Managed by Machines: The Rise of AI in the Gig Economy

How Algorithms Are Reshaping Work, Control and Opportunity

White Paper

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NEXT HORIZON CONSULTING

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At a Glance

Next Horizon Consulting, in collaboration with **Synergy: The Corporate Society of SSCBS**, has prepared this **White Paper**, which brings together consulting insight and academic rigour to examine one of the most consequential shifts in India's labour market.

India's gig economy is no longer a footnote in the country's economic story. It is becoming the story itself. What began as a quiet digitisation of informal labour has evolved into a structural transformation that touches millions of livelihoods, reshapes entire industries, and challenges the very foundations of how we define work, employment, and protection.

This white paper, Managed by Machines: The Rise of AI in the Gig Economy, was undertaken with one clear purpose: to move beyond surface-level commentary on gig work and offer a rigorous, grounded analysis of the forces that have shaped it, the realities it has created, and the questions it leaves unanswered.

Our research draws on macroeconomic data, sectoral case studies, and an examination of emerging regulatory frameworks to build a picture of the gig economy that is specific to India, not borrowed from Silicon Valley narratives or Western policy templates. India's informality is not a problem to be solved before gig work can flourish; it is the very soil in which platform labour took root. Understanding that distinction is central to everything that follows.

The paper covers the historical and structural origins of gig work in India, the role of the COVID-19 pandemic as an accelerant rather than an origin point, the emergence of quick commerce as a distinct logistical and labour model, the dual nature of India's gig ecosystem across digital and semi-digital segments, and in its most forward-looking section, the arrival of algorithmic gig logic into India's legal services sector.

We have approached this subject not with the intent to celebrate or condemn, but to examine honestly. The gig economy has provided livelihoods where formal employment has failed to materialise. It has also created new forms of precarity under the guise of flexibility. Both of these things are true, and any meaningful policy or institutional response must hold both in view.

We hope this white paper serves as a useful resource for students, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in understanding one of the most consequential shifts in India's labour market in recent decades.

Executive Summary

Section 1: The Rise and Transformation of Gig Work in India

India's gig economy did not emerge as a disruption to the existing labour market — it emerged as its digitised continuation. With 90–93% of India's workforce already operating informally, platform-based gig work replaced local contractors and middlemen with algorithmic matching systems, making informal labour more scalable, visible, and integrated into formal supply chains.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a structural shift already underway. What had been supplementary income for many became the primary livelihood for millions, as lockdowns wiped out formal and semi-formal employment. Between FY21 and FY25, gig worker numbers rose by 55%, embedding platform labour not as a crisis-era workaround but as a permanent feature of the economy.

A divergence from the Silicon Valley model is apparent in how Indian users have interpreted these platforms. Designed around asset-sharing and flexible supplementary income, global platforms were reinterpreted in India as channels for semi-permanent employment — driven by the structural absence of formal job creation rather than entrepreneurial choice. Today, gig work exists in two forms: algorithmically managed digital gigs and the far larger non-digital or semi-digital segment, which operates through WhatsApp groups, neighbourhood brokers, and word-of-mouth — and dominates in Tier 2/3 cities and rural India.

Section 2: Algorithmic Management in AI-Enabled Quick Commerce

Quick commerce — defined by 10–20 minute delivery windows — is not an accelerated form of e-commerce but a distinct logistical model. Built on dark stores and real-time algorithmic dispatch, platforms such as Blinkit replace sequential, human-managed operations with dynamic, continuously optimised networks where time and responsiveness outweigh traditional metrics like cost and distance.
Within this system, the delivery partner is central yet highly constrained. Task allocation is algorithm-driven, with acceptance thresholds and incentive-linked timelines shaping behaviour. This creates “disguised autonomy”: frequent micro-decisions that simulate choice while limiting its practical exercise. A delivery partner typically receives 20–25 task prompts daily, each requiring immediate response; repeated rejection leads to reduced task access or temporary suspension, raising the cost of opting out.

Section 3: AI-Mediated Mental Health Services

India's gig economy is not a disruption of the labour market but its digitised extension. With nearly 90–93% of the workforce already informal, platform-based work has largely replaced traditional intermediaries with algorithmic systems, making informal labour more scalable, visible, and integrated into formal value chains rather than fundamentally altering its nature.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transition. What was once supplementary income became a primary livelihood as formal employment contracted. Between FY21 and FY25, gig worker participation grew by 55%, with numbers rising from 7.7 million in 2020–21 and projected to reach 23.5 million by 2030—signaling a structural, not temporary, shift.

Unlike Silicon Valley's model of flexible, asset-sharing work, gig platforms in India have evolved into semi-permanent employment channels, driven by limited formal job creation. The ecosystem now spans two segments: digitally managed platform work (ride-hailing, delivery, freelancing) and a larger semi-digital network operating through informal channels like WhatsApp groups and local brokers, particularly in Tier 2/3 and rural regions.

As a result, gig workers in India occupy a hybrid structural position—they are managed by platforms but lack formal protections.

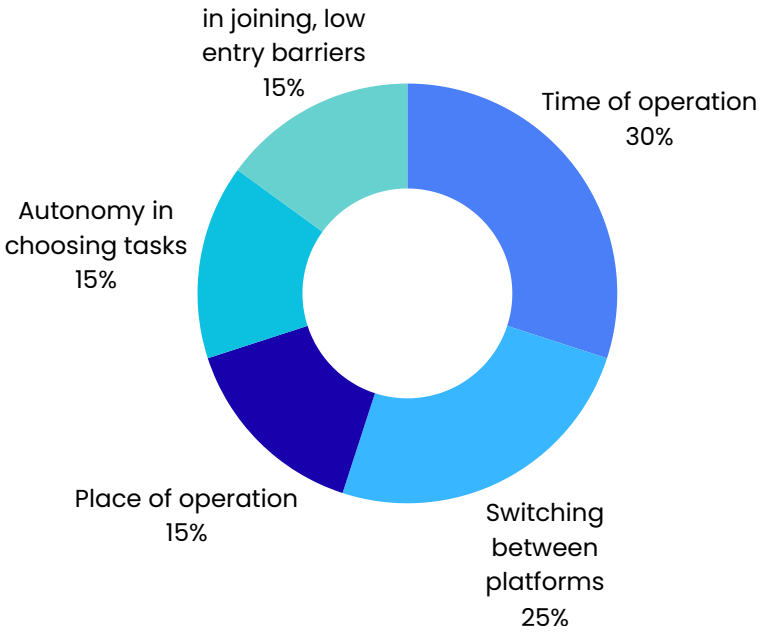
Section 4 — Reconfiguring Legal Work through AI and Gigification

India's legal sector is undergoing a quiet but consequential restructuring, driven by the intersection of AI capability and platform-mediated gig work. With 69,233 compliance obligations and over 6,600 annual filings, AI accelerates demand by decomposing bundled legal services into discrete tasks —contract abstraction, regulatory research, document review, and compliance drafting — which platforms then match to gig workers at scale.

The structural risks, however, are equally real. When platforms fragment legal work into modular tasks, the question of whether any individual output constitutes regulated "legal advice" becomes genuinely difficult to answer. A substantial part of client cost savings reflects not efficiency gains but the structural transfer of costs onto workers: their own training, insurance, and income volatility. The apprenticeship pipeline through which legal judgement was historically transmitted has no platform equivalent, and that gap is quietly hollowing out.

Exhibit E1

Flexibility is chosen as the defining criterion for gig work because it captures the degree of worker control over when, where, how, and for whom work is performed.



$$Gig\ score = \sum_{i=1}^{5} w_i \cdot \frac{S_i}{4}$$

This gives a normalized score between 0 and 1

Factor considered	Weightage	Score (0-4)	Weighted score	Justification /evidence
Time of operation	30	S_1	0.30 × (S_1/4)	e.g., Can log in/out anytime
Place of operation	15	S_2	0.15 × (S_2/4)	e.g., Location-independent
Switching between orgs	25	S_3	0.25 × (S_3/4)	e.g., Works across multiple apps
Task autonomy	15	S_4	0.15 × (S_4/4)	e.g., Accept/reject orders
Low entry barriers	15	S_5	0.15 × (S_5/4)	e.g., Minimal qualification needed

Section 1: Understanding the Rise and Transformation of Gig Work in India

Gig work in India emerged as a structural response to informality, not merely as a temporary trend.

India's gig economy cannot be understood as a Western-style "side hustle revolution." Instead, it is deeply rooted in the country's long-standing structural reality: widespread labour informality. Nearly 90–93% of India's workforce operates in informal arrangements, lacking written contracts, social security, or job stability. (1) This massive base of precarious labour created fertile ground for platform-based gig work to emerge—not as disruption, but as digitized continuity of informality.

