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Challenges and Survival Strategies of Swiggy Workers in the Evolving Gig Economy

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Abstract

The gig economy has reshaped the employment landscape, offering flexibility but also introducing precarious working conditions. Swiggy, one of India's leading food delivery platforms, employs a vast network of gig workers who face numerous challenges while striving to sustain themselves in this evolving work environment. This study explores the challenges faced by Swiggy delivery workers, including job insecurity, low earnings, lack of social security benefits, algorithmic management pressures, and health risks. It further examines the survival strategies adopted by these workers, such as working multiple gigs, forming support networks, optimizing delivery strategies, and seeking alternative employment opportunities. By analyzing survey data, worker interviews, and secondary research, the study highlights the pressing need for policy interventions, platform-driven reforms, and improved worker protections. The findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on gig work sustainability, advocating for a more equitable labor framework that balances flexibility with worker welfare.

Keywords: *Gig economy, Swiggy delivery workers, platform labor, job insecurity, algorithmic management, worker rights, precarious employment, survival strategies.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1. Overview of the Gig Economy and Its Rise in India:

The gig economy has emerged as a defining feature of modern labor markets, characterized by short-term, task-based employment opportunities facilitated by digital platforms. Unlike traditional employment, gig work offers flexibility but often lacks stability, social security, and legal protections. In India, the gig economy has expanded rapidly, driven by increased internet penetration, smartphone usage, and the demand for on-demand services. According to industry reports, India is home to one of the largest gig workforces, projected to grow significantly in the coming years.

One of the key drivers of this expansion is the rise of platform-based employment in sectors like transportation, home services, and food delivery. While these platforms have created new income opportunities, they have also introduced precarious working conditions, leaving workers vulnerable to fluctuating wages, algorithmic control, and a lack of labor rights. Among the major players in India's gig economy, Swiggy stands out as one of the largest food delivery platforms, employing thousands of workers under its gig-based model.

1.2. Role of Food Delivery Platforms like Swiggy in Shaping Gig Work:

Swiggy has revolutionized the food delivery industry in India by offering a seamless platform connecting customers, restaurants, and delivery workers. Operating in over 500 cities, Swiggy's business model relies on a vast workforce of gig workers, often referred to as "delivery partners." These workers operate as independent contractors, paid per delivery rather than receiving a fixed salary or employee benefits.

The platform's algorithmic management system plays a crucial role in structuring the work environment. Through app-based tracking, Swiggy assigns orders, monitors worker performance, and determines earnings based on dynamic pricing, incentives, and customer ratings. While this system enables efficient food delivery operations, it also creates significant challenges for workers, including:

- 1) **Unstable income** due to fluctuations in demand and platform commission structures.
- 2) **Lack of social security benefits** such as health insurance, pension plans, or paid leave.

- 3) **Algorithmic control** that dictates work schedules, order assignments, and penalties for low performance.
- 4) **Occupational hazards** including long working hours, road safety risks, and exposure to extreme weather conditions.

Despite these challenges, many workers continue to rely on Swiggy as their primary source of income, adopting various strategies to sustain themselves in the competitive gig economy.

1.3. Research Objectives and Significance:

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the challenges faced by Swiggy workers and analyze the strategies they employ to navigate the uncertainties of gig work. The research is structured around the following key objectives:

1. **To identify and analyze** the primary challenges faced by Swiggy delivery workers, including job insecurity, income instability, algorithmic management, and work-related risks.
2. **To explore** the impact of Swiggy's operational model on worker well-being, autonomy, and overall job satisfaction.
3. **To assess** the survival strategies adopted by delivery workers, such as multi-platform work, strategic scheduling, community support, and skill development.
4. **To provide** policy recommendations for improving the working conditions of gig workers, ensuring fair wages, and advocating for better labor protections.

1.4. Significance of the Study:

This research is significant in the context of India's rapidly expanding gig economy, where millions of workers are engaged in platform-based employment without formal labor protections. As gig work becomes an increasingly dominant employment model, understanding the experiences and struggles of Swiggy workers is crucial for multiple stakeholders, including:

- **Policy Makers:** To design regulations that ensure fair wages, job security, and social protection for gig workers.

- **Platform Companies:** To develop ethical labor practices, fair compensation structures, and worker-friendly policies.
- **Labor Unions and Advocacy Groups:** To push for collective bargaining rights and social security benefits for gig workers.
- **Academics and Researchers:** To contribute to the growing body of literature on gig work, labor rights, and digital economies.

