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Behind the Orders: Unpacking the Realities of New Delhi's Food Delivery Gig Workers

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Dedication

To the Zomato delivery riders, who work through all conditions to ensure our meals reach us. This is also a thank you on behalf of every customer who may have forgotten to express their appreciation—your efforts are seen, valued, and never taken for granted.

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List of Acronyms

BCG - Boston Consulting Group

EMI - Equated Monthly Installment

GPS - Global Positioning System

ID - Identification Document (often referring to platform-specific identification)

ILO - International Labour Organization

NASSCOM - National Association of Software and Service Companies

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

NITI - National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog)

WDR - World Development Report

QR - Quick Response (used in the context of QR codes for survey distribution)

Abstract

This study examines the dual impact of New Delhi's gig economy, focusing on Zomato's food delivery platform. It investigates how such platforms provide income for those excluded from formal work while raising concerns about working conditions and well-being. Guided by the question—How does Zomato simultaneously create employment opportunities and perpetuate social hierarchies through economic sorting? —this research explores whether gig work in India mitigates or reinforces socio-economic inequalities. Based on original fieldwork (85 surveys, 20 interviews, and 3 group discussions), findings reveal that while Zomato appears inclusive, it directs marginalized workers into precarious roles, subtly sustaining social stratification through implicit market mechanisms and exposing the 'myth of freedom' within the gig economy. Despite these issues, platforms like Zomato provide critical income within India's informal economy, where alternatives are scarce.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research contributes to Development Studies by examining how platforms operate within a predominantly informal labor markets in India. While much of the existing literature focuses on regulatory policies or algorithmic control, this study explores how broader societal forces shape the working conditions of gig workers, particularly food delivery riders. Unlike in the Global North, where gig work is a relatively new source of informalization, platform work in the Global South intensifies the socio-economic vulnerabilities already pervasive in informal labor. This research highlights the unique policy challenges within India's informal economy, suggesting a need for adaptive labor protections that go beyond traditional regulatory frameworks to address gig work's distinct role in development contexts where protections are minimal, and the conventional regulatory frameworks are insufficient to address the distinct needs of gig workers.

Keywords- Gig Economy, Informality, Working Conditions, Algorithmic Management, Socio- economic inequalities.

1. Introduction

In India's rapidly evolving urban environment, the digital revolution has opened pathways to a new era of work opportunities through the platform economy. With over 90% of the workforce engaged in unregulated, precarious jobs within a predominantly informal labor market (International Labour Organization, 2018), digital platforms have emerged as significant intermediaries transforming employment opportunities for many. Services such as transport, food, and grocery deliveries are now available through these platforms, giving rise to a large workforce engaged in a distinct form of digitally mediated work known as gig work.

Digital platforms, as defined by Srnicek (2017), are infrastructural intermediaries that facilitate and shape interactions between customers, service providers, advertisers, and businesses. While these platforms cater to a growing middle class of consumers, fuelled by widespread smartphone access and affordable data, the focus here is not on consumer convenience. Instead, it's on the lives and labor conditions of the workers who fulfil these orders and the challenging conditions they encounter behind the screen.

Central to this digital transformation is the emergence of gig work, a form of employment characterized by temporary, short-term tasks typically mediated through digital platforms that connect employers with workers (Cherry & Antonio, 2017; Huws et al., 2017). Gig work represents a fundamental shift from traditional employment relationships, operating through a system where workers perform discrete tasks without the security of long-term contracts.

Sundararajan (2016) suggests that platforms exemplify crowd-based capitalism by decentralizing labor markets and broadening employment opportunities for marginalized groups, especially those historically excluded from formal employment. NITI Aayog, a government-affiliated think tank, reports that India has 7.7 million gig workers spanning low, medium, and high skill levels, with significant growth in both low- and high-skill categories (NITI Aayog, 2022). By 2025, India's platform economy is anticipated to reach $30 billion, with food delivery platforms significantly contributing to structured yet precarious employment for socio-economically marginalized groups (NASSCOM, 2018; NITI Aayog, 2022). These platforms have generated millions of jobs, including around 440,000 positions specifically in food delivery (Business Today, 2019).

In this context, the emergence of the platform economy, particularly in the food delivery industry as exemplified by Zomato, presents new income opportunities for marginalized communities in urban centres like New Delhi. Founded in New Delhi in 2008, Zomato began as a service to digitize restaurant menus but quickly evolved into a pioneer in India's food delivery sector, setting industry standards and influencing labor practices across the country. By 2023, Zomato boasted a workforce of over 300,000 delivery partners, operated in 800 cities, and held a 57% market share in the food delivery sector (Goldman Sachs, 2024).

As a consumer, I became increasingly aware that platforms like Zomato have not only revolutionized the way we order food but have also created a new workforce whose labor remains largely invisible. Each order I placed sparked questions about the individuals behind each delivery—how they navigate the vast and demanding city of New Delhi and what their workdays entail. What began as curiosity turned into a commitment to uncover the hidden realities behind a service I often used.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature on the gig economy, which has been largely shaped by scholarship from the Global North. In contexts where formal labor markets dominate, gig work is seen as a novel form of informalization that undermines traditional labor protections. However, this framing overlooks the specific socio-economic contexts of the Global South, particularly India, where informality has long been a defining feature of the labor market. In India, gig work operates not as a groundbreaking shift but as an accelerated, data-driven extension of existing informal labor practices. Although platforms like Zomato provide new employment opportunities, they do so within a pre-existing structure of precarious, unregulated work that has historically characterized India's informal economy.

Furthermore, while much of the existing literature focuses on regulatory policies or algorithmic control, this study explores how broader societal forces shape the working conditions of gig workers, particularly food delivery riders. Platforms emerge as apparent saviours, offering economic engagement for those marginalized from the formal labor market, yet they simultaneously perpetuate social hierarchies and inequalities through implicit mechanisms of economic sorting. Despite an ostensibly open hiring process devoid of explicit caste, class, or education barriers, gig work directs marginalized groups into precarious, low-security roles. This contradiction reflects a broader critique of liberalism, where the promise of

autonomy and freedom is coupled with enduring social stratification, highlighting the "myth of freedom" within ultra-liberal economic frameworks.

The main research question guiding this study is: How does the gig economy, exemplified by platforms like Zomato, simultaneously create earning opportunities while reproducing social hierarchies and inequalities through implicit mechanisms of economic sorting?

To address this broad question, the study is divided into three sub-questions, each targeting a specific aspect of the main question:

1. How do the paradigms of algorithmic management impact the working conditions of gig workers in New Delhi?
2. How does platform work reproduce or mitigate existing inequalities within the informal economy in New Delhi?
3. To what extent does Zomato's platform reinforce or challenge traditional hierarchies in the labor market while contributing to income generation in New Delhi?

To address these questions, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from 85 surveys with qualitative insights from 20 interviews and three spontaneous group discussions with Zomato delivery workers. This methodology allows for a comprehensive analysis, capturing both demographic patterns and individual narratives that illuminate the factors influencing workers' daily realities and overall well-being.

This research is structured to explore the impacts of gig work on food delivery riders in New Delhi, with a particular focus on those working for Zomato. Following the introductory chapter, the study begins with a literature review examining the dual role of digital platforms within India's informal labor market, engaging with pre-existing literature on the platform economy and examining central debates on gig work, informality, algorithmic management, social stratification, and precarity—particularly within the context of food delivery platforms in India's labor market. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, detailing the mixed-methods approach used to understand the complex realities of gig workers. Chapter 4 presents the analysis, interpreting findings on how algorithmic management, income instability, and social hierarchies shape the daily experiences of riders. Finally, Chapter 5 synthesizes these insights, connecting them back to the study's objectives by addressing the research questions and

reflecting on the broader implications for the working conditions of food delivery riders in New Delhi.

This study, titled "Behind the Orders: Unpacking the Realities of New Delhi's Food Delivery Gig Workers," seeks to give a voice to those behind the screens and delving into the real experiences behind each delivery.

2. The Duality of Digital Platforms in India's Informal Labor Market

2.1 Introduction

This literature review examines the opportunities and inequalities introduced by digital platforms in India's informal labor market. Positioned within this largely informal economy, platforms like Zomato are reshaping labor markets by providing employment opportunities beyond the traditional scope. Analyzing platform labor in this context offers a distinct perspective on the Global South, where informal labor systems differ significantly from those in the Global North. While these platforms democratize work access, this transformation also introduces new forms of labor commodification and reinforces class-based inequalities, presenting both opportunities and challenges within the gig economy.

2.2 Zomato: A New Frontier for Informal Labor

In India, where informal employment has long been the backbone of the labor market, the rise of digital platforms brings new dimensions to a well-established reality, blending technological innovation with deeply rooted labor practices.

2.2.1 Navigating Informality within the Gig Economy

The concept of the informal economy was first introduced by Hart (1973), who used the term to describe economic activities that operate outside formal structures of regulation and taxation. This distinction between formal and informal work has been foundational in understanding labor markets, particularly in developing economies. While initially seen as a peripheral or transitional phase, informality has since been recognized as a core and enduring feature of labor markets, especially in the Global South (Breman, 2013).

In gig work, platforms like Zomato act as digital extensions of informality. While these platforms bring new forms of labor organization, they do not fundamentally improve the precarious conditions of informal work. Instead, as Meagher (2021) argues, digital platforms create "infrastructures of inclusion," connecting informal workers to formal market

economies by giving them access to jobs and income. However, this inclusion remains conditional and precarious. Workers gain ties to the formal economy but are subject to strict algorithmic management that values efficiency and profit over worker rights and protections. This creates what Meagher terms "adverse incorporation," where workers are included in economic circuits but under exploitative and highly unstable conditions. For instance, while gig workers may receive regular payments, they still lack essential labor protections like healthcare, pensions, or job security. Thus, these platforms integrate informal workers into the formal economy without addressing the core vulnerabilities of informal labor.

2.2.2 Bringing Structure to Gig Work

Digital labor platforms, as Rangaswamy (2019) notes, create a veneer of structure and organization that sets them apart from traditional informal sectors like domestic labor or street vending. However, this framework does little to address the core precarity of gig work. Despite regular payments, workers lack essential protections such as healthcare, pensions, and job security. The persistence of informality within the technologically driven gig economy reveals deeper structural inequalities in India's labor market. Although platforms like Zomato provide some formalization through job access, working conditions remain precarious. Gig work, despite its modern platform-based structure, is not a disruption but a continuation of longstanding informal labor practices in India.

For many Indian workers, gig work represents not a disruption but rather a continuation of the informal labor practices that have historically dominated the country's workforce. The precarity of gig work, characterized by job insecurity, fluctuating incomes, and lack of social protections, closely mirrors the conditions of traditional informal urban labor, such as the work of chaiwalas [1] and dabbawalas [2]. This continuity highlights the persistence of economic

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[1] **Chaiwala**: A chaiwala is a tea vendor in India who prepares and sells tea informally, often from roadside stalls or by moving through busy areas, typically without job security or formal protections.

[2] **Dabbawala**: A dabbawala is a lunchbox carrier in Mumbai who collects and delivers home-cooked meals to office workers, operating within the informal economy and typically without formal job benefits or security.

vulnerability within India's informal labor market, even as digital platforms introduce new forms of labor organization (Graham et al., 2017).

Furthermore, while platforms like Zomato streamline service delivery and create new earning opportunities, they raise critical questions about labor conditions and societal implications. The precarious work conditions experienced by gig workers often amplify the vulnerabilities long associated with informal work, particularly in the absence of comprehensive labor protections (Wood et al., 2019). In this way, the gig economy in India represents not just a new frontier for labor but a digital perpetuation of existing informal labor dynamics, where economic inclusion is achieved on uneven and often exploitative terms.

2.3 Algorithmic Management and Digital Measurement

Algorithmic management is a central feature of the platform economy, especially in gig work environments like food delivery. Parwez (2021) notes that platforms like Zomato use algorithms to allocate tasks, monitor performance, and influence earnings, relying on data points such as delivery times, customer ratings, and order volumes. While these algorithms aim to optimize efficiency and service speed, they often undermine workers' autonomy and job satisfaction by exerting control over their working conditions.

Platforms like Zomato utilize algorithmic management to oversee their workforce. Gig-based applications manage labor markets without directly hiring workers, acting as digital brokers who control the allocation of tasks and monitor performance (Gandini, 2021). Through sophisticated algorithms, these platforms assign deliveries, track worker locations, and evaluate performance metrics, effectively managing a dispersed workforce without traditional managerial roles.

Workers are subject to platform-imposed restrictions and the unpredictability of demand-driven markets (Choudary & Vasant, 2021). Despite being labeled as independent contractors, they must adhere to algorithms that dictate their work schedules, routes, and even interactions with customers. Srnicek (2017) situates this within a neoliberal framework that prioritizes flexibility and efficiency over worker security, illustrating how algorithmic management reshapes labor dynamics in the gig economy.

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2.3.1 Digital measurement

Digital measurement plays a crucial role in how platforms like Zomato monitor and influence worker behavior. Every aspect of a delivery worker's performance is quantified—delivery times, customer ratings, acceptance rates of tasks, and more. This data-driven approach allows platforms to create performance profiles for each worker, which can impact their access to future tasks and earnings.

Building on this, digital measurement tools such as GPS tracking and performance metrics enable platforms to monitor each step of a worker's tasks with unprecedented precision. These technologies track everything from the time taken to complete a task to the distance traveled, ensuring optimal route planning and timely service delivery. This allows companies to optimize the matching of delivery workers with orders and improve efficiency.

Algorithms help identify high-demand areas and peak times, directing delivery workers where they are needed most, thereby balancing supply and demand effectively. Quality is monitored through customer ratings and reviews, as well as task completion photos, ensuring accountability and consistency in service.

This measurement is not just about enhancing operational efficiency but also about how work is visualized and categorized. Tasks that were previously invisible or uncounted can now be broken down into measurable steps, each valued and tracked. While this provides new insights into work processes, it also introduces constant surveillance and performance evaluation for workers, raising concerns about privacy and the pressures associated with continuous monitoring (Rathi & Tandon, 2021).

2.3.2 Algorithmic Management

A crucial aspect of algorithmic management is the creation of information asymmetry, where workers are often left in the dark about how decisions regarding task allocation and performance evaluations are made. This lack of transparency creates a significant power imbalance, leaving workers in a state of uncertainty regarding the factors influencing their earnings and job stability. For instance, drivers may be unsure why they are assigned specific routes or how their ratings fluctuate, which can lead to stress and feelings of helplessness.

Woodcock (2021) expands on these issues by discussing how workers are reduced to performing repetitive, algorithm-dictated tasks that offer little opportunity for skill development. This makes them more replaceable in the eyes of the platform, further entrenching their precarious position in the labor market (Rathi & Tandon, 2021). This opaque decision-making contributes to what has been termed "algorithmic cruelty," where the impersonal and automated nature of these systems exacerbates workers' vulnerabilities. Workers are subject to unpredictable work schedules, sudden changes in task assignments, and arbitrary performance evaluations, all dictated by algorithms prioritizing efficiency over worker well-being (Parwez, 2021). Furthermore, platforms often utilize algorithmic control to enforce compliance and productivity. For example, food delivery workers may be incentivized or penalized based on their performance metrics, such as delivery speed and customer satisfaction ratings. This system encourages workers to maximize their efficiency, often at the expense of their health and safety. The constant pressure to perform under the watchful eye of an algorithm can lead to burnout and decreased job satisfaction (Rathi & Tandon, 2021).