Gig platforms such as ride-hailing, food delivery, and logistics did not invent precarious work; they formalised access to it through technology. By replacing local contractors and middlemen with algorithmic matching systems, these platforms made informal work:

- More visible and scalable
- More accessible to migrants and urban job seekers
- More integrated into formal supply chains

In fact, over 50% of gig workers are migrants, indicating that platform work functions as a bridge between rural underemployment and urban income opportunities. (2)

Rather than being an anomaly, gig work represents a 'third space' between formal employment and traditional informality, a system where workers are not employees, but their labour is still highly structured, monitored, and managed

This hybrid nature is why the gig economy has scaled rapidly. India had 7.7 million gig workers in 2020–21, projected to reach 23.5 million by 2030, making it one of the fastest-growing labour segments. (3)

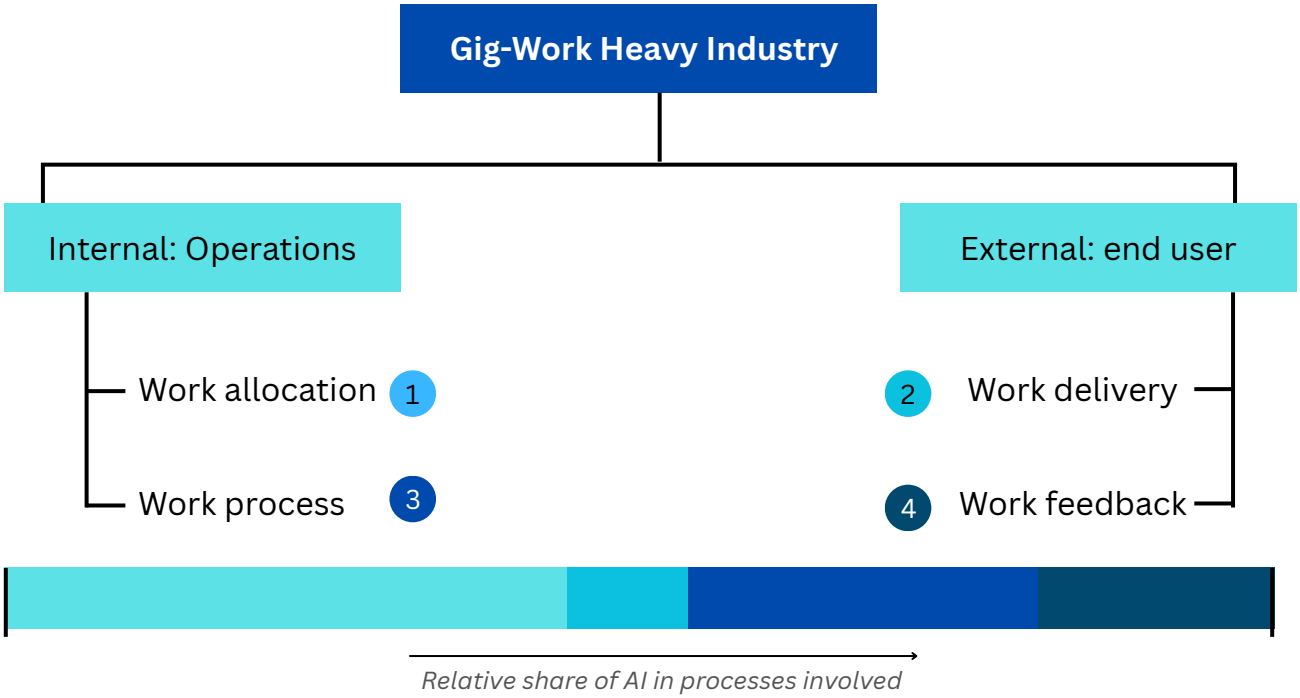
Importantly, this growth is not incidental—it reflects a structural function:

- The gig economy absorbs surplus labour
- It provides low-barrier entry jobs where formal sector job creation is insufficient
- It acts as a shock absorber during economic transitions

Policy discourse increasingly recognises this. The Economic Survey notes that gig work is part of a "structural transformation driven by digitalisation", rather than a temporary employment pattern. (4)

Exhibit E1

Gig work–intensive industries operate through a dual-layered system in which internal platform processes and external user interactions are increasingly mediated and optimized by algorithmic systems.



However, this structural embedding comes with consequences. While platforms create opportunities, they also inherit the vulnerabilities of informal labour, like income instability, lack of benefits and weak bargaining power. For instance, around 40% of gig workers earn below ₹15,000 per month, highlighting the persistence of low-income precarity despite technological mediation. (5)

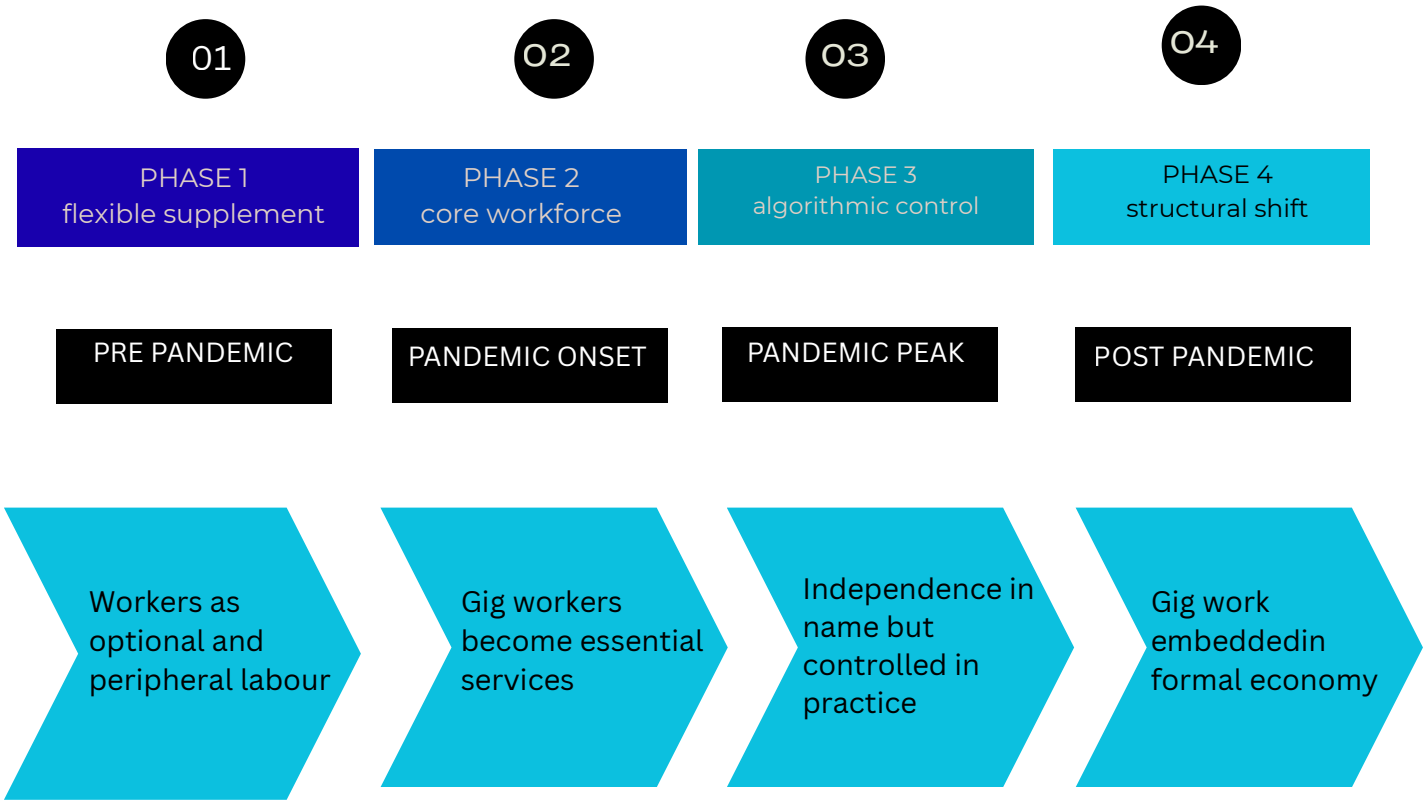
In this sense, gig work in India is best understood not as "future of work," but as the digitisation of an already informal present—where AI and algorithms replace human intermediaries but do not fundamentally alter labour insecurity.

The definition of gig work shifted from 'flexible supplemental income' to 'primary livelihood' during the pandemic.

Before 2020, gig work in India was largely framed as supplementary income—a flexible way for students, part-time workers, or urban youth to earn extra money. However, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered this perception.

Exhibit E2

The evolution of gig work in India



As lockdowns disrupted traditional employment, millions of workers experienced job losses in the formal and semi-formal sectors, reduced working hours and business closures in MSMEs.

In this context, gig platforms became one of the few accessible income sources, triggering a shift from optional work to essential livelihood.

Academic and policy analyses confirm that pandemic conditions increased gig employment at the expense of formal jobs, as workers migrated into platform-based work for survival. (6)

This shift in dependency coincided with a broader structural change: gig workers moved from the periphery of the economy toward its core, becoming indispensable in food delivery, urban logistics, and mobility — sectors that the pandemic turbocharged overnight. Yet even as their economic importance grew, so did the mechanisms of control.

Between FY21 and FY25, gig worker numbers rose by 55% (Forbes India), embedding gig labour not as a crisis-era workaround but as a permanent and expanding feature of the formal economy. What began as disruption had quietly become the new structure.

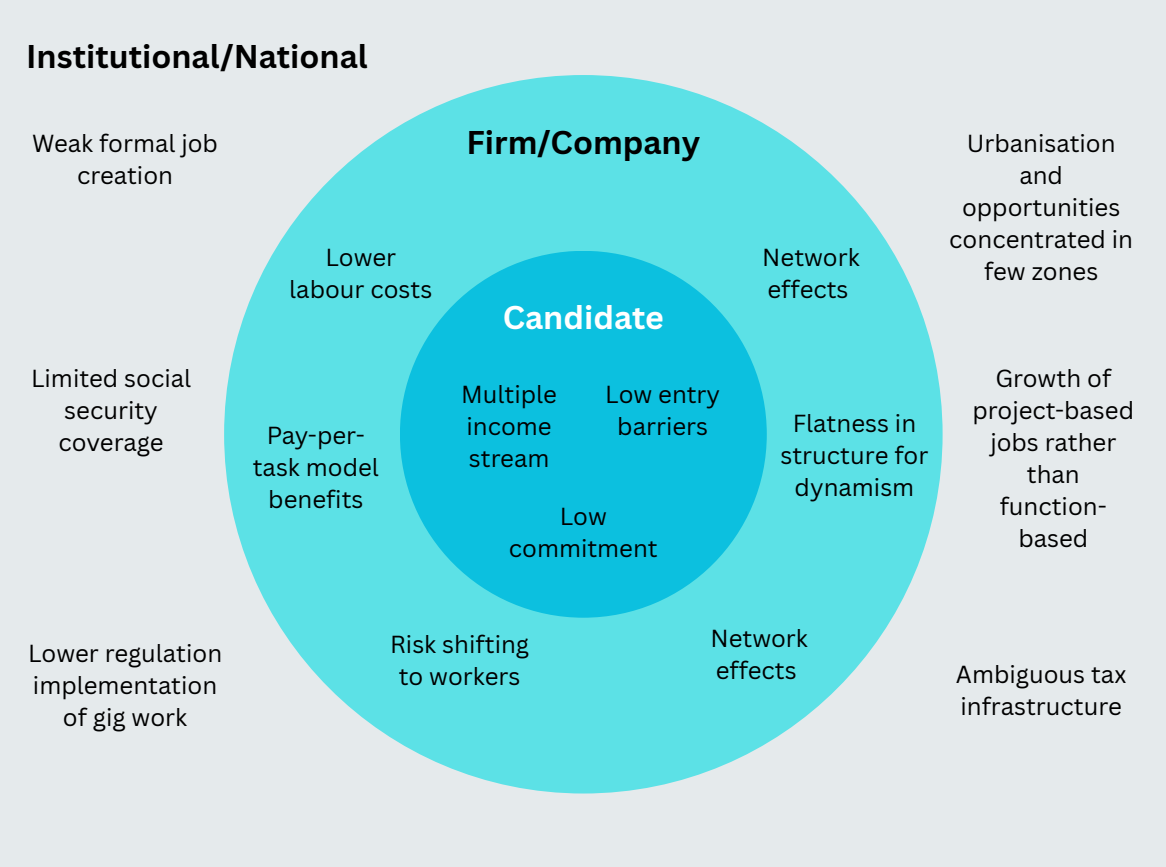
India's gig workforce expanded due to structural youth demographics and limited formal job creation: India's labour absorption capacity has not matched its demographic expansion.