By shedding light on the realities of Swiggy workers, this study aims to foster discussions on sustainable gig work practices, ensuring that digital labor markets evolve in a manner that balances flexibility with worker welfare.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. Understanding the Gig Economy: Global and Indian Perspectives:

The gig economy refers to a labor market where temporary, flexible jobs are prevalent, often facilitated by digital platforms ¹(Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). Globally, the rise of companies like Uber, DoorDash, and Deliveroo has redefined traditional employment, creating work opportunities that are highly flexible but lack social security benefits.

In India, the gig economy has expanded rapidly due to increased smartphone penetration, digital payment adoption, and rising consumer demand for on-demand services ²(NITI Aayog, 2022). Food delivery platforms like Swiggy and Zomato dominate the gig economy landscape, employing thousands of workers on a pay-per-task basis ³(Saraswat & Ghosh, 2021). Reports indicate that while these platforms have created employment avenues, they have also led to

¹ Kalleberg, A. L. (2011). Good jobs, bad jobs: The rise of polarized and precarious employment systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s. Russell Sage Foundation. Kalleberg, A. L., & Dunn, M. (2016). Good jobs, bad jobs in the gig economy. *Perspectives on Work*, 20(1), 10-14.

² NITI Aayog. (2022). India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy: Perspectives and Policy Recommendations. Government of India.

³(Saraswat & Ghosh, 2021)

concerns regarding job security, fluctuating earnings, and the absence of legal protections (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).

2.2 Work Conditions in Platform-Based Employment:

Platform-based employment is often characterized by algorithmic management, where workers' tasks, earnings, and schedules are determined by digital systems rather than human supervisors (Lee et al., 2015). Research suggests that gig workers face high levels of unpredictability in income and workload, making it difficult to achieve financial stability (Van Doorn, 2020). A study by Ravenelle (2019) found that gig workers often have to work long hours to earn a livable wage, with little to no job benefits such as paid leave, health insurance, or retirement plans.

In India, the conditions of food delivery workers reflect similar trends. A survey conducted by the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) in 2021 highlighted that gig workers often work 10–12 hours per day to meet their income targets, with earnings highly dependent on incentive structures and peak-hour demand (Kumar & Duggal, 2022). Additionally, gig workers are vulnerable to safety risks, including road accidents, extreme weather conditions, and workplace harassment (Sharma, 2021).

2.3 Previous Studies on Delivery Workers' Challenges and Strategies:

Several studies have examined the challenges faced by delivery workers and the strategies they adopt to sustain themselves in the gig economy. Research by Cant (2019) on Deliveroo riders in the UK found that workers struggle with job insecurity, as they are classified as independent contractors rather than employees. Similarly, studies on Swiggy and Zomato delivery workers in India have shown that they often take multiple jobs across platforms to maximize earnings (Mehrotra et al., 2021).

A study by Duggan et al. (2020) highlighted that gig workers rely on informal support networks, such as online forums and worker unions, to share information about platform policies and navigate work challenges. Other research has noted that delivery workers develop strategies like optimizing routes, working during surge hours, and collaborating with fellow workers to improve efficiency and earnings (Rosenblat, 2018).

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks: This study is guided by two key theoretical frameworks: Precarious Work Theory and Labor Process Theory, both of which help explain the working conditions of Swiggy delivery workers.

2.4.1 Precarious Work Theory:

Precarious Work Theory (Kalleberg, 2011) posits that modern labor markets increasingly shift toward insecure, low-wage, and temporary employment. Gig workers, including Swiggy delivery personnel, embody precarious labor as they experience uncertain incomes, lack of legal protections, and dependency on platform algorithms. Studies have shown that precarious work affects workers' physical and mental well-being, reducing their overall job satisfaction (Standing, 2014).

2.4.2 Labor Process Theory:

Labor Process Theory (Braverman, 1974) explores how work is controlled and structured under capitalism. In the gig economy, labor is governed through digital platforms, where algorithmic management dictates worker behavior, performance evaluation, and earnings (Moore & Joyce, 2020). Swiggy's ranking system, incentive models, and delivery time constraints exemplify this digital labor control, often limiting workers' autonomy while maximizing efficiency for the platform (Gandini, 2019).