While the surveillance and performance monitoring tools benefit platforms, they also have deeper implications for workers' autonomy. Woodcock (2021) argues that algorithmic management not only controls workers' performance but also reduces workers to performing repetitive, algorithm-dictated tasks that require minimal cognitive input. This limits opportunities for skill development and makes workers more replaceable in the eyes of the platform. Thus, while Parwez focuses more on the psychological impact of algorithmic control, Woodcock's argument dives deeper into the structural transformation of labor, particularly how platforms standardize tasks and devalue individual worker contributions (Woodcock, 2021).

Woodcock and Graham (2019) examines additional insights into how algorithmic management reshapes labor relations. They argue that while algorithms offer efficiency and scalability for platforms, they also introduce new forms of surveillance and control that can exacerbate existing inequalities and vulnerabilities among workers. The data-driven nature of these platforms means that workers are continuously monitored and evaluated, often without clear guidelines or the ability to appeal against unfair treatment (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). Moreover, the reliance on algorithms for task allocation and performance monitoring often means that workers have little recourse to challenge decisions or negotiate better terms. The impersonal nature of algorithmic management strips workers of the ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with their employers, reducing their agency and reinforcing their dependence on the platform (Zia, 2021).

A significant problem in this context is that platforms can deactivate worker accounts, effectively cutting off their ability to earn income. This deactivation can occur for various reasons, such as low ratings, customer complaints, or violations of platform policies, and often leaves workers with limited means to appeal the decision (Gridwise, 2024). Such platforms also contribute to social exclusion by treating workers as interchangeable parts of a broader system, prioritizing operational efficiency over worker well-being (Fischer, 2020). This commodification of labor is particularly harmful to workers from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds, who find themselves caught in cycles of precarious jobs with limited opportunities for career advancement (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). These workers face significant economic vulnerabilities, with little chance to improve their circumstances under the current platform-based labor model.

2.5 Reinforcing Class-Based Inequalities in the Global South

The concept of technological impartiality, as examined by Pollio (2019) through Uber's platform model in Cape Town, resonates closely with Zomato's approach in India, where the platform allocates delivery tasks algorithmically, minimizing the subjective biases prevalent in conventional workplaces. This algorithm-driven system ostensibly offers a fairer alternative, bypassing social markers such as caste and religion that have historically influenced employment access and hierarchies in India. Zomato's digital infrastructure, like Uber's, appears

to create a level playing field by focusing solely on availability and proximity to assign jobs, sidestepping personal discretion.

Yet, while technological impartiality fosters inclusivity, it also introduces limitations. The emphasis on algorithmic fairness does not inherently address the socio-economic vulnerabilities that workers face beyond the platform, such as the lack of job security or social protections. This mirrors Pollio's observations in the context of Uber, suggesting that while technology-driven systems create the appearance of impartiality, they may fall short of addressing the broader socio-economic realities and inequalities workers encounter outside the algorithm.

Harriss-White (2003) highlights how stratification economics contextualizes India's informal labor market as one regulated by caste and class structures rather than state policy or labor laws. These deeply rooted social hierarchies determine who performs what type of work and under what conditions. Platforms like Zomato, rather than changing this system, exploit it by offering gig work as a convenient alternative to formal employment, where worker rights, benefits, and job security remain absent. Gig work may attract workers from lower socio-economic strata due to its low entry barriers, yet it effectively locks them into cycles of economic vulnerability. Here, Harriss-White's insight underscores that gig platforms do not innovate but rather leverage traditional social divisions, commodifying labor based on caste and class to reduce labor costs and increase platform adaptability.

This dynamic resonates with Fischer's (2018) critical distinction between poverty and social exclusion. Fischer argues that moving out of poverty does not inherently reduce a worker's vulnerability to social exclusion. Zomato's workers, though they may earn enough to avoid absolute poverty, remain economically excluded and deprived of formal employment protections, their labor conditions dictated by algorithms and devoid of agency. While Zomato's gig model appears to promise economic inclusion, Fischer's argument reveals this as largely superficial, masking deep-rooted inequities that further isolate workers from meaningful socio-economic mobility. In this framework, inclusion becomes a form of precarious entrapment, where workers experience income volatility and persistent exploitation without the recourse or protection afforded by formal employment.

The emergence of gig work via platforms such as Zomato in India signifies not a departure from history but rather a perpetuation of the structural disparities that have historically characterized the informal economy. Building on this, Mezzadri (2022) situates gig work within the broader context of social reproduction, arguing that platforms like Zomato don't merely replicate pre-existing inequalities—they actively institutionalize them through algorithmic control and insecure labor contracts. Zomato's flexible work structure, presented as a liberating model, in reality upholds the social hierarchies of the informal economy by treating workers from marginalized backgrounds as expendable resources. These workers are called upon during demand surges but are unsupported during downtimes, a practice that mirrors traditional informal labor dynamics. By relying on on-demand labor, Zomato commodifies its workforce, reducing workers to data points controlled by algorithms, where labor becomes interchangeable and workers disposable.

In this context, Zomato's operations reinforce the very social hierarchies that define informal labor, contradicting any claims of offering new economic opportunities. Fischer's argument that social exclusion goes beyond income captures this nuance: even as gig workers achieve marginal economic gains, they are systematically denied the ability to shape their work conditions, rendering their employment insecure and their socio-economic status static. Despite promises of economic inclusion, gig work amplifies socio-economic stratification, reinforcing class-based inequalities that deny workers meaningful economic agency. They offer an illusion of flexibility and autonomy, yet this guise masks the lack of institutional support, job security, and collective bargaining rights that would be necessary for any genuine economic empowerment (Parwez & Ranjan, 2021).

Breman (2013) underscores that informal labor in India has long marginalized communities, offering little chance for socio-economic advancement. Gig work, as epitomized by Zomato, digitizes this exclusion, using algorithmic management to dictate wages, conditions, and access to work. Nair (2022) suggests that platform labor in India reflects these traditional exploitative practices, where caste, gender, and class restrict access to more secure and better-paying jobs. Zomato's reliance on algorithmic management perpetuates these divisions by dictating terms of employment that are invisible and inflexible, effectively trapping workers in cycles of precarity. Workers remain at the mercy of algorithms that allocate tasks and monitor performance without offering avenues for feedback, negotiation, or recourse.

These scholars collectively reveal the gig economy's contradictory role: while it offers surface-level financial gains, it entrenches workers in a socio-economic stasis—beyond the immediate reach of poverty, yet firmly within the grip of exploitation and exclusion.

2.6 Invisibility of Workers in the Gig Economy

Invisibility is a core trait of platform labor, characterized by both technical surveillance and social marginalization. Zomato riders, like many gig workers, are monitored intensively by algorithms that track performance, location, and productivity. Although this data-driven surveillance helps platforms manage and evaluate workers, it doesn't afford the workers any real control or insight into their labor conditions, creating a significant power imbalance (Bertolini et al., 2020). Workers remain uninformed about key aspects such as pay determinants, task assignments, and the basis of performance assessments, leaving them powerless and disconnected from the operational logic of their work.

This lack of transparency is a hallmark of "algorithmic management," which makes critical labor decisions without revealing the underlying logic, engendering an environment of uncertainty and alienation (Van Doorn, 2017). For instance, a Zomato delivery rider might experience unexplained fluctuations in earnings or changes in job volume, emphasizing the one-sided nature of this visibility.

Moreover, the design of platforms like Zomato fosters social invisibility by emphasizing seamless interactions between customers and the digital interface, rendering the human workers who fulfill these services invisible and undervalued. Such workers, crucial to urban ecosystems, become mere cogs in the service delivery machine, stripped of individuality and unseen in the social fabric (Gandini, 2021).

The commodification of labor, driven by data-centric strategies, treats workers as expendable assets to manage costs and maximize exploitation, deepening the alienation felt by gig workers (Van Doorn, 2017). In India, labor dynamics are influenced heavily by social

institutions, which intersect with platform algorithms to further entrench workers' precariousness (Harriss-White, 2004).

Invisibility thus spans both the inability of workers to influence their work conditions and their erasure from social and policy considerations. This dual invisibility through opaque algorithmic processes and societal neglect perpetuates the marginalization and exploitation of workers, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are disproportionately represented in precarious gig roles. These workers find themselves overlooked not only by customers and platforms but also by regulators, exacerbating their vulnerability (Fischer, 2018). Without societal recognition or political will to address these inequities, the precarious situation of gig workers remains entrenched, reinforcing systemic inequalities within the economy.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to understand the working conditions of gig workers in New Delhi, focusing on Zomato delivery workers. Employing a mixed-methods approach—incorporating surveys, semi-structured interviews, and spontaneous group discussions—enabled a comprehensive capture of both the everyday experiences and broader perspectives of these workers.

3.1 Introduction

The fieldwork for my research was carried out between July and September 2024 in New Delhi, the capital of India and a key operational hub for Zomato.

Surveys gathered essential demographic data and insights into working conditions, job satisfaction, income stability, and the adequacy of earnings relative to living expenses. This quantitative data laid the foundation for identifying trends such as working hours, transport ownership, income predictability, and access to health benefits. To capture a more comprehensive view of workers' experiences, qualitative methods were vital. The semi-structured interviews enriched the survey data by providing deeper insights into how workers managed flexibility, income, and personal sacrifices. For example, while the surveys revealed access to health insurance, the interviews highlighted how workers used these benefits, often reserving them for emergencies. Spontaneous group discussions, which arose during riders' breaks, offered additional collective perspectives on shared challenges, despite not being part of the original research design. This mixed-methods approach—combining surveys for broad patterns with interviews and group discussions for nuanced realities—was crucial for addressing the research question:

How does New Delhi's gig economy, exemplified by platforms like Zomato, simultaneously create employment opportunities while reproducing social hierarchies and inequalities through implicit mechanisms of economic sorting?

By integrating both methods, the research moved beyond surface-level statistics, revealing the socio-economic factors shaping workers' decisions and coping mechanisms. This combined approach provided a holistic view of how gig work has affected the lives of Zomato's delivery workers, addressing both the overarching trends and the individualized experiences.

3.2 Data Collection Methods
3.2.1. Surveys

The primary purpose of the surveys was to gather foundational data on the working conditions and job satisfaction of Zomato delivery workers. Given the nature of their work, where delivery riders often operate under tight schedules to maximize income and incentives, the surveys were designed to be concise and easy to complete during brief periods of rest or downtime. The goal was to capture a broad spectrum of data that would provide an initial understanding of the riders' work experiences without placing additional strain on their time.

In the last week of June, a pilot of the survey was conducted to refine its effectiveness. Initially, the survey was more detailed, but the rider's feedback indicated that it was too lengthy and that the Hindi language used was somewhat complex for participants. Based on this feedback, the survey was shortened and simplified to make it more accessible and better suited to participants' needs. This adaptation was crucial in increasing participation and ensuring the quality of the data collected.

The target population for the surveys comprised Zomato delivery workers in New Delhi. To effectively reach this population, I employed a multi-pronged distribution approach aimed at maximizing participation without imposing on the riders' limited time. The survey locations were strategically chosen at busy restaurant pickup points, rest areas, and common waiting spots, where Zomato delivery riders frequently gather. Additionally, flyers containing QR codes that linked directly to the online survey were pasted outside restaurants, Zomato restrooms, and other areas commonly visited by the riders. Riders interested in participating could scan these codes to access the survey and complete it at their leisure during breaks or free time, ensuring they were not rushed while working. This method not only facilitated

ease of access but also encouraged more thoughtful and candid responses by providing riders the flexibility to participate on their own terms. This was complemented by snowball sampling, where participants were encouraged to share the survey with their peers, thereby increasing the reach. Initially, the target was to collect 50 responses, but through these efforts, I was able to gather 85 completed surveys.

An unexpected challenge emerged with the distribution of survey QR codes. Some restaurant owners were uncomfortable with flyers being posted outside their establishments, limiting the number of locations where the the surveys could effectively distributed. This obstacle required direct reliance on direct, face-to-face interactions with the riders in their rest spots. While this initially seemed like a setback, it ultimately led to richer, more personal interactions and a deeper understanding of the participants' context.

The survey data, collected through Google Forms and accessed via QR codes distributed at key pickup points, provided a structured and efficient data-gathering mechanism. The use of Google Forms enabled automated aggregation, allowing the responses to be systematically converted into percentages, visualized as pie charts and bar graphs, and other analytical outputs. This type of automated structuring is often referred to as descriptive coding in quantitative analysis (Babbie, 2016). By using predefined answer categories and response options, it was possible to quickly capture trends such as income stability, work-life balance, and job satisfaction levels.

This descriptive coding created a foundation for initial analysis, where patterns and trends could be observed without needing further breakdown or manual categorization. These charts and percentages provided a quantitative thematic overview—an initial layer of analysis that highlighted broad patterns across the workforce, such as the percentage of riders who cited dissatisfaction with earnings or reported difficulty balancing work and personal life.

3.2.2. Interviews

The primary objective of conducting interviews was to delve deeper into the personal experiences and perspectives of Zomato delivery workers. These interviews were designed to complement the quantitative data gathered through surveys, offering qualitative insights into the lived experiences of workers, allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and the strategies they use to navigate the gig economy. Probing questions further explored how gig work impacted their well-being, stress levels, and family life. Participants for the interviews were identified through a multi-faceted recruitment process. Initially, the survey's final question served as a direct method to gauge interest in follow-up interviews. My approach involved spending time at various rest spots frequented by the delivery workers—under trees, tea stalls, and waiting areas outside restaurants.

During these initial brief interactions, the interviewer introduced themself and explained the intent of my research. If riders expressed interest, their contact information was collected to schedule a more convenient time for a detailed interview. Initially, the plan was to conduct interviews at waiting spots where riders gathered, assuming this would be effective. However, the time constraints riders faced, driven by their need to maximize deliveries and income, made this approach less effective. Riders were often on tight schedules and could not spare extended periods for interviews during work hours. To address this challenge, interviews were scheduled at more convenient times i.e. either before or after their shifts. This flexibility ensured that participation did not interfere with their work commitments.

Although there was initial hesitance about telephonic interviews due to the lack of non-verbal cues, the riders' schedules made this method necessary. Surprisingly, telephonic interviews proved highly effective, allowing participants more time to speak freely, resulting in some of the most insightful data collected. This experience highlighted the importance of being open to alternative methods.

Method	Number of Participants
Telephonic Interviews	9
In-Person Interviews	11
Spontaneous Group Discussions	3 groups (7-10 people in each group)

Table 1: Interview Methods and Participant Numbers

One of the initial strategies was snowball sampling, where participants would refer other riders for interviews. However, this approach proved ineffective due to the transient nature of the gig economy. Delivery workers often do not maintain lasting connections with their peers because they meet new people daily and rarely exchange contact details. This lack of stable networks among riders made it difficult to recruit additional participants through referrals, highlighting the unique challenges of researching a highly transient and dynamic workforce.

Participant apprehension was another significant challenge. Some riders hesitated to participate, likely due to concerns about job security or misconceptions that I was associated with Zomato. To mitigate this, the voluntary nature of participation was emphasized upon, assuring them of anonymity, and clarifying the independent nature of the academic research. Despite these efforts, the selection bias observed adds a unique layer to the research findings, highlighting the voices that are often silenced in precarious job conditions. Interviews were conducted both in person and via phone, depending on the participants' preferences and availability. In-person interviews took place in informal locations familiar to the riders, such as tea stalls or under trees where they rested or wherever else was most convenient. For participants who preferred not to meet in person, particularly full-time workers with limited flexibility, telephonic interviews were offered.