India's demographic dividend, characterized by a large and youthful population entering the labour market annually, has created significant pressure on employment systems. With millions of young individuals, particularly those aged 15–29 seeking work each year, the country's formal sector has struggled to generate sufficient jobs to match this influx.

Official data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and related reports indicate persistent challenges in labour absorption, where overall unemployment has moderated in recent years (hovering around 4.8–5% in late 2025 and early 2026), but youth unemployment remains elevated, often in the 10–14% range or higher in urban areas. This structural mismatch between rapid demographic expansion and slower formal job creation has positioned the gig economy as a critical absorber of surplus labour.

Exhibit E3

The rise of gig work is not accidental; it is the outcome of aligned incentives across workers, firms, platforms, and policy gaps.



This expansion is driven by factors such as high smartphone penetration, digital payment infrastructure, turning gig work into a primary livelihood for many rather than a supplementary activity.

The initial platform intent vs Indian user interpretation diverged: Original global intent (Silicon Valley model)- asset-sharing economy, optimisation of idle capacity, decentralised micro-entrepreneurship. Indian user interpretation- semi-permanent employment.

Globally, gig platforms originating from the Silicon Valley model were designed around an asset-sharing economy that optimizes idle capacity, promotes decentralized micro-entrepreneurship, and enables flexible, supplementary income through peer-to-peer exchanges. Services like ride-hailing and accommodation sharing (e.g., Uber, Airbnb) emphasized monetizing under-utilized personal assets or skills on an episodic basis, with users acting as independent entrepreneurs rather than full-time employees.

In India, however, users have largely reinterpreted these platforms as sources of semi-permanent employment. For millions of delivery partners, drivers, and service professionals, gig work functions as the core or sole steady income stream, often involving daily or weekly commitments that substitute for traditional salaried jobs amid limited formal opportunities. This shift has transformed platforms intended for optimization of surplus resources into de-facto channels for on-demand, commoditized labour, where workers seek stability and regularity rather than occasional side hustles.

There are now two main types of gig employment in India: non-digital/semi-digital gigs and gigs mediated by digital platforms. Digital platform-mediated gigs, which fall into the first group, use sophisticated mobile apps and online markets to link workers with projects in real time using algorithms. This includes professional freelancing (Upwork, Freelancer, Truelancer), food and grocery delivery (Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit), home and beauty services (Urban Company, Housejoy), and ride-hailing (Ola, Uber), Mental Health (BetterHelp, Talk Space etc), IT Sector companies (Fiverr, Upwork).

Exhibit E3

Gig work in India today exists in two broad forms- digital platform-mediated gig, non-digital/semi-digital gig

SILICONE VALLEY MODEL

Asset Sharing Economy

- Optimise idle capacity (cars, rooms)
- Decentralised micro-entrepreneurship
- Flexible supplementary income
- Independent contractor ethos

Uber **Airbnb** **P2P Sharing**

INDIAN INTERPRETATION MODEL

Semi Permananent Model

- Core or sole steady income stream
- Substitute for formal salaried jobs
- Stability & regularity over side-hustle
- Driven by limited formal opportunities

High Informality **Urban Migration**

These platforms create a highly visible and quantifiable environment by offering digital infrastructure for job search, GPS monitoring, immediate payments, performance ratings, and dynamic pricing. Approximately 7-8 million workers, mostly urban, tech-savvy youngsters who use the platform as their main work interface, make up this category as of 2025 estimates.
Non-digital or semi-digital gig work, on the other hand refers to the broad, less structured layer of flexible employment that depends on conventional networks, word-of-mouth recommendations, or rudimentary digital tools like SMS, WhatsApp groups, or simple listing apps. This includes daily-wage construction labourers, plumbers and electricians finding jobs through neighbourhood brokers, domestic helpers and cooks arranged via local agencies or community contacts, street vendors, tailors, and small-scale repair technicians who may occasionally use a simple app for leads but do not depend on algorithmic matching or centralised platforms. This type is thought to be several times larger than the pure platform segment and dominates India's gig market in terms of both scale and geographic distribution, particularly in Tier-2/3 cities and rural areas. Together, the two types show how gig work has developed in India as a hybrid solution to the same structural job problems by fusing state-of-the-art technology with the nation's deeply ingrained informal economy.

Section 2: Understanding algorithmic management through AI-enabled quick commerce

The rapid emergence of quick commerce in India represents a significant structural evolution of traditional e-commerce, driven by changing consumer expectations and advancements in digital infrastructure. Conventional e-commerce models were historically built around scheduled delivery systems, with fulfillment timelines ranging from same-day to multiple days. However, increasing urbanisation, rising time sensitivity among consumers, and the growing preference for convenience have led to the adoption of ultra-fast delivery models, typically within 10-20 minutes. These platforms operate on a fundamentally different model compared to traditional e-commerce, focusing on speed, proximity, and high-frequency consumption.

The rise of high-frequency and spur-of-the-moment purchases in quick commerce leads to increased volatility in demand patterns, thereby requiring substantial expansion and dynamic allocation of delivery partners to sustain rapid fulfillment times.

The rise of quick commerce is closely linked to evolving consumption patterns in urban India. Unlike traditional e-commerce, which emphasizes bulk purchasing and planned consumption, quick commerce is characterised by high-frequency, low-basket-size transactions, often driven by immediate needs.

Several factors have contributed to this shift. First, urban consumers increasingly value time efficiency and convenience, preferring on-demand access to goods rather than waiting for scheduled deliveries. Second, the proliferation of digital payment systems and mobile internet has significantly reduced transaction friction, enabling seamless ordering experiences. Third, quick commerce platforms have expanded beyond groceries into categories such as personal care, electronics, and pharmaceuticals, further increasing usage frequency.

These changes collectively reflect a transition toward what can be described as an “instant consumption economy”, where delivery speed becomes a critical determinant of consumer choice.

Exhibit E4

Comparative Models of Delivery Partner Allocation

E-commerce	Q-commerce	3PL players
Planned and batch allocation **How it works?** • Orders aggregated at warehouses. • Partners assigned routes (not single orders) **Algorithm logic:** • Minimize total distance • Maximize drop density per route • Optimum workload across riders	**Real-time Dynamic Dispatch** **How it works?** • Orders originate from dark stores. • Delivery partners wait nearby (idle pool) • Each order assigned instantly. **Algorithm logic:** • Minimize delivery time (not distance) • Reduce idle time	**Hybrid Network and Contracted Allocation** **How it works?** • Shipments move through hub-and-spoke network • Load-based allocation (bulk shipments to agents) **Algorithm logic:** • Optimize network flow (not just last mile) • Cost vs timelines

Another defining feature of quick commerce is the transition from linear supply chains to platform-coordinated logistics ecosystems. In this model, digital platforms act as central coordinators, integrating multiple stakeholders including customers, warehouses, and delivery partners in real time.

This system relies heavily on:

- real-time data processing
- location tracking
- automated dispatch mechanisms

Unlike traditional logistics, where processes are sequential and human-managed, quick commerce operates as a dynamic, data-driven network, where decisions are continuously optimized through digital systems. This transformation indicates a shift from "inventory-led logistics" to "time-led logistics," where speed and responsiveness become the primary performance metrics.

Despite being classified as gig work, delivery partner roles exhibit constrained flexibility and autonomy due to platform-driven controls, resulting in a significant mismatch between their intended gig nature and actual work dynamics.

Using the proposed flexibility-based scoring framework, the delivery partner role, while conventionally classified as gig work, exhibits relatively low scores on critical dimensions such as autonomy in task selection and flexibility in time of operation. In practice, algorithmic task allocation, acceptance rate pressures, and incentive-linked time windows significantly constrain a worker's ability to freely choose tasks or working hours.

As a result, despite being positioned as a high-flexibility role, the computed Gig Score is moderated downward, reflecting only partial alignment with true gig work characteristics. This indicates a structural mismatch between the intended design of gig work, which emphasizes high flexibility and autonomy, and the operational reality experienced by delivery partners, which is shaped by platform-driven control and constrained flexibility.

This divergence highlights that platform-mediated delivery work, although labeled as gig work, functionally operates closer to controlled, semi-flexible labor rather than truly independent gig engagement.

High-frequency, low-intensity decision points in platform-mediated delivery work create a perceived sense of autonomy

Platform-based delivery systems are structured around a continuous stream of micro-decisions, wherein workers are repeatedly prompted to accept or reject tasks within short time windows. On average, a delivery partner may engage with 20–25 such decisions in a single day, each requiring a near-instantaneous response. Individually, these decisions appear low in significance and cognitively lightweight. However, their high frequency generates an aggregation effect, whereby the cumulative experience of repeated choice creates a strong perception of control and flexibility.

This design interacts closely with behavioral tendencies, particularly in contexts where instantaneous choice and perceived independence are highly valued. The availability of frequent decision points fosters a psychological sense of agency, reinforcing the belief that workers retain meaningful discretion over their work patterns.

However, this perceived autonomy is structurally constrained. Platform mechanisms such as acceptance rate thresholds, temporary suspensions, or reduced task visibility effectively penalize repeated rejection of tasks. As a result, while workers are technically presented with a choice, the cost of exercising that choice is disproportionately high.

