



TITLE: THE HUMAN COST OF GIG ECONOMY

INTRODUCTION

The growth of technology has resulted into the growth of accessibility as well. Accessibility to information and utilities of all kinds. What used to be a planned ritual and a gamble of quality, is now just a click away. Conglomerate platforms such as Zomato and Swiggy have changed the definition and dynamics of food delivery, creating a robust marketplace. This business boom has also brought upon a system previously unknown, at least at this scale to India: Gig Work.

Essentially, Gig work is when a person can work on a contractual basis with companies, with flexible working hours and an option to terminate the contract as per requirements. Food delivery, cab services, and grocery/essential services delivery apps are now a part of our daily lifestyles. People from all walks of life; students, parents, employees, even vendors themselves require some or the other gig worker to deliver some or the other goods to them. Gig Work alone is expected to make up 7% of India's GDP in the next decade.

In metropolitan cities, especially Mumbai, the gig workers are as much a lifeline as the local train, yet, they suffer tremendous hardships and struggle to thanklessly deliver food and goods 24/7, only to have no say in regulatory decisions, change in prices, suspension of IDs, cancellation of orders, and overall, a brutalist work environment.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF A GIG WORK CONTRACT

All major Indian delivery platforms classify riders as “delivery partners”, and essentially engage them in a contractual basis of employment. Anyone can sign up to be a delivery partner. There is an onboarding center located at each area, wherein the contract is signed, and company merchandise is given. The terms of the contract lay out the scope of work and definitions of stakeholders.

The company makes it abundantly clear that it acts solely as an intermediary. Therefore, any incidents related with the restaurant cannot fully be dealt with by the company. Deliverers face a lot of backlashes when it comes to failed delivery attempts from the restaurant's side. When it comes to payment, the company clearly empowers itself to set the delivery partner fee according to the algorithm.

Platforms can penalize or deactivate delivery partners for various criteria. The T&C set terms of fraud, misconduct and continued poor performance. However, in practice, even minor infractions trigger harsh actions by the platform. A delivery partner claims that accounts get deactivated by managers for speaking up about work issues. Late delivery also counts as a ground for reducing rating and suspension of IDs. Given the vast population of metro cities and their traffic conditions, it is difficult for deliverers to reach their destinations on time. A deliverer, fearing suspension, termination, or pay cut, drives rashly to complete as many deliveries as possible. In a country where road safety is of utmost importance, these deliverers work in such a place that forces them to drive rashly. There have been various incidents of accidents or vehicle breakdowns that have caused delays, which have gone unheard and IDs have been terminated on these grounds on the behest of the managers. So, while on paper the Gig economy does look beneficial, the amount of discretion companies hold over their employees is concerning and harmful to the workers.

The contract gives a lot of discretionary powers to the platform. For example, Zomato's T&C specifically allow the company to set and revise delivery fees algorithmically, and revise the fee based on demand and distance. Therefore, no minimum pay is guaranteed. Job assignment, pay, and incentives are given based on subjective metrics (speed, acceptance rate, and rating). This makes employees work non-stop, without breaks, and drive in a risky manner in hopes of securing benefits.

THE HUMAN COST

Delivery work in India is extremely hazardous. Many riders have experienced severe traffic conditions and accidents. An instance where a delivery partner fell into a ditch and lost his life, the company did not show any involvement or provide any relief to the family. An average delivery partner finds it impossible to earn rs.300-500 a day, because of the delivery fee being minimal. A deliverer works throughout the day, through scorching heat, immovable traffic, thankless customers, piling orders, all to barely afford to live for another day. Luxury is a way of life, but we often forget the human cost behind it. The Egyptians were able to build 3 enormous pyramids, Shah Jahan the Taj Mahal, built from materials imported from all over the world, in an era where there were no airplanes or motor powered cargo boats. It was sheer human capital in its rawest form. More the slaves, more the luxury. But that was the way of life before modernization. Unfortunately, we forget that it is becoming a way of life today as well. Unspoken people deliver whatever we desire at our doorstep within minutes, and they get no



thanks, no money, no security for it. India has been against these practices since independence, yet, when it comes to such capitalist structures, the state turns a blind eye. The constitution writers saw this coming, and thus introduced the concept of the DPSPs. It is the duty of our state to use these tools and funds not on baseless projects and vote mongering through free meals, but on improving the quality of life of everyone in the country.