Conducting interviews in person and via phone had distinct impacts on the interaction dynamics and the type of knowledge produced. Telephonic interviews allowed participants to engage from their own comfortable environments and at their convenience, which often led to them being more open and providing more in-depth responses. This setting likely reduced the formality of the interaction, helping participants feel less intimidated and more willing to share personal experiences and opinion

In-person interviews, on the other hand, offered valuable non-verbal cues through body language, which enriched the data collection process. Being able to observe participants' expressions and gestures helped in understanding their emotions and reactions to questions more deeply. This method also facilitated a more dynamic interaction, where immediate

follow-up questions could be tailored based on the participants' physical and emotional responses, leading to richer and possibly more candid discussions.

The interviews started by asking each participant for permission to record the conversation, ensuring that recordings were made only with their consent. These voice recordings were then transcribed by hand, which allowed me to engage closely with the data, capturing subtle expressions and nuances that might have been missed otherwise.

After transcription, manual coding was applied to identify and categorize key themes expressed by the participants. Each transcript was reviewed line by line, marking recurrent words, phrases, and sentiments that stood out across interviews. This open coding approach allowed themes to emerge naturally from the participants' own language and perspectives, without forcing them into predefined categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, frequent mentions of "long hours," "financial uncertainty," and "lack of platform support" highlighted the daily struggles riders face in balancing work demands and earnings.

Following this initial coding phase, thematic analysis was used to organize these codes into broader patterns, allowing for a deeper exploration of recurring themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this analysis, related codes were clustered into overarching themes, such as "job precarity," "institutional neglect," and "disrespect from society." This thematic structuring revealed how different aspects of riders' work experiences—such as earnings, safety, and customer interactions—intersected to shape their overall view of platform-based employment.

Through the integration of manual coding and thematic analysis, it was possible to go beyond surface level trends to reveal the detailed ways in which riders interpret and manage their roles. This approach offered an in-depth perspective on the daily realities experienced by Zomato delivery riders, highlighting their struggles and insights into their coping mechanisms to navigate the complexity of the gig economy in New Delhi.

3.2.3. Spontaneous Group Discussions

Fieldwork with food delivery workers would have been challenging without their generous advice. They provided specific names of restaurants and roads where riders typically waited for orders, offering invaluable insider knowledge that helped me identify key locations to approach potential participants. This guidance led to spontaneous group discussions during riders' breaks.

While my original research plan centered on surveys and individual interviews, the communal nature of the riders' rest periods naturally gave rise to group discussions. These unplanned gatherings became a valuable method for understanding the collective experiences of the riders, providing insights into common challenges and the dynamics of their interactions. The participants were enthusiastic and keen to share their experiences, feeling recognized and valued during these exchanges. The informal, conversational setting allowed them to express their thoughts freely, adding depth to the data collected.

During these discussions, the riders patiently walked through the incentive structures and bonuses, showed their partner app and walked through how they accept orders and the conditions behind the incentives. This hands-on explanation enriched the understanding of the platform's internal workings. Challenges posed by various stakeholders and environmental factors affecting their well-being, such as dealing with the extreme 50-degree summer heat and monsoon floods were also discussed. Additionally, the riders shared strategies they use to maintain a sense of autonomy within the algorithmically managed system, providing insights into how they navigate a tightly controlled work environment.

These discussions took place in familiar, informal settings—under trees, outside popular food outlets, and at dhabas where riders typically gathered. Three group discussions emerged, each involving 7–10 riders who were available and willing to engage during their breaks. The group setting created a unique opportunity for participants to openly share both shared challenges and individual perspectives.

Initially, the plan was to not conduct focus group discussions to avoid the possibility of riders being influenced by each other's opinions. The goal was to gather personal and uninfluenced feedback from each participant. However, during the interactions at rest spots,

riders eagerly shared their experiences in groups. Recognizing the value of these spontaneous discussions, the approach was to include them in the data collection. This experience highlighted the importance of allowing space for natural group dynamics in qualitative research.

In addition to formal interviews, ethnographic tools such as casual conversations, observations, and field notes were incorporated throughout the field research. These tools helped gather insights organically, leading to more natural, relatable interactions with the riders, especially in unplanned settings. This approach transformed the exchanges into genuine conversations rather than structured interviews.

Since these conversations arose spontaneously, they were not recorded to maintain the natural flow without interrupting with formalities. Instead, mental notes and images of what the riders showed me on their delivery partner apps were taken to document key aspects of the discussions.

To analyze these insights, thematic analysis were applied to explore how riders perceive and respond to the platform's algorithmic management. Through open coding, recurring themes such as "algorithmic control," "incentive-driven motivation," and "app navigation strategies" were identified. Using axial coding, they were grouped into broader themes like "platform dependence" and "strategies for autonomy." This layered analysis provided a deeper understanding of how riders interpret and adapt to the algorithm's demands, offering valuable insights into their operational realities within the gig economy.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

In conducting this research, several steps were taken to ensure that all ethical considerations were addressed, particularly regarding participant confidentiality, voluntary participation, and transparency about the study's intent. Given the sensitive nature of the gig workers' concerns, ensuring their anonymity and comfort was a priority throughout the data collection process.

To build trust and ease participants' apprehensions, each interaction by clearly explaining the interviewers background, the study's purpose, and the clarifying the independence of the

research This helped mitigate any misconceptions and assured participants that their involvement would not affect their employment. They were informed that the study was independent and focused solely on understanding their working conditions and challenges.

All interviews were voluntary, with participants free to skip any questions or leave the interview at any time. No personal information, such as names or contact details, was recorded, ensuring their identities remained protected. The participants were reassured that no photographs would be taken, and voice recordings were only made with their consent.

By adhering to these ethical principles, an environment was created where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences without fear of repercussions, ensuring the integrity and confidentiality of the data collected.

3.4 Positionality

A researcher's positionality significantly shapes the data collection process and dynamics. Conducting fieldwork as a young woman in a predominantly male environment, I navigated gender dynamics, safety concerns, and inherent power relations in my interactions with an all-male sample of Zomato delivery riders. These factors influenced the data generation process and required ongoing reflexivity.

During my first group discussion, what began as a small gathering quickly expanded as more riders joined, initially making me feel apprehensive in the informal, male-dominated setting. However, the riders showed respect and eagerness to share their experiences, fostering a positive group dynamic and a sense of collective recognition that enriched the research process.

Our public interactions often attracted curious glances from passers-by, who sometimes slowed to listen or looked back at me and the male participants. These silent observations hinted at social assumptions regarding a young woman engaging with men in low-paid service work, reflecting gendered and class-based expectations in our context.

My gender identity shaped both my fieldwork and experience of it. As a woman working with predominantly male participants, I was unable to access certain social spaces—

particularly leisure or recreational areas—that might have been available if my participants were women. While I joined participants for tea, coffee, or lunch in public settings, I adhered to implicit boundaries. Some riders were hesitant to add me to their WhatsApp groups due to the nature of messages shared there.

Despite the positive outcomes, my positionality required constant vigilance regarding my safety and well-being, including avoiding night fieldwork for personal safety. I carefully selected public locations for interviews and group discussions to create safe, open spaces for dialogue. This cautious approach helped me establish trust with participants while maintaining professional boundaries, ultimately shaping the spaces and contexts in which data was gathered.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Male-Dominated Sector:

In presenting my sample, I focused on Zomato riders, a group largely representative of the male-dominated nature of the gig economy. Despite Zomato's claim that 10% of their workforce consists of women, I was unable to find and include any female riders in my sample.

4.2 Duration of Work:

Duration of Work at Zomato	Percentage of Respondents
Less than a year	20
1-5 years	40
More than 5 years	40

Table 2: Length of Tenure for Zomato Workers

The varying tenure among riders at Zomato highlights a temporal dimension in their outlook on platform work, illustrating how experiences over time shape perceptions of stability and value. In my study, 40% of riders had worked over five years, 40% between 1-5 years, and 20% less than a year, creating a spectrum of perspectives that reflects different stages in their relationship with the platform.

For long-term riders (over five years), there is often a more cynical view of the job. As one rider noted, "Since I've been in this line, the pay has only gone down and so have the incentives." This gradual erosion of earnings, coupled with the physical demands of long hours, has led to disillusionment, as riders see that initial incentives have systematically declined. This ongoing deterioration in financial reward fosters resentment toward the platform, with long-term workers feeling increasingly trapped by the demanding work for diminishing returns.

Mid-term riders (1-5 years) occupy a middle ground; they have seen the decline in incentives but may still hold onto some hope for improvement. One rider expressed, "Initially, the salary and incentives were good, but every few months we'd hear that our pay had been reduced." These mid-term workers are beginning to recognize the systemic issues in platform work—unpredictable wages, reduced incentives, and high workloads—reflecting growing disillusionment, though some optimism remains.

Short-term riders (less than a year) tend to view platform work with more optimism, drawn by its flexibility and accessibility. For them, the platform initially seems like a viable way to earn income, even if earnings can be unpredictable. However, as one newer rider observed, "The earnings are unpredictable, and it's hard to plan financially." While short-term riders appreciate the initial appeal, they soon begin to notice the financial instability and realize that long-term sustainability may be limited.

This tenure-based outlook reveals the temporal nature of platform work, where longer engagement often leads to frustration and burnout, while shorter tenures maintain a sense of opportunity. Meagher's (2019) critique resonates here, as the gig economy frequently fails to provide long-term stability or social protections, a reality that becomes clearer with time. Although BCG (2020) and Rangaswamy (2024) acknowledge the short-term benefits of structure and autonomy that platforms like Zomato offer, this temporal analysis suggests a deeper tension: while platforms afford short-term financial stability, they struggle to provide the security and support needed for sustainable, long-term work.

4.3 Two Experiences, One Platform (Full-Time vs. Part-Time Workers)

According to my surveys, 56.6% of the riders consider Zomato their main source of income (full-time riders), while 43.3% do not (part-time riders). Through my engagement with these riders, it became evident that the distinction between part-time and full-time riders on Zomato matters significantly. This section examines how the stakes and experiences they encounter differ, demonstrating how riders navigate the platform differently.

क्या प्लेटफॉर्म का काम आपकी मुख्य आय का स्रोत है? (Is platform work your main source of income?)
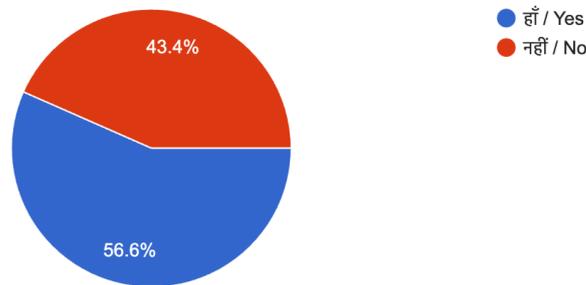83 responses

Figure 1: Main Source of Income for Platform Workers

4.3.1 Part–time

Part-time riders are drawn to Zomato primarily for its perceived flexibility, allowing them to manage other responsibilities, such as education, family, or secondary jobs. One part-time rider noted, "I finish my job as a watchman by 6 PM and log into Zomato to earn extra money during the evening rush." While the ability to log in at any time is appealing, viable earnings largely depend on working during peak hours, which limits their autonomy and often requires scheduling shifts around high-demand periods to maximize earnings.

Additionally, part-time riders face challenges in meeting Zomato's incentive targets, which require completing a set number of deliveries within specific time frames. Because they typically work fewer hours than full-time riders, these incentive thresholds can be difficult to achieve. A rider shared, "I log in after work for a few hours, but it's hard to meet the incentive targets when I don't have enough time to complete that many deliveries." This challenge makes the flexibility of part-time work less financially rewarding, as incentive bonuses are often beyond their reach. This makes the flexibility of part-time work less financially rewarding, as incentive bonuses are often beyond their reach.

Despite Zomato's promise of flexibility, many part-time riders find that their earnings depend heavily on working during peak hours, as platform demand patterns effectively

dictate their schedules. While they can technically choose when to work, viable earnings are often only achievable during high-demand times, limiting their control.

Part-time workers are generally motivated by the need for supplemental income rather than viewing platform work as a long-term career. Many are students, professionals, or individuals with other commitments, and they see Zomato as a way to fill short-term income gaps or cover specific financial needs. They are motivated by the immediate need for money rather than by career development opportunities, as the gig economy offers little to no upward mobility for part-time workers.

4.3.2 Full-time

In contrast, full-time riders rely heavily on Zomato as their primary, if not sole, source of income. Many come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds with limited formal employment opportunities. Zomato's algorithmic management system plays a significant role in shaping their work experience. While the platform theoretically offers flexibility, many full-time riders feel controlled by the algorithm.

They are constantly running for incentives, needing to meet conditions like remaining online for a set number of hours and avoiding cancellations, which strips them of autonomy over their schedules. One full-time rider explained, "I keep the app on all day. Missing any order means I might not make enough to cover my costs." This compels them to be available whenever demand is high, often staying online for extended periods with little control over their time.

The pressure to meet Zomato's incentive targets is intense, as they are crucial to their income. Failing to meet these targets can significantly reduce their earnings, leading to financial insecurity. Another rider noted, "We have to keep working fast to hit our delivery targets, even if it means breaking traffic rules or skipping meals." This relentless pressure of meeting delivery quotas often pushes full-time workers into unsafe working conditions, where they prioritize speed over safety to achieve financial stability.

Coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds where formal employment opportunities are limited, these riders are often motivated by necessity. Their dependency forces them into long working hours, often exceeding 12 hours per day, just to meet financial needs. One rider expressed, "I work more than 12 hours a day, handling 30 to 35 orders. It's exhausting, but I don't have a choice if I want to make enough." Missing orders or failing to reach daily targets can have serious financial repercussions, as they rely heavily on Zomato earnings to cover essential expenses like rent and bills.

They often feel trapped in a cycle of overwork, with little opportunity for career progression. The absence of upward mobility within the gig economy leaves them with limited long-term prospects, creating a dissonance between the immediate financial benefits of gig work and the lack of long-term career stability.

Zomato's promise of flexibility remains largely illusory for full-time workers, who experience significant pressures to meet quotas under algorithmic constraints, while part-time workers grapple with balancing incentives with their limited hours. For full-time riders, the dependency on incentives imposes a high-stakes environment where even minor setbacks can jeopardize earnings. The contrasting experiences of full-time and part-time workers highlight the precarious balance between perceived flexibility and the rigid demands of platforms, underscoring a fundamental disparity in how "flexibility" is experienced across different worker types.

4.4 Migration: A Search for Stability

A significant portion of Zomato's workforce, 61.9%, consists of migrant workers from rural regions like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, drawn to the city out of economic necessity. This urban migration aligns with Huijsmans's (2023) concept of migration infrastructure, where low-barrier work like gig labor offers quick entry into the urban economy but also shapes migrant lives in often restrictive ways.

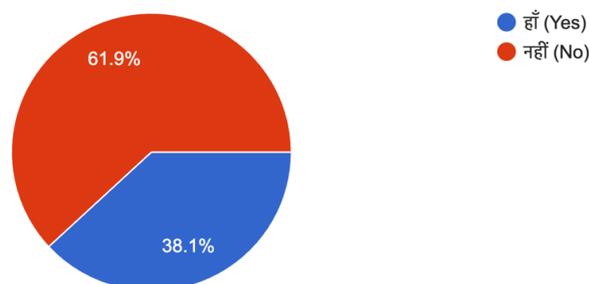क्या आप दिल्ली में पैदा हुए हैं?   (Are you born in Delhi?)
84 responses

Figure 2: Origin of Zomato Workers

For these Zomato riders, platform work functions as an "arrival infrastructure," providing immediate income without requiring formal qualifications. Yet, as Huijsmans (2023) suggests, such jobs often lead to long-term dependency on precarious, low-wage work, entangling workers in survival-based labor rather than fulfilling their aspirations for stability.