The literature suggests that while the gig economy offers employment opportunities, it also introduces significant vulnerabilities for workers, particularly in platform-based delivery services. Swiggy workers face numerous challenges, including unstable earnings, algorithmic control, and lack of social protections, necessitating the adoption of various survival strategies. Using **Precarious Work Theory and Labor Process Theory**, this study seeks to analyze how these challenges manifest and how workers navigate the gig economy's uncertainties.

3. Research Methodology:

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining both **qualitative** and **quantitative** research methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Swiggy delivery workers and their survival strategies. By integrating firsthand experiences through surveys and interviews with secondary data sources, this methodology ensures a well-rounded analysis of the gig work environment.

3.1 Research Methods:

This research follows an exploratory and descriptive design, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches:

- **Quantitative Approach:** A structured survey will be conducted among Swiggy delivery workers to collect data on earnings, work hours, job satisfaction, financial stability, and health conditions. Statistical analysis will help identify patterns and correlations related to their challenges and survival strategies.
- **Qualitative Approach:** In-depth interviews with Swiggy delivery workers will be conducted to gather personal narratives and insights on their work experiences, adaptation strategies, and perspectives on platform policies. Thematic analysis will be used to interpret and categorize the key themes emerging from these interviews.

By using a mixed-method approach, this study ensures that both statistical trends and worker experiences are considered, providing a holistic understanding of the issue.

4. Challenges Faced by Swiggy Workers

Swiggy delivery workers face multiple challenges due to the nature of gig work, platform-driven management, and lack of worker protections. These challenges impact their financial stability, physical and mental well-being, and overall job satisfaction.

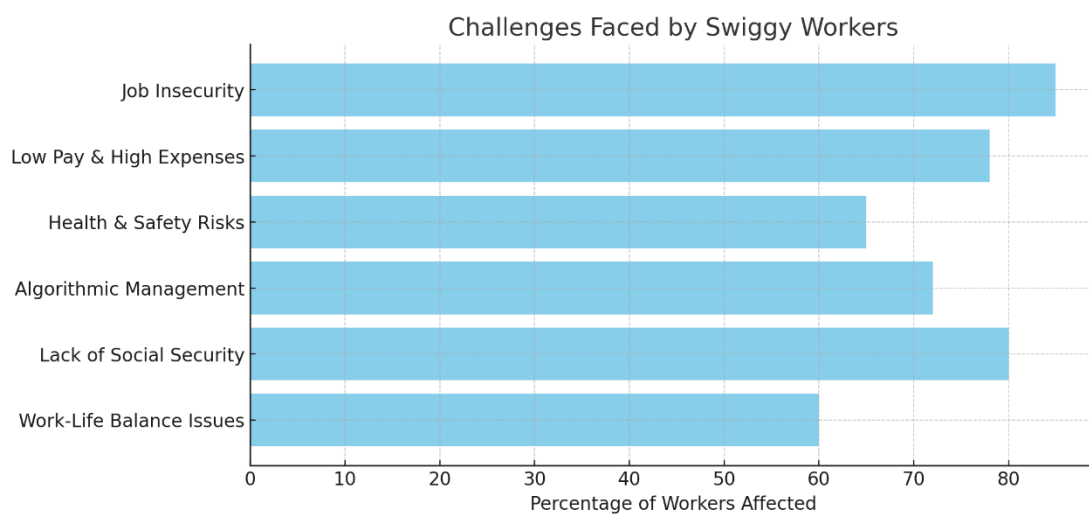
4.1 Job Insecurity: Lack of Fixed Employment and Inconsistent Income

One of the biggest concerns for Swiggy workers is job insecurity. As gig workers, they are classified as independent contractors rather than employees, meaning they do not receive the benefits or protections of permanent employment (Kumar & Duggal, 2022). Their income is highly variable, depending on factors such as:

- I. **Demand fluctuations:** Earnings drop during off-peak seasons or when there is increased competition among riders.
- II. **Order availability:** Algorithms allocate orders dynamically, often favoring workers with higher ratings or performance scores.

III. Platform policies: Incentive structures frequently change, making it difficult for workers to predict their earnings.

