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NO CONTRACT, NO COVER: PRECARIOUS LABOUR, FRACTURED IDENTITY, AND THE SOCIAL SECURITY DEFICIT AMONG PLATFORM GIG WORKERS IN VISAKHAPATNAM CITY

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ABSTRACT

Background: *India's platform economy has grown faster than the labour policy framework designed to govern it. In Visakhapatnam, a city classified as the tenth largest economy in India as of 2025, tens of thousands of workers deliver food, transport passengers, and perform domestic services through aggregator platforms including Swiggy, Zomato, Ola, and Uber. They earn without employment contracts, contribute to no provident fund, and fall outside the coverage of every labour protection built for organised sector workers. This study examines who these workers are, what kind of life the gig economy actually produces for them, and how far recent national and state-level policy reforms have gone toward addressing their situation.*

Methods: *A qualitative-dominant mixed methods study was conducted in Visakhapatnam between January 2025 and March 2026. Structured interviews were administered to 90 platform gig workers across food delivery, ride-hailing, and domestic services sectors, 25 platform supervisors and aggregator representatives, and 15 labour officials and union representatives, totalling 130 respondents. Purposive and snowball sampling was used. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data; frequency distributions were used for closed-question responses.*

Results: *Sixty-seven per cent of respondents worked across two or more platforms simultaneously to achieve minimum subsistence income. Seventy-eight per cent had no accident insurance at the time of interview, and 84% had no access to any provident fund or pension contribution. Income instability was described by 73% of respondents as their primary source of stress, ahead of road safety and health costs. Self-identified occupational identity was absent among a majority of respondents, with most describing their work in negative terms relative to prior or imagined stable employment. Awareness of the Union Budget 2025 announcement on e-Shram registration for gig workers was low at 21%.*

Conclusions: *Gig work in Visakhapatnam produces a population that is economically active but socially invisible to the state's welfare architecture. The platform economy's growth has not been accompanied by commensurate expansion of social protection. Guy Standing's precariat framework applies with particular force to this setting: workers lack occupational identity, labour rights, and any stable narrative they can give their working lives. National policy reforms announced in 2025 represent a beginning, not a resolution.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

On any given evening in Visakhapatnam, hundreds of delivery workers navigate the city's traffic on two-wheelers, carrying food from restaurants in the Steel Plant corridor to apartments in Rushikonda, or ferrying passengers from the IT park at APIIC Health City to the railway station at Dwaraka Nagar. They are visible everywhere. They are, in every legal and administrative sense, nearly invisible.

India's gig and platform economy is large and growing faster than most comparable economies. NITI Aayog estimated 7.7 million gig workers in 2021 and projected this would rise to approximately 23.5 million by 2029-30 (NITI Aayog, 2022; Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025). These workers are embedded in the country's urban economic life: they deliver meals ordered on Swiggy, drive cars booked through Ola, install appliances through Urban Company, and clean homes listed on TaskEasy. Their labour enables a consumption economy that a large and growing urban middle class depends on. Yet the workers themselves have no employment contracts with the platforms they work for, are classified as independent contractors rather than employees, and are excluded from virtually all of the social security architecture that India built for organised sector workers over the past seven decades.

Visakhapatnam is a particularly useful place to examine this situation. As the tenth largest city economy in India as of 2025 (Wikipedia, 2025), the city combines a large industrial base anchored by Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL), the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant, a growing IT and services sector at Rushikonda and APIIC, a major port, and a rapidly expanding food delivery and ride-hailing market. Its workforce includes both formally employed industrial workers with full labour protections and a growing population of platform workers with none. The contrast between these two sections of the city's working population, operating within two kilometres of each other in some neighbourhoods, makes Visakhapatnam a natural site for sociological inquiry into the faultlines of contemporary Indian labour.

The policy context shifted during the period of this study. The Union Budget 2025-26 announced the registration of online platform workers on the e-Shram portal and their inclusion under Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY health coverage (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025). Karnataka promulgated the Platform-based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Ordinance in 2025, levying a welfare cess on aggregator platforms (Deccan Herald, 2025). Telangana moved toward a comparable bill. These are real developments. Whether they translate into material change for gig workers in cities like Visakhapatnam is the question this study, from the ground up, attempts to answer.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 states the objectives and research questions. Section 4 describes the methodology. Section 5 profiles the study area. Section 6 presents findings across five thematic categories. Section 7 discusses the findings through theoretical frameworks. Section 8 concludes with policy analysis and recommendations.