Reinforcing Huijsmans's notion of platform work as a form of immediate income, one worker from Bihar shared his journey to New Delhi in 2012, detailing the economic struggles that led him to Zomato,

> I left my village in Bihar in 2012 and came to Delhi. Initially, I worked in my uncle's factory where we made pins and wires for mobile phones. But then I decided to take a loan and start my own factory. However, the competition was tough, and I couldn't keep up, so eventually shut it down. I tried my level best to look for jobs, so that I could pay back the loan. I sacrificed my food consumption and moved from my own accommodation to my uncle's home to avoid paying rent. When I nearly gave up and decided to go back to Bihar, I heard about Zomato. Zomato gave me a chance to earn and get back on my own feet when nothing else did.

While many rural migrants come to cities with high hopes, they encounter high living costs and intense competition. Another migrant, arriving with only 500 rupees, recounted the harsh urban realities-

I came here with 500 rupees and a dream. But everything was so expensive, people were rude, I would go days without eating, and there was a truck that came for water—it was like a war zone. I didn't have a roof over my head at first, but eventually, I found a shared accommodation in Mayur Vihar, and my roommates happened to be Zomato riders, so I joined them.

Unlike Delhi-born riders, many migrants bear the additional responsibility of sending remittances back home, adding another layer of financial pressure. They are not just supporting themselves but are often responsible for providing for their families in their villages, one respondent mentioned, "I send money back home to support my parents and my son's education. It's tough, but I have no choice. I've been here for a few years now, but every month it's the same work as much as possible just to get by".

Despite its challenges, the ability to send money home suggests that working with Zomato provides a dependable, though limited, source of income. This is significant, as Zomato offers a viable financial fallback compared to other options available to migrants, which may not even enable them to meet family obligations. The ease of entry and lack of formal qualifications make gig work accessible, even if it's far from ideal: "It's not an ideal job, but you can run to it when you need money quickly," another worker remarked.

In most cases, the respondents express that gig work provides immediate employment, allowing them to earn money quickly without specific qualifications. At the same time, the easy hiring process associated with gig work like Zomato provides workers with a sense of safety. As several respondents noted, while it may not be an ideal job, the ability to start working quickly and without the need for formal qualifications offers a crucial lifeline. For many, gig work becomes a way to make ends meet when other opportunities are lacking: "It's not an ideal job, but I guess it's there when nothing else is. You can always run to it when you need money quickly."

This underscores the role of gig work for migrants as both a struggle and a crucial safety net. Gig work remains an essential option for those lacking alternatives in the urban labor market, balancing the promise of opportunity with the need for immediate survival. This

captures what Huijsmans describes as the entanglement of aspiration and survival, where gig work provides temporary support yet keeps workers tied to precarious employment and deferred ambitions.

4.5 Transport Costs and their Financial Implications

क्या आप अपने परिवहन के मालिक हैं या किराए पर लेते हैं? (Do you own or rent your transport?)
83 responses

- मैं इसका मालिक हूँ / I own it
- मैं इसे किराए पर लेता हूँ / I rent it (for a fee)
- मैं उधार लेता हूँ / I borrow (for free)
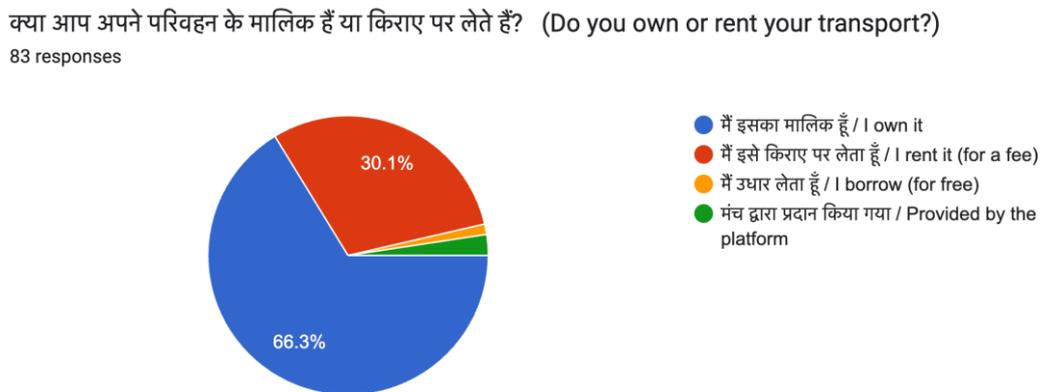- मंच द्वारा प्रदान किया गया / Provided by the platform

Figure 3: Ownership of Transport by Zomato Workers

Transport ownership is a significant aspect of Zomato riders' work, with 66.3% of respondents owning motorcycles or scooters. Ownership is common among long-term, full-time riders who rely on their vehicles to maximize earnings. However, owning a vehicle comes with high, ongoing expenses, particularly for motorcycles, which make up 71.4% of all vehicles used. One long-term rider shared, "I've invested ₹1 lakh in my motorcycle, but most of my earnings go toward maintenance and fuel," illustrating how monthly fuel costs, which can reach up to ₹7,000, along with fluctuating fuel prices, significantly reduce income. This ongoing expenditure means that ownership doesn't always equate to financial stability, as the continuous demands of fuel, maintenance, and repairs create persistent financial strain.

Some riders acquire vehicles through EMI payments to offset initial costs, which adds another fixed monthly expense. One rider explained, "When I first started, I couldn't afford to buy a bike outright, so I had to get it on EMI. But now, between fuel, maintenance, and EMI payments, I'm left with little." This setup turns ownership into a financial risk, particularly with rising fuel prices affecting stability.

For newer or short-term riders, renting vehicles provides flexibility and a lower initial commitment. However, the 30.1% who rent often face challenges with vehicle quality. One rider noted, "Renting is cheaper, but I can't always control the quality of the bike," which can hinder their ability to meet quotas and earn incentives. While initially cheaper, poor-quality rented vehicles or unexpected breakdowns reduce earning potential.

Migrants, who often start with less financial security, are also more likely to rent to avoid the upfront costs of ownership. Though renting allows quick entry into work, recurring fees limit financial growth and can trap them in a cycle of payments. Renting provides flexibility if they plan to relocate or leave gig work but at the expense of long-term financial stability. In contrast, non-migrant, long-term riders more often invest in ownership, though they continue to face high operating expenses.

Transport costs affect full-time and part-time riders differently. Full-time riders, who depend solely on gig work, are more likely to own vehicles as essential tools to maximize income. Part-time riders typically rent, avoiding high upfront ownership costs and aligning with their secondary income needs, allowing flexibility to work fewer hours or leave the platform without maintenance costs.

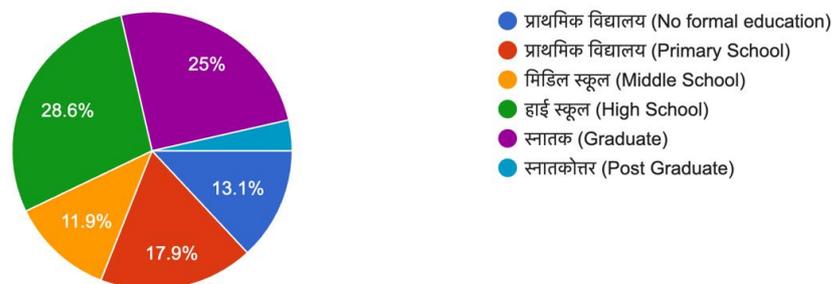## 4.6 Education and the Mismatch with Job Roles

Figure 4: Education Level of Riders

The standout aspects of Zomato's employment model is its open access to workers regardless of formal education. A significant portion of Zomato's workforce consists of individuals who, despite higher education or vocational training, find themselves in roles that underutilize their qualifications. Survey data reveals that over 40% of Zomato riders have not completed higher education yet found employment on the platform, challenging the traditional link between academic credentials and job opportunity. Among these riders, 28.6% have completed high school, and 25% hold graduate degrees, with many graduates and postgraduates working as food delivery drivers alongside studies or after unsuccessful job searches.

This disparity points to a broader issue where degrees and technical qualifications do not translate into viable career opportunities, pushing individuals with advanced education into gig work due to a scarcity of stable, fulfilling roles. Despite educational achievements, many workers take on gig roles out of necessity. For example, graduates, including engineering and vocational diploma holders, encounter limited job prospects, with starting salaries in entry-level formal jobs often comparable to or lower than what they earn at Zomato. This economic imbalance, combined with limited growth prospects in traditional jobs, drives them toward delivery work, where they can surpass typical entry-level earnings, even without social security benefits.

For some riders, delivery work serves as a temporary or part-time solution to meet immediate financial needs. For instance, an 18-year-old with secondary education works long hours to support his family while preparing for government job exams. Zomato's open-access model thus provides an essential entry point into the workforce, especially for the 13.1% of riders without formal education who are often marginalized by traditional job barriers.

Although surveys presume literacy, a basic level of English or Hindi literacy is necessary for riders to communicate effectively with customers, restaurants, and other stakeholders. This accessibility is valuable in a context where formal education, language skills, and professional experience often limit economic opportunities.

This mismatch is evident as those with advanced degrees turn to gig work at Zomato due to a scarcity of suitable alternatives in the job market, revealing a broader disconnect between educational achievement and stable, fulfilling roles. While Zomato's model mitigates

some employment barriers, it can also trap workers in low-mobility roles, making it more of a financial stopgap than a career path. This reliance underscores a labor-market mismatch, where higher education does not equate to secure employment, revealing systemic underemployment. Highlight the need for better alignment between education and job opportunities, as gig work increasingly serves as a fallback rather than a route to career advancement.

4.7 The Reality of Exclusion

While Zomato's employment model transcends these traditional social markers, it does not shield workers from broader structural inequalities that manifest in terms of societal status, income disparities, and recognition. Despite the absence of caste or religious bias in hiring practices—a fact corroborated by workers who mention that "No one asks about our caste or creed"—the platform does not inherently provide a remedy for deeper socio-economic challenges. Workers' statements reflect a shared experience free from direct social prejudice, highlighting a shift in workplace dynamics that allows riders to focus on mutual aid and efficiency rather than social divisions.

This sense of inclusivity represents a departure from entrenched hierarchies typical in Indian work environments, establishing a sense of camaraderie among workers. One rider explained how they support each other regardless of background, saying, "We help each other out if someone's bike breaks down," emphasizing the non-discriminatory nature of their interactions. As another worker described, "No one asks about our religion or caste when creating an account on the app."

This mirrors Pollio's (2019) observations in the context of Uber, suggesting that while technology-driven systems create the appearance of impartiality, they may fall short of addressing the broader socio-economic realities and inequalities workers encounter outside the algorithm.

Gig workers encounter various challenges from stakeholders such as customers, restaurants, public authorities, and the platform itself, all of which add layers of marginalization

and logistical burdens. These interactions collectively reinforce workers' outsider status and position them as vulnerable within urban spaces.

Customers, for instance, frequently contribute to delays and inefficiencies by providing incorrect addresses or being unresponsive. Zomato's policy requires workers to wait up to 20 minutes when a customer does not answer, without compensating them for lost time. As one rider noted, "For an earning of just ₹20, I have to wait, losing the chance to take another order." The lack of customer accountability forces workers to absorb the inefficiencies and missed opportunities that result from unresponsive clients, increasing the unpredictability and financial strain of their work.

Restaurants also contribute to these logistical challenges by prioritizing dine-in customers over delivery orders, causing significant delays. Workers describe waiting outside restaurants with no designated spaces to park, only to be told after a long wait that an order is canceled or delayed. "We wait almost an hour, then find out the item isn't ready, with no compensation," one rider explained, underscoring how these delays lead to unproductive waiting times. Without a structure to compensate them for delays, workers bear the financial cost of these inefficiencies, with neither the restaurant nor the platform assuming responsibility.

The challenges extend into public spaces, where parking and enforcement policies add further strain. Workers are frequently fined or even towed by traffic police when forced to leave their bikes in unauthorized areas due to a lack of accessible parking. As one worker shared, "We have to leave our bikes on the main road, and traffic police fine us or even tow our vehicles. We often lose money before making any." This exclusion from secure parking highlights how public authorities view gig workers as a nuisance rather than as contributors to the economy, positioning them as outsiders within the very urban infrastructure they support.

Building security guards also reinforce these divisions, especially in malls and gated communities. Workers are often barred from standard entrances and must use hidden or back service areas, which reinforces their invisibility. Some report verbal harassment or even being denied use of elevators. "Sometimes we're beaten or verbally abused if we try to use the same lifts as residents," one worker shared, describing how these restrictions highlight societal

prejudices. These interactions not only hinder workers' efficiency but also reinforce their marginalization, signaling that they are not equal participants in these spaces.

Another critical issue is Zomato's compensation structure, which only pays workers for completed deliveries, leaving them unpaid for time spent waiting at restaurants or dealing with unresponsive customers. Workers describe losing both time and money to uncompensated waiting, with one stating, "We're constantly waiting, but there's no compensation for the time lost." This structure of unpaid waiting transfers the platform's logistical inefficiencies onto workers, adding financial strain to their already precarious work.

Workers also described facing disciplinary actions if they attempted to voice their concerns. "The moment I started to speak up about the falling rates, my ID was blocked. The manager didn't even give me a chance to explain—they just shut me out," shared one worker, illustrating the platform's approach to dissent. Another worker noted, "Whenever I tried to ask questions or bring up issues, they said, 'If you don't want to work, there are a hundred more riders waiting to take your place.' It's like we're all disposable." These experiences reinforce Srnicek's (2017) commodification thesis, emphasizing how platforms solidify control while sidestepping responsibility by reminding workers of their replaceability

Overall, these challenges reflect a fragmented structure of responsibility, where the burdens of platform work are divided across multiple actors—customers, restaurants, public authorities, and Zomato itself—all of whom benefit from gig labor without taking accountability for worker welfare. Srnicek's (2017) theory of commodification describes this arrangement, where platforms reduce workers to disposable data points within an efficiency-driven model, while Van Doorn (2024) emphasizes how this fragmentation of responsibility leaves workers financially and socially vulnerable. Gig workers are thus trapped in a system where no single actor assumes responsibility for their well-being, resulting in a cycle of logistical strain and marginalization that they must navigate alone.

Beyond financial and logistical challenges, workers experience a sense of invisibility that extends into physical spaces, where they are frequently directed to use back entrances or hidden areas to collect orders. One worker recounted, "It's like they don't want anyone to see us. We're made to go from the back, often after a long walk and climbing stairs. We're

not allowed to use the main entrance." Such spatial relegation denies workers social recognition and reinforces societal judgments about who "belongs" in visible spaces, confining gig workers to the edges of urban life. This restriction exemplifies Fischer's (2020) view that precarious workers are systematically excluded from full participation in public life, heightening their sense of marginalization.

This invisibility is further compounded by societal expectations about appearance. Workers are often judged not only on their performance but also on how they present themselves to customers. "We have to look clean and presentable because customers complain if we don't," one rider observed, explaining how expectations of a polished appearance persist despite the grueling conditions of long shifts. This commodification of appearance, as Srnicek (2017) argues, reduces workers to deliverable outputs, disregarding the physical toll of their work.

Thus, while Zomato's platform bypasses markers in its hiring process, gig workers' experiences reveal that the platform's claimed neutrality does not dismantle underlying social inequalities. Instead, it reproduces invisibility and exclusion through interactions with other stakeholders, situating workers as marginalized laborers who bear the risks and burdens of a system that prioritizes efficiency over welfare.

