

Are gig workers a part of India's labour data?

Though gig work is technically included under economic activity in the Periodic Labour Force Survey, without a specific classification, the survey fails to offer visibility into the unique nature of digital labour, characterised by multiple job roles, dependence on algorithms, lack of formal contract and absence of safety metrics

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Online food delivery workers at Namakkal in Tamil Nadu on July 1. | Photo Credit: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The 2025 Union Budget took several measures to formally 'recognise' gig and platform workers, and extended various social protection schemes to this growing workforce. Despite this recognition, the revised Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2025 does not include substantive changes to account for the diverse forms of gig and platform work.

Gaps in labour classification

Gig workers were first incorporated into the legal framework through the Code on Social Security, 2020. Under Chapter I, Section 2(35), a gig worker is defined as “a person who participates in a work arrangement and earns from such activities outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship.” Platform work, as defined in the Code, is “a work arrangement outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship in which organisations or individuals use an online platform to access other organisations or individuals to solve specific problems or to provide specific services or any such other activities which may be notified by the Central Government, in exchange for payment.”

While this definition separates gig workers from both formal and informal categories, it doesn't clearly define who a gig worker is or the nature of gig work. According to NITI Aayog's 2022 report 'India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy,' the gig workforce is expected to reach 23.5 million by 2029-30. Despite such projections and efforts to define gig work, India's primary labour statistics source, the PLFS, continues to subsume gig work under vague categories such as 'self-employed', 'own-account workers', or 'casual labour'. This statistical invisibility has direct consequences.

Clause 141 of the Code on Social Security, 2020, “seeks to provide that the Central Government shall establish a Social Security Fund for social security and welfare of the unorganised workers, gig workers and platform workers.” Similarly, the National Social Security Board, constituted under Section 6 of the Code on Social Security, 2020, is tasked with framing and overseeing welfare schemes for gig and platform workers. Such welfare boards and policymakers rely on the PLFS for 'evidence-based policy,' but the absence of a distinct category for gig and platform workers undermines its very intent. When classification itself is unclear in primary datasets, access to schemes becomes uneven and exclusionary.

How the PLFS falls short

In response to a Rajya Sabha query on whether the government had updated PLFS methodology to capture the rise of gig work, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation stated, “No updation in the PLFS Schedule has been undertaken with the objective of specifically identifying persons engaged in the gig economy. However, all market activities i.e. activities performed for pay or profit which result in production of goods and services for exchange are included under the domain of economic activity considered in PLFS. The activity situation of a person who is found to be working or being engaged in economic activity during a specified reference period is associated

with employment in PLFS. Hence, even the persons engaged in ‘gig economy’ for pay & profit are covered in PLFS.”

Though gig work is technically included under economic activity, without a specific category or classification, the survey fails to offer visibility into the unique nature of digital labour, characterised by multiple job roles, dependence on algorithms, lack of formal contract and absence of safety metrics. In the survey, while the question on the type of job contract provides an option for ‘no written job contract’, it doesn’t capture the hybrid nature of work.

Unlike traditional self-employment, gig work is shaped by platform algorithms, performed across multiple apps and are mostly task-based rather than time-bound. Workers have no stable contracts, and often rely on digital reach. Many lack access to benefits or protections available to formal workers, and don’t fully own their work processes, making the “self-employed” label misleading. Employment uncertainties, income volatility and algorithm governance remain invisible within PLFS classification. A food delivery person working across platforms like Swiggy, Zomato, for instance, will be flattened into a category that does not reflect entirely on their employment conditions or social security needs.

Recognition without representation

Recent policy efforts like the e-Shram registration, the issuance of digital ID cards, and health coverage under the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana indicate the state’s recognition of the gig and platform workforce. But unless statistical systems like the PLFS evolve, the data meant to support and monitor these interventions cannot be considered inclusive.

The 2025 PLFS revision introduced some important updates: a larger sample size, monthly estimates, and better rural representation. However, it still does not address the issues of how gig work is defined and understood. For inclusive policy making, India must update PLFS classification codes or introduce survey modules that distinctly capture gig work.

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