Research Gap

No Scopus-indexed sociological study has examined gig worker precarity specifically in Visakhapatnam. Existing national-level literature on India's platform economy (Nair, 2022; Pankaj, 2024) does not disaggregate by city or examine the specific configuration of a rapidly industrialising port-and-IT city where formal and informal sectors coexist at close range.

This study addresses that gap by combining city-specific field data with theoretical frameworks from labour sociology, providing both a grounded local account and a contribution to the broader comparative literature on precarious work in Indian cities.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 The Platform Economy and the Remaking of Labour in India

The expansion of platform-based work in India has proceeded through a particular logic. Platforms classify workers as service providers or partners rather than employees, which removes the platform's obligation to provide minimum wages, paid leave, accident coverage, provident fund contributions, or maternity benefits. This classification is not accidental. It is the structural mechanism through which platform companies pass the costs and risks of employment onto individual workers while retaining the revenue from their labour (Nair, 2022; Pankaj, 2024).

The Indian legal framework was slow to respond to this structure. The Code on Social Security, 2020, which consolidated nine central labour laws, was the first statutory instrument to explicitly define gig and platform workers and include them within the scope of potential welfare measures. The 2024 draft notifications under the Code proposed a welfare fund mechanism with employer contribution obligations. As of mid-2026, these notifications had not yet been fully operationalised at the national level, though state-level initiatives in Rajasthan and Karnataka had moved faster (Code on Social Security, 2020; IJLLR, 2026).

The pace of worker growth has outrun the pace of policy implementation. Swiggy alone reported over 4.5 lakh active delivery partners per month as of June 2024; Zomato's delivery network exceeded 3.5 lakh in the same period (YourStory, 2025). Workers frequently operate across multiple platforms simultaneously, a practice called moonlighting in the policy literature, which creates particular challenges for any system of worker registration or welfare fund contribution that assumes a stable single-employer relationship (YourStory, 2025).

2.2 The Precariat: Standing's Framework and Its Applicability in India

Guy Standing's conceptualisation of the precariat, developed across several books from 2011 onward, offers the most systematic theoretical account of what is distinctive about this form of labour (Standing, 2011, 2014). Standing argues that the precariat is not simply poor or insecure. Its defining characteristic is the absence of occupational identity. Where the proletariat could construct a narrative of its working life around a trade, a union, a set of accumulated rights and expectations, the precariat cannot. Its members move between jobs, sectors, and platforms without accumulating the relational or institutional capital that stable employment produces. They have no occupational story to tell about themselves (Standing, 2014).

Standing's framework has been applied to Indian gig workers with productive results (Nair, 2022; Pankaj, 2024). Nair's (2022) study of ride-hailing workers found that the promise of platform work as upward mobility gave way, in practice, to a daily experience of downward flexibility: lower rates, higher targets, deteriorating equipment, and platform penalties that could wipe out a week's earnings. Pankaj (2024) documented systematic exploitation and deliberate exclusion from social security across food delivery, logistics, and domestic service platforms.

Two theoretical supplements to Standing's framework are used in this study. Erving Goffman's concept of stigma is applied to the management of occupational identity among workers who describe their gig work as temporary or as something other than their real work. The stigma of platform work, in contexts where a stable job in RINL or the government sector remains the cultural benchmark for respectable employment, is a social fact with psychological consequences (Goffman, 1963). Karl Marx's concept of the reserve army of labour provides the political economy dimension: the structural function of a large pool of easily disposable workers in suppressing wages and disciplining the employed workforce (Marx, 1867/1990).

2.3 Social Security and the Limits of Reform

The Union Budget 2025-26 announced the registration of online platform workers on the e-Shram portal and proposed their inclusion under AB-PMJAY health coverage. As of August 2025, over 30.98 crore unorganised workers had registered on the e-Shram portal, including approximately 3.37 lakh platform and gig workers (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025). The gap between total gig workforce (estimated at 1 crore in 2024-25 and rising) and e-Shram platform registrations (3.37 lakh) indicates the registration challenge.

State-level initiatives have moved with more speed but variable coverage. Rajasthan's 2023 Gig Workers Act proposed a welfare fund financed by a 1-2% transaction cess. Karnataka's 2025 Ordinance extended the model to Swiggy, Zomato, Ola, and Uber, with a 1-5% cess per transaction (Deccan Herald, 2025). Andhra Pradesh had, at the time of data collection, no comparable state-level gig worker legislation, placing it behind peer states in the southern region.

3. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Objectives

1. To document the socioeconomic profile and working conditions of platform gig workers in Visakhapatnam's food delivery, ride-hailing, and domestic services sectors.
2. To examine the social security deficit experienced by gig workers, with reference to accident insurance, provident fund access, health coverage, and income stability.
3. To analyse how platform work affects occupational identity, self-perception, and social standing in a city where formal sector employment remains the cultural norm.
4. To assess awareness and utilisation of existing government schemes among gig workers, including e-Shram registration and the Union Budget 2025 announcements.
5. To evaluate the adequacy of current national and state policy responses against the documented conditions of gig workers in Visakhapatnam.

3.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by four research questions. Who are the platform gig workers in Visakhapatnam: what are their demographic characteristics, prior employment histories, and reasons for entering platform work? What social security protections, if any, do they actually have access to, and how does this map against their actual exposure to risk? How do workers describe the effect of platform work on their sense of occupational identity

and social standing? And what do workers know about the policy reforms announced in 2025, and how much difference, in their assessment, have these reforms made?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative-dominant mixed methods design. The choice reflects the nature of the research problem: understanding precarity requires attending to how workers describe and experience their situation, not only to the frequency distributions of their responses. Qualitative data from open-ended interview questions and field notes formed the primary evidential base; frequency counts from closed questions gave scale and proportion to the qualitative findings. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data and descriptive distributions for quantitative data. Findings were triangulated across the three respondent groups.

4.2 Respondents and Sampling

Table 1: Sample Composition

Respondent Group	Sub-Category	n	Location / Method
Platform Gig Workers (Schedule A)	Food delivery workers (Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit)	40	Steel Town, MVP Colony, Gajuwaka, Rushikonda; Purposive + Snowball
Platform Gig Workers (Schedule A)	Ride-hailing drivers (Ola, Uber, auto-platform)	30	City-wide pickup points, railway station, airport vicinity; Purposive
Platform Gig Workers (Schedule A)	Domestic and home services workers (Urban Company, local apps)	20	Madhurawada, Seethammadhara, Bheemunipatnam; Snowball
Platform Supervisors / Aggregator Staff (Schedule B)	Delivery hub managers, fleet supervisors	25	Swiggy/Zomato dark stores, Ola fleet offices; Institutional gatekeeping
Labour Officials / Union Representatives (Schedule C)	APGWC officials, unorganised sector union reps, ASHA-equivalent e-Shram facilitators	15	District Labour Office, CITU Visakhapatnam unit; Purposive
TOTAL		130	Visakhapatnam city (GVMC area)

Source: Primary fieldwork, 2025-2026

4.3 Data Collection

Three structured interview schedules were designed. Schedule A for gig workers contained 32 questions covering socioeconomic background, platform work history, income stability, accident and health experiences, social security access, occupational identity, and awareness of recent policy changes. Questions on occupational identity were drawn from Standing's (2011) theoretical criteria for precariat membership and adapted to the Indian urban context. Schedule B for platform supervisors covered 18 questions on workforce management, attrition, safety incidents, and company-level social security contributions. Schedule C for labour officials covered 14 questions on registration drives, scheme awareness, and implementation of the Code on Social Security 2020. Interviews were conducted in Telugu for gig workers and in English or Telugu for supervisors and officials. Fieldwork ran from January 2025 to March 2026.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent prior to interview. Gig workers were approached individually at rest stops, dark store waiting areas, and fuel stations, not while actively working, to avoid any disruption to their earnings. Anonymity was assured throughout; respondents are identified by codes (e.g., GW-12 for gig worker 12; PS-04 for platform supervisor 04). No identifying information was shared with aggregator companies. The study protocol received approval from the Doctoral Research Committee, Department of Sociology, Andhra University.

5. STUDY AREA: VISAKHAPATNAM'S LABOUR ECONOMY

Visakhapatnam city in 2025 is an economy in visible transition. The RINL Steel Plant at Ukkunagaram, with approximately 17,800 direct employees, anchors a formal industrial working class that lives in the township sectors of Ukkunagaram, Steel Township, and adjoining colonies. These workers have union representation, provident fund accounts, on-site hospitals, and housing. They represent one version of what it means to work in this city.

Two kilometres away, in the restaurant rows of MVP Colony or the delivery dark stores of Gajuwaka, a completely different kind of work organises itself each morning. Delivery workers collect their insulated bags, activate their apps, and begin a day measured in completed orders, kilometres ridden, and customer ratings accumulated on platforms whose algorithm determines whether they earn enough to cover fuel costs, equipment wear, and their household's daily expenses. No contract governs this relationship. No supervisor is accountable for their safety. And no retirement fund accumulates from their labour.

The city's economic geography matters for understanding the gig workforce. The expansion of the IT and ITES sector at Rushikonda and the APIIC Health City has created a dense middle-class residential and consumption zone in the northern part of the city. This zone generates high food delivery and ride-hailing demand. The industrial and port areas in the southern and western sections generate different kinds of platform demand: logistics and last-mile delivery services. Gig workers move between these zones constantly, and most do not live in either of them. They live in Steel Township workers' colonies, in Gajuwaka, in Bheemunipatnam, and in adjacent peri-urban areas, commuting into the consumption zones to work.

6. FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of interview data produced five major themes. These are presented with supporting quantitative data from closed questions.

6.1 Who the Workers Are: Profile and Entry Pathways

The 90 gig worker respondents were overwhelmingly male (83%), with a median age of 28 years. Fourteen per cent were women, all in the domestic and home services category. Sixty-one per cent had completed secondary schooling (Class 10 or 12); 22% held undergraduate degrees. The presence of graduates in the delivery worker category was a consistent finding: 19 of the 40 food delivery respondents had completed some college education, and 11 held full undergraduate degrees. This is a point worth dwelling on. These are not workers who lacked educational options. Several described degrees in commerce, arts, or technical certification. What they lacked was a formal sector labour market willing to absorb them at wages they could live on.

Table 2: Socioeconomic and Work Profile of Gig Worker Respondents (n=90)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	75	83%
	Female	15	17%
Age	Below 25 years	28	31%
	25-35 years	47	52%
	Above 35 years	15	17%
Education	Below Class 10	8	9%
	Class 10 or 12 pass	55	61%
	Undergraduate degree	22	24%
	Postgraduate degree	5	6%
Platform type (primary)	Food delivery (Swiggy/Zomato/Blinkit)	40	44%
	Ride-hailing (Ola/Uber/auto)	30	33%
	Home services (Urban Company/local)	20	22%
Multi-platform work	Works on 2 or more platforms simultaneously	60	67%

Prior employment	Prior formal sector job (RINL/govt/private firm)	18	20%
	Prior informal sector (shop, construction, factory contract)	44	49%
	No prior employment / first job	28	31%
Residence	Steel Township / Ukkunagaram colony	21	23%
	Gajuwaka / industrial areas	33	37%
	Bheemunipatnam / peri-urban	18	20%
	Other GVMC areas	18	20%

Source: Primary fieldwork, Schedule A interviews, 2025-2026

Entry into platform work followed two broad pathways. The first was economic pressure following the loss or failure to obtain formal employment. Eighteen respondents had previously worked in the formal sector and had either been retrenched, left low-paying formal jobs, or lost work during business closures. GW-23, a commerce graduate who had worked briefly as a clerical assistant at a private firm in the Steel Plant area, described the calculation plainly: 'The office paid Rs. 8,000 a month fixed. On Swiggy on a good day I make Rs. 800 to Rs. 1,000. That is more even without a salary slip.' The second entry pathway was convenience and flexibility, particularly cited by younger respondents and those with caregiving responsibilities at home. But this framing of flexibility proved, on closer examination, to be a rationalisation of constrained choice rather than a genuine preference for non-standard work.

6.2 The Social Security Deficit: Documented Absence

The findings on social security coverage were stark. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents had no accident insurance of any kind at the time of interview. This is despite the fact that platform work is physically dangerous: food delivery on two-wheelers in Visakhapatnam's traffic, ride-hailing in night hours, and home appliance installation work all carry regular injury risk. Seventeen respondents had been involved in road accidents during their platform work. Of these, 14 had paid for their treatment entirely out of pocket. Three had partial coverage from family health insurance schemes not connected to their platform work.

Table 3: Social Security Coverage Among Gig Worker Respondents (n=90)

Social Security Indicator	Yes	No	Don't Know
Has active accident insurance	20 (22%)	70 (78%)	0
Has provident fund / pension contribution	14 (16%)	76 (84%)	0
Registered on e-Shram portal	22 (24%)	55 (61%)	13 (14%)
Aware of Union Budget 2025 gig worker announcement	19 (21%)	71 (79%)	0
Received any platform-provided welfare benefit (last 12 months)	18 (20%)	72 (80%)	0
Has health insurance of any kind	31 (34%)	59 (66%)	0
Knows about NTR Vaidyaseva Scheme	47 (52%)	43 (48%)	0
Enrolled in NTR Vaidyaseva (if aware)	23 (49% of aware)	24 (51% of aware)	0

Source: Primary fieldwork, Schedule A interviews, 2025-2026

The provident fund situation was particularly revealing. Sixteen per cent of respondents had any provident fund or pension contribution being made on their behalf. In every case, this contribution was from a previous formal sector job, not from current platform work. No aggregator platform was making PF contributions for its gig workforce in Visakhapatnam. The workers understood this perfectly. GW-41, a 34-year-old man who had

worked for RINL as a contract worker before joining Ola, described the difference: 'In the plant, even contract work had PF. Rs. 200 went in every month. Now nothing goes in. When I am too old to drive, there is nothing.'
Multi-platform working, reported by 67% of respondents, was not a lifestyle choice. It was an income necessity. The arithmetic was repeated by respondent after respondent: single-platform earnings, after fuel, mobile data, vehicle maintenance, and platform deductions, rarely cleared Rs. 15,000 per month. By working across two platforms, adding morning Blinkit grocery deliveries to evening Swiggy food deliveries, workers could push monthly earnings to Rs. 18,000 to Rs. 22,000. This was above subsistence but below any reasonable account of livelihood security for a household in a city where a two-room rental in Gajuwaka costs Rs. 4,000 to Rs. 6,000 per month.

6.3 Income Instability as a Structural Condition

Respondents were asked to rank their primary sources of stress from a provided list that included income instability, road safety, health costs, platform penalties, customer ratings, and family strain. Seventy-three per cent ranked income instability first. This is not the same as low income. Workers with relatively high monthly earnings, Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 25,000 in good months, still ranked income instability as their primary stress because that earning was not guaranteed from week to week.

Table 4: Income Data and Instability Indicators

Income Variable	Finding
Estimated monthly earnings: below Rs. 12,000	17 respondents (19%)
Estimated monthly earnings: Rs. 12,000 to Rs. 18,000	38 respondents (42%)
Estimated monthly earnings: Rs. 18,000 to Rs. 25,000	29 respondents (32%)
Estimated monthly earnings: above Rs. 25,000	6 respondents (7%)
Reported more than 3 months of earnings falling below minimum subsistence in past year	54 respondents (60%)
Income instability ranked as primary source of stress	66 respondents (73%)
Reported platform penalty deductions in past month	49 respondents (54%)
Reported algorithmic de-prioritisation (fewer orders assigned) in past 3 months	38 respondents (42%)
Had borrowed money to meet household expenses in past 6 months	61 respondents (68%)

Source: Primary fieldwork, Schedule A interviews, 2025-2026

The platform penalty system deserves specific attention. Fifty-four per cent of respondents reported having had penalty deductions from their platform earnings in the previous month. Penalties were applied for order cancellations, late deliveries, customer rating drops, and periods of inactivity. In most cases, workers had no formal mechanism to contest these deductions. GW-07, a food delivery worker in the MVP Colony zone, described receiving a penalty deduction of Rs. 1,200 for cancellations on a day he had been ill: 'I was sick and cancelled four orders. They took Rs. 1,200 from my payout. There is no form to fill, nobody to call. The app just tells you the amount is deducted.'
Sixty-eight per cent of respondents had borrowed money in the past six months to meet household expenses. Moneylenders, family networks, and local microfinance groups were the three most common sources. None had access to any formal institutional credit mechanism tied to their platform earnings, because those earnings are not recognised as formal income for loan assessment purposes.

6.4 Fractured Occupational Identity: The Precariat in Practice

Standing's (2011, 2014) argument that the precariat's defining feature is the absence of occupational identity is supported strongly by the interview data from Visakhapatnam. When asked what they did for a living, only 31% of gig worker respondents identified themselves using their current platform role as the primary description. Fifty-four per cent used a framing that qualified or distanced from the current work: 'I am doing delivery for now', 'currently driving for Ola', 'just doing this until something better comes'. Fifteen per cent gave their educational qualification or a previous job title as their answer before mentioning platform work at all.

Table 5: Occupational Identity Indicators Among Gig Worker Respondents (n=90)

Identity Indicator	n	%
Identifies primarily as a delivery worker / driver / platform worker	28	31%
Identifies current work as temporary or transitional	49	54%
Gave educational qualification or prior job as primary self-description	13	14%
Describes platform work as their 'real' work	22	24%
Reports feeling looked down upon by family/community for platform work	58	64%
Reports platform work affects self-confidence or self-esteem negatively	51	57%
Would leave platform work immediately if formal sector offer received	79	88%
Has recommended platform work to a younger family member or friend	11	12%

Source: Primary fieldwork, Schedule A interviews, 2025-2026

Sixty-four per cent reported feeling looked down upon by family or community members because of their platform work. This finding is specific to Visakhapatnam's social context, where the RINL Steel Plant and its associated formal employment have shaped a dominant model of respectable working-class identity across multiple generations. A delivery rider in this context is not simply doing a different kind of job; he is doing a job that his neighbours' fathers would not have done, in a city where the definition of decent work was formed in a steel plant's time-office and union hall.

GW-52, a 26-year-old with a B.Com degree who had been doing food delivery for two years, described this with unusual directness: 'My father worked in RINL for 30 years. He had a badge, a uniform, a pension. When I park my bike outside the house with the delivery bag, I feel it. The neighbours know. The aunties know. My father does not say anything but I know he thinks this is not what he worked for.'

Goffman's stigma framework maps precisely onto this situation. The delivery bag, the app-assigned rider jacket, and the two-wheeler parked outside a residential colony are discrediting symbols in a social environment that associates visible platform work with failed aspiration. Workers develop management strategies: removing the delivery bag before entering their colony, not mentioning their platform work in matrimonial contexts, describing their occupation to acquaintances as 'self-employed' or 'logistics work'.

6.5 Policy Awareness and the Ground Reality of Recent Reforms

Awareness of the Union Budget 2025-26 announcement on e-Shram registration and AB-PMJAY inclusion for gig workers was low. Only 21% of respondents had heard of this announcement, and of these, only eight had taken any action toward registration. The primary reason given for non-registration was procedural uncertainty: workers knew that registration existed as a concept but did not know how to complete it, who to approach, or what benefits it would actually confer.

Table 6: Policy Awareness and Reform Uptake Among Gig Worker Respondents (n=90)

Policy Indicator	n	%
Aware of Union Budget 2025 gig worker e-Shram announcement	19	21%
Has registered on e-Shram portal (any time)	22	24%
Registered specifically because of 2025 budget announcement	8	9%
Aware of Karnataka/Rajasthan gig worker welfare legislation	7	8%

Aware that Andhra Pradesh has no comparable state-level gig law	12	13%
Believes government policy will materially improve their situation in next 2 years	14	16%
Believes platforms will ever voluntarily provide full social security	6	7%
Knows about NTR Vaidyaseva and is enrolled	23	26%
Aware of AB-PMJAY coverage extension to gig workers (Budget 2025)	9	10%

Source: Primary fieldwork, Schedule A interviews, 2025-2026

The finding that only 16% of respondents believed government policy would materially improve their situation within two years is perhaps the most sobering data point in this study. Workers were not cynical about government in the abstract. Several cited NTR Vaidyaseva and other welfare schemes positively. But when asked about gig-specific policy, the dominant response was scepticism grounded in experience. PS-08, a delivery hub manager who had previously been a gig worker himself, put it bluntly from the platform side: 'The government talks about registration and welfare. But unless someone forces Swiggy to pay PF, registration is just a number in a database.'

Labour officials and union representatives (n=15) gave a consistent assessment: the Code on Social Security 2020 was a framework without a delivery mechanism. The e-Shram portal worked for workers who approached it actively, but there was no systematic outreach infrastructure in Visakhapatnam that was actively registering gig workers. The District Labour Office had no dedicated gig economy desk. The CITU union representative interviewed for this study acknowledged that traditional union organising models did not fit platform workers, who had no fixed workplace and no employer relationship to organise around.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings from Visakhapatnam describe a population that is economically functional and socially marginalised simultaneously. Gig workers are not unemployed. They are not absent from the economy. They are, in fact, essential to a substantial portion of urban economic life. And yet the social contract that India built for its working population, through PF, ESIC, trade union rights, minimum wage enforcement, and maternity protections, simply does not apply to them. They earn without accumulating. They work without belonging.

Standing's precariat framework holds well against the Visakhapatnam data. The absence of occupational identity (54% describe their work as temporary), the lack of labour rights (78% without accident insurance, 84% without PF), the reliance on informal borrowing (68% have borrowed in the past six months), and the exposure to market fluctuations without institutional buffering (73% cite income instability as primary stress) all align with Standing's theoretical criteria. What the Visakhapatnam data adds is a specific cultural dimension: in a city shaped by the RINL Steel Plant's model of respectable formal employment, gig work carries a social stigma that deepens the precariat experience beyond its economic dimensions.

The reserve army of labour argument (Marx, 1867/1990) applies to the platform economy's structural function with particular clarity. The existence of a large, easily enrolled pool of gig workers, who can be activated or deactivated by algorithmic assignment without contractual liability, gives platforms a labour discipline tool that formal employers do not have. Workers who push for better rates or complain about penalties find themselves algorithmically de-prioritised, a process 42% of respondents had experienced. This is not an abuse of the system. It is how the system was designed.

The policy reform picture is mixed, and the mixture matters. The Union Budget 2025 announcement and the Karnataka Ordinance represent genuine state recognition that gig workers exist as a category requiring attention. But recognition and protection are different things. Registration on e-Shram gives a worker a database entry. It does not give them accident compensation when they are hit on the road in Gajuwaka, a provident fund contribution when they complete their hundredth delivery, or paid leave when their child is ill. The distance between the announcement and the material change is considerable.

Andhra Pradesh's absence from the state-level legislative map is a specific policy failure worth naming. Karnataka passed an ordinance. Rajasthan passed a law. Telangana moved toward legislation. Andhra Pradesh, with one of the fastest-growing urban platform economies in peninsular India, had no comparable instrument at the time of data collection. The gig workers in Visakhapatnam who compare their situation to their counterparts in Karnataka are not wrong to note the difference.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Platform gig work in Visakhapatnam is not a transitional phase in a city moving from informal to formal labour. It is a structural feature of how Indian urban economies have been organised in the post-2015 period, and it is not going to dissolve on its own. The workforce in this sector will grow to 23.5 million nationally by 2029-30. In cities like Visakhapatnam, where the formal sector cannot absorb even the educated portion of the labour market, platform work will remain the economic home of a large and growing working population. What kind of social contract governs that home is a political question, not a market question.

The study's findings support four specific recommendations. First, Andhra Pradesh should enact state-level gig worker welfare legislation modelled on Karnataka's 2025 Ordinance, with a welfare cess levied on aggregator platforms operating in the state. The cess revenue should fund accident insurance, health coverage under NTR Vaidyaseva, and a contributory provident fund for registered gig workers. Second, the District Labour Office in Visakhapatnam should establish a dedicated gig economy desk with active e-Shram registration drives at delivery dark stores, ride-hailing pickup points, and fuel stations where platform workers congregate. Passive portal registration will not work for a workforce that is constantly mobile and informally networked. Third, aggregator companies operating in Visakhapatnam should be required to disclose monthly workforce data to the District Labour Office, including active worker counts, accident records, and any in-house welfare contributions. Without data, enforcement is impossible. Fourth, the platform penalty system should be subject to a minimum dispute resolution mechanism, one that does not require workers to navigate a corporate grievance structure through an app. Even a simple Ward Welfare Secretary-level mediation process would represent a meaningful protection for workers who currently have no recourse.

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