This creates a system of soft compulsion, where workers are nudged toward consistent task acceptance to maintain platform access and income continuity.

Consequently, the aggregation of numerous small choices does not translate into substantive autonomy. Instead, it produces disguised autonomy, where the frequency of decisions obscures the limited freedom embedded within each one. The worker appears to operate in a flexible, self-directed environment, while in reality functioning within tightly governed algorithmic boundaries.

This outcome diverges from the foundational premise of gig work, which emphasizes aligning tasks with individual preference, capability, and comfort. In an ideal system, task rejection would serve as a feedback signal, enabling the platform to refine task allocation in accordance with worker preferences. Instead, current implementations often interpret rejection as non-compliance, leading to reduced opportunities rather than improved matching.

The result is a structural misalignment: a system designed to offer flexibility and autonomy instead leverages high-frequency decision-making to simulate these attributes, without substantively delivering them.

As work arrangements in India shift toward gig and AI-mediated models, the traditional employment value of security and organizational belonging is eroding, creating a structural trade-off between flexibility and worker protection that remains institutionally unresolved.

In the Indian labor context, employment has historically been valued not merely as a source of income but as a provider of stability, predictability, and long-term security. Multiple workforce surveys in India consistently show that job security ranks among the top priorities for workers, often above compensation growth or role mobility. This preference is shaped by economic conditions, limited social safety nets, and cultural emphasis on stable career trajectories.

However, the rise of gig work and AI-driven management systems is fundamentally altering this equation. Platform-mediated work models prioritize flexibility, scalability, and efficiency, often at the cost of traditional employment securities such as assured income, social protection, and long-term engagement.

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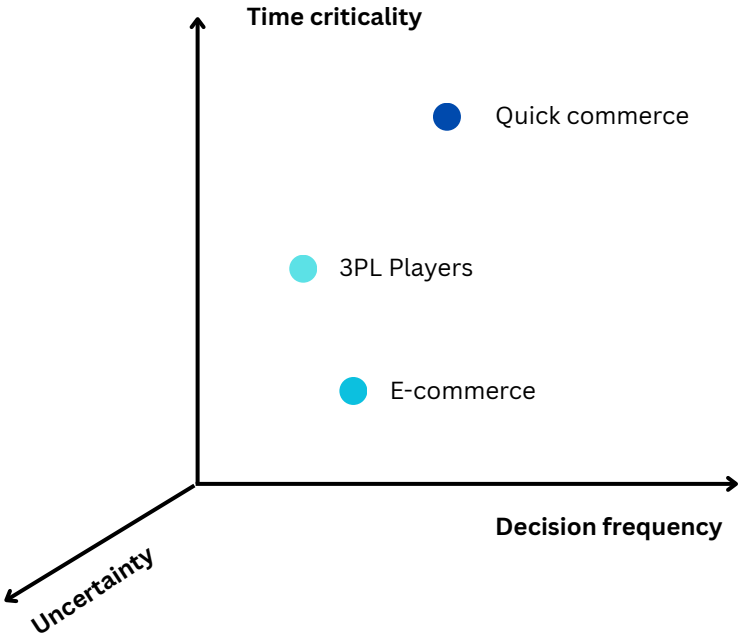
As algorithmic systems increasingly govern task allocation, performance evaluation, and compensation, the worker's relationship with the organization becomes more transactional and less relational.
A critical implication of this shift is the erosion of organizational belonging. In traditional employment structures, workers derive identity, loyalty, and a sense of inclusion from their association with a firm. In contrast, gig workers operate in a fragmented ecosystem where their engagement is intermittent, platform-dependent, and largely devoid of institutional attachment. The question of "who the worker belongs to" becomes ambiguous.
This ambiguity is further reinforced by the structural design of platform firms. For instance, companies such as Uber Technologies explicitly position themselves as technology intermediaries rather than service providers. By defining their role as enabling connections rather than delivering services, such platforms effectively distance themselves from employer-like responsibilities. This classification allows them to limit obligations related to worker benefits, insurance, and long-term welfare, thereby shifting risk onto the worker.

Within the flexibility-based framework, the ability to switch between organizations is treated as a key indicator of gig work. While this mobility enhances worker choice, it simultaneously weakens continuity and reduces access to benefits traditionally tied to stable employment. Flexibility, in this sense, becomes inversely related to security. This creates a fundamental trade-off:

- High flexibility enables mobility and choice
- Low attachment reduces access to benefits, protections, and belonging

Exhibit E6

Businesses want to shift AI from being a support tool to 'core engine' to optimise workflow and increase efficiency



AI Intensity Gradient in Delivery Systems

AI's value and fit for any delivery model can be understood as a combination of:

Time criticality × Decision frequency × Uncertainty

The drivers

Decision frequency: How often allocations are made
Uncertainty: Variability in demand and fulfilment time
Time criticality: Cost of delay or wrong decision

The evolution of gig work reveals a deeper structural issue—not just about flexibility, but about the redefinition of work itself. While platforms successfully deliver efficiency and scalability, they do so by fragmenting the traditional employment contract, removing the very elements that historically provided workers with stability and identity.
The gig worker, therefore, exists in an institutional void:

- Not fully an employee
- Not entirely independent
- Managed, but not protected
- Engaged, but not belonging

This unresolved status lies at the core of the modern gig economy and represents one of its most critical challenges going forward.

Executive insights: AI in Quick Commerce Gig Operations

Interviewee: Rajat Gupta
Company: Blinkit
Position: Program manager
Education: Delhi College of Engineering

To understand how artificial intelligence is shaping gig work in quick commerce, we conducted in-depth interviews with operators managing last-mile and dark store operations.

Q. How is AI shaping operations in quick commerce?

AI is most useful in understanding hyperlocal demand and optimizing how we run dark stores. For example, a store in Mukherjee Nagar (student-heavy) will have very different demand compared to South Delhi. AI helps decide what inventory to keep so it doesn't become dead stock.
It also impacts how inventory is placed inside the store. Today, store managers decide which fast-moving items should be near dispatch, but increasingly AI will decide what to place, where, and how, to reduce picking time within our 2–3 minute window.

Q. With increasing automation, are delivery partners becoming less important?

No, they are still the most critical part of the system. You can reduce managers, but not delivery partners. If there are no riders, the system simply doesn't work—you'll either see surge pricing or the platform will stop servicing an area.

Q. What happens to gig workers' earnings in this system?

If one platform reduces demand, others will absorb the workforce—so jobs remain, but income growth may not keep pace.
ly doesn't work—you'll either see surge pricing or the platform will stop servicing an area.

Q. Do algorithms fully replace human decision-making?

No. Algorithms are necessary because demand is highly dynamic—varying by time of day, location, and even local festivals. This level of variability cannot be managed manually. Humans still decide how much inventory or manpower to deploy based on cost and feasibility. So both have to work together.

Q. What should researchers and policymakers understand about gig work systems?

They need to experience it on the ground. Without understanding how gig workers actually operate, it's difficult to design effective systems or policies.

Section 3: AI-mediated mental health services being the new normal

Mental health represents one of the defining public health challenges of the twenty-first century. According to the World Health Organization's *World Mental Health Today* report (September 2025), more than one billion people, approximately one in seven individuals globally, are currently living with a mental health condition. Yet this scale of need has not translated into the delivery of care. The WHO's *Mental Health Atlas 2024* reveals that global mental health spending has stagnated at a median of just two percent of health budgets, a figure unchanged since 2017, and in low-income settings, fewer than ten percent of people affected by psychosis receive any treatment at all.

Exhibit E7

India grapples with a massive mental health crisis marked by 197 million affected and critical treatment gaps.

People affected in India
197M
Global Burden of Disease est.

No adequate treatment
70-92%
Huge treatment gap exists

Psychiatrists per 100k
0.75
WHO minimum: 1.0

Global MH Budget Share
2%
Unchanged since 2017

Inference

The data highlights the severity of India's mental health crisis, with nearly 197 million people affected and a treatment gap reaching up to 92%. Limited psychiatric resources and low public health spending further deepen the challenge, leaving millions without adequate care and support.

The pattern is reproduced with particular severity in India. The NIMHANS National Mental Health Survey 2015-16 found that approximately 10.6 percent of Indian adults carry a diagnosable mental disorder, with more recent Global Burden of Disease estimates placing the total number of affected individuals at nearly 197 million. Of these, between 70 and 92 percent receive no adequate treatment, a treatment gap that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Indian Psychiatric Society have consistently identified as among the widest in the world. The drivers are familiar: social stigma, geographic inaccessibility, financial barriers,

and most structurally, a profound shortage of trained professionals. India has approximately 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 population against a WHO-recommended minimum of one, and a 2023 Parliamentary Standing Committee report found only 9,000 practising psychiatrists where the population requires at least 36,000. Geospatial analyses have confirmed the severity of this maldistribution: in a 2025 study of seven districts in Madhya Pradesh, 88 percent of psychiatrists were clustered in a single city, with three districts having none at all. This is the structural context that makes the emergence of platform-based mental health work not merely understandable but, to a significant degree, inevitable.

The emergence of platform-based care is not incidental, but structurally conditioned by systemic shortages

For much of the twentieth century, mental health professionals in India operated within two primary frameworks: institutional employment and independent private practice. Institutional roles provided stability but restricted practitioners to fixed, largely urban locations, often with compensation misaligned with workload demands. In contrast, private practice offered autonomy but required significant upfront investment, slow client acquisition, and prolonged financial uncertainty before becoming viable.

Traditional systems prioritised stability over accessibility, they were designed to function, not to expand.

A clinical psychologist interviewed for this research described her hospital post as one in which she was professionally protected but clinically constrained, with waiting lists stretching months while she had no mechanism to extend her reach. Another, who had moved from NGO-based employment to private practice, described the transition as a period of financial vulnerability that peers without family support simply could not have managed.

Both models shared a fundamental limitation: neither could scale at speed. A district hospital psychiatrist could serve only those who attended the facility. An independent practitioner was bounded by the hours in a working day and the reach of a single location.

The COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022 made this structural rigidity impossible to ignore. The sudden disruption of in-person care, combined with a documented surge in depression, anxiety, and distress across all demographic groups, forced a rapid pivot toward digital delivery. What followed was an improvised but consequential experiment in remote therapeutic practice. Platform sign-ups in India surged by over 45 percent between 2020 and 2022. Stigma, historically one of the most formidable barriers to help-seeking, proved more tractable in digital settings where anonymity reduced the social risk of seeking care. And practitioners who adapted to remote work discovered genuine advantages: geographic flexibility, scheduling autonomy, and the ability to maintain clinical practice alongside other commitments. It was this convergence of demonstrated need, available technology, and the visible failure of existing models that created the conditions for platform-based mental health work to emerge as something more than marginal.

Platforms such as YourDOST, Amaha, Wysa, BetterHelp, and Talkspace offered a third organisational model: therapists functioning as independent contractors, matched to clients algorithmically, without the institutional constraints of hospital employment or the overhead of private practice. The platform assumed client acquisition, marketing, payment processing, and scheduling; the practitioner provided clinical time. Earnings were session-based and variable, unaccompanied by employment protections, but the elimination of the most precarious aspects of independent practice proved attractive to a significant cohort of professionals. A counsellor interviewed for this research described receiving her first client referrals within weeks of joining a platform, a process that had previously taken years. A psychologist who maintained both a part-time hospital appointment and platform work described the platform as a buffer, a mechanism for sustaining clinical volume and income during periods when his institutional caseload was reduced.

It is essential at this point to resist treating artificial intelligence as a development separate from the platform model. AI is not a subsequent addition to platform-based mental health work; it is constitutive of how that model functions. The two form a single integrated system. Patient-facing tools such as Wysa and Woebot deliver guided cognitive behavioural exercises, mood tracking, and initial screening as a first layer of contact, filtering and routing clients before a human practitioner is engaged.

Evidence from 2025 indicates individuals engaging with these tools experienced measurably greater reductions in depression symptoms than control groups. Therapist-facing tools, including automated session documentation products such as Blueprint, Upheal, and Nabla, transcribe and summarise clinical sessions; intelligent scheduling systems manage logistics; and algorithmic matching systems assign clients to practitioners based on presenting concern, credentials, availability, and prior outcome data. The administrative overhead that once consumed 20 to 30 percent of a practitioner's working day is being systematically compressed.

Exhibit E8

Mental health practice models reveal critical trade-offs between stability, autonomy, scalability, and reach.

Comparison Table

Basis	Institutional Hospital/NGO employment	Private Practice Independent Work	Platform Based Gig/Contractor Model
Reach	Fixed, urban locations	Single location only	Anywhere, fully digital
Client Acquisition	Institutional referral	Self-generated, slow build	Algorithmic matching - fast
Financial Stability	Stable salary	Variable, often precarious	Session-based, variable
Scalability	Low - fixed capacity	Low - one practitioner	High - networked scale
Employment Protection	Full employment rights	None	None - contractor status
Clinical Autonomy	Constrained by institution	Full autonomy	Constrained by algorithm

These developments are not incidental to the gig model; they are what make it viable at scale.

The efficiency case for AI-integrated platform work is legitimate and must be acknowledged clearly. Faster matching reduces the clinically significant delay between help-seeking and care. Automated documentation returns measurable hours to practitioners. Higher throughput capacity extends reach to populations that traditional models cannot serve. These are material gains in a field where access constraints carry direct clinical consequences.

The limitations are equally real. Platform algorithms optimise for utilisation, and the resulting pressure toward higher caseloads and compressed inter-session intervals is systematic, if often unstated. Practitioners on high-volume platforms have described managing upwards of 60 active clients per week, conducting back-to-back sessions shorter than the 45-to-50-minute industry standard, and responding to client messages outside scheduled hours without additional compensation. There have been documented instances of practitioners using AI-generated responses in lieu of personally authored communications, a development that reflects not individual ethical failure but the logical endpoint of compensation structures that cannot sustain genuine engagement at scale. BetterHelp's 2023 Federal Trade Commission settlement, requiring payment of USD 7.8 million to approximately 800,000 users for deceptive data-sharing practices, illustrates the wider risks of inadequate governance in this sector.

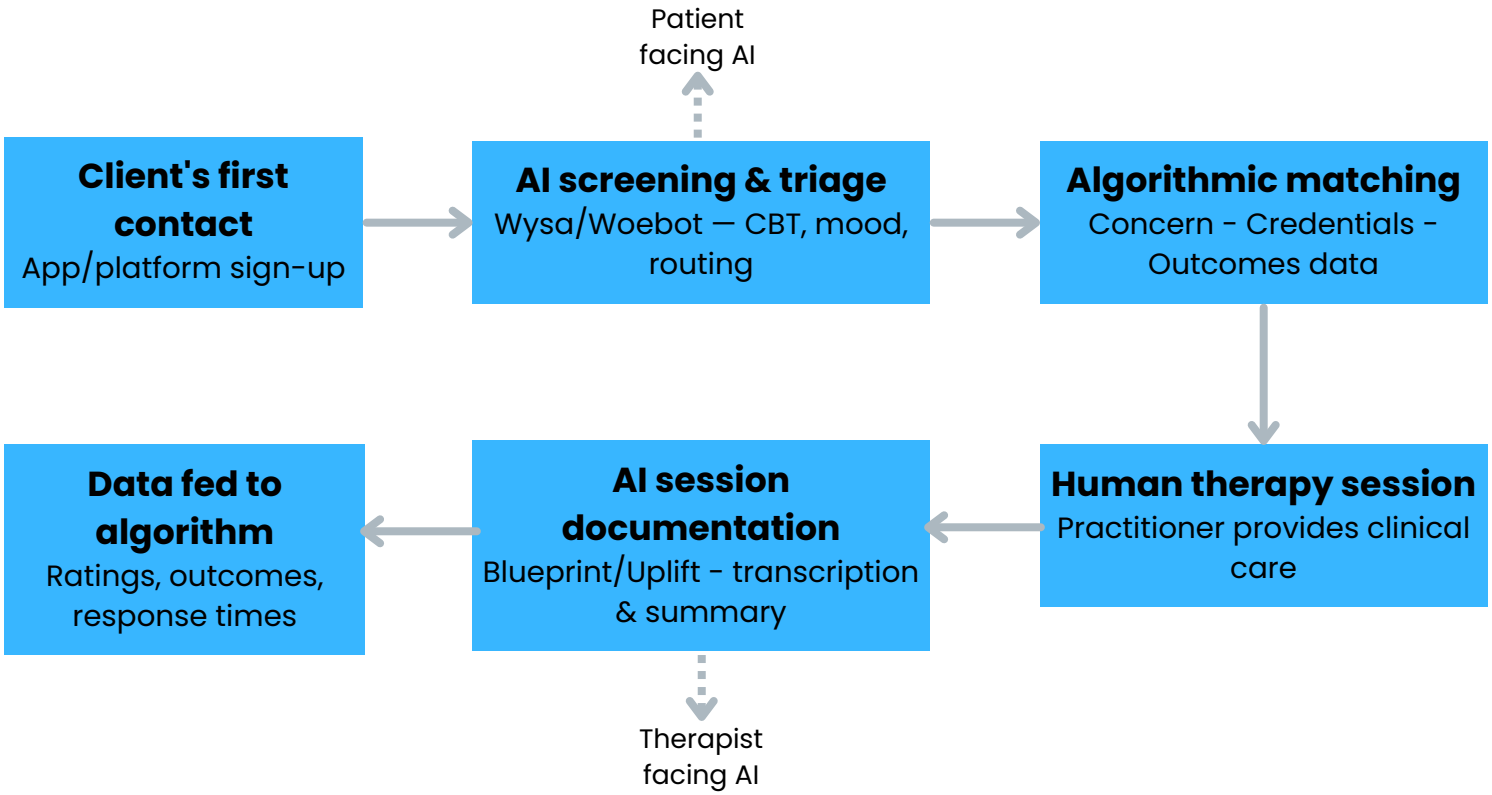
When AI triages the client, the practitioner conducts the session, and AI summarises the outcome, the care process is distributed across systems operating at different stages

This fragmentation may produce operational efficiency on paper while undermining the relational continuity that research consistently identifies as a primary mechanism of therapeutic change. The therapeutic alliance, the quality of the collaborative relationship between practitioner and client, is not incidental to outcomes; it is, in a substantial body of clinical literature, their most robust predictor. On platforms where algorithmic scheduling and caseload allocation override practitioner judgement, the clinical discretions that constitute

therapy, the decision to extend a line of inquiry, to follow up proactively, to pace a session according to what a client needs, are increasingly made by proxy.

Exhibit E9

The study analyzes the end-to-end flow of hybrid AI-human mental health therapy delivery.

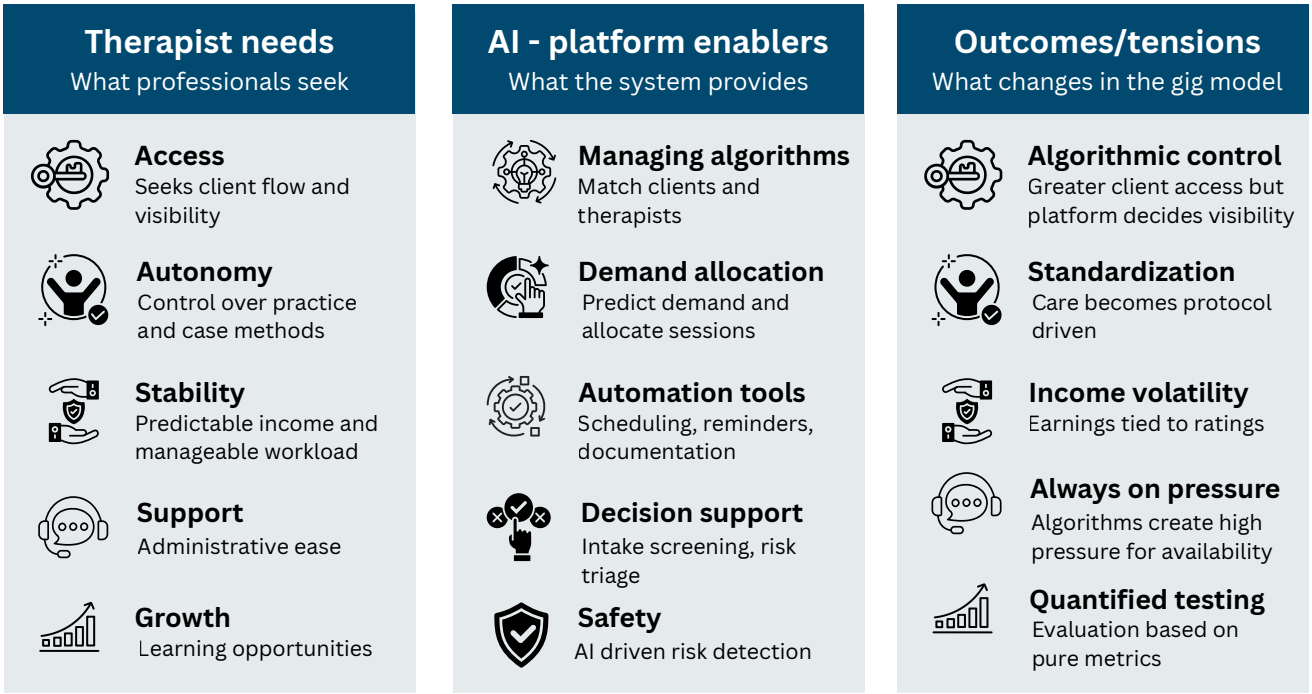


The challenge confronting the mental health sector is not to choose between scale and quality. It is to design the conditions under which both can coexist

