce services, have made India the fastest-growing gig economy, transforming the principles of modern labour relations on a fundamental basis. Although gig work is depicted as flexible and independent, the everyday experiences of gig workers reveal a form of systemic precarity, exploitation, and a lack of access to basic labour protections, similar to the classic forms of exploitation faced by labourers under a capitalist society. This article examines the state of gig workers in India through Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation to prove that their situation is not accidental, but rather intrinsic to platform capitalism.

Applying the four dimensions of alienation, it argues that Gig workers are alienated from the products of their labour, as they are subjected to intense algorithmic control and have no autonomy over their work. They are alienated from the process of labour, as shown by the empirical realities of India's quick-commerce industry. Alienation to species-being is developed on the condition of internalisation of the algorithmic surveillance, wherein human creativity is being replaced by machine-controlled measures. Lastly, legal misclassification supplemented alienation from society through the exclusion of gig workers from substantive social and labour laws.

This article comparatively analyses the standards prescribed by the International Labour Organisation and other jurisdictions, such as the European Union, Italy and the United Kingdom. They highlight how recognition of these problems can serve as a basis for extending labour protections. It concludes by suggesting a hybrid system of regulation in India that maintains flexibility while ensuring basic labour protections. Along with this, the article strongly vouches for algorithmic transparency and platform accountability. These reforms are vital for restoring workers' independence, social citizenship and human dignity.

Keywords: Gig Workers, Alienation, Algorithmic Control, Platform, Quick-Commerce.

Introduction

The recent year-end strike by gig workers has brought renewed national focus on one of India's fastest-growing yet least formalised workforce. While the entire nation was set to enter a brand-new chapter of their lives, more than 2 lakh disparate gig workers took to the streets across the country, particularly Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Bangalore, to protest against the draconian demands of their jobs.¹ This event reveals the opaque wage structure, immense pressure to meet unrealistic delivery targets, arbitrary deactivations, penalties for failure to meet time commitments, lack of social security, unsafe working conditions, etc., in platform work. At the core of this issue is a simple question: Does the platform economy offer qualitative working conditions and fair remuneration?

This article aims to highlight the alienation faced by gig workers in India and propose a realistic framework for the protection of the basic rights of these workers, ensuring meaningful regulation of this rapidly growing gig economy.

Situation of gig workers in India

"Gig worker" means a person who performs work or participates in a work arrangement and earns from such activities outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship². As of 2025, a massive workforce of over 12 million gig workers forms the backbone of India's fast-growing e-commerce economy, which is expected to grow to over 23 million by 2030.³ The present situation of gig workers in India closely resembles the classical forms of capitalist exploitation faced by labourers. The Theory of Alienation by Karl Marx offers a powerful perspective for this. Marx identified 4 dimensions of alienation faced by workers in a capitalist society where wealth maximisation is the only target, and workers are exploited to their limits with very little remuneration.⁴

The first dimension pertains to alienation from the *product of labour*. This expresses that the object which the labour produces, confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of

¹ *Gig workers' stir: Riders say accidents, shrinking payouts drove strike call; restaurants bypassed apps to deliver orders*, The Times of India, Jan. 1, 2026, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/as-gig-workers-strike-nationwide-on-new-years-eve-delivery-platforms-offer-incentives-to-meet-order-surge/articleshow/126278287.cms>.

² The Code on Social Security, 2020, § 2(35) (India).

³ Ministry of Finance, Gov't of Ind., Economic Survey, 12.37 (2025-26).

⁴ Karl Marx, *Estranged Labor*, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (first published 1932).

the producer.⁵ Gig workers in India are treated as “Independent Contractors”, but in reality, there is a complete use of algorithmic control over their work.⁶ The algorithm has full discretion over their wage system and task allocation. It follows an opaque and ineffective rating-based reputation system and uses it to allocate deliveries, wages and arbitrary penalties & deactivations.⁷ They do not have an assured minimum wage that they can expect per task that they complete. On platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, BigBasket, JioMart, Blinkit, Zepto, etc, delivery partners cannot choose orders or customers. The algorithm allocates orders to them based on real-time Global Positioning System [“GPS”] location, past acceptance rates, delivery speed, and customer ratings. Refusing or ignoring assigned orders results in reduced future allocations, lower incentive eligibility, or a temporary logout by the system. This means that the workers have very little to no actual autonomy over their work. In a recent interview with podcaster Raj Shamani, the founder and CEO of Zomato, Mr Deepindar Goyal admitted to firing over 5,000 delivery partners per month based on an obscure “Karma System.”⁸ Along with this, he further added that every month, nearly 1.5-2 lakh delivery partners leave on their own, which represents the practical manifestation of their alienation.