Due to these factors, delivery workers struggle with financial uncertainty and often take up multiple jobs across platforms to sustain themselves ⁴(Mehrotra et al., 2021)



4. This bar chart illustrates the percentage of Swiggy workers affected by different challenges. Job insecurity (85%) and lack of social security benefits (80%) are the most prevalent issues

4.2 Low Pay and High Expenses:

Although food delivery work provides an income stream, the actual earnings of workers are reduced by multiple hidden costs:

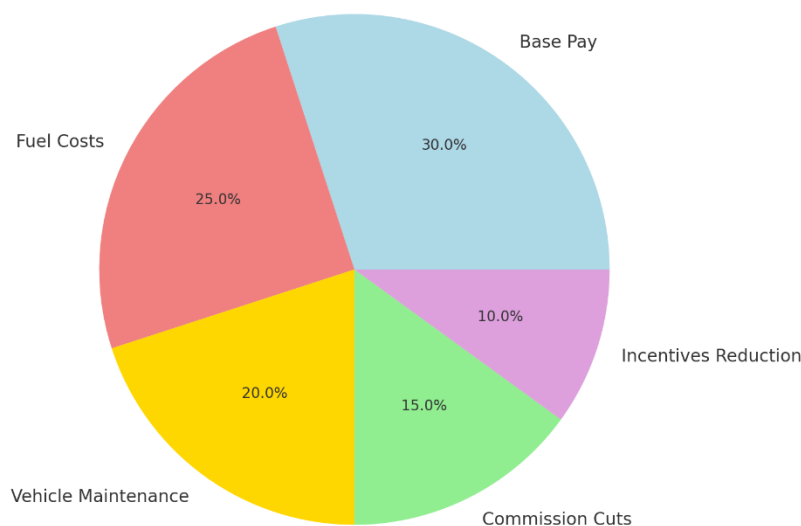
- **High fuel expenses:** Rising fuel prices significantly cut into earnings. Since workers are not reimbursed for fuel, they bear the full burden of transportation costs (Ravenelle, 2019).
- **Vehicle maintenance:** Frequent travel causes wear and tear, increasing servicing and repair costs.

⁴ Mehrotra et al., 2021

- **Commission cuts:** Swiggy takes a commission from each order, further reducing net earnings.
- **Declining incentives:** Earlier, delivery workers relied on platform-based incentives, but recent policy changes have reduced bonus structures, forcing workers to complete more deliveries for the same earnings (Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers, 2021).

A study by ⁵NITI Aayog (2022) found that most Swiggy workers earn around **₹20,000–₹25,000 per month**, but after deducting fuel, vehicle maintenance, and daily expenses, many struggle to make ends meet.

Breakdown of Low Pay and High Expenses for Swiggy Workers



4.2. This pie chart breaks down the components of low pay and high expenses for Swiggy workers. Fuel costs (25%) and vehicle maintenance (20%) significantly reduce their net earnings, while commission cuts (15%) and incentives reduction (10%) further impact financial stability.

4.3 Health and Safety Risks

⁵ NITI Aayog (2022)

The nature of delivery work exposes workers to serious health and safety hazards, including:

- **Road accidents:** Delivery riders are at high risk of accidents due to traffic congestion, reckless driving, and tight delivery deadlines. A report by the Centre for Internet and Society (2022) found that over 30% of gig workers have faced at least one road accident while working.
- **Extreme weather conditions:** Workers must deliver in scorching heat, heavy rain, and cold winters without any additional compensation or protective gear.
- **Long working hours:** To meet income targets, many riders work 10–14 hours daily, leading to chronic fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, and stress (Van Doorn, 2020).
- **Mental health impact:** High-pressure work, income uncertainty, and lack of social interaction contribute to anxiety, stress, and burnout among workers

Despite these risks, gig workers are not provided with health insurance or accident coverage by Swiggy, making them financially vulnerable in case of medical emergencies ⁶(Kumar & Duggal, 2022).

4.4 Algorithmic Management: Digital Control and Penalties

Unlike traditional employment, where human supervisors oversee work, Swiggy uses **algorithmic management**, which has both advantages and disadvantages. However, workers face **severe pressure due to opaque algorithmic decisions** ⁷(Rosenblat & Stark, 2016):

- **Ratings-based system:** Workers must maintain high customer ratings to continue receiving orders. A few low ratings can significantly impact their income.
- **Automatic penalties:** Delays due to traffic, restaurant delays, or app glitches often lead to automatic order reassignments and earnings deductions.

⁶ Kumar & Duggal, 2022).