4.8 A Race for Incentives

Zomato's work regime has undergone significant shifts, especially in its compensation model, oscillating between performance-based and salary-based structures. Initially, Zomato paid workers based on the number of deliveries completed, incentivizing speed and productivity. In 2020, Zomato introduced a salary-based model to offer riders a more predictable income, aiming to improve worker retention by reducing income volatility. However, due to operational constraints, this model was short-lived, and Zomato reverted to performance-based pay, reintroducing financial instability and intensifying competition among riders.

This shift profoundly affected long-time riders, many of whom had come to rely on the security of fixed income. As one long term rider recalled, "In the beginning, the first two years were comfortable. But then every few months, we'd hear that our salary or incentives

had been reduced." The gradual erosion of earnings has shifted the financial burden onto workers, who must now maintain high productivity levels to earn the same, or often less than before, destabilizing their finances and weakening trust in Zomato's labor practices.

Through spontaneous group discussions, riders demonstrated the Zomato partner app and explained the importance of incentives, which vary by factors such as working hours and weather. Their collective insights underscored how incentives are critical yet variable between part-time and full-time riders.

Currently, Zomato's work structure revolves around "gigs," pre-scheduled time slots during which riders must complete deliveries to qualify for incentives. Gigs can last between 1.5 to 2 hours, and riders must log in and remain available to accept orders for the duration. Each gig requires a minimum number of completed deliveries to unlock bonus incentives, which vary based on factors like weather, the number of completed gigs, and peak demand. A rider explained, "If you don't get incentives, it's like everything is over," emphasizing the importance of these bonuses in supplementing their base pay.

These bonuses initially rewarded workers for completing a set number of deliveries, pushing productivity and income. For instance, completing 10 orders in a 2-hour gig could earn ₹125, but missing a target disqualifies riders from any incentive, increasing pressure to meet strict thresholds.

For gig-based bonuses, the rewards increase with the number of deliveries:

o 2 gigs and 8 orders: ₹100 incentive

o 3 gigs and 10 orders: ₹125 incentive

o 5 gigs and 13 orders: ₹170 incentive
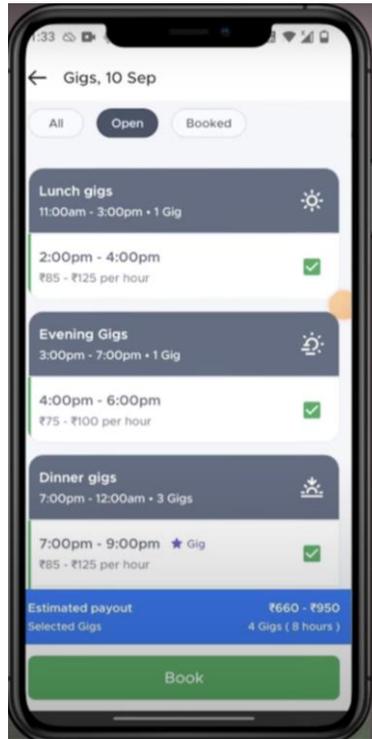
o 6 gigs and 16 orders: ₹250 incentive

Figure 5: Gig slots in the Zomato Parner App

Completing 5 orders in the rain grants a 15% bonus, while 9 orders offer 30% extra, and 12 orders lead to a 60% bonus.
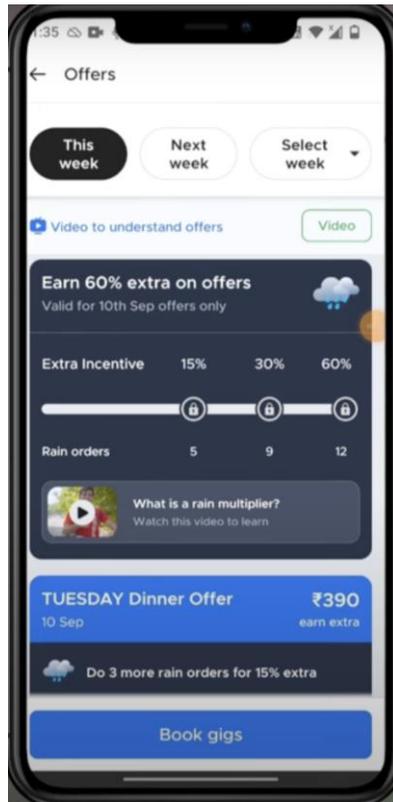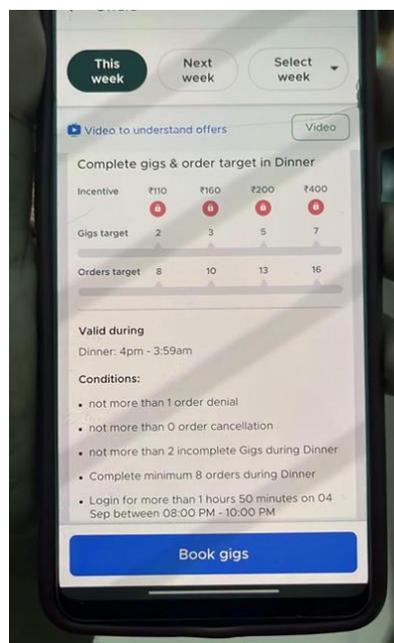
Figure 6: Rain Bonuses in the Zomato Parner App

Figure 7: Conditions for incentives in the Zomato Parner App

Riders face strict penalties for order denials, with even a single denial resulting in forfeited incentives. Once a rider books a shift, they are required to accept all orders regardless of

distance and complete at least 8 deliveries during the dinner shift (6 PM to 4 AM). Additional penalties apply for canceling a shift less than two hours before its start. While the dinner shift offers higher incentives, it also poses added safety risks due to extended hours. One rider noted, "If I deny even one order, I lose the entire incentive," emphasizing the challenge of maintaining earnings under these stringent conditions.

The demanding incentive structure exemplifies Srnicek's (2017) theory of commodification, in which gig platforms prioritize measurable outputs over the intrinsic value of labor. By focusing on delivery speed and completion rates, platforms like Zomato reduce workers to mere data points, valued solely for their efficiency in meeting predefined targets. This approach not only strips riders of personal agency but also compels them to work under conditions that often jeopardize their safety, as they prioritize reaching targets over their own well-being.

As incentive structures evolved, rewards became harder to attain, amplifying financial strain, especially for full-time riders dependent on Zomato for income. One rider explained, "I handle about 30-35 orders just to earn around ₹15,000-16,000 a month. But with reduced incentives, I end up working 14-15 hours a day just to make ends meet." The return to performance-based pay has created an environment where financial stability remains elusive.

Full-time riders face intense productivity demands without sufficient financial support, leading to cycles of physical and emotional exhaustion. While full-time riders endure more pressure, part-time workers, though impacted, rely less on incentives. As one part-time rider described, "I log in after my regular job to pick up some deliveries. The incentives help cover extra expenses, but I don't rely on it as my main income." This flexibility allows part-time riders some reprieve, enabling them to view incentives as a bonus rather than a necessity.

The increased competition and evolving incentive structures mirror Fischer's (2018) paradox of income mobility in the gig economy: while earnings may lift workers out of absolute poverty, they are also exposed to high levels of exploitation and instability. Riders reported that "getting multiple orders is tough because there are so many delivery boys now," highlighting how competition impacts their ability to meet targets. One rider echoed this

frustration, noting, "It's almost impossible to hit the targets now. You work longer hours just to get what used to be easy to earn."

However, riders are not passive recipients of these structures; many employ a range of tactics to navigate and challenge the algorithmic control that shapes their work. Multi-apping is one common strategy, where riders work across multiple platforms, like Zomato and Swiggy3, to select the most profitable or time-efficient orders. "If Zomato's rates drop, I switch to Swiggy," one rider shared, "so I'm not stuck relying on one platform to make enough in a day". This flexibility allows them to avoid being locked into the algorithmic demands of any single platform.

Riders also employ batching or stacking orders, accepting multiple orders within close proximity and delivering them in one go. This approach allows them to fulfill more orders quickly and maximize their earnings in a shorter time frame, especially during peak hours. One rider, who mentioned sacrificing bonuses by declining orders, explained, "I try to pick up orders from the same area, so I can deliver two or three meals in a single run and earn more without wasting time on back-and-forth trips." This approach helps maximize immediate earnings, but by focusing on nearby deliveries, the rider sacrifices bonuses tied to consecutive orders, highlighting a trade-off between efficiency and the incentive structure set by the platform.

Another tactic is selective cancellations and reassignments, where riders decline or reassign orders that are too far or would disrupt their daily goals. "I'd rather take a small penalty than waste an hour on a long-distance order that doesn't pay enough," a rider explained, highlighting the calculated risk they take to maintain control over their work conditions.

Together, these tactics illustrate how riders "play the platform" to reclaim control over their work, transforming algorithmic constraints into opportunities for greater agency and resilience.

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3 **Swiggy**: An app-based food delivery platform in India connecting customers with restaurants and gig delivery workers.

The evolving incentive requirements increasingly shift operational costs onto riders, who extend hours and take risks to meet harder-to-reach targets, reinforcing Fischer's (2018) paradox: rising earnings often coincide with deepening exploitation. Zomato's flexible pay model, while marketed as opportunity, demands intense work for unpredictable rewards, prioritizing platform efficiency over worker stability

4.9 Struggling to Find Balance

आप एक सप्ताह में कितने घंटे काम करते हैं?   (How many hours a week do you work on average?)
84 responses

Figure 8: Hours of work in a week
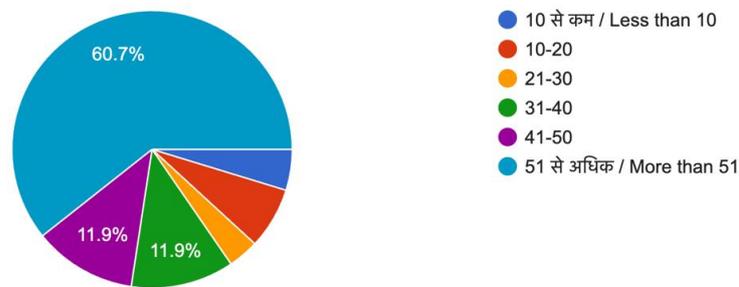
The struggle to find balance between long working hours and personal life is a defining characteristic of platform work. Survey data shows that 60.7% of respondents work over 51 hours a week, reflecting the relentless demands of gig work. These hours impact workers' ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance, with 46.9% of respondents rarely having time for personal or family life.

क्या आपको लगता है कि आपके पास अपने निजी जीवन और परिवार के लिए पर्याप्त समय है? (Do you feel you have enough time for personal life and family?)
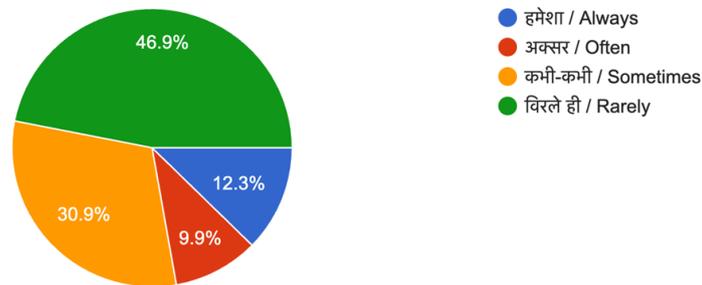
81 responses

Figure 9: Work Life Balance

When asked if they have sufficient time for personal and family life, only 12.3% said yes, underscoring the struggle of managing personal responsibilities alongside work demands. A middle-aged rider who moved to the city to support his family shared that he now works from early morning until late at night. "I used to take my kids to school, but now I don't see them in the mornings," he shared, highlighting how platform work creates an emotional distance as job demands erode personal relationships

This painful disconnect between work and family, driven by the constant pressure to earn and support loved ones, exemplifies the structural pressures faced by gig workers. Their lives are dictated by economic hardship, familial obligations, and platform demands, leaving them little control over their own time. The struggle for balance is not merely logistical—it is deeply emotional, as many workers bear this burden quietly, feeling guilt and failure as they try to provide for their families.

Fischer's (2020) views on precarity are particularly relevant here, as they highlight how structural pressures—such as financial instability and the constant need to support family—trap workers in cycles of overwork and alienation. This rider's experience vividly illustrates how, despite the promised "flexibility" of gig work, workers are forced to endure long, strenuous hours with little autonomy. They are caught between the economic demands of platform labor and the emotional weight of missing out on the lives of their families. The cost

of trying to meet both needs is often a profound sense of alienation—from their families, their time, and ultimately, from themselves.

For another rider, who works 12-hour shifts to support his aging parents and young children, the emotional toll is evident. "I don't remember the last time I had a proper dinner with my family," he shared. "I'm always either working or resting however much I can get ready for the next day." His story echoes that of countless others who feel disconnected from their loved ones, sacrificing daily interactions and important family moments just to meet the basic financial demands of survival. This lack of time for personal life illustrates the broader struggle of gig workers to maintain a sense of balance between their professional and personal commitments, leading to emotional exhaustion and guilt that often go unnoticed.

The unpredictability of income exacerbates this imbalance. Many workers, including a young rider in his twenties who recently migrated from Bihar, described how they are often forced to sacrifice personal time in order to stabilize their earnings. "I barely get to spend time with my family. I have to keep the app on all the time, hoping for orders, or else I won't make enough," he shared. This sentiment is echoed by others, such as a middle-aged rider supporting a large family, who explained the difficult trade-off between financial stability and personal well-being that characterizes gig work.

इस नौकरी से आपकी साप्ताहिक आय कितनी अनुमानित है? (How predictable is your weekly income from this job?)
82 responses

● बहुत अनुमानित/ Very Predictable
● कुछ हद तक अनुमानित / Somewhat Predictable
● तटस्थ / Neutral
● अप्रत्याशित / Unpredictable
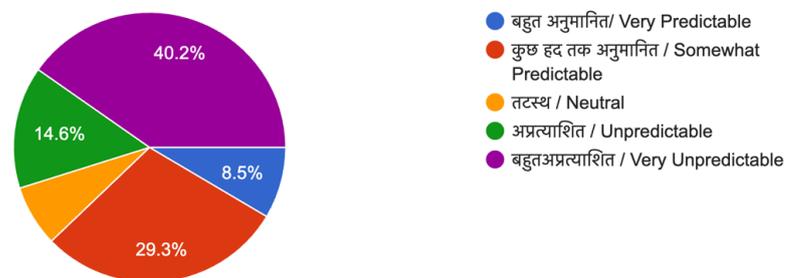● बहुतअप्रत्याशित / Very Unpredictable

Figure 10: Income Predictability

The survey data highlights the challenging nature of gig work, particularly the unpredictability of income. When respondents were asked, "How predictable is your weekly income from this job?" 40.2% of them reported that their earnings fluctuate significantly from week to week, creating an environment where financial insecurity dominates. This constant fluctuation forces many workers into a relentless cycle of staying logged into the platform, hoping to secure more deliveries just to stabilize their income.

A middle-aged rider, supporting a large family, emphasized the difficult trade-off between financial stability and personal well-being. He explained how the unpredictable nature of his income makes it nearly impossible to plan for anything: "There are times when I've had to borrow money just to get through the month because my earnings were lower than expected. I needed to pay my rent and my daughter's school fees, but because of the distances of my orders for that month, luck just wasn't on my side." This rider's experience illustrates how gig workers are caught in a dynamic where they feel compelled to overwork, staying online and sacrificing personal care or familial obligations in an attempt to mitigate financial uncertainty.