For platform operators, the foundational principle should be augmentation rather than acceleration: the appropriate test for any AI tool is not whether it increases throughout, but whether it reduces friction for the practitioner without compressing the space within which clinical judgement can be exercised. Algorithmic matching criteria, performance-scoring methodologies, and caseload allocation decisions should be transparent and contestable by the practitioners they govern. Practitioner wellbeing, including sustainable caseloads, protected time between sessions, and access to peer supervision, must be integrated into platform performance metrics rather than treated as secondary concerns.

Exhibit E10

AI aligns access but reconfigures autonomy, stability, and care delivery



For regulatory and professional bodies, the employment classification of gig-based practitioners in AI-assisted environments imports assumptions of independent clinical judgement that are structurally compromised when algorithmic management governs how, when, and to whom care is delivered. This warrants legislative attention. Clinical AI tools that influence matching, screening, and outcome assessment should be subject to mandatory audit for bias and transparency. Data rights for session-generated information must be defined clearly, with protections for both practitioners and clients. For practitioners themselves, collective engagement through professional associations offers greater capacity than individual negotiation to set workload standards, negotiate data rights, and advocate for algorithmic transparency.

Executive insights: AI in Mental Health Gig Economy

Interviewee: Pankhuri Sharma
College: VIPS IPU
Position: Councelling Psychologists & Wellness Society Coordinator

To understand how AI and digital platforms are shaping mental health work in the gig economy, we conducted an in-depth interview with Pankhuri Sharma, a practising psychologist working with college students, hospitals, and government programmes.

Q. How has demand for mental health services evolved with platforms and technology?

Demand has grown significantly from millennials to Gen Z due to better awareness, accessible platforms, school counsellors, and social media. Gen Z is more proactive in seeking help and making lifestyle changes. Platforms and digital tools have made mental health support far more visible and available than before.

Q. How are digital platforms changing how psychologists work?

Platforms offer greater flexibility in timings and shared responsibility. Psychologists can choose their availability, unlike rigid institutional schedules. They also enable 24x7 accessibility, allowing more people to receive support. However, institutions provide better control and in-person non-verbal observation.

Q. What are the main advantages and challenges of gig/platform-based mental health work?

Advantages include flexibility, autonomy in choosing hours, and broader reach. Shared responsibility helps cover urgent cases. Challenges involve ethical concerns like session recordings affecting privacy, difficulty in reading non-verbal cues online, and clients sometimes not taking therapy seriously. Gig models increase access but require strong accountability.

Q. Do algorithms and AI fully replace human decision-making in mental health gig work?

AI cannot replace human empathy, emotional depth, or non-verbal understanding. However, it can help with client-therapist matching based on preferences, therapy styles, and needs. AI increases accessibility but real therapy still needs human connection.

Q. What should researchers and policymakers understand about gig work systems in mental health?

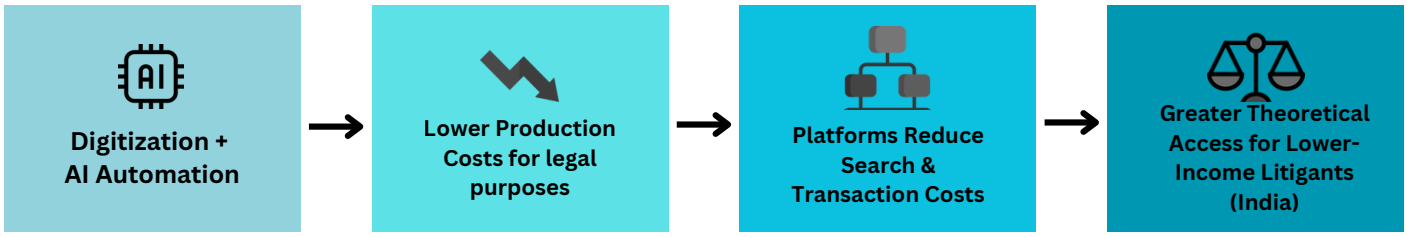
They need to experience ground realities. Without understanding gig platforms' flexibilityand dynamics, it's hard to design effective AI-supported policies.

Section 4: . Reconfiguring Legal Work through AI and Gigification

AI-Assisted Freelance Legal Services Increase Access to Legal Assistance Among Lower-Income Litigants in India

The access argument rests on a straightforward market logic:

Exhibit E11



The supply-side mechanism is real, digitisation has reduced compliance task completion times by an estimated 40–70%, and AI tools compress the marginal cost of producing legal output significantly.
On the demand side, algorithmic matching reduces the information asymmetry that has historically been as significant a barrier as cost itself: identifying competent counsel, assessing quality in advance, and navigating a profession not structured around accessibility were each obstacles that fell hardest on lower-income litigants.

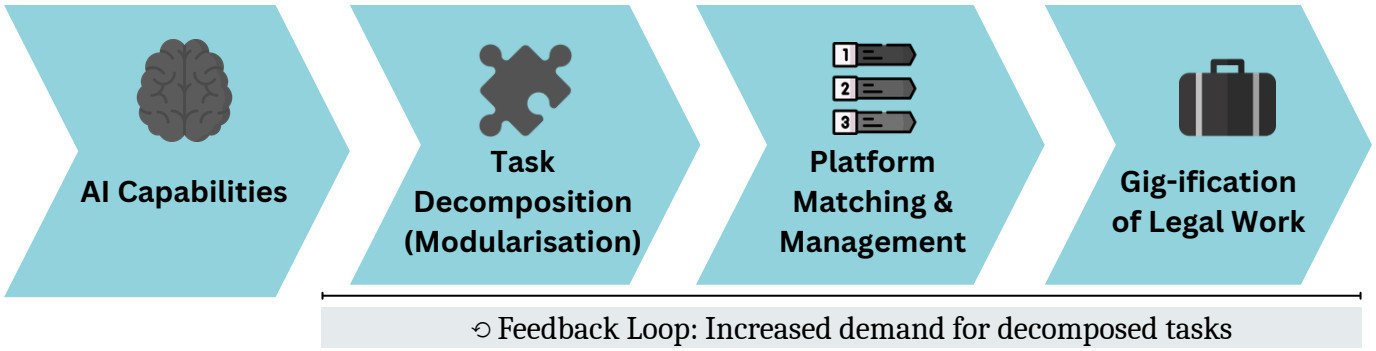
However, the access benefit carries structural qualifications the evidence demands. Platform contracts are rarely accessible or clear, fewer than a third of platform contracts evaluated across jurisdictions could be regarded as understandable to workers, and client-facing contracts are similarly opaque. Lower-income litigants may not understand what they are purchasing, what accountability exists, or what recourse they have when service proves inadequate. Digital access itself is unequally distributed; AI-assisted platforms reach digitally literate users before rural litigants facing district courts. Most critically, the accountability deficit in platform-mediated legal services falls hardest on precisely the clients the access argument invokes. Those without cannot, and the platform structure, which distributes liability across client, platform, and worker without any single actor bearing enforceable responsibility, offers the least protection to the most vulnerable.

Verdict: Partially supported. The cost and access mechanisms are real but unevenly distributed and accompanied by accountability risks concentrated among the most vulnerable users.

Artificial Intelligence Accelerates the Gig-ification of Legal Work by Enabling the Modularisation and Platformisation of Legal Services

AI enables the decomposition of bundled legal services into tasks; platforms scale their matching and management.

Exhibit E12



India's regulatory environment accelerates this on the demand side. With 69,233 compliance obligations and over 6,600 annual filings, the compliance burden generates continuous demand for specialist knowledge that most organisations cannot sustain in-house, making task-specific, platform-mediated engagement economically rational. As AI makes compliance tasks more decomposable, platforms make decomposed tasks more efficiently matchable. The feedback loop is self-reinforcing.

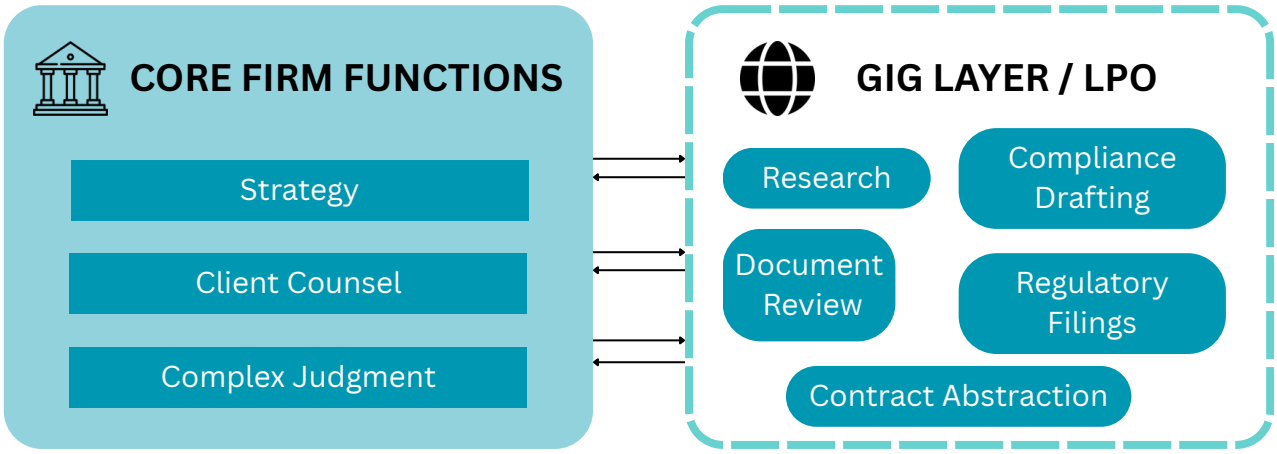
The supply-side merit is real: modularisation creates market access for qualified professionals outside established firm networks. The demerit is equally real: the apprenticeship pipeline through which legal knowledge and judgment were transmitted has no platform equivalent. Gig professionals may develop task-level competence without acquiring the contextual judgment that competent legal practice requires. On the demand side, platformisation delivers efficiency at the cost of accountability diffusion, replacing the identifiable responsibility chain of firm-based practice with a distributed network in which no actor bears clear liability.

Verdict: Well-supported. The modularisation and platformisation mechanism is empirically observable and causally linked to AI capability. Both the efficiency gains and the accountability risks are real and require governance rather than assumption.

Law Firms Increasingly Rely on Contract-Based Legal Professionals for Research and Drafting Tasks When AI Tools Are Integrated into Workflows

AI integration does not eliminate the firm, it restructures it. When AI handles document review, contract abstraction, and regulatory research, the firm's internal headcount requirement for this category of work falls. The work is externalised: performed by smaller teams or external contractors using AI tools, rather than by cohorts of full-time associates. India's LPO sector illustrates this trajectory directly, tasks previously requiring large review teams are increasingly pre-processed by AI, with human workers handling exceptions and quality checks, simultaneously increasing throughput and reducing headcount requirements.

Exhibit E13



The roles channelled through gig arrangements confirm the pattern: regulatory compliance consulting, contract drafting for DPDP Act adherence, compliance audits, and KYC/AML paralegal support, each maps directly onto tasks previously performed by in-house junior lawyers.

For contract-based professionals on the supply side, this creates a growing market under degraded conditions. India's Code on Social Security creates a welfare category for gig workers, but the Wages Code, Industrial Relations Code, and Occupational Safety Code extend none of their protections to this workforce. The firm captures efficiency gains from AI-assisted contract labour; the worker bears the risk. For firms on the demand side, the arrangement is economically rational: contract engagement eliminates training, benefits, office infrastructure, and partnership-track obligations while maintaining access to the cognitive labour those structures previously provided.

Verdict: Supported. AI integration is restructuring the firm into a thinner, more networked structure, retaining strategic and client-facing functions while externalising supporting cognitive labour to a gig market operating without adequate regulatory protection.

AI-Driven Task Matching Reduces Transaction Costs Between Clients and Freelance Legal Professionals, Increasing Gig Adoption

Before AI-enabled platforms, engaging freelance legal expertise carried high information costs: assessing worker quality required professional network access or costly trial-and-error. Algorithmic matching eliminates this barrier. Platforms build comprehensive digital worker profiles, from location data, productivity metrics, acceptance rates, response latency, ratings, and sentiment analysis, and use these to match clients with workers whose past performance on similar tasks is algorithmically verified. Neither party requires an existing relationship. Transaction costs fall; gig adoption rises.

The merit on both sides is genuine. Smaller firms, SMEs, and individual clients access specialist expertise previously gatekept by elite professional networks. Legal professionals outside those networks gain market visibility through algorithmic matching their reputational capital alone would not have secured.

The demerit is a significant concentration of power. The platform controlling the matching algorithm controls the terms on which supply meets demand. Platforms have access to large amounts of information on worker actions, while workers lack equivalent information about the platform or its management, an asymmetry that allows platforms to unilaterally vary pay through surge pricing and adjust worker visibility without worker knowledge or consent. Data ownership compounds this: platforms assert ownership of performance data through terms of service, and India's DPDP Act, while recognising workers as data principals, does not address algorithmic transparency in labour contexts.

Verdict: Strongly supported on the core claim. The qualification is that transaction cost reduction benefits are asymmetrically distributed, platforms and clients benefit more than workers, and the data infrastructure enabling matching creates informational concentration risks the efficiency narrative does not address.

AI-Enabled Gig Platforms Increase the Likelihood of Non-Licensed Individuals Performing Tasks That May Constitute Unauthorised Legal Practice

This is the most acute risk hypothesis, and the structural mechanism generating the risk is clear. When platforms decompose legal work into modular tasks, clause identification, regulatory checklist completion, contract templating, document annotation, and assign them through algorithmic matching, the question of whether any individual task constitutes "legal advice" becomes genuinely difficult to answer. A data annotator classifying contract clauses is not, in isolation, giving legal advice. But the aggregate output of their work delivers a service clients reasonably understand as legal guidance. The platform positions itself as a technology intermediary; no licensed professional may have meaningfully supervised the process.

Bar Council of India rules formally restrict legal practice to enrolled advocates, and professional responsibility remains with the individual worker. But enforcement against distributed, platform-mediated arrangements is practically untested. Platforms disclaim responsibility as intermediaries; individual gig workers may lack licensure; and the client, often a lower-income litigant seeking affordable legal help, has no reliable way to assess the gap in accountability underlying the transaction.

Exhibit E14

The risk is not evenly distributed. Licensed professionals face competitive pressure from lower-cost unlicensed workers performing tasks at the regulatory boundary. Non-licensed workers risk inadvertently crossing into regulated practice without the institutional protection firm-based practice provides. Clients bear the consequences of inadequate or unauthorised advice with limited recourse.

The partial merit deserves acknowledgment: modularisation can legitimately separate tasks that do not require licensure from those that do. A well-designed platform with clear task classification and meaningful supervision of licensed-practice components could capture disaggregation's efficiency benefits without the unauthorised practice risk. Existing platforms have not consistently achieved this.

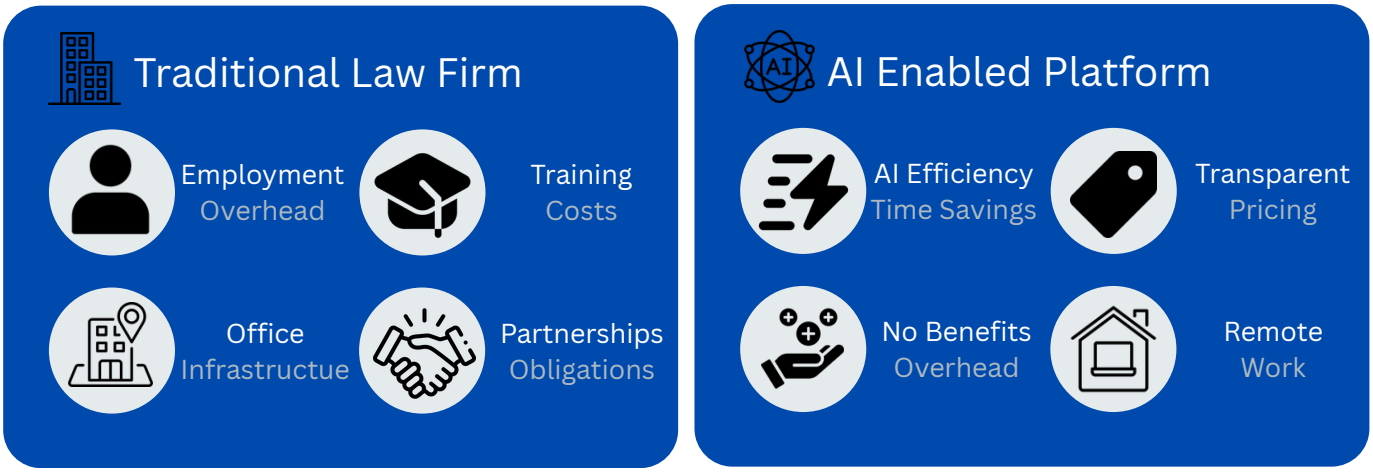
Verdict: Supported. The structural conditions for unauthorised practice are generated by disaggregation combined with absent classification frameworks and platform intermediary status. This is a governance failure that better regulatory design could partially address, but one that current Indian law has not meaningfully confronted.

Clients Using AI-Enabled Gig Legal Services Incur Lower Costs Compared to Traditional Law Firm Engagements

The cost compression is real and the mechanisms are well-evidenced. AI reduces the time required for legal tasks, research, contract review, document assembly, regulatory filing, that previously required junior associate hours. Platform competition drives transparent, competitive pricing that eliminates firm billing opacity. Structurally, gig workers classified as independent contractors are priced without employment overhead: no benefits, training costs, office infrastructure, or partnership obligations. The cost advantage over traditional firm engagement is therefore partly driven by genuine efficiency gains and partly by the externalisation of risk and cost onto workers.

For SMEs and smaller clients, the economic case is compelling: the compliance burden, 69,233 obligations, 6,600-plus annual filings, demands specialist expertise that cannot be justified as a full-time hire. Platform-based engagement delivers expertise when needed, at costs that scale with actual usage.

Exhibit E15



The supply-side demerit is structural: a substantial portion of the client cost savings are extracted not from efficiency but from transferring costs onto workers, their own insurance, equipment, training, and income volatility. India's Code on Social Security acknowledges this implicitly by requiring aggregator welfare contributions of 1–2% of platform turnover, but this remains a narrow correction to a much larger structural imbalance. The Wages Code and Industrial Relations Code leave the cost transfer largely intact.

The longer-term risk is quality. If the apprenticeship pipeline producing legal quality is hollowed out by gig-ification, current cost savings may generate quality deficits not priced into platform transactions. A cheaper contract review may also be a less reliable one, a trade-off clients currently lack the information to assess.

Verdict: Supported. Cost reductions are real but reflect a combination of genuine AI-driven efficiency and structural cost transfer onto workers. Regulatory frameworks extending employment protections to gig workers would compress the cost advantage, revealing how much of current pricing reflects efficiency rather than externalised risk.

Executive insights: AI in Legal & Compliance Gig Economy

Interviewee: Soumya Malhotra
College: Symbiosis Law School, Noida
Position: Indirect Tax, Taxes Consultancy Bureau

To understand how AI and digital platforms are shaping legal and compliance work in the gig economy, we conducted an in-depth interview with Soumya Malhotra, a practising GST litigation expert with experience across compliance, advisory, and dispute representation before tax authorities.

Q. Which parts of GST litigation and advisory can potentially be automated using AI?

Law is conservative by nature, so AI adoption is cautious. That said, AI is useful for clerical, research, and technical tasks, I've personally used it to ease advisory opinions and research. It saves time in a system known for being slow. The Supreme Court is reportedly building AI tools for case filing and judge allotment. However, blind reliance is dangerous, some advocates were penalized for citing AI-generated, non-existent cases. AI should be a supportive tool, used with caution.

Q. How are digital platforms changing how psychologists work?

Yes, in fact, independent practice has always been the norm in Indian law. Most practicing advocates work independently, especially at district and lower courts. Big-firm setups are reserved for high-value corporate matters (M&A, amalgamations) where confidentiality, team size, and risk demand institutional backing. GST consultants, in particular, very commonly work independently.

Q. How might AI adoption impact demand for legal professionals?

In the short term, impact on employment will be limited. Long term, larger firms may need fewer people as AI handles technical and mundane tasks. A key concern is internships, junior lawyers traditionally learn by doing these mechanical tasks. If firms use AI instead, hands-on learning opportunities will shrink, making internships more selective and competitive. Future professionals will need greater skill from the start.

Q. What are the major challenges in adopting AI within GST practice?

Currently, compliance work, monthly and annual return filing, data collation, takes significant human effort. AI is already streamlining this. The concern is that as businesses adopt AI-powered tools for compliance themselves, they may stop outsourcing to law firms or CA firms altogether, severely impacting employment in the compliance segment.

Section 5: Conclusions

Across quick commerce, mental health services, and legal work, a single structural pattern emerges: AI and platform intermediation are not transforming gig work so much as intensifying contradictions already embedded within it. The gig worker in India was never truly autonomous. What platforms have done is make that constrained autonomy legible, scalable, and profitable, while leaving the worker in the same institutional void they always occupied, now governed by an algorithm rather than a middleman.
Three conclusions follow from the evidence.

First, efficiency gains are real but unevenly distributed. Whether in Blinkit's dark stores, a BetterHelp session queue, or an AI-assisted contract review, platforms deliver measurable gains in speed, matching, and access. These are not trivial. In a country where 197 million people lack adequate mental health care and millions of SMEs cannot afford full-time legal counsel, algorithmic intermediation genuinely extends reach. The gains, however, accrue disproportionately to platforms and clients. Workers absorb the residual risk, income volatility, absence of benefits, and the cost of their own training and equipment, none of which is priced into platform transactions.

Second, the concept of "flexibility" requires systematic reassessment. Across every sector studied, the paper finds evidence of what might be called disguised autonomy: high-frequency micro-decisions that create the experience of choice while the structural costs of opting out make meaningful freedom largely illusory. Quick commerce delivery partners face suspension for rejection rates. Mental health practitioners on high-volume platforms manage caseloads that structurally preclude the relational continuity on which therapeutic outcomes depend. Legal gig workers develop task-level competence without the contextual judgement that platform arrangements cannot transmit. Flexibility, in each case, has become a mechanism for externalising risk rather than genuinely expanding worker agency.

Third, the governance gap is the central policy problem of the next decade. India's existing labour codes, the Wages Code, the Industrial Relations Code, and the Occupational Safety Code, extend no meaningful protections to platform workers. The Code on Social Security acknowledges the category but responds only with a narrow welfare contribution mechanism.

Meanwhile, AI systems are making decisions about task allocation, performance evaluation, and access to income that have direct and material consequences for millions of workers, without transparency requirements, contestability mechanisms, or accountability structures of any kind. In mental health and legal services, this governance absence carries additional risks: clinical quality and professional accountability are being diluted in ways that harm the most vulnerable users, the very populations the access argument invokes in platform justification.

India's gig economy did not emerge as disruption. It emerged as the digital continuation of a labour market that had always been structurally informal, precarious, and under-protected. Algorithmic management has made that continuity more efficient, more legible, and far more difficult to reform, because the opacity of the platform model makes the exercise of worker power, regulatory oversight, and client accountability considerably harder than it was in the human-intermediated economy it replaced.

The challenge is not to resist these platforms. Their contribution to access, matching efficiency, and economic inclusion is too significant to dismiss. The challenge is to govern them, to design regulatory frameworks that are sector-sensitive, that treat algorithmic transparency as a non-negotiable public interest, and that extend meaningful protections to workers without simply importing the assumptions of formal employment into a labour market that operates on fundamentally different terms.

The gig worker is managed but not protected, engaged but not belonging. Resolving that condition, not reversing platform adoption, but building the institutional architecture that makes it equitable, is the defining labour policy question of the decade ahead.

Acknowledgements

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The research and writing process was led by the core contributors of the paper: Deepannita Mukherjee, Kabir Upneja, Kanav Garg, Khyati Malik, Pahul Kaur, Harshita Sharma, Madhav Singhal, Kamya Gulyani, Princy Sanghvi, whose collective effort shaped the analytical direction, field insights, and conceptual framework of this study.

We are especially grateful to the professionals and practitioners who contributed their time, expertise, and on-ground perspectives through interviews and discussions. Their insights were invaluable in bridging the gap between theoretical analysis and operational realities across sectors including quick commerce, mental health services, and legal compliance.

Special thanks to Rajat Gupta from Blinkit for providing detailed operational insights into AI-driven quick commerce systems and the evolving dynamics of algorithmic management in delivery ecosystems. We also extend our gratitude to Pankhuri Sharma for sharing perspectives on platform mediated mental health services and the changing nature of psychological practice in digitally enabled environments. In addition, we thank Soumya Malhotra for her valuable inputs on AI adoption within legal and compliance services, and its implications for gigification in the legal sector.

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Finally, we would like to thank the leadership and members of Synergy and Next Horizon Consulting for supporting this initiative and encouraging independent, research-driven work on emerging economic and technological transformations.

This white paper was prepared independently for academic and research purposes. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and rigor, the interpretations and conclusions presented are those of the authors alone.

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20. AI changes how work is assigned, monitored or evaluated in this industry Wiley Online Library
21. AI-based demand forecasting significantly improves inventory accuracy and fulfillment rates, which are critical in maintaining the speed and reliability of quick commerce operations (McKinsey & Company, 2023).
22. AI-driven platforms can process thousands of variables simultaneously, enabling instant and scalable decision-making (World Economic Forum, 2021)
23. Fairwork India Report (2023) https://fair.work/en/fw/publications/fairwork-india-ratings-2023/
24. India currently hosts 2,500 dark stores across over 100 cities, and is projected to grow to nearly 7,500 by 2030, (The New Indian Express).

India’s AI-Gig Work Triple Imperative

Unbundle | Allocate | Orchestrate

UNBUNDLE

AI fragments services into standardized units

From employment to engagement

ALLOCATE

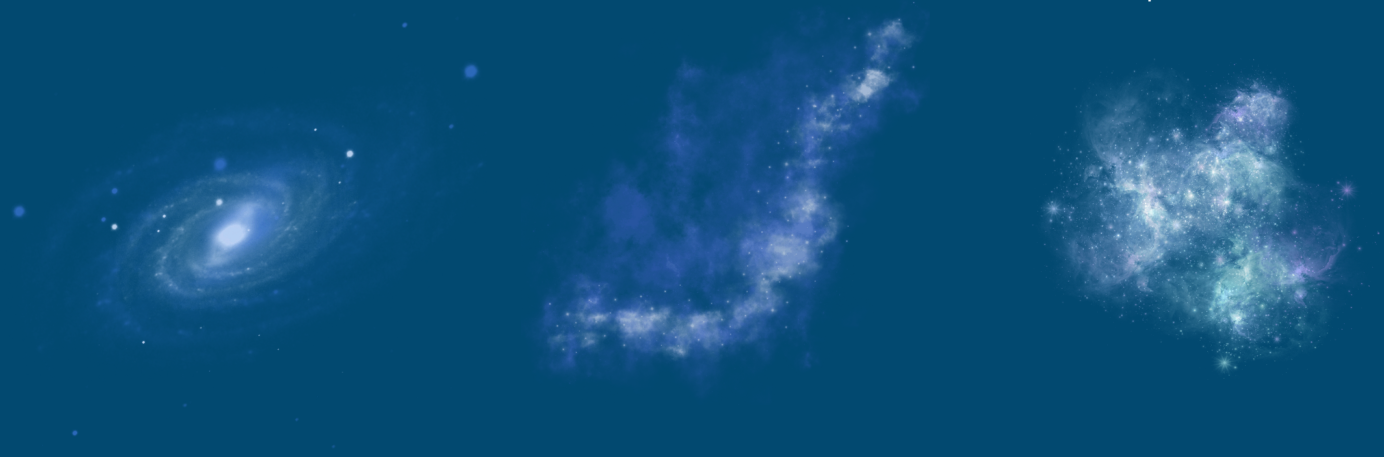
Platforms dynamically assign work across a distributed workforce

From firms to platforms

ORCHESTRATE

Systems ensure quality, trust, and continuous optimization

From credentials to capability signals



AI’s true impact will not come from what it can do in isolation, but from how intelligently we organize human effort, institutions, and platforms around its capabilities.

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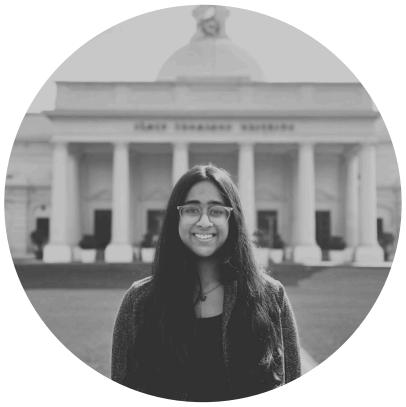

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