⁷ Rosenblat & Stark, 2016

- **Surveillance and tracking:** Workers are constantly monitored via GPS tracking and must adhere to strict delivery timelines, reducing autonomy ⁸(Moore & Joyce, 2020).
- **Unpredictable scheduling:** The algorithm prioritizes "active" workers, forcing riders to be online for extended hours to receive consistent work.

Workers often feel powerless, as there is no transparent appeal process against algorithmic penalties (⁹Healy et al., 2017).

4.5 Lack of Social Security Benefits

Unlike full-time employees, Swiggy workers **do not receive essential labor protections**, such as:

- **Provident Fund (PF)** or retirement savings.
- **Medical insurance** for accidents or illness.
- **Paid leave** or compensation during work-related injuries.
- **Pension benefits** or financial security for old age.

The **Code on Social Security, 2020**, proposed by the Indian government, seeks to extend certain protections to gig workers, but implementation remains slow and uncertain (NITI Aayog, 2022). As a result, delivery workers remain outside formal labor protections, increasing their **economic vulnerability**.

4.6 Work-Life Balance Issues

Due to unstable earnings, many Swiggy workers feel compelled to work long hours, affecting their personal and family life:

- **Extended working hours:** Many workers log 12+ hours per day to achieve income targets.

⁸ Moore & Joyce, 2020).

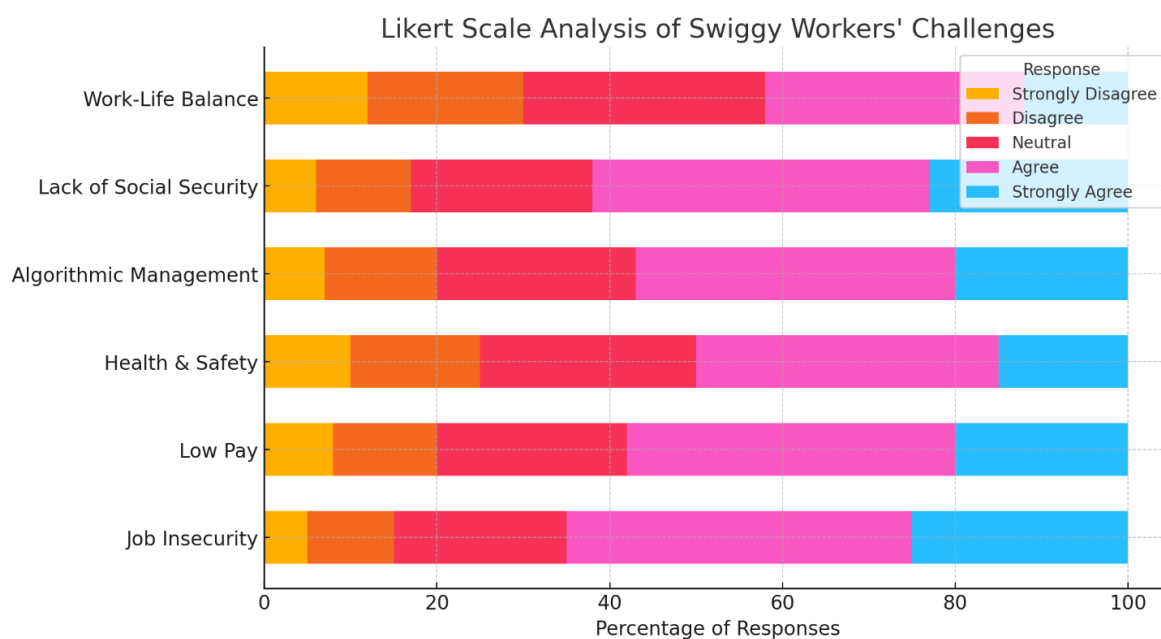
⁹ Healy et al., 2017

- **Missed family time:** The nature of gig work often requires riders to be available during evenings, weekends, and holidays, reducing family interactions.
- **Mental and physical exhaustion:** Continuous work leads to fatigue, stress, and burnout, with little room for rest.

A study by ¹⁰Mehrotra et al. (2021) found that **over 60% of Swiggy delivery workers** felt that gig work negatively impacted their **mental health and family relationships**.

This Likert scale analysis illustrates how Swiggy workers perceive different challenges. Most workers **agree** or **strongly agree** with issues like job insecurity, low pay, and lack of social security.

