

# PEDALLING AGAINST THE ODDS: UNRAVELLING THE STORY OF FOOD DELIVERY RIDERS

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## Abstract

*Lately, the gig economy's popularity has increased as a viable source of livelihood, mainly among youths. This study investigates the socio-demographic background and working conditions of the food delivery riders, who are essential to the gig economy. We try to analyse the degree to which the gig economy has been able to satisfy the aspirations of gig workers through a primary survey conducted amongst food delivery riders in Delhi. The results reveal that most workers would want to opt out of delivery services if given an option. However, some factors might constrain them from making an independent choice.*

JEL Classification: J10, J41, J46, J60

Keywords: : Gig Economy; Food Delivery Riders; Labour Mobility; Working Conditions; Push and Pull Factors.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The first-of-its-kind report by NITI Aayog (India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy: Perspectives and Recommendations on Future Work, 2022) estimated that in 2020, 7.7 million workers were engaged in the gig economy. Accordingly, the gig workforce is expected to broaden to 23.5 million by 2029-30. The report defines gig workers as "those engaged in livelihoods outside the traditional employer-employee arrangement." These workers are categorised as a platform and non-platform workers. Platform workers are those who work via a digital platform. In contrast, non-platform workers are usually casual workers without any platform of representation. This paper is concerned with the location-based platform workers,

The popularity of food delivery companies is explicitly focusing on the food delivery riders. In keeping with the IMARC<sup>1</sup> group, India's food delivery market size is expected to reach US\$ 118.2 billion by 2028 displaying a compound annual growth rate of 27.8% between 2023 and 2028. With such meteoric growth, food delivery riders are expected to lead to the emergence of a new major occupational group. Thus, making it necessary to dig deeper into this stratum.

The popularity of food delivery companies is attributed to the changing lifestyle of people, specifically in the metro cities. Changes in eating habits and rising demand for ready-to-eat meals due to boisterous schedules and escalating disposable income also have a role to play. As far as the workforce involved, i.e., delivery riders are concerned, the flexibility and malleable terms of service, catalysed by the pandemic, have lured them towards the industry to earn their livelihood. With the ever-increasing labour supply in the food delivery service, there has also been a rising concern among the workers about the challenges offered by the service. Our survey found that a colossal chunk of delivery riders want to migrate either out of the gig economy or to some other sector within the gig economy. While it may be easy for some, others do not enjoy the same flexibility. Evaluation of different aspects of job profile and mobility factors concerned with these delivery riders form the essence of this paper.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence and growth of platform-based gig economy workers have steered a transformation in the overall structure of the work landscape. The importance of comprehending the evolving role of

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this group of workers and the broad spectrum surrounding their work environment has been recognised globally. This is evident because we could witness voluminous literature focusing on different aspects of gig workers, which are unfolded subsequently.

The first strand of literature focuses on the working conditions and the plight of gig workers, particularly regarding social security coverage. Uchiama et al. (2022) and Ahmad (2021) discuss the social protection and medical benefits of delivery riders, drawing upon the Malaysian experience. The latter emphasised the degrading working conditions while highlighting the significance of upskilling and reskilling amongst gig workers to remain competitive. Aguilera (2022) describes three categories of delivery riders: students, people with another paid job, and people with no other paid job, based on differing characteristics and challenges concerning their work and mobility.

Another strand has to do with the health and safety concerns of the delivery riders regarding the physical demands of their job. Zheng (2019) highlights the role of the working conditions of riders in inducing risky riding behaviours and crash involvement among them. This was done by studying the behavioural aspects of delivery riders in China. Papakostopoulos and Nathanael (2021) also conducted similar studies in Athens. On the other hand, Nasreen (2017) shows the effect of delivery work on the delivery riders' physical health and socio-economic life.

In another study by Brancati et al. (2020) in Europe, socio-demographics are drawn to compare platform and offline workers. The emphasis is laid on factors such as age, household size and composition, education, migrant status, etc. This study targets the web-based platform workers, while we focus on the location-based platform workers. Biswas and Dey (2023) conducted a similar study in India. The paper concerns gig workers' socio-demographics, working conditions, and challenges.

The push and pull factors associated with the job structure of delivery riders are instead an unexplored segment. Through this research, we evaluate various considerations involved in job decisions made by the delivery riders. We also analyse future job mobility

and its dynamics from the delivery riders' point of view. More importantly, we explore a segment of delivery riders who are 'stuck' in this service and cannot find a way out of it. These areas are relatively undiscovered and we close this literature gap through this research paper.

### 3. OBJECTIVES

Food delivery riders have emerged in recent years, forming a significant segment of gig economy workers. They represent varying backgrounds and aspirations. With the popularity of food delivery services as a viable livelihood option, there have also been rising concerns about the lack of social security coverage and other job challenges.

- Firstly, the paper aