



Urban commons shape the lives of India’s gig workers

- As heat waves in cities grow more frequent and intense, workers who spend hours outdoors without breaks are on the frontlines of this crisis.
- India’s cities must start treating urban commons as critical infrastructure to support the livelihoods and the dignity of workers in the gig and platform economy.
- Supporting the gig economy would mean embedding gig worker perspectives in zoning, mobility planning, and climate action plans.
- The views in the commentary are that of the author.

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Cities across India are bracing for an intense summer, with forecasts warning of prolonged heat waves and above-normal temperatures. Yet, even as advisories urge people to stay indoors, millions of outdoor workers simply cannot. Among them is Anita, a delivery worker moving from one neighbourhood to another, bringing food to others while unsure where she’ll eat her own lunch or if she’ll get the chance to sit down at all. For many gig workers, the city is their workplace and its commons shape their everyday lives.

Gig workers engage in livelihoods outside the traditional employer-employee arrangement, and a subset of them, called platform workers, perform tasks based on online software apps or digital platforms. While digital platforms dictate their livelihoods, it is places like street corners, public parks, and local markets that function as their informal workplaces. These are spaces where they pause, recover, and meet basic needs. The International Labour Organisation underscores that appropriate rest facilities are crucial for workday breaks, and for gig workers on the move, these must be available across the city. Yet, as fewer cities acknowledge this reality, rapid urbanisation, privatisation, and climate change are eroding these very commons that make dignified work possible.

By 2029-30, India’s gig economy will expand to 23.5 million workers, driven by delivery riders, ride-hailing drivers, and freelance professionals at its core. Their work is mobile, fragmented and deeply reliant on the city itself. As gig work grows in scale and visibility, its relationship with the physical city becomes more apparent. India’s cities must start treating urban commons as critical infrastructure to support the livelihoods and the dignity of workers in the gig and platform economy.

Urban commons: scaffolding of the gig economy

The platform economy has altered how services are delivered and disrupted the traditional contours of the workplace. Gig workers operate in constant transition, from restaurant to doorstep, from task to task. In this in-between space, urban commons provide the informal scaffolding of work. The curb becomes a lunchroom. A shaded wall becomes a waiting zone. A tea stall in the street corner becomes a place to ask for water, to charge a phone or to simply catch a breath.

As cities densify and public land gets repurposed, gig workers find themselves with fewer places to pause between jobs. In formal offices, lounges, pantries and restrooms are widely recognised as essential for worker wellbeing. For gig workers however, their public space equivalents are rarely acknowledged, let alone planned for. What this reveals is not simply a planning gap, but a deeper disconnect between economic systems and physical space.

Gig platforms structure work through algorithms, ratings, and incentives. But they externalise the responsibility for rest, recovery, and safety onto the worker. A city that cannot provide a clean toilet or a safe spot to rest for those who keep its services running is failing a large segment of its workforce. Even where commons exist, access is unequal. Wealthier neigh-



bourhoods tend to have public seating, shade, tree-lined pavements while in lower-income or highly commercialized areas, commons are often missing entirely. This spatial inequality raises a profound question: Who gets to use these spaces without being policed or pushed out?

Heat exposure and the right to rest

Gig worker Lalit knows the exact stretch of footpath that catches shade at noon. It’s his waiting spot

Climate extremes do not just disrupt the livelihood of gig workers; they threaten their health, dignity, and survival.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has warned this summer will be hotter than usual, with gig workers exposed to all the elements. In a survey conducted by the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union (TGPWU) and HeatWatch, around 52% of surveyed workers reported experiencing heat exhaustion and heat stroke from working over eight hours outdoors each day. However, the platform economy today offers little to no social and medical protection or insurance.

These challenges deepen for women gig workers who face limited access to safe and clean toilets, greater exposure to harassment in public spaces, and additional care responsibilities. A female rider may have to travel out of her way to find a facility, or restrict her water intake to avoid using unsanitary bathrooms, risking dehydration. What begins as an infrastructure gap quickly becomes a serious occupational safety hazard under climate extremes and, ultimately, a barrier to participation in the workforce.

Towards a commons-based infrastructure

To support this growing segment of urban workers, we must reimagine public spaces through attention to the shared elements of the city — the commons. A bench offers relief for aching feet; a tree shields against the sun; a public toilet is a necessity, not a convenience. These are the enabling conditions of work for those whose livelihoods depend on navigating the city by the hour.

There are examples emerging. In 2023, Zomato piloted “Rest Points”, offering toilets, drinking water, seating, and phone charging to delivery workers. More recently, cities like Chennai and Bengaluru are setting up rest areas. These are welcome efforts, but isolated initiatives cannot replace systemic planning.

Supporting the platform economy means building toilets, shaded rest areas and drinking water stations into city budgets and design. It would mean embedding gig worker perspectives in zoning, mobility planning, and climate action plans. It also means recognising that the responsibility to sustain labour does not lie with the individual alone. Indian cities must reclaim and redesign urban commons as inclusive, climate-resilient micro-infrastructure. In doing so, cities not only support a workforce in motion but also create inclusive, walkable spaces that serve diverse urban communities.

Even as work has dispersed across streets and networks, the systems that support it have not kept pace. In this new urban landscape, the commons offer a way to restore balance. They are where care and economy meet, where individual hustle is supported by collective resources. For the gig economy to be socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable, it must be supported by spaces of rest, care, and recovery. By protecting and investing in these commons, and making them cooler, safer, and accessible, India’s cities can ensure that the people who deliver convenience to our doorsteps are not themselves left out. If the gig economy is here to stay, so too must the commons that support its workforce.