



GANDHIAN PRINCIPLES AND WORKER RIGHTS IN INDIA'S FOOD DELIVERY GIG SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi, beyond being the leader of India's freedom struggle, was a visionary social thinker whose economic ideas remain highly relevant in addressing India's socio-economic challenges. This paper aims to apply Gandhian principles such as non-violence (Ahimsa), dignity of labor, self-reliance (Swadeshi), and trusteeship to improve worker rights and ethical labor practices in India's rapidly growing food delivery gig economy. Using a qualitative descriptive approach based on secondary data from academic research and policy documents, this study highlights gap between modern labor practices and the Gandhian ideal of socio-economic justice. The findings suggest that integrating Gandhian values into gig economy governance and labor policies could promote dignity, fairness, and sustainability for gig workers, offering a human-centered alternative to the prevailing model. This alignment with Gandhi's critique of industrialization and materialism emphasizes the need for economic systems that prioritize inclusive growth, social equity, and environmental stewardship.

Keywords: Gandhian Economics, Gig Economy, Worker Rights, Food Delivery Sector

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, India's gig economy has expanded rapidly especially in urban centers such as Bengaluru, Delhi, Mumbai and many other which are driven by smartphone penetration, internet access, venture capital flows, and the convenience of on demand platforms. The food delivery sector, led by companies such as Swiggy, Zomato and many other now employs thousands of gig workers, mostly young, largely male, and precariously engaged as independent contractors. These workers face unstable incomes, lack of social security, hazardous road conditions, piece rate pay, opaque algorithmic management, and minimal voice in their work environment [1].

Simultaneously, India continues to struggle with enduring socio economic inequalities: persistent rural poverty, informal employment, and exclusion

from formal labour protections. The traditional industrial economy has definitely benefited some, but large segments remain marginalised. In this context, the ideals of Gandhian Economics with its emphasis on non violence (Ahimsa), simplicity, self reliance (Swadeshi), trusteeship, and dignity of labor offer an alternative lens to address modern labour challenges [2].

Gandhi argued that true progress lies in a decentralised, human scale economy grounded in ethical relations and social equity [3]. He opposed exploitative industrial capitalism and highlighted the moral dimension of production: workers must be treated as ends, not means, and economic arrangements must serve human welfare. Applying these principles to the gig economy may help bridge the breach between digital convenience and ethical labor practice.



This study seeks to explore how Gandhian social and economic thought can inform worker rights discourse in India's food delivery gig sector, highlighting the disjuncture between current practice and what a humane, dignified, just system might entail.

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the key gaps between the living labour conditions in India's food delivery gig economy and Gandhian principles of dignity, non violence, self reliance, and trusteeship.
2. To explore how Gandhian economic ideas can inspire policy frameworks or platform governance reforms that enhance worker rights, fairness, and well being.
3. To propose actionable, value based recommendations for integrating Gandhian principles into gig economy regulation and practice to ensure inclusive, sustainable outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative descriptive design based on secondary data. Sources of data include peer reviewed journal articles on gig economy labour, government policy reports, labour publications, and Gandhian economic texts. The study analyzes and synthesizes insights across these secondary sources to map out current worker conditions in the gig sector and contrast them with Gandhian normative principles.

The approach is descriptive and interpretive, focusing on thematic evaluation on mapping the gaps; interpreting Gandhian philosophy in contemporary terms and generating suggestions grounded in both theory and documented policy interventions. The research emphasis on conceptual clarity, relevance, and bridging academic and policy literatures to produce grounded recommendations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literatures review has broadly classified into sections considering the importance of content contained in the research which is reviewed as follows:

Worker Conditions in the Gig Economy

Scholars such as Ashkanasy et al. [4] and Sengupta & Banerjee [5] document that food delivery gig workers in cities like Bengaluru and Delhi endure income volatility, lack of written contracts, unpredictable working hours, and no paid leave. They are classified as independent contractors, denying them minimum wage protections, social security, or health benefits. Algorithmic management systems often enforce delivery times that encourage risk taking and traffic violations. Despite minimal capital requirements, their social isolation, lack of collective voice, and absence of grievance mechanisms expose them to exploitation. Forde et al. [6] and De Stefano [7] have critiqued the "platform capitalism" model, calling for human centered labor regulations that restore agency, collective voice, and minimum standards. Such frameworks emphasize transparency, fairness in algorithmic assignment, and access to dispute resolution.

Gandhian Economic Principles

Gandhi's economic vision, as elaborated in Hind Swaraj [8] and other writings, prioritized Swadeshi which is economic self reliance through local production and consumption, rejecting exploitative industrialization [9]. He advocated trusteeship, whereby owners manage wealth as trustees for community welfare, forbidding hoarding or profiteering at workers' expense. Dignity of labour was central to his moral economy: manual work and all honest labour had intrinsic value and deserved respect. His commitment to Ahimsa extended beyond non violence in conflict, it encompassed non exploitation, fair wages, and equitable treatment of workers [10].

Attempts to Embed Gandhian Ideas in Modern Policy

Past initiatives such as the Khadi and Village Industries Commission or Gramodyog programmes embodied partial Gandhian ideals, promoting decentralized livelihoods, local self reliance, and dignity of craft labour [11]. More recently, debates on corporate social responsibility and fiduciary corporate models echo trusteeship.



Yet these ideas have seldom penetrated digital gig platforms or official labour laws governing them [12].

FINDINGS

According on the study and discussion described above, the following findings have been made:

- Gig workers are classified as independent contractors, which deprives them of basic labour rights like minimum wage, social security, and job protection. This leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and without legal safeguards.
- The gig workers income is highly unstable, depending on the number of deliveries, incentives, and unpredictable surge pricing. Such irregular pay often falls below a living wage, making financial security difficult.
- Work assignments and performance targets are controlled by opaque algorithms, leaving workers with little transparency or input. This removes their ability to negotiate or appeal unfair treatment.
- Delivery workers face hazardous road conditions and pressure to meet tight deadlines, increasing the risk of accidents. They generally lack access to health insurance or compensation for injuries.
- Gig workers have no formal unions or collective bargaining power, limiting their ability to improve wages or working conditions. Their fragmented status prevents unified representation.
- Platforms focus mainly on rapid growth and maximizing profits, often at the expense of worker welfare. This profit-driven approach overlooks the human costs of labor exploitation.
- Many expenses like fuel, vehicle maintenance, and fines are borne entirely by the workers,

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not the platforms. This cost-shifting increases workers' financial burdens unfairly.

SUGGESTIONS

- The government should legally recognize gig workers to ensure they receive basic labour rights and protections.
- Minimum wage standards and social security benefits should be specified for gig workers by the state.
- Platform companies should make algorithmic management transparent and allow workers to participate in decisions.
- Platform companies, together with the government, should offer health insurance and safety measures to reduce risks faced by delivery workers.
- The government and civil society organizations should support the formation of worker cooperatives or unions to strengthen collective bargaining power.

CONCLUSION

Gandhi's ideas about economics are based on non-violence, respect for all kinds of work, self-reliance, and caring for others which offers a thoughtful way to tackle the deep inequalities and uncertainties that gig workers in India face today. Right now, food delivery platforms rely heavily on algorithms, unstable pay, and weak worker protections, which go against these values. If we rethink how the gig economy is managed by setting fair minimum standards, involving workers in decisions, encouraging cooperative ownership, building skills, and protecting the environment, India can create a fairer and more caring economy. Bringing Gandhian values into policies for gig workers doesn't just make work fairer but it also helps build a society that's more just and inclusive for everyone.



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