The concept of "Struggling to Find Balance" is closely tied to Sundararajan's (2016) critique of the sharing economy. Platforms like Zomato promote flexibility as a major benefit, yet the income instability workers face pushes many into extended hours that compromise their personal lives. Although workers theoretically control their schedules, the unpredictable nature of earnings often compels them to work longer hours just to achieve financial stability, leaving little time for rest or personal commitments. Sundararajan's framework captures this inherent contradiction, where the promise of flexibility masks a deeper lack of stability, situating workers in precarious, unsustainable conditions.

The drive to meet performance-based incentives exacerbates this precarity, as riders feel pressured to prioritize speed over safety. One rider shared how meeting delivery quotas led him to skip red lights and drive dangerously fast, saying, "I skip red lights and drive at speeds of 70 km/h just to meet the bonuses, even though I know it's dangerous." Such risk-taking, incentivized by modest financial rewards, heightens physical dangers and reinforces the demands for relentless work under unsafe conditions. Despite these incentives, many workers express dissatisfaction, noting that they fall short of making the job viable. As one

interviewee noted, "We think we're making good money—1,400 to 2,000 rupees a day—but after expenses, there's no life in this job. Although platforms enable individuals to engage in paid work, the jobs provided remain precarious, often lacking long-term security and critical social protections.

Meagher critiques the platform economy for addressing short-term unemployment without significantly improving long-term financial stability, particularly for workers who rely on these jobs as their primary source of income. Although platforms enable individuals to engage in paid work, the jobs provided remain precarious, often lacking long-term security and critical social protections. Meagher critiques the platform economy for addressing short-term unemployment without significantly improving long-term financial stability, particularly for workers who rely on these jobs as their primary source of income. Although platforms enable individuals to engage in paid work, the jobs provided remain precarious, often lacking long-term security and critical social protections. Meagher critiques the platform economy for addressing short-term unemployment without significantly improving long-term financial stability, particularly for workers who rely on these jobs as their primary source of income. Although platforms enable individuals to engage in paid work, the jobs provided remain precarious, often lacking long-term security and critical social protections. Meagher critiques the platform economy for addressing short-term unemployment without significantly improving long-term financial stability, particularly for workers who rely on these jobs as their primary source of income.

Income unpredictability also limits workers' ability to maintain control over their finances, which in turn impacts their sense of autonomy. Riders reported struggling to predict their earnings from one day to the next, a problem exacerbated by Zomato's fluctuating incentive structures and inconsistent order flow. One respondent remarked, "There's no fixed salary. Some days I make a lot, but on others, I barely break even." The lack of predictability in earnings leaves workers feeling disempowered, unsure of how much they will earn despite the number of hours worked. This reflects the broader gig economy literature, where workers face unstable income and little job security (Bertolini et al., 2020).

The promise of stable pay is often an illusion within platform work. Though hourly rates may appear fixed, the complexity of platform algorithms—alongside variable payment

structures—makes it impossible for workers to rely on consistent earnings. Bertolini et al. (2020) note that gig workers in the food delivery sector are particularly vulnerable to these fluctuations, as their pay depends not only on the number of hours worked but also on the demand for services, which is unpredictable and out of their control. Zomato riders, many of whom rely on the platform as their primary source of income, experience ongoing financial instability, which only deepens their economic insecurity.

This instability starkly contrasts with the image of flexibility that platforms like Zomato sell to workers. While the promise of choosing when to work is attractive, most workers are compelled to remain logged in for extended hours just to meet their basic income needs. Sundararajan's (2016) aptly describes this contradiction, where the flexibility of gig work is overshadowed by the financial insecurity that comes with it. As a result, workers find themselves trapped, constantly striving to find a balance between long hours and their personal lives, while facing ongoing uncertainty about their earnings.

The findings from the survey and interviews reveal a stark reality: the flexibility promised by platforms like Zomato often comes at the cost of personal and emotional well-being, with workers left struggling. to balance the unrelenting demands of work with the equally pressing needs of their families. The instability of income exacerbates this struggle, pushing workers to overwork in the hopes of financial stability that remains elusive. This analysis highlights the systemic pressures created by platform labor, where workers are trapped between financial insecurity and the emotional burden of missing out on family life. The struggle to find balance is not just an individual challenge but a structural consequence of the gig economy, where precarity, unpredictability, and emotional sacrifice are the norm rather than the exception.

4.10 Hazardous Conditions and Lack of Institutional Support

पिछले 1 महीने में, क्या आप काम करते समय किसी दुर्घटना में शामिल थे? (Over the last 10 months, were you involved in an accident while working?)
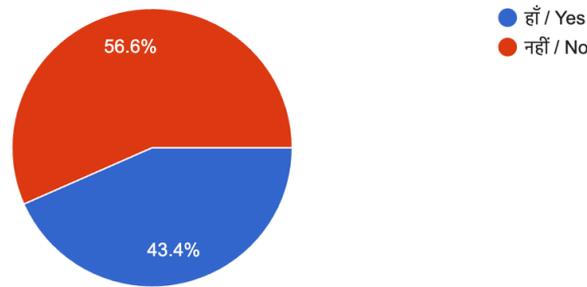
83 responses

Figure 11: Accident Involvement

Survey data reveals a stark reality: 43.4% of respondents reported work-related accidents in the past 10 months, underscoring the risks faced by food delivery riders. The financial pressure to maximize deliveries often forces riders into hazardous behaviors like speeding or skipping meals. As one rider explained, "We're in such a rush, constantly under pressure… it's not that we want to be reckless, but we don't have a choice." Schwellnus et al. (2019) describe how algorithmic management in gig work, rather than directly enforcing these behaviors, indirectly pressures workers by linking earnings to delivery volume. Zomato's algorithm-driven system prioritizes speed and efficiency, placing workers in risky situations without explicitly demanding these actions, contributing to frequent accidents and making working conditions particularly precarious.

One Zomato rider recounted a severe accident that revealed significant gaps in Zomato's emergency response system. Following the incident, the rider faced delays in receiving assistance from Zomato's helpline, forcing their family to arrange medical care independently. Although the rider ultimately filed an insurance claim through Zomato's partner, Acko General Insurance, the initial uncertainty over whether the insurance was active heightened their stress. Though the claim was eventually processed, covering ₹1 lakh for hospitalization and providing ₹500 per day for the hospital stay, the delays in support posed immediate risks to the rider's health.

Despite eventual coverage, the delays and unclear processes expose riders to immediate health risks, highlighting how platform policies leave workers to navigate complex support systems alone, especially in critical situations.
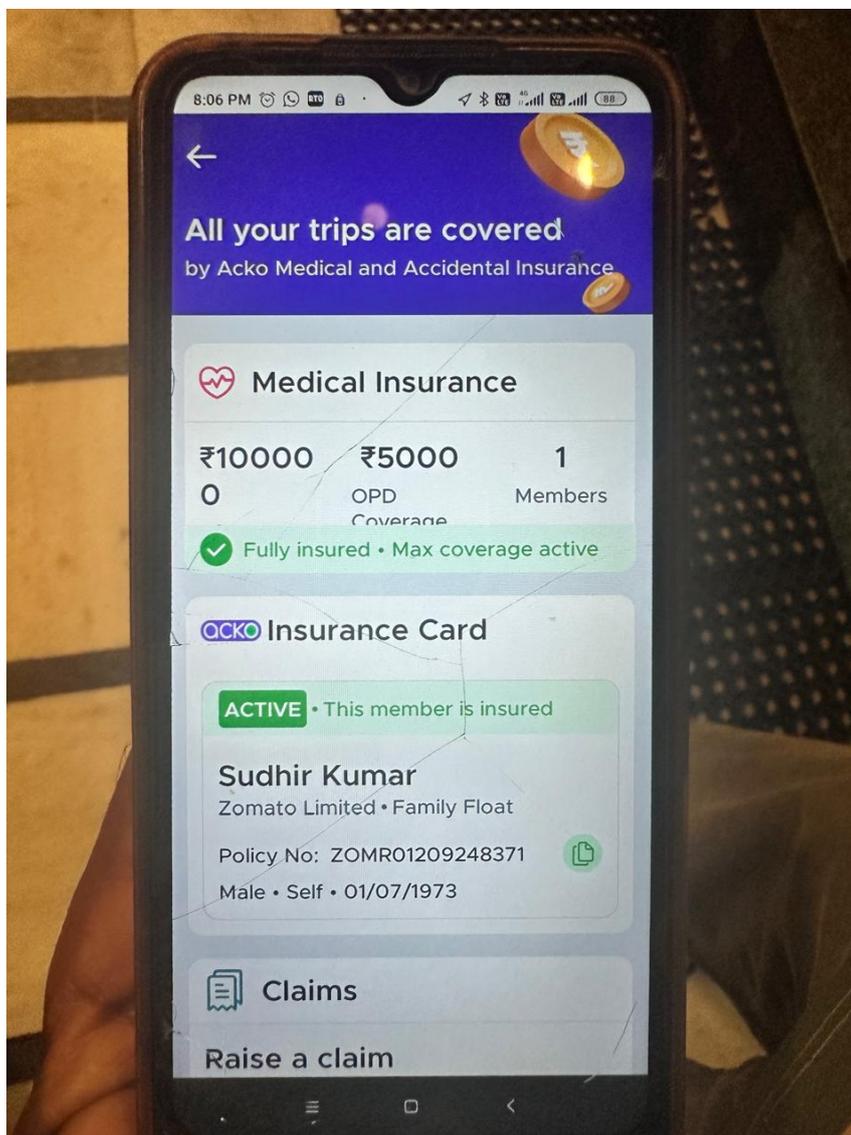
Figure 12: Insurance on Partner App

As seen in the delivery rider's phone, the Zomato delivery app provides riders with insurance coverage details through its partner, Acko General Insurance, covering accidental and medical expenses. This partnership illustrates a partial safety net, but riders report that the claims process is fraught with delays and lacks transparency, highlighting a substantial gap between promised protections and workers' actual experiences. The requirement to

submit multiple documents, such as hospital bills and accident reports, often while still recovering, reflects the challenges inherent in accessing even minimal support.

Risks in high-crime areas add another layer of danger. One rider described a theft incident where he faced violent threats. Seeking assistance from Zomato's field manager, he was simply redirected to customer service with no immediate help provided, underscoring the limited, impersonal institutional support available to riders in times of crisis.

Zomato's practice of classifying riders as independent contractors exacerbates their vulnerability. This strategy of "risk displacement", as Roll (2021) highlights, allows platforms to avoid traditional responsibilities such as healthcare, pensions and job security, thereby shifting work-related risks directly onto workers. Schwellnus et al. (2019) explain how this model, underpinned by algorithmic management, removes workers' agency by dictating tasks, earnings, and even working conditions, thereby reinforcing economic instability and limiting riders' ability to seek redress.

Adding to these challenges, many riders avoid making insurance claims out of fear that early claims might exhaust their benefits, leaving them exposed in case of future emergencies. The lack of clear information on coverage status in the Zomato app fuels this insecurity, with one rider expressing, "I've never dared to claim it… what if something worse happens?" This widespread hesitancy reflects riders' uncertainty in accessing the minimal protections they are given.

The lack of training on emergency protocols and vague communication channels compound these issues, delaying necessary care and increasing stress. This limited support exacerbates riders' exclusion from meaningful institutional backing, creating a fragmented experience that compounds the precariousness of their work.

Beyond safety risks, riders must also endure constant pressure to comply with customers' demands without recourse. Every interaction comes with an unspoken demand to be unfailingly polite, even in the face of rude, dismissive, or abusive behavior from customers. Riders recount instances where customers cancel orders post-delivery, refuse to pay, or make

unreasonable demands, all while expecting riders to respond courteously. As one rider expressed, they must tolerate these interactions "knowing even a minor complaint can result in ID blocking."

This looming threat of ID deactivation leaves riders in a cycle of compliance, forcing them to accept mistreatment silently. Losing access to their ID effectively severs a rider's means of income, yet the platform provides no transparent appeals process or support for riders to contest these decisions. This model of customer prioritization reduces workers to expendable resources, monitored by algorithms and customer ratings, with no safeguards for their rights or dignity.

These limited protections align with Meagher's (2019) critique of progressive universalism, which provides only superficial support to informal workers. Zomato represents a nominal safety net that is more symbolic than substantive, comprising complicated claims processes, inadequate emergency responses, and ambiguous insurance policies. This limited safety net, provided through third-party insurers, allows platforms to maintain a socially responsible image while distancing themselves from direct responsibility for worker welfare. The superficial engagement with workers' needs fits within the progressive universalism model, as it offers only a facade of inclusion, without meaningfully enhancing workers' well-being or security.

Fischer's critique of minimalist universalism further reveals the fundamental inadequacy of Zomato's fragmented protections. By limiting assistance to isolated benefits like accident insurance, the policy reinforces the structural vulnerability of gig workers, preventing them from connecting to a broader social safety net. This segmented welfare approach fails to provide both immediate aid and long-term security, leaving gig workers dependent on inadequate protections that fall short of addressing their core economic and social vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, this approach to protections reflects a strategic choice that serves the interests of platforms by minimizing the cost and administrative burden of worker benefits. However, this minimalism comes at the expense of worker well-being, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and economic insecurity. By adopting this strategy, platforms meet regulatory and public expectations for worker support without fundamentally improving the vulnerable conditions

that gig workers face, leaving them exposed to risks that these nominal protections purport to mitigate.

The significant health and safety risks faced by riders, exacerbated by a lack of institutional support and the shifting of responsibility onto workers, reflect a systemic neglect in platform management. Zomato's minimalistic support structures, exemplified by delayed or unreliable insurance coverage, place workers at the mercy of unpredictable environments without adequate protections. This risk displacement highlights an ethical gap within the gig economy, where platforms offload responsibility for worker welfare onto individual contractors, leaving them exposed to both physical and financial dangers.

4.11 Satisfaction: Balancing Necessity and Contentment

The gig economy, while often critiqued for its exploitative nature, continues to be a major source of employment in India. Findings from this study reveal a nuanced picture: although food delivery workers endure chaotic traffic, unpredictable weather, long hours, and unsafe environments, many value the opportunities that gig work provides. In a competitive labor market like New Delhi, the open-access model of platform work has enabled workers to secure steady income, which they might otherwise struggle to find in informal or traditional sectors.

One primary advantage identified by workers is the relative predictability of income. A Zomato rider noted, "It's not easy to cover all my expenses, but at least I know I'll get paid regularly—more than I can say for other jobs I've had." While earnings fluctuate in response to demand, the regular pay cycle offers a stability that sets platform work apart from other informal employment, where payments are often delayed or inconsistent. Weekly payments and occasional cash transactions provide workers with a degree of financial predictability, reducing their need for short-term loans, or "hand-loans," for daily expenses. Another worker highlighted, "Getting payment weekly is a benefit for us because this means we do not have to take hand-loans or wait 30 to 45 days for payment settlement." This payment structure, though not always sufficient, differentiates gig work from domestic work, where irregular cycles leave workers financially vulnerable.

क्या आपको लगता है कि आपकी कमाई आपके जीवन यापन के खर्चों को पूरा करने के लिए पर्याप्त है? (Do you feel that the income you earn is sufficient to cover your living expenses?)

80 responses
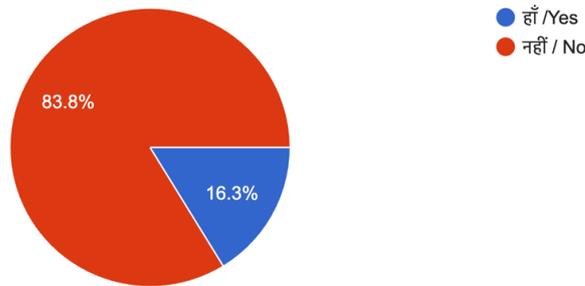
Figure 13 : Income Sufficiency for Living Expenses

Additionally, the flexibility of platform work is widely valued among gig workers. One participant reflected, "I work longer hours than I might in a regular job, but I can choose to work at night or during weekends, which lets me earn more when I need it." The flexibility to align work hours with personal needs or high-demand periods grants a sense of autonomy. Another worker added, "It's my choice if I want to work harder and earn more," pointing to a unique feature of platform work: the financial agency that enables workers to control their earnings through additional effort.