Moreover, these workers also do not enjoy any benefits of the surplus value created by them. It is instead misappropriated by these platforms in the form of efficiency, reputation and higher orders. Each order completed before time is produced through the worker’s skill, risk-taking and labour. However, it benefits the platform through improving customer loyalty and market dominance, while the workers receive no actual benefit. Thus, the gig workers in India are left alienated by the product of their labour.

At the international level, this alienation has been recognised by the International Labour Organisation [“ILO”]. The ILO has repeatedly recognised that although platform workers create significant value, they are deprived of any meaningful benefits. This is because they have no say in remuneration, no stability and no profit participation.⁹

The second dimension pertains to alienation from the *process of labour*. According to

⁵ Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, 443 (Dietz, 4th eds. 1968).

⁶ Lu Zhang et al., *Looking at Both Sides of Algorithmic Control and Employee Well-Being: A Job Demands-Resources Model*, 17 *Frontiers in Psychol.* 1736349 (2026).

⁷ NITI Aayog, *India’s Booming Gig and Platform Economy: Perspectives and Recommendations on the Future of Work* (2022).

⁸ Priya Raghuvanshi, *Deepinder Goyal Explains Why Zomato Fires Nearly 5,000 Delivery Agents Every Month*, *Times Now*, Jan. 5, 2026, <https://www.timesnownews.com>.

⁹ Int’l Lab. Org., *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends* (2021).

Marx, a man alienates the products of his labour because his own activity becomes an alien process for him, an activity which he does not affirm but denies himself, an activity which does not free but subjugates him¹⁰.

This dimension is starkly evident in the case of the quick-commerce industry in India, where work is organised around strict time requirements and principles of the algorithm discipline. Recent accounts from workers employed by platforms like Blinkit suggest that delivery timelines of “10-minute delivery” are enforced through rigid performance metrics, continuous surveillance and a zero-tolerance attitude towards delay. These workers claim they work under constant time pressure, dictated by timers and productivity systems such as per-picking-item [“PPI”] metrics, where even slight deviations can result in penalties.¹¹ The workers described the warehouses, or dark stores, as small and cluttered, with racks and items. They are supposed to run while picking orders, moving through crowded spaces and sharp corners, and racing against time. Due to the nationwide protests and the central government’s intervention, the platforms have agreed to drop the 10-minute branding and advertising.¹² Blinkit has revised its principal tagline from 10,000+ products delivered in 10 minutes to 30,000+ products delivered at your doorstep as part of the change.¹³ But the underlying competitive pressures remain unchanged. The list of demands made by the Gig and Platform Services Workers Union to the Ministry of Labour highlights that the phenomenon of gig workers’ alienation is not a matter of chance, but a direct result of a structural problem embedded in the process.¹⁴

Other countries have started addressing algorithmic control over the process. In the European Union [“EU”], platform workers are formally classified as self-employed. However, courts increasingly recognise that algorithmic control over pricing, performance, and task allocation equates to an employment relationship, thereby providing labour protections based on a particular situation.¹⁵ In India, the absence of these safeguards enables platforms to have

¹⁰ Gajo Petrović, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 23 Phil. & Phenomenological Res. 419 (1963).

¹¹ NDTV, *Part-Time Worker Reveals “Scary” Reality Behind Blinkit’s 10-Minute Delivery: Accidents Are Common*, NDTV (June 10, 2025), <https://www.ndtv.com/feature/part-time-worker-reveals-scary-reality-behind-blinkits-10-minute-delivery-accidents-are-common-8627705>.

¹² *Govt asks quick commerce platforms to drop ‘10-minute delivery’ branding*, The Economic Times, Jan. 13, 2026.

¹³ Anees Hussain & Yaruqullah Khan, *Govt Steps in to Rein in 10-Minute Delivery*, Fin. Express, Jan. 13, 2026.

¹⁴ Express News Serv., *Gig Workers Union Calls Nationwide Strike Today; Seeks Better Pay, End to 10-Minute Delivery*, Indian Express (Dec. 31, 2025), <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/gig-workers-union-nationwide-strike-better-pay-delivery-10447124/>.

¹⁵ Directive 2024/2831, of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2024 on Improving Working Conditions in Platform Work, 2024 O.J. (L 283) 1.

absolute control over the labour process, absolving them of their responsibilities.

The third dimension highlights alienation from the *species-being* (self-alienation). According to Karl Marx, by alienating his own activity from himself, man in fact alienates his essence from himself. Man is a creative and practical being, and when he alienates his creative activity from himself, he alienates his existence from himself. Transforming his generic essence, man alienates himself from his humanity.¹⁶

In the present scenario, gig workers are continuously monitored through ratings, GPS tracking, acceptance rates, and productivity metrics. Gradually, workers incorporate these algorithmic standards, regulating their own behaviour in the prediction of penalties. They have lost their essence in this algorithmic process. In contrast, EU labour law increasingly sees algorithmic surveillance as a human rights issue. The Platform Work Directive requires platforms to ensure that automated systems do not exert undue pressure on workers.¹⁷ Workers are given the right to contest algorithmic decisions, asserting human utility over machine-driven governance. This highlights an effort to alleviate self-alienation by restoring workers' capacity for self-establishment.

