
ALWAYS-ON WORK CULTURE VS. STATUTORY PROTECTIONS: INDIA'S GIG WORKERS POST-2025 CODES

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ABSTRACT

The digital overreach of India has long targeted its salaried workers and gig workers due to the ubiquitous work culture in the country, propagating unpaid overtime and mental health breakdowns as evidenced by the increasing number of suicide cases at the workplace. The pre-November 2025 labour legislation did not provide protection to the platform worker who provides services in legal anonymity due to the prevalence of rating-based precarity. This paper discusses the change after the adoption of four unified Labour Codes on November 21, 2025, which officially identifies the meaning of gig workers and aggregators and adds social security payments, minimum wage systems, and formal grievance procedures. It contrasts the anarchy at the onset of chaos with the post-implementation reality in March 2026, and how the completion of the ruthless working culture keeps subjecting these new codified pillars to test.

Keywords: Labour Codes, Gig workers, Gig Economy, Unpaid Work, Exploitation

INTRODUCTION

It's 10:30 PM. The report is not submitted and one of the clients calls insistently on one and the time to revise a report until tomorrow is looming. The official working hours were over at 6 PM, yet to an innumerable number of the Indian staff and gig workers, the day has no ending. Emails buzz continuously, reports sent by superiors or applications with requests to reply immediately even during leaves, and in the case of a delivery rider or even a driver, one negative comment regarding the product will reduce income by half or cause a complete deactivation forcing people to be always available just to make it. It is the trap of work life that was present in pre-2025 and lacked the legislation in the sphere of digital overreach and gig precarity. Already, with the curved four Labour Codes in effect since November, 21, 2025, which amalgamates 29 old acts. It is the first significant step in the modern protection of workers in India, after the platform workers were officially recognized and a wage floor established. Still the late-night call raises the question: just do these changes redefine the boundary between the work and the rest?

PRE-CODES REALITY: INVISIBLE CHAINS

The labor laws in India have opposed these times until November 2025 when they change to the digital age, that was meant to work in factories and shifts that were fixed and not midnight emails that determine life through their rate on the app. The Factories Act of 1948 and other laws targeted bricks and mortar work-places, and the salaried workers and gig laborers were left to be at the mercy of the unregulated digital demands and having no means of legal recovery whenever they were invaded after hours. Unpaid work at home Salaried workers were forced to abide by unwritten rules: produce client reports until you go home, or the following day your deducted salary and bad reviews. The leaves were very small. The bosses were unimpressive. Home was basically part of the office you could make free phone calls from there. The company treated any idleness like a crime, forcing overnight work as daily punishment. Gig workers were even worse: services required them to be independent contractors, which is not defined in faith, where bad ratings of the customers due to late-night orders can deactivate their accounts at night, compelling them to be always ready to work all day and all night to make a living.¹ The presence of this gap contributed to exploitation. In the absence of minimum wage

¹ *Times of India*, Scammed, Scolded, Shamed: The Stories Gig Workers Can't Tell You (Oct. 18, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/scammed-scolded-shamed-the-stories-gig-workers-cant-tell-you/articleshow/124681402.cms>

and social security, the income of the gigs on relentless availability depended, whereas classic workers were registered with untaxed overtime in the atmosphere of celebrating hustle. In 2024-2025 tragic cases that emphasized the toll. The narratives showed the invisible links of legal silent on digital overwork that understood workers much earlier than the codes did.

MENTAL HEALTH TOLL: UNCHANGED PRESSURES

The 24/7 requirements exerted a horrific mental cost and burnouts, anxiety, and suicides were on the rise as work oozed out hour after hour. A cross-sectional study involving 425 male app-based food delivery riders was carried out in Tamil Nadu, the study revealed- Burnout affected 89.2% at low/medium levels and 10.8% at high levels; anxiety impacted 23.7% moderately and 12.5% at moderate-severe/severe levels; depression struck 26.8% moderately and 16.2% at moderate-severe/severe levels,² which is further exacerbated in the gig sector by the uncertainty of income and punitive rating, many other wanted to quit there jobs. The World Health Organization attributes 745,000 deaths per year to stress related heart disease and strokes on long hours all over the world.³

INDIAN CASES

1. *Employee at Ola, Engineer Krutrim (May 2025)*

Krutrim was a 25-year-old software engineer in Ola AI and he committed suicide. It is reported that he was overworked, with three people and their work on his shoulders, and tortured by the tyrannical culture in the management.⁴

2. *Employee at EY Pune (Sep 2024)*

This suicide was that of a 26-year-old Chartered Accountant who had been employed by EY in Pune four months before he committed suicide because of work pressure. Her mother has

² J. Samal et al., *Prevalence and Factors of Anxiety, Depression, and Burnout Among Healthcare Workers*, PMC (May 25, 2025), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12318562/>.

