

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY GIG WORKERS AND FREELANCERS DURING COVID-19**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The unpredictable and unexpected breakout of COVID-19 pandemic has an impact on economic health of numerous enterprises throughout the world. The purpose of this article is to objectively assess level of destruction faced by Indian gig workers and freelancers as a result of the epidemic restrictions. This research critically examines the unpredictability and unlawful behaviors of freelancers, as well as how gig workers in India are exploited on occasion as a result of their unemployed status. The report concisely outlined issues faced by Indian gig workers and freelancers at the start of the shutdown. The Economic Survey, 2020-21 emphasizes rising importance of the gig economy in India amidst pandemic-induced lockdown, which has resulted in massive development in online retail market. Employers initiated layoffs & instead hired freelancers or flexi-staff to save overhead expenses. Many studies have been made to examine impact of current pandemic on economy & stock markets, but relatively few have focused on epidemic's impact on gig workers. The current study attempts to fill this gap by evaluating impact of COVID-19 on gig workers and freelancers by determining whether an increase in new COVID-19 cases leads to an increase in number of gig workers in Indian economy, or whether it has a significant impact on gig workers & freelancers.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, gig economy, drivers, pandemic, gig workers, freelancer etc.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Challenges for Indian gig workers and freelancers began on March 22, 2020 when Indian govt. announced a 14-hour voluntary shutdown. However, on March 24, 2020, Indian govt. issued a statewide lockdown for 21 days, until April 14, 2022. As people were banned from leaving their houses, Indian highways were deserted, with just frontline personnel out on the streets providing basic services to the impoverished people. Because of the enforced lockdown limits, the demand for these transportation services decreased dramatically, and those employed in that field suffered the most. Those who relied only on gig work found themselves in an overwhelming situation with no money or assistance.

Since the COVID-19 epidemic began, technology has overtaken the traditional manner of doing work. The engagement in gig economy has expanded as a result of COVID-19 lockdown measures, since customers rely on gig workers to provide basic requirements. Furthermore, many people established gig gigs to supplement their income, while others used them as their principal source of income during the difficult COVID-19 situation. Globally, the United States (47.00%) dominates demand for online jobs; nevertheless,

demand is unequal among nations throughout the epidemic. During epidemic, demand for online gig work surged in UK, Australia, Canada, India, & Germany, but fell in United States.

The reduction in the United States can be attributed to gig labor, which includes creative & multimedia, clerical & data entry, writing & translation. However, India & United Kingdom have seen a growth in online gig employment, particularly in software development & technology (Rani & Dhir2020). The number of internet gig workers climbed by 27% in March 2021 compared to previous year. While several studies have examined impact of COVID19 epidemic on financial markets and traditional economy, few have looked at pandemics influence on Indias gig economy, which appears to have enormous potential. The current study seeks to address this gap by investigating impact of COVID19 on Indian gig economy.

However, this was only beginning; 21 day lockdown was prolonged for another 21 days until May 3rd, and then again for another 2 weeks (The Economic Times 2021; Express Web Desk 2021). During this nearly two-month period, gig workers and freelancers suffered the most as a result of the comprehensive travel ban. This is supported by the fact that the monthly average number of service customers fell by 44% between March 2020 and April 2020, & by about 25.20% between March and May 2021, during second wave (Malik 2021). As demand for taxi services decreased, drivers' income & employment, as well as those of other gig workers and freelancers in this industry, began to suffer financially owing to a lack of other employment possibilities. It is critical to study problems & suffering that gig workers and freelancers endured during covid-19 epidemic.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Veluchami et al. (2021), traditional employment practices have lost their essence, & global workers are looking for work that provides them with flexibility & allows them to work according to their schedule. As a result, the majority of employees have shown a desire in joining gig economy. According to Anwar & Graham (2021), gig platform industry has little or no entrance barriers, and it has enormous potential for providing a wide range of jobs in India. Furthermore, this industry provides high earning potential in comparison to similar non-gig occupations, which encourages many young Indians to become gig workers. Individuals who are studying & searching for temporary sources of income are turning to gig economy to make money when it suits them.

According to Roy and Shrivastavaa (2021), number of Indian gig laborers rose to more than 15 million in 2015. These people picked their career in order to gain a competitive advantage, improve efficiency, and drive industry innovation. According to the survey, Indian freelance workers are embracing gig economy to obtain the ability to be their own boss & work at their own pace, with 41% of Indian gig workers working in the IT industry. The growing use of technology and the increasing availability of technical tools enticed many people to work fluidly even under reduced pressure in terms of earning potential.