The fourth and final dimension mentions alienation from *society*. This is a direct consequence of self-alienation. The proposition that man's species-nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man's essential nature¹⁸.

In India, due to the classification of gig workers as independent contractors, they fall outside the traditional employer-employee relationship and are deprived of almost all the social security benefits and legal protections enjoyed by a regular employee or a labourer. They do not have an assured minimum wage, protection against arbitrary termination, or compensation for injury or death. Under Indian law, gig workers have explicit legal recognition only under one law, i.e. the Social Security Code, where the company is required to manage a security fund for these workers, for which enforcement remains faint.¹⁹ Also, the Indian government proposed a 90-day employment requirement for workers to be eligible for this benefit in December 2025 under the draft Social Security Code (Central) Rules, 2025, further

¹⁶ *Supra* note 10.

¹⁷ *Supra* note 15.

¹⁸ *Supra* note 5.

¹⁹ *Supra* note 2.

strengthening the barrier for gig workers to access basic labour rights.²⁰

Internationally, the ILO recognises that occupation is not just income, but is a social contract warranting legal recognition and collective representation²¹. Globally, most gig & platform workers lack health insurance, security funds, and possess little to no legal protections against arbitrary penalties or collective representation. This leads them to being practically visible to employers but socially and legally invisible. Hence, India urgently needs a strict regulation mechanism to mitigate the problems faced by gig workers.

Recommendation

To provide an effective relief to gig workers, it is suggested that instead of treating gig workers like independent contractors, there should be a dynamic middle ground where these workers do enjoy the flexibility offered by gig work but at the same time are ensured the basic rights of a worker. Internationally, this dynamism has been meticulously implemented by several jurisdictions. In Italy, delivery riders have been classified under a special category called *Lavoratori Etero-Organizzati* (hetero-organised workers), which has evolved to regulate occupations that fall between traditional employment and independent contracting.²² This classification ensures core labour protections, such as minimum wages, social security and welfare benefits, and safety protections, without the rigid commitments that come with traditional employment.

In the case of *Uber BV v. Aslam* (2021), the UK Supreme Court classified gig workers such as Uber drivers as ‘workers’.²³ They fall between that of an employee and a contractor. This ensures basic labour rights, such as minimum wage, paid leave and rest breaks, while allowing them the flexibility that comes with gig work. The EU issued the Platform Work Directive, under which there is a presumption of employment for platform workers when platforms exercise de facto control over their work. This enables the protection of their basic labour rights. Crucially, it has also mandated algorithmic transparency into how automated systems

²⁰Labour Ministry Proposes 90-Day Annual Work Threshold for Gig Worker Social Security, The Hindu (Jan. 2, 2026), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/labour-ministry-proposes-90-day-annual-work-threshold-for-gig-worker-social-security/article70470596.ece>.

²¹Int'l Lab. Org., Work for a Brighter Future (2019).

²²Decreto Legislativo 15 Giugno 2015, art. 2, as amended by Decreto-Legge 3 Settembre 2019 (It.).

²³Uber BV v Aslam, [2021] (UKSC) 5.

allocate tasks, calculate remuneration, and evaluate performance, and has restricted the use of automated systems for matters such as suspension and termination.

These examples showcase a calibrated balance between flexibility and rights. Similarly, the Indian government can introduce a special category for this rapidly growing workforce. The government may introduce mandatory basic rights for these workers, such as a fixed minimum wage, transparency in algorithmic work allocation, protection from arbitrary deactivations or wage cuts, and effective social security. This allows workers to have a minimum estimate of how much they will receive per delivery, knowledge about how the algorithm distributes work among them, and the discretion to choose when and how much to work. This also ensures an effective legal representation for this rapidly growing sector in India.

Conclusion

The recent protest by gig workers reveals the true state of quick commerce in India. Through the lens of Marx's theory of alienation, it is highlighted that the situation of gig workers is not necessarily a result of technological advancement, but a lack of a proper regulatory framework. This makes the alienation of gig workers inherent to the algorithm-based platform work.

Several jurisdictions have started to acknowledge this issue. In contrast, India has afforded only a nominal status with no specific protections for gig workers. So, there is a critical need for a balanced approach that respects the rights of gig workers and addresses their vulnerabilities. This journey towards a comprehensive regulatory mechanism must prioritise inclusivity, impartiality, and the promotion of decent work for all, regardless of any work arrangement. At the end, by ensuring ethical governance and adapting to the technological changes. India can pave the way for a gig economy that is both progressive and equitable in the coming years. The recession of labour, as used by Marxists, denotes the restoration of worker autonomy to their jobs, societal lives and eventually their humanity.