आप अपनी वर्तमान कार्य स्थितियों से कितने संतुष्ट हैं? How satisfied are you with your current working conditions?

89 responses

Figure 14: Worker Satisfaction

Job satisfaction remains a complex theme. Of the 89 respondents surveyed on their current working conditions, 30.1% reported feeling 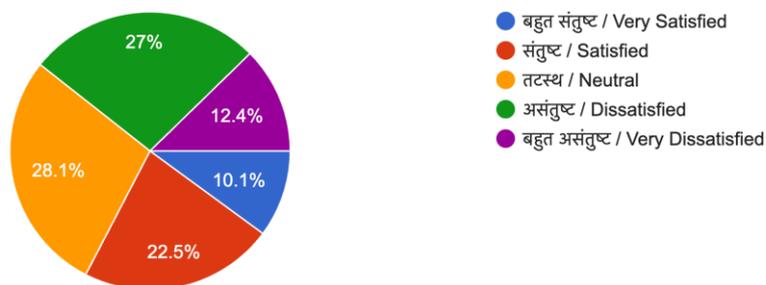neutral, 20.5% were satisfied, and only 7.2% expressed high satisfaction. Although workers recognize the value of consistent income, they often struggle with earnings instability, which affects overall satisfaction. Many view their roles as necessary rather than fulfilling, prioritizing the immediate income over potential career growth.

This sentiment is well-encapsulated by one worker's statement: "I'm grateful for the job because it's helping me get by, but I wouldn't say I'm happy. The income is unpredictable, and it doesn't offer the security I need. It's more of a necessity than something I enjoy doing." This response illustrates a recurring theme within the study—workers regard gig work as an essential source of survival, but not as a path to personal satisfaction or long-term security.

The absence of traditional supervision in platform work is another aspect that many workers appreciate. A former retail worker shared, "In my old job, I had to deal with constant oversight and criticism. Here, the app assigns the work, and as long as I do my job, I don't have anyone yelling at me." This digital task allocation fosters a sense of independence and respect, which contrasts with the scrutiny and oversight common in other informal jobs.

Although unregulated, platform work offers more structure than some informal sectors, where regular pay is not guaranteed. One worker remarked, "At least gig workers know they will be paid, unlike others who are not assured of a fixed salary each month." This payment consistency, even when variable, provides a level of predictability that other informal jobs often lack. For many, gig work supplements other incomes, while for some, it is their primary financial resource.

For workers facing challenges in securing stable employment, platforms like Zomato serve as crucial financial lifelines. Even if the job does not fulfill personal or professional aspirations, it enables financial continuity when more secure employment is inaccessible. This duality is central to the gig work experience: it provides flexibility and income but lacks the stability that workers ultimately desire. Chebbi's (2024) research further substantiates these findings, noting that gig workers in India often prefer platform-based work over other

informal options for its predictability and accessibility. While flexibility initially draws many workers, it is the relative stability of payments that sustains their engagement.

Despite numerous challenges, gig work remains essential for many, though it falls short of providing ideal conditions. Workers' acceptance of these subpar conditions underscores a survival-oriented approach, where financial necessity overrides job satisfaction. The stability of regular payments contrasts with broader dissatisfaction, as participation in the gig economy is largely driven by limited alternatives rather than genuine contentment. This reliance on gig work as a financial safety net reflects the shortcomings of current labor markets in offering viable employment, highlighting platforms like Zomato as stopgap solutions rather than sustainable career paths.

5. Unpacked and Delivered-Final Reflections

When I first began exploring gig work in New Delhi, it was as a curious consumer, intrigued by the lives behind each delivery. Platforms like Zomato presented a vision of digital transformation—a new workforce empowered by flexibility and opportunity within India's largely informal labor market. However, as I transitioned from a consumer to a researcher, my study uncovered a complex reality behind the screens of the "Zomato Partner Apps." What began as curiosity evolved into a commitment to highlight the structural challenges facing gig workers, who navigate a balance between precarious employment and vulnerability within India's evolving informal economy.

5.1 Algorithm and Beyond

Algorithmic management—through allocating tasks, monitoring performance, and reliance on customer reviews—significantly impacts the autonomy and well-being of Zomato riders. While these platforms advertise flexibility, this study finds that such algorithms strip workers of genuine agency. Riders are reduced to data points, often viewed as mere extensions of the app or platform. Ultimately, these algorithmic systems prioritize efficiency and customer satisfaction over workers' rights, contributing to a rigid and high-pressure work environment disguised by flexible employment.

In addition to platform control, various external pressures critically shape the experiences of gig workers. Customers frequently perceive riders as mere extensions of the app, demanding swift deliveries without recognizing the human effort involved. To maintain service standards, restaurants prioritize dine-in customers over delivery orders, resulting in delayed orders and unpaid waiting time for riders, who often endure these delays without compensation. Moreover, interactions with parking authorities and police exacerbate these challenges, as riders face displacement from waiting areas, fines, and even harassment. The absence of essential facilities, such as designated parking, underscores a broader pattern: the logistical and financial burdens of gig work are systematically offloaded onto the workers, with minimal accountability from platforms, restaurants, or customers. Consequently, riders must navigate these inefficiencies independently, often at their own expense.

Beyond algorithmic oversight, riders contend with significant unpaid labor. Zomato's policy of compensating only for completed deliveries ignores idle time spent waiting for orders or addressing logistical issues, forcing workers to absorb risks and inefficiencies within a poorly coordinated system. These external pressures are further compounded by platform practices, including abrupt fee drops and reductions in incentives. Platforms like Zomato frequently adjust compensation structures without rider input, directly impacting earnings and exposing vulnerabilities inherent in this labor model. Such unpredictability highlights the gig economy's limited resilience to economic fluctuations, leaving riders' livelihoods in a state of constant uncertainty.

Amidst these multifaceted demands, a striking lack of accountability persists—none of the stakeholders assume responsibility for riders' well-being. This fragmented system forces riders to bear cumulative pressures alone, without substantial support or protection from any party involved. In addressing my research question on the impact of algorithmic management on riders' working conditions, it becomes evident that while algorithmic systems significantly structure gig work, the broader network of external pressures is equally critical. The interplay between technological control and socio-economic factors creates a complex environment where gig workers navigate both digital and physical challenges, highlighting the multifaceted nature of inequality within the gig economy.

5.2 Stability Amidst Precarity

Platforms like Zomato offer a vital lifeline for workers often excluded from formal employment due to systemic barriers such as caste, class, migrant status, religion, language, education, or lack of connections. In an economy dominated by precarious, low-paying jobs, Zomato creates a more level playing field by making income opportunities accessible. Becoming a delivery worker requires only a smartphone and a mode of transport, reducing entry barriers and opening pathways for marginalized individuals. For many, especially migrants, gig work serves as both a struggle and a crucial safety net, balancing the promise of opportunity with the pressing need for immediate survival.

In India's highly informal labor market, where traditional roles are fraught with instability, gig work occupies a unique yet essential space—providing these workers with a foothold in the labor market, albeit with constraints. Although unregulated, platform work offers more structure than other informal sectors. Zomato's regular pay cycles offer a semblance of stability, sparing workers the ordeal of negotiating, begging, or pleading with a boss. Earnings may fluctuate based on demand, but the predictable payment intervals offer a consistency often absent in informal jobs, where wages can be delayed or unreliable. This predictability makes gig work an appealing choice for those who, lacking viable alternatives, view platform work as one of the few pathways to earn without fear of irregular pay.

Yet, the limitations are clear. Platform work provides immediate income but falls short of offering a path out of poverty. The high cost of urban living quickly erodes modest earnings, leaving workers economically vulnerable. The lack of social protections, benefits, or advancement opportunities means that while Zomato's payment system fills an immediate need, it does not provide lasting stability.

The presence of platform work in India highlights a continuation—and deepening—of structural disparities within the informal sector. Platforms do not merely mirror existing inequalities; they institutionalize them through algorithmic control and insecure contracts, embedding traditional capital-labor dynamics in a digital context. This reality makes it fully understandable why so many workers sign up for platform work, as even its minimal stability is an improvement over more fragmented forms of informal labor, like street vending or daily wage work, where earnings are often lower, inconsistent, and entirely unprotected.

In a city where formal job opportunities and labor protections are scarce, platform work has become a substitute for traditional employment—a flawed but critical bridge in an economy that otherwise lacks structure and inclusivity. While platforms can entrench existing inequalities and exploit workers' vulnerabilities, their absence would leave these workers with even fewer ways to secure income. Thus, platform work serves as a solution that is marginally better than other available options and a crucial, albeit imperfect, safety net for migrants and other marginalized workers navigating New Delhi's workforce.

5.3 Myth of Freedom

This study contends that although the gig economy, exemplified by platforms like Zomato, presents itself as an egalitarian force by dismantling traditional barriers, it concurrently perpetuates social stratification through implicit economic sorting. By portraying a notion of inclusivity and flexibility, these platforms create a façade of opportunity. However, the structure of gig work subtly channels economically marginalized groups into precarious roles, perpetuating the very inequalities it purports to dismantle.

The appeal of the platform lies in the absence of overt discrimination. Unlike traditional hiring processes, platforms do not explicitly sort workers by socio-economic markers, instead offering a "level playing field" where anyone with a smart phone and mode of transportation can participate. Yet, financial necessity plays a silent but powerful role, driving those from disadvantaged backgrounds into gig work out of compelling financial need.

The absence of explicit social barriers conceals this underlying reality: market forces control who enters and remains in the gig workforce by capitalizing on workers' economic vulnerability. Platforms exploit this vulnerability, drawing from a labor pool that lacks alternatives, thereby replicating social hierarchies within an ostensibly inclusive model.

This paradox exposes the myth of freedom within the gig economy. While platforms like Zomato promote flexibility as a core benefit, this "freedom" is constrained by economic pressures. Many workers have little choice but to accept gruelling schedules, peak-hour demands, and algorithm-driven incentives to make a sustainable income. Riders may appear to control their schedules, but in practice, they are bound to the platform's demands, incentivized to work during high-demand periods or accept extended, unfavorable shifts. For many, this flexibility is less a choice than a financial imperative.

The dependence on platform incentives drives both part-time and full-time riders into constrained roles. Part-time workers, initially attracted by the promise of supplemental income, quickly find their earning potential restricted to peak hours, limiting their autonomy. Full-time riders face even greater pressures, working long hours to meet income targets and sacrificing personal agency to align with platform demands. The need to meet quotas and

secure bonuses forces many to compromise safety and well-being, underscoring how financial need, not true flexibility, dictates their schedules.

This dependency reveals a structural coercion where "flexibility" serves as a tool for labor control rather than autonomy. Platforms like Zomato capitalize on economic vulnerability, sorting riders into low-security, low-mobility roles that perpetuate social hierarchies under the guise of equality. This economic sorting mechanism is central to the gig economy's functionality. By presenting low barrier work as universally accessible, platforms obscure the reality that financial precarity determines who enters and endures the demands of gig work. Workers from marginalized communities are more likely to remain in these roles, bound by financial constraints and limited alternatives, creating a segmented labor market that mirrors the precariousness of traditional informal work.

In this way, the gig economy reflects a paradox within ultra-liberal economies: freedom and equality are championed in theory but compromised by market forces that prioritize profit over worker well-being. Platforms like Zomato maintain a facade of freedom while subtly directing workers into roles defined by financial insecurity and limited advancement. This "myth of freedom" reflects the contradictions of ultra-liberalism, where market-driven processes sustain, rather than dismantle, social hierarchies. Flexibility and independence exist, but only for those who can afford them—leaving economically vulnerable workers in roles that perpetuate their hardship.

5.4 Final Reflections

In India's highly informal economy, where nine out of ten workers engage in jobs without legal or social protections (Ghosh, 2022), platform work represents a precarious form of inclusion, providing immediate income yet lacking stability. For marginalized workers, the gig economy can appear as a rare opportunity, offering an income stream in a context where stable employment options are limited. However, this type of work is only marginally better than unemployment; it allows workers to earn sustainable earnings but does little to address deeper societal issues like economic inequality and job security. The platform economy, far

from disrupting hierarchies, often reinforces them, as it exploits workers' need for income while offering minimal protections and advancement opportunities.

This underscores the uncertainty of platform work in India—although it offers millions an entry point into the labor market, it fails to provide the safety net that would support long-term financial stability. Although platform work is evolving and alternatives remain scarce, the promise of egalitarianism largely falls short, leaving workers in an ambiguous space where income is accessible but precarious. The absence of platform work might leave these workers with no immediate livelihood, yet its presence should not be mistaken for a solution to larger systemic issues. Addressing these structural vulnerabilities will be crucial as the gig economy expands; future policy and research must recognize the unique needs of gig workers within this evolving space to prevent further marginalization and ensure fair, stable working conditions.

Future research on gig work should avoid generalizing findings across regions and instead focus on the unique local economic conditions being examined. Insights from studies in the Global North or South must be thoughtfully contextualized, as the structural challenges encountered by gig workers differ significantly across regions.

This context specific approach holds great importance in India's gig economy. where platform work cannot be adequately understood without considering its distinct socio-economic and labor frameworks, which contrast drastically with those in the Global North. In India, platform work intersects with the deeply entrenched cultural and economic factors, suggesting that its implications on workers' lives extend beyond simply employment statistics to encompass issues of social stratification, inequality, and opportunities. By acknowledging and addressing these complexities, research can contribute to more effective policy interventions that directly address the evolving needs and challenges faced by the workers in the specific economies.

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7. Appendix

7. 1 Ethics Form

ISS Research Ethics Review Form
for RP research carried out by MA students[1]

Aim:
This Form aims to help you identify research ethics issues which may come up in the design and delivery of your Research Paper (RP). It builds on the session on Research Ethics session in course 3105 and subsequent discussions with your peers and RP supervisor/reader. We hope the form encourages you to reflect on the ethics issues which may arise.

The process:
The Ethics Review process consists of answering questions in the following two checklists: B1-Low-sensitivity and B2-High-sensitivity. Depending on the answer to these questions you might need to fill section **C-Statement of Research Ethics** too.

The background document "ISS Research Ethics Guidelines for MA Students" provides advice and detailed information on how to complete this form.

Step 1 - Fill checklists B1 and B2
Step 2 - After answering checklists B1 and B2, the process proceeds as follows:

- **If you answer 'yes' to one or more low-sensitivity questions (checklist B1):** please discuss the issues raised with your supervisor and include an overview of the risks, and actions you can take to mitigate them, in the final design of your RP. You can refer to the ISS Research Ethics Guidelines for MA Students for help with this.

- **If you answer 'yes' to one or more high-sensitivity questions (checklist B2)**, please complete section 'C' of the form below describing the risks you have identified and how you plan to mitigate against them. Discuss the material with your supervisor, in most cases the supervisor will provide approval for you to go ahead with your research and attach this form to the RP design when you upload it in canvas. If, after consultation with your supervisor, it is felt that additional reflection is needed, please submit this form (sections B1, B2, and C) to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) for review as follows:

  When submitting your form to the REC, please send the following to researchethics@iss.nl:
  1) the completed checklists B1 and B2 (or equivalent if dealing with an external ethics requirement)
  2) the completed form C 'Statement of Research Ethics'
  3) a copy of the RP design
  4) any accompanying documentation, for example, consent forms, Data Management Plans (DMP), ethics clearances from other institutions.