³ World Health Org. & Int'l Lab. Org., *Long Working Hours Increasing Deaths from Heart Disease and Stroke: WHO, ILO*, WHO (May 17, 2021), <https://www.who.int/news/item/17-05-2021-long-working-hours-increasing-deaths-from-heart-disease-and-stroke-who-ilo>

⁴ *Hindustan Times*, *Ola Group Sees Second Suicide Case Within Six Months* (Oct. 20, 2025), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/business/ola-group-witnesses-second-case-of-death-by-suicide-within-six-months-101760954889055.html>.

penned a letter to the head of India on how she has been overworked and lacked support.⁵

3. *Employee at Bajaj Finance (Oct 2024)*

One of the employees at Bajaj Finance committed suicide and the relatives of the deceased claimed that he was mentally harassed and beaten to achieve sales goals and when the person was unable to do so, he used his money to achieve the goals.⁶

4. *Arti Yadav, Community Health Officer (May 2025)*

Arti Yadav was a Community Health Officer, who committed suicide with the government of Chhattisgarh. They claimed that she had denied them leave, was overworked, reported late with threats of her secret report and alone. This case highlights failures in the system of the public health sector.⁷

5. *Samarveer Singh, professor (April 2023)*

Samarveer Singh, an ad-hoc professor at Hindu College, University of Delhi committed suicide. Fired from his job without prior notice, his suicide brought the discussion of the abuse of ad-hoc faculty in Indian higher education back.⁸

6. *Vimal Negi, GM at HPPCL (March 2025)*

Vimal Negi who was the General Manager in the Himachal Pradesh Power Corporation Limited was discovered dead in mysterious circumstances. His family has indicated that they believe that the death was as a result of stress and work pressure. The family is demanding CBI inquiry.⁹

⁵ *Hindustan Times*, EY Pune Employee, 26, Died Due to Work Stress (Sep. 17, 2024), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/trending/ey-pune-employee-anna-sebastian-perayil-26-died-due-to-work-stress-no-one-from-ernst-young-attended-funeral-101726637649530.html>

⁶ *Bus. Standard*, *Bajaj Finance Employee Dies by Suicide; Family Alleges Mental Harassment* (Sep. 30, 2024), https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/bajaj-finance-employee-dies-by-suicide-family-alleges-mental-harassment-124100100325_1.html

⁷ *Times of India*, *'Systemic Failures, Mental Harassment and Disregard by Officials' Behind CHO's Suicide: Union* (May 16, 2025), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/raipur/systemic-failures-mental-harassment-and-disregard-by-officials-behind-chos-suicide/articleshow/121219701.cms>

⁸ *Indian Express*, *Former Hindu College Ad Hoc Lecturer Dies by Suicide in Delhi, Students Protest* (Apr. 27, 2023), <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/former-hindu-college-ad-hoc-lecturer-suicide-students-protest-8578899/>

⁹ *NDTV*, *How Engineer Vimal Negi's Death Sparked BJP vs Congress Cop vs Cop in Himachal* (May 25, 2025), <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/how-engineer-vimal-negis-death-sparked-bjp-vs-congress-cop-vs-cop->

GLOBAL CONTRAST

India was struggling with the digital overworking plea as per the limits of pre-2025 legislations, but at least some countries had already passed the right to disconnect, to protect workers against after-hours invasions. In 2017, France was the first with the El Khomri Law, that requires firms with 50+ employees to negotiate and publish a written regulation of restrictions on off-hours work emails and calls to establish negotiated limits instead of bans.¹⁰ Portugal prohibited contacts between the employer and employees after their working shifts.¹¹ In 2022, Ontario province of Canada was next with the Working for Workers Act that mandates companies with 25 or more employees have written after-hours communication policies, a direct attack on remote burnout.¹² In South Korea, the limit on overtime was legally enforced,¹³ In Germany regulates overtime (max 8 hrs/day avg., overtime by collective agreements).¹⁴ In Spain Workers' Statute caps overtime at 80 hrs/year, rates set by collective agreements.¹⁵ In India pre-2025 labour codes were silent on digital connectivity (after-hours work), unlike EU nation's explicit boundaries.¹⁶ These models provided established templates, and it underlined how such considerations of the law could redesign individual time despite economies of technology.

POST-CODES SHIFT: KEY CHANGES

The labor situation in India changed on November 21, 2025, when the central government introduced four unified codes-

1] Code on Wages, 2019,

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¹⁰ Nat'l L. Rev., *New French Law Limits Work Email Outside of Business Hours* (Feb. 13, 2017),

<https://natlawreview.com/article/new-french-law-limits-work-email-outside-business-hours>

¹¹ Law No. 83/2021 of Dec. 6, 2021 (Port.), as cited in *The New Federalist*, *No More Boss After Working Hours: Portugal's New 'Right to Disconnect' Law* (Dec. 13, 2021), <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/no-more-boss-after-working-hours-portugal-s-new-right-to-disconnect-law?lang=fr>

¹² Ont. Prop. Stat. L. 2021, c. 35, Sched. 1 (*Working for Workers Act, 2021*) (Can.), as amended by *Working for Workers Act, 2022*, S.O. 2022, c. 7 <https://www.ontario.ca/document/your-guide-employment-standards-act-0/written-policy-disconnecting-from-work>

¹³ Labor Standards Act, Act No. 14763 (S. Kor. 2017), art. 53 <https://iuslaboris.com/insights/south-koreas-maximum-working-week-to-be-reduced-to-52-hours/>

¹⁴ Arbeitszeitgesetz [ArbZG] [Working Time Act], Nov. 23, 2023, BGBl. I 2408 (Ger.)