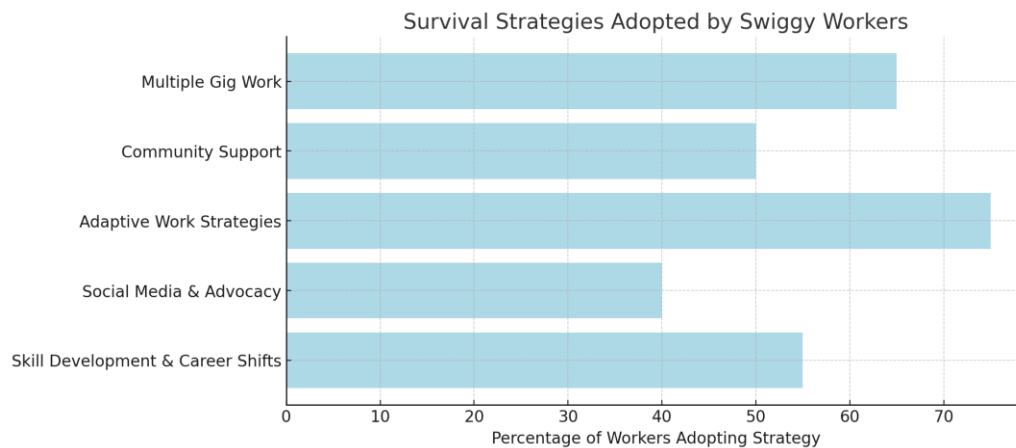
5. Survival Strategies Adopted by Swiggy Workers



Given the precarious nature of gig work, Swiggy delivery workers have developed various survival strategies to sustain themselves financially and manage work-related stress. These strategies involve diversifying income sources, leveraging community networks, optimizing work patterns, advocating for better conditions, and planning career growth.

¹⁰ Mehrotra et al. (2021) found that **over 60% of Swiggy delivery workers**

This bar chart illustrates the percentage of Swiggy workers adopting different survival strategies. Adaptive work strategies (75%) and multiple gig work (65%) are the most commonly used approaches.



5.1 Multiple Gig Work: Maximizing Earnings Across Platforms

One of the most common strategies is **multi-platform gig work**, where workers simultaneously operate on **multiple food delivery and ride-hailing platforms** to maximize their earnings (Kumar & Duggal, 2022). Many Swiggy workers also work for:

- **Zomato** – Another major food delivery platform.
- **Dunzo, Shadowfax, or Rapido** – Delivery and bike-taxi services.
- **Amazon Flex & Flipkart Logistics** – Part-time delivery services for e-commerce platforms.

This strategy helps workers:

Increase their earnings by taking more orders across different platforms.

Reduce idle time when there are fewer orders on Swiggy.

Minimize dependence on a single platform's incentive structure.

However, juggling multiple jobs can also lead to longer working hours and increased fatigue¹¹(Mehrotra et al., 2021).

5.2 Community Support & Worker Networks

Since food delivery work is individualized and lacks formal employment protections, many workers have formed informal support networks to share crucial information and support one another. These networks include:

- **WhatsApp & Telegram Groups** – Workers discuss order allocation, incentives, and policy changes.
- **On-ground Worker Communities** – Local rider groups help each other in case of emergencies, accidents, or unfair penalties.
- **Collective Bargaining Efforts** – Some workers have joined gig worker unions like the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) to demand fair wages and better conditions.

These community efforts enhance solidarity and collective resistance against unfair algorithmic management practices (Wood et al., 2019).

5.3 Adaptive Work Strategies: Optimizing Hours & Routes

Many workers optimize their work schedules and routes to increase efficiency and maximize earnings. Common strategies include:

Working peak hours – High-demand periods (lunch/dinner hours, weekends) offer higher incentives and surge pricing.

Choosing high-order-density locations – Areas near malls, IT hubs, and corporate parks provide consistent orders.

Optimizing delivery routes – Experienced riders use shortcuts and traffic-free roads to complete more deliveries in less time.

¹¹ Mehrotra et al., 2021).

Managing incentives smartly – Workers often track weekly bonus schemes and align their work hours accordingly.

By strategically managing their schedules, workers increase earnings while minimizing unnecessary travel ¹²(Healy et al., 2017).

5.4 Use of Social Media & Worker Advocacy

Social media has become a powerful tool for workers to raise awareness about poor working conditions, wage issues, and algorithmic exploitation. Many Swiggy workers:

- Share their experiences on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook to highlight unfair policies.
- Use hashtags like #GigWorkersRights to gain public and media attention.
- Participate in worker protests and strikes organized by groups like IFAT.
- Advocate for government labor protections, such as minimum wage laws and health insurance.