Bates et al. (2019), gig workers perform & earn money through an informal labor arrangement. They are not involved in the usual employer-employee relationship. The gig economy is predominantly informal, including on-call workers, temporary contractual workers, online platform workers, freelancers, & other people who operate in unconventional ways. According to the report, companies frequently exploit these short-term jobs, and the gig economy's unsustainable methods harm workers. According to Myhill et al. (2021), the two most important concerns threatening gig workers' wages are a lack of access to net safety benefits & income instability. However, few research have highlighted benefits of gig economy, which is informal in nature.

According to Bruckner and Forman (2021), the fast decline in insurance plans & employer-sponsored savings contributes little or nothing to closing wealth gap among contract workers. Many gig workers are financially exposed due to a lack of benefit safeguards. However, in 2019, Indian Parliament adopted a new social security fund legislation that included notion of gig & platform workers & approved benefit plans for such individuals. Rani and Dhir (2020) expressed worry about the gig economy's informality during COVID-19. Gig workers who worked on location-based platforms such as cab services & delivery began to face hazards owing to the nature of their employment & imposed social distancing limits. Karthik and Sinha (2021), gig workers faced health difficulties as well since they were unable to finance self-quarantine even after experiencing COVID symptoms because they relied only on task-based labor.

According to Howson et al. (2021), COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased levels of economic & physical insecurity by providing gig workers with low wages due to economic instability, sparked strikes, ignorance of workers' demands, & so on, which suppressed expression of offline gig workers, primarily cab drivers. According to Nicola et al. (2020), COVID19 boosted demand for online purchasing. Schools, colleges, universities, & a number of businesses began working remotely to offer optimum safety against the spread of the coronavirus. As a result, most people began staying at home more often and reducing their transportation costs, impacting the expansion of Ola & other driving services.

Cariapa et al. (2022), Indian Ola drivers struggle to earn a living during lockdown due to decreased rate of transportation into country during pandemic period. According to Jain(2020), COVID19 pandemic forced Ola to change its business model, as company's annual revenue decreased by 95% due to lockdown restrictions. The implementation of 'work from home' or 'remote working' during the epidemic significantly reduced global transportation activity. The company's drivers, who were contract workers, struggled to survive epidemic. During severe economic conditions caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, car sharing services lay off numerous staff in order to decrease employee maintenance expenses and conserve future funds.

Chi et al.(2022), gig firms & car sharing platforms began exploring a variety of techniques to revitalize company development following the pandemic's severe impact. Ola,

Uber, & other ride-hailing companies concentrated on maintaining 6S sub-constructs such as scan, safety, support, spread, system, & speed. According to Raja et al. (2022), cab service providers' strategies for regrowing the business included identifying threats through advanced technology, realigning community cultural support, expanding delivery services based on business needs, & providing a consumer-centric approach. Morshed et al. (2021), in United States, Uber began to use its archetypal disruptive business model. This strategy was essential in revitalizing the expansion of TNCs (Transportation Network Companies). During the lockdown, the United States contemplated utilizing the 'sentimental analysis' paradigm to better evaluate customer perceptions regarding vehicle services. To analyze and comprehend consumers' emotion, sentimental analysis tries to provide a list of emojis or phrases linked with good or negative sentiment that encourages customers to consider business.

According to Paramudhita and Sinaga (2021), throughout the epidemic, the United Kingdom concentrated on a 'partnership system' based on the premise of mutual benefit. Indonesia also used similar partnership concept to help gig workers and vehicle driving partners during difficult economic times. In contrast to India's structure, Indonesia and the United Kingdom assisted drivers in improving their company success. Researchers investigated the effects of COVID19 on stock markets & economies. According to Baker et al. (2020), COVID19 has a greater negative influence on stock markets than previous pandemics. Sansa (2020) discovered the exact reverse in the US & Chinese financial markets, indicating a beneficial influence of present epidemic.

Dev M. & Sengupta (2020) examine impact of COVID19 on Indian economy, predicting a slump owing to lockdowns, global recession, & supply chain disruptions. A large number of studies have been conducted on impact of ongoing pandemic on financial markets & economies at national & global levels; however, few empirical studies have examined impact of COVID19 on emerging gig economy, which is regarded as an important economic change of previous decade & deserves much attention. This study seeks to fill this gap by concentrating on influence of COVID19 on India's gig economy, which appears to have enormous potential.

## OBJECTIVES

- Identify and research gig employment opportunities in India.
- Analyze impact of COVID19 outbreak on gig workers & freelancers in India.
- To assess the obstacles experienced by gig workers and freelancers during covid-19 epidemic.

## METHODS:

Data for this study were gathered from media articles and official reports released after first corona virus infections were detected in India & a first lockdown was enacted. The data in this case is predominantly secondary qualitative in nature. Thematic data analysis was used in this study.

## FINDINGS

With growth of digital technology, gig economy has become more prevalent in worldwide countries. Employees that demonstrate a willingness to work in those professions will often be given more flexibility. The expansion of IT & e-commerce services increased need for contract workers, which contributed significantly to rise of gig economy in this digital era. In this context, technology has significantly increased prevalence of gig economy by providing more flexible possibilities for individuals to make money via a variety of ways (BHRRC, 2022). In India, gig economy is anticipated to be a source of lowering pay disparities between individuals.

Although gig economy is beneficial in terms of eliminating income disparities among diverse global workers, its nature fails to protect workers' safety, putting their existence at danger. Although gig workers who operate on digital platforms are not affected, those who labor offline frequently experience difficulties owing to a variety of circumstances. Employers in gig economy frequently abuse gig workers, failing to provide them with insurance coverage or extended employment durations. In India, gig labor includes up to 15million individuals who provide IT & shared services.

According to the India Staffing Federation2019, India has fifth largest gig economy in the world, trailing only US, China, Brazil, and Japan (Drishti IAS, 2022). The unexpected outbreak of the epidemic limited individuals' movement, contributing significantly to global expansion of gig economy. In India, COVID19 outbreak acted as a catalyst, expanding gig economy. According to ASSOCHAM (Associated Chambers of Commerce & Industry in India), Indian gig industry is predicted to develop at a 17% CAGR by2021 (Chakraborty, 2022).

Thus, despite fact that the gig sector does not give legal protection to its employees, rising need for shared services, IT services, & other reasons are driving up demand for gig workers. The COVID-19 epidemic has far-reaching consequences for both life and work. The epidemic has had a negative impact not just on how we live and work, but also on the economy as a whole. COVID19 had an impact not just on stock markets & economic development, but also on the informal sector including gig workers, who are defined as 'those who utilize platforms like an application to conduct labor' (Wood etal.,2019).

Workers in gig economy either take orders online & deliver them physically (e.g.,Uber) or conduct services online without the need for physical presence (Huws etal.2016). In India, gig economy is expanding rapidly. According to ASSOCHAM projections, Indian platform or gig economy is now valued at \$250billion and is expected to grow to \$455billion by2023. The Indian gig economy is expected to generate up to 90million employment in non-farm sector alone, with the potential to contribute over 1.25percent of country's GDP in long term (Augustinraaj and Bajaj,2021).

During COVID19 shutdown, when people had to stay indoors, they demanded that essentials be delivered to their doorsteps, providing platform workers with potential earning prospects despite the economic crisis. Numerous complications have developed as a result

of rapid worldwide spread of COVID19 pandemic, including health concerns, increasing population growth, & greater mobility (Nkengasong & Mankoulaa,2020). In these unusual times, new business models might be established to generate income through the use of Industry4.0, resulting in digital firms with hyper-personalization. As a result of this transformation, many businesses have reviewed their operations and contemplated shifting to an online mode rather than a conventional offline mode, paving the door for short-term online gig employment to be performed across platforms.

Healy etal. (2017) define these platforms as applications that users download & then use, resulting in an innovative business concept depicting a triangular relationship in which goods & services are exchanged between buyers & producers, with a digital intermediary acting as a facilitator (Stewaart and Stanford, 2017).

## DISCUSSION

It has already been discovered that worldwide citizens are increasingly relying on gig economy for learning objectives. They are less likely to work in formal positions that do not allow them to combine their professional and personal lives. Unlike its formal job counterpart, gig industry provides gig workers and freelancers with freedom, significant earnings potential, and a variety of professional possibilities. In most circumstances, gig workers and freelancers make virtually as much as regular employees do. However, gig workers and freelancers are not recruited through a formal process, & they often enter gig economy as contractors for a certain amount of time.

That implies gig workers can move to other job alternatives at their leisure under specific conditions, which is unthinkable under traditional employment procedures. As a result, most people pursuing an education began to work in gig economy in order to gather job experience that they might use later in their careers. The rise of digital tools has helped world's unemployed individuals earn & survive fairly with their earnings; however, informal practice of gig economy employers affects gig worker's life in terms of exploiting them based on their needs by taking advantage of their unemployed status. In today's digital age, advent of sharing economy has raised demand for gig workers and freelancers.

In this context, as previously discussed, research by Banik&Padalkar (2021) found variables that drove the rise of carsharing industry & other contributors to gig economy. The rapid expansion of fast-moving consumer sector, hotel services, IT-enabled services, start-up & software services has increased need for gig workers. As scale of car-sharing economy expands, the need for driving companions will increase in the future. Furthermore, following the epidemic, many schools, colleges, and institutions have begun to operate offline. As a result, many college & university students, as well as office professionals, would regularly seek assistance from driving partners & other car-sharing service providers when they need to go somewhere quickly.

Because pandemic has a negative impact on worldwide population's health, most educated and health-conscious people will prefer to travel in taxis rather than taking

inexpensive public transportation with a crowd. As a consequence, the negative losses incurred by gig workers such as drivers & other freelancers will be mitigated in coming days. According to Tolbaa (2021), use of new technologies helps to gig economy's growth. The car-sharing sector in India is quickly increasing as urban road mobility undergoes a transformation. Until 2025, the online car service market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 12.94%.

Rapid access, simple availability, & inexpensive pricing for automobile services in India provide consumers with freedom and comfort, contributing to the sector's high income creation. As a consequence, many people searching for careers that would provide them with flexibility and a good work-life balance are considering becoming car sharing drivers. The fundamental concern facing global gig economy is informal work practices. Employers in gig economy hire people based on their business needs & do not assume their legal & financial responsibilities. The gig economy's employment relationship is largely uncertain in terms of workers' rights and working hours.

In most circumstances, businesses have control over their employees' employment contracts without incurring hiring costs (Investo-pedia Team, 2022). In this regard, it has also been shown that gig employers frequently abuse gig workers based on their business demands & often compel them to work by taking advantage of their unemployment (Tronsor 2018).

In India, gig economy sector is very informal since it serves as a platform for bridging & facilitating transactions between sellers & customers with little maintenance expenses. Such a company strategy significantly lowers cost of personnel upkeep. For example, if an Indian cab driver is looking for passengers, linking with Ola will allow him to quickly reach consumer.

The consumer will also receive car to utilize for transportation (Business Standards 2022). As a result, increase of technology innovation is enabling gig economy to flourish fast with support of growing digital technologies. Although pandemic had a negative impact on whole global economic sector, informal gig economy was hit worst. The personnel linked with car-sharing firms faced worst-case scenario. As virus spread, more people began working from home, reducing their reliance on transportation vehicles. As IT personnel accounted for 40% to 50% of rides in India's big cities, working from home significantly impacted profits.

As a result, although technology innovation aided car sharing industry's expansion, work-from-home aspect hampered pandemic's spread. Following the pandemic shock, vehicle sharing firms began to consider developing methods to grow and control the severe losses caused by the outbreak. In this regard, Chi et al. (2022) described 6S constructive strategy used by car-sharing firms, which encompassed scan, safety, support, spread, system, & speed.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, the gig economy is becoming more prevalent in several worldwide nations, including India. The growth of digital technology & rise of global sharing services have raised need for gig workers and freelancers. Globally, many jobless people are turning to gig economy for the ability to work flexible hours while earning money. However, while the flexibility and plenty of earning opportunities are significantly lowering the worldwide unemployment rate, the absence of legal protection for workers & informal character of gig economy add to harsh conditions that cause gig workers to suffer. Employers occasionally act as contractors, hiring staff for specific tasks. However, these folks are not technically employed. As a result, their employers exploit them in the worst conceivable way. The globe had a significant negative impact from COVID19 epidemic. The impact of epidemic on gig workers and freelancers was enormous. The imposed lockdown curtailed global individuals' movement, and their use of shared automobiles decreased nearly totally. As a result, demand for vehicle sharing services decreased, threatening the viability of gig workers. In India, rapid advent of virus resulted in a 95% drop in annual income of most popular TNC.

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