<https://www.reedsmith.com/our-insights/blogs/employment-law-watch/102klil/overtime-compensation-in-germany-staying-compliant-to-avoid-legal-challenges/>

¹⁵ Workers' Statute, art. 34-35 (Royal Legislative Decree 2/2015, Oct. 23, 2015) (Spain)

<https://www.qureos.com/labor-laws/working-hours-in-spain>

¹⁶ *Shravan Anande and Hari Priya Murarikar, Right to Disconnect in India- Blog, (15 Dec 2025)*

<https://vidhilegalpolicy.in/blog/right-to-disconnect-in-india/>

2] Industrial Relations Code, 2020

3] Code on Social Security, 2020

4] OSH Code, 2020

by rationalizing 29 obsolete laws into simplified systems specific to the present-day work, such as gig and digital reality. Prior to 2025, protections were unbundled and factory-based, after enforcement, gig workers have acquired the status of the first time ever, and wage floors and dispute procedures were created to address the long-overlooked vulnerabilities. Beyond core provisions, codes mandates appointment letters¹⁷ for all, free health check-ups¹⁸ and women's night shift with safety.¹⁹ Expanding ESIC pan-India even to single employee hazardous units.

These changes are a step in the right direction by March 2026 as compliance will be simplified and boundaries will have a foundation, yet clear after-hours safeguards will not be implemented in the context of early adoption.

GIG ECONOMY: PRE AND POST AMENDMENTS

Before 2025, the gig workers on websites such as Zomato, Swiggy, or Ola would be legally unregulated as independent contractors with no fixed working hours, salaries, or rights, whose survival depended on the reviews provided by customers who needed them to be available all strengths of night and day. One negative feedback of a late-night order may lead to wage reduction or termination of an account, where riders and drivers are stuck in an infinite loop to meet the daily target and eliminate the punishment of an algorithm. The Code on Social Security 2020 has formal definitions of platform workers and aggregators (after November 2025), and platforms cannot avoid paying 1-2 percent of turnover to welfare funds to mitigate life insurance, maternity benefits, and old age support first-of-its-kind security which will reduce part of the income precarity.²⁰ Ratings systems, however, always remain, always taxing with necessities of constant logins in the face of any knowledge of piece rate, as the minimums of the Wages Code brings partial relief, but not hour restriction, to a business where no work ever clocks-in. Money is being spent by March 2026, yet the 24/7 grind wears its new

¹⁷ Occupational Safety, Health & Working Conditions Code, No. 37 of 2020, § 6(1)(f) (2020).

¹⁸ Occupational Safety, Health & Working Conditions Code, No. 37 of 2020, § 6(1)(c) (2020).

¹⁹ Occupational Safety, Health & Working Conditions Code, No. 37 of 2020, § 43(2020).

²⁰ Code on Social Security, No. 36 of 2020, § 114(4) (2020) (notified effective 21 Nov. 2025).

foundations out.

EARLY POST-CODE LANDSCAPE

Four months into the enforcement period, in March 2026 the codes have made life easier to the employers, and new accountability mechanisms introduced into the Indian gig and digital workforce that were previously unheard of. The social security code Gig funds are beginning to take effect whereby the aggregator credits are being directed towards tangible benefits such as insurance with early report platforms registering workers with e- Shram which is a step forward compared to 2025 anonymity.²¹ Industrial Relations Code Grievance committees provide easy channels to file overwork complaints and OSH standards have now become more vigilant of remote arrangements by identifying the health hazards in non factory areas. Nonetheless, the client 10:30 PM call continues: there are no codes requiring after-hours partings, and the ratings pressures on the organization and the pressures of unpaid overtime in the gray area remain as the auditor agencies intensify audits. Pre-shift damages such as in the 2025 case of Ola tragedy can be reduced, but coming in 2026 we will see whether tribunals and salary transparency rehabilitate the cycle or even a more sinister web of digital boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Between the pre-2025 confusion on the definition of gig labor and the absence of any type of regulatory intervention on the digital ping of a surrogate worker and the post-codes era of official workerhood on platforms and welfare vendors, the Indian workforce, as of March 2026, is at an ordered gateway. The four codes fulfil paper floor wages, grievance routes and safety nets but the end-of-night buzz indicates incomplete development, where operations are now showing whether the development has allowed slackening the never-off switch that drove burnout and tragedy. The struggle against boundaries by workers has reached its legal silence, to the systematic protection of boundaries, which is only awaited practically in reality.

²¹ Code on Social Security, No. 36 of 2020, § 114(4) (2020) (notified 21 Nov. 2025); PIB, Labour Reforms (19 Nov. 2025), <https://www.pib.gov.in> [web:62].