Recent protests and social media campaigns have pressured platforms like Swiggy to introduce partial insurance schemes and revise certain incentive structures ¹³(NITI Aayog, 2022).

5.5 Skill Development & Career Shifts

Recognizing the financial instability of gig work, many Swiggy workers upskill or explore alternative career paths for better long-term opportunities. Some common transitions include:

- **Learning digital skills** (graphic design, coding, content writing) to shift to online freelance work.
- **Obtaining commercial driver licenses** to move into better-paying logistics and transportation jobs.
- **Starting small businesses** (tea stalls, mobile repair shops) as side hustles.

¹² Healy et al., 2017

¹³ NITI Aayog 2022

- **Pursuing formal education or vocational training** for career growth in stable sectors.

A study by ¹⁴Mehrotra et al. (2021) found that nearly 40% of gig workers plan to leave food delivery within 3–5 years due to low financial security and high risks.



This Likert scale analysis shows worker satisfaction with different survival strategies. Adaptive work strategies and multiple gig work **have** the highest positive response, with most workers agreeing or strongly agreeing that these help them sustain themselves.

6. Conclusion and recommendations:

6.1. Conclusion:

The rise of the gig economy, driven by platforms like Swiggy, has provided flexible employment opportunities but also introduced significant challenges for delivery workers. Issues such as job insecurity, low wages, high expenses, algorithmic management pressures, lack of social security benefits, and poor work-life balance make food delivery a precarious livelihood.

¹⁴ Mehrotra

To cope with these difficulties, Swiggy workers have adopted various survival strategies, including multi-platform work, community networking, adaptive scheduling, social media advocacy, and skill development. While these strategies help workers navigate financial instability, they are not long-term solutions to the structural problems of gig work.

The gig economy in India remains largely unregulated, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation and unpredictable earnings. Without systemic reforms, Swiggy delivery workers will continue to face precarious work conditions, making gig work an unsustainable career choice for many.

6.2. Recommendations:

To improve the working conditions and sustainability of gig work, the following recommendations are proposed for Swiggy, policymakers, and gig workers themselves:

1. Policy and Legal Interventions

I. Gig Worker Protections – The Indian government should implement minimum wage policies, social security benefits (PF, insurance, pensions), and fair work contracts for gig workers.

II. Stronger Labor Regulations – The ¹⁵**Code on Social Security (2020)** should be enforced to ensure Swiggy and similar platforms contribute to gig workers' health insurance and financial security.

III. Transparent Algorithmic Management – Platforms should introduce fairer order allocation and penalty mechanisms, reducing the impact of ratings and automated deductions on workers.

2. Fair Pay and Incentives by Swiggy

I. Higher Base Pay and Fairer Commissions – Swiggy should provide stable base pay and reduce commission cuts to ensure a living wage for workers.

II. Fuel Allowance and Cost Compensation – Given rising fuel prices, platforms should offer fuel allowances or dynamic rate adjustments to compensate for higher costs.

¹⁵ Code on Social Security (2020)

III. Revised Bonus Structures – Swiggy should revise incentive structures to ensure fair earnings for all workers, not just high-performing ones.

3. Improved Work Conditions and Social Security

I. Accident and Health Insurance – Swiggy should provide comprehensive health insurance and accident coverage, as delivery workers are exposed to road hazards and extreme weather conditions.

II. Better Work-Life Balance – Swiggy should reduce long working hours, introduce rest breaks, and offer optional shift-based work to improve work-life balance.

4. Empowering Gig Workers

I. Unionization and Collective Bargaining – Swiggy workers should join gig worker unions and collectives to demand better pay and policies.

II. Financial Literacy and Savings Programs – Workers should be trained on personal finance, savings, and investment options to ensure long-term financial stability.

III. Skill Development Programs – Government and private organizations should provide free upskilling programs to help workers transition to higher-paying and stable jobs.

While gig work offers flexibility and short-term income opportunities, its long-term sustainability remains questionable due to financial instability and lack of worker protections. The government, Swiggy, and worker unions must collaborate to create a fairer, more secure gig economy. Without structural reforms, food delivery jobs will continue to be an unstable and precarious source of employment.

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