  Your application will be reviewed by a reviewer who is not part of your supervisory team. The REC aims to respond to ethics approval requests within a period of 15 working days.

Step 3 - Integrating the Ethics Review process into the RP:

- This Ethics Review Form (checklists B1 and B2) needs to be added as an annex in your RP Design document to be uploaded in the Canvas page for course 3105 and to be presented in May.
- If, as a result of completing sections B1 and B2 of this Review Form you also need to complete section C , add section C 'Statement of Research Ethics' and Section D 'Approval from Research Ethics Committee' (if available) as an annex to your final RP design to be to be uploaded in the Canvas page for course 3105 in July.

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[1] This checklist and statement is adapted from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Research Ethics Committee and informed by the checklists of two Ethics Review Boards at EUR (ESHCC and ERIM) and the EU H2020 Guidance – How to complete your ethics self-assessment.

Project details, Checklists, and Approval Status

A) Project/Proposal details

1.	Project/Proposal Title	Behind the Orders: Unpacking the Realities of New Delhi's Food Delivery Gig Workers
2.	Name of MA student (applicant)	Reet Chhatwal
3.	Email address of MA student	690479rc@eur.nl
4.	Name of Supervisor	Roy Huijsmans
5.	Email address of Supervisor	huijsmans@iss.nl
6.	Country/countries where research will take place	India

7. Short description of the proposed research and the context in which it is carried out:

This study critically examines the impact of the gig economy on food delivery riders in New Delhi, using Zomato as a case study. While platforms like Zomato offer flexible work options and income opportunities for individuals often excluded from the formal workforce, they also introduce significant challenges related to working conditions and overall well-being. This research delves into the experiences of these workers, exploring the complex interplay between employment opportunities and socio-economic vulnerabilities within New Delhi's platform economy.

In India, where the informal economy constitutes a large portion of the workforce, platform-based work presents both benefits and drawbacks that differ markedly from formal labor markets. New Delhi's diverse population and economic activities make it an ideal setting for understanding these dynamics. This study argues that, while the gig economy—exemplified by platforms like Zomato—appears to promote inclusivity by lowering barriers to employment, it simultaneously reinforces social hierarchies through implicit economic sorting mechanisms. Despite the absence of explicit barriers related to caste, class, or education in hiring, gig work often channels marginalized groups into precarious, low-security roles. This contradiction underscores a broader critique of liberalism, where the promise of freedom from traditional regulations coexists with persistent social stratification, exposing the 'myth of freedom' in ultra-liberal economies.

Through surveys, in-depth interviews, and spontaneous group discussions with Zomato riders, this research provides a nuanced perspective on the daily realities, working conditions, effects of algorithmic management, and socio-economic challenges impacting these workers' livelihoods. The findings aim to contribute valuable insights to policy discussions on labor protections and social equity within India's evolving digital economy.

B) Research checklist

The following checklist acts as a guide to help you think through what areas of research ethics you may need to address. For explanations and guidance please refer to the background document 'ISS Research Ethics Guidelines for MA students'. Please complete both sections (B1 and B2)

	Please tick the appropriate box	YES	NO
B1: LOW-SENSITIVITY			
1.	Does the research involve the collection and or processing of (primary or secondary) personal data (including personal data in the public domain)?	✓	
2.	Does the research involve participants from whom voluntary informed consent needs to be sought?	✓	
3.	Will financial or material incentives (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		✓
4.	Will the research require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for access to the groups, communities or individuals to be recruited (e.g., administrator for a private Facebook group, manager of an institutions, government official)?		✓
5.	Does the research include benefit-sharing measures for research which takes place with people who could be considered vulnerable? – please revise the background document (Guidelines) for more information.	✓	

If you have ticked 'yes' to any of the above boxes (1-5), please discuss with your supervisor and include more information in your RP design describing the issue raised and how you propose to deal with it during your research.

2

B2: HIGH SENSITIVITY	YES	NO
6. Does the research involve the collection or processing of *sensitive* (primary or secondary) personal data? (e.g. regarding racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, biometric data, data related to health or a person's sex life or sexual orientation)	✓	
7. Does the research involve participants for whom voluntary and informed consent may require special attention or who can be considered 'vulnerable'? (e.g., children (under 18), people with learning disabilities, undocumented migrants, patients, prisoners)?		✓
8. Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the research without their knowledge and consent (covert observation of people in non-public places)?		✓
9. Will the research be conducted in healthcare institutions, in healthcare settings, or will it involve the recruitment or study of patients or healthcare personnel?		✓
10. Could the research induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences for research participants, researchers, or persons and institutions connected to them?		✓
11. Could the situation in one or several of the countries where research is carried out put the researcher, individuals taking part in the research, or individuals connected to the researcher, at risk? Presence of an infectious disease such as COVID-19 is considered a risk – please provide information as outlined in the background document (Guidelines).		✓
12. Does the research require ethical approval or research permission from a local institution or body?		✓

If you have ticked 'Yes' to one of the above (5-11), please complete section 'C' below describing how you propose to mitigate the risks you have identified. After discussion with your supervisor, please submit the form to the Research Ethics Committee. In addition, if you have ticked 'Yes' to a question on any kind of personal data, please also complete the privacy questionnaire.

YOU ONLY NEED TO COMPLETE THIS SECTION IF YOU HAVE ANSWERED YES TO ONE OF THE QUESTIONS IN SECTION B2 ABOVE (Questions 5-11)

C) Statement of Research Ethics

Using the background document 'ISS Research Ethics Guidelines for MA students', please address how you are going to deal with the ethics concern identified, including prevention measure to avoid them from manifesting, mitigation strategies to reduce their impact, and preparedness and contingency planning if the risks manifest.

Please number each point to correspond with the relevant checklist question above. Expand this section as needed and add any additional documentation which might not be included in your RP design, such as consent forms.

> **[TO BE COMPLETED BY MA STUDENT AND DISCUSSED WITH THE SUPERVISOR. IF THE SUPERVISOR FINDS IT NECESSARY TO SEEK FURTHER REVIEW, THE STUDENT MUST SUBMIT THE FORM TO THE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE]**
>
> In conducting this study, I adhered to strict ethical standards to protect the confidentiality, autonomy, and comfort of all participants, particularly given the vulnerabilities inherent to food delivery riders. These workers face a high degree of job insecurity, as their livelihoods are subject to the risk of account deactivation or job loss due to customer complaints or algorithmic errors. Without adequate avenues for redress or transparency, riders live in constant fear of losing access to their income. Recognizing these conditions, I prioritized clarifying that my research was entirely independent of Zomato, emphasizing my academic intent and showing my identification card when requested. I communicated openly that my objective was solely to understand their working conditions for research purposes.
>
> 1.Voluntary Participation :
>
> To foster trust and alleviate any fears about repercussions from Zomato, I provided clear information on the study's purpose, process, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential, and they were free to skip any questions or withdraw at any time without consequence. Audio recordings were only made with explicit consent, and no photographs were taken.
>
> 2.Anonymity and Data Protection:
>
> Respecting participants' privacy, I refrained from recording any personally identifiable information, such as names or contact details. Audio recordings were securely stored and encrypted on institutional platforms to maintain confidentiality.
>
> 3.Freedom of Choice and Comfort in Participation:
>
> Riders were given the freedom to choose the interview settings and times that best suited their comfort and work schedules. I used QR codes posted outside popular spots frequented by riders, such as restaurants and rest areas, allowing them to voluntarily scan to access a survey. After explaining the research intent, I only provided the QR code to interested individuals, granting them complete discretion over filling out the survey. The survey included an optional question about their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview; only those who provided contact details were approached. For interviews with riders not recruited through the survey, I collected contact information only from those who offered it after learning about the study's purpose. In spontaneous group discussions, riders joined organically, without any encouragement or persistence on my part, ensuring a natural and pressure-free environment.

D) Approval from Research Ethics Committee

*To be completed by the Research Ethics Committee only if

Approved by Research Ethics Committee: ------------------------------------- **Date:** --------------

Additional comments for consideration from Research Ethics Committee:

> If the REC needs more information before approving, the REC secretary will be in touch with the MA student. If after requesting more information the REC still has concerns, the REC secretary will ask the supervisor to discuss these with the student. In the unlikely event that there is still no resolution, the REC will refer the application to the Institute Board.

4

7.2 Survey Questions

1. क्या आप दिल्ली में पैदा हुए हैं? (Are you born in Delhi?)

- हाँ (Yes)

- नहीं (No)

2. आपका लिंग क्या है? (What is your gender?)

- पुरुष (Male)

- महिला (Female)

- अन्य (Other)

3. अगर नहीं, तो आप दिल्ली कब आए? (If not, when did you come to Delhi?)

- 1 साल से कम (Less than 1 year ago)

- 1-5 साल पहले (1-5 years ago)

- 5-10 साल पहले (5-10 years ago)

- 10 साल से ज्यादा (More than 10 years ago)

4. आपकी शिक्षा का उच्चतम स्तर क्या है? (What is your highest level of education?)

- प्राथमिक विद्यालय (No formal education)

- प्राथमिक विद्यालय (Primary School)

- मिडिल स्कूल (Middle School)

- हाई स्कूल (High School)

- स्नातक (Graduate)

- स्नातकोत्तर (Post Graduate)

5. आपकी उम्र क्या है? (What is your age?)

- 18 से कम (Under 18)

- 18-24

- 25-34

- 35-44

- 45-54

- 55 और उससे ज़्यादा (55 and above)

6. क्या आपके कोई आश्रित हैं? (जैसे बच्चे, वृद्ध माता-पिता) (Do you have any dependents? (e.g., children, elderly parents))

- हाँ (Yes)

- नहीं (No)

7. आपका घरेलू स्थिति क्या है? (What is your domestic situation?)

- अकेले रहते हैं (Live alone)

- परिवार के साथ रहते हैं (Live with family)

- सहपाठियों के साथ रहें (Live with roommates)

8. आप डिलीवरी के लिए किस प्रकार का परिवहन उपयोग करते हैं? (What type of transport do you use for deliveries?)

- साइकिल (Bicycle)

- मोटरसाइकिल (Motorcycle)

- स्कूटर (Scooter)

- कार (Car)

9. क्या आप अपने परिवहन के मालिक हैं या किराए पर लेते हैं? (Do you own or rent your transport?)

- मैं इसका मालिक हूँ (I own it)

- मैं इसे किराए पर लेता हूँ (I rent it)

- मैं उधार लेता हूँ (I borrow it)

- मंच द्वारा प्रदान किया गया (Provided by the platform)

10 पिछले 1 महीने में, क्या आप काम करते समय किसी दुर्घटना में शामिल थे? (Over the last month, were you involved in an accident while working?)

- हाँ (Yes)
- नहीं (No)

11. आप एक सप्ताह में कितने घंटे काम करते हैं? (How many hours a week do you work on average?)

- 10 से कम (Less than 10)
- 10-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51 से अधिक (More than 51)

12. क्या आपको लगता है कि आपके पास अपने निजी जीवन और परिवार के लिए पर्याप्त समय है? (Do you feel you have enough time for personal life and family?)

- हमेशा (Always)
- अक्सर (Often)
- कभी-कभी (Sometimes)
- विरले ही (Rarely)

13. क्या आपने जोमैटो से कोई प्रशिक्षण प्राप्त किया है? (Did you receive any training from Zomato?)

- हाँ (Yes)
- नहीं (No)

14. इस नौकरी से आपकी साप्ताहिक आय कितनी अनुमानित है? (How predictable is your weekly income from this job?)

- बहुत अनुमानित (Very Predictable)

- कुछ हद तक अनुमानित (Somewhat Predictable)

- तटस्थ (Neutral)

- अप्रत्याशित (Unpredictable)

- बहुत अप्रत्याशित (Very Unpredictable)

15. क्या आपको लगता है कि आपकी कमाई आपके जीवन यापन के खर्चों को पूरा करने के लिए पर्याप्त है? (Do you feel that the income you earn is sufficient to cover your living expenses?)

- हाँ (Yes)

- नहीं (No)

16. क्या प्लेटफॉर्म का काम आपकी मुख्य आय का स्रोत है? (Is platform work your main source of income?)

- हाँ (Yes)

- नहीं (No)

17. आप अपनी वर्तमान कार्य स्थितियों से कितने संतुष्ट हैं? (How satisfied are you with your current working conditions?)

- बहुत संतुष्ट (Very Satisfied)

- संतुष्ट (Satisfied)

- तटस्थ (Neutral)

- असंतुष्ट (Dissatisfied)

- बहुत असंतुष्ट (Very Dissatisfied)

18. क्या आप एक अनुवर्ती साक्षात्कार में रुचि रखते हैं? (Would you be interested in a follow-up interview?)

- हाँ (Yes)

- नहीं (No)

- शायद (Maybe)

19. अगर हाँ, कृपया संपर्क विवरण प्रदान करें। (If Yes, Provide Contact Information)

7.3 Semi- Structured Interview Guide

Introduction and Background:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?

2. How did you start working as a delivery rider for Zomato?

3. What were you doing before you started this job?

Job Choice and Experience:

4.Why did you choose to work with Zomato instead of other options?

5.What factors influenced your decision to start working as a delivery rider?

Daily Work Routine:

6.Can you describe a typical day in your work as a delivery rider?

7.Do you feel that you can work at times that are convenient for you?

8.How does flexibility in choosing work hours affect your overall job satisfaction?

Income and Financial Stability:

9.   How stable is your income from Zomato? Does it change a lot week to week?

10. Do you feel that the money you earn is enough to support yourself and your family?

11. Have you faced any financial difficulties due to the nature of gig work?

Working Conditions:

12. Over the last month, have you had any accidents while working?

13. If so, what happened, and how did Zomato support you?

14. How much does Zomato take as a cut from each delivery you make?

Multi-apping and Strategies for Algorithmic Challenges:

15. Do you use other delivery platforms besides Zomato (multi-apping) to increase your income? How does this affect your work?

16. What strategies, if any, do you use to manage or challenge the algorithm, such as avoiding low-paying jobs or maximizing incentives?

Support and Benefits:

17. Did Zomato provide you with any training when you started?

18. What kind of support or benefits (like insurance) do you get from Zomato?

19. Have you ever needed help from Zomato for any issues, and how was their response?

Job Satisfaction:

20. Are you happy with your job at Zomato? Why or why not?

21. What do you like most about your job, and what do you dislike the most?

Health and Wellbeing:

22. Do you feel stressed because of work? How often, and what causes the stress?

23. How adequate do you find the health benefits or support services provided?

Impact on Personal Life:

24. Do you have enough time to fulfill your familial obligations and spend time with your family?

25. How do you balance work with your personal life?

Perceptions of Work and Inequality:

26. Do you feel that working for Zomato has improved or worsened your financial situation compared to other jobs you've had?

27. Do you think gig work is fair compared to traditional jobs in terms of stability and respect?

28. Have you faced any discrimination or unfair treatment while working?

29. Were you ever asked about your caste or religion by colleagues or customers? How did it affect your work?

30. How often do you encounter discriminatory behavior from customers, colleagues, or platform management?

31. What steps, if any, have you taken to report discrimination, and what was the outcome?

32. Do you have any friends at Zomato from different castes or religions? How are they perceived at work?

Future Plans:

33. What are your future plans? Do you want to continue working as a delivery rider, or do you have other goals?

34. What changes or improvements would you like to see in your job or on the platform?

Concluding Thoughts:

35. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience working for Zomato?

36. Would you be interested in participating in future studies or follow-up interviews? If so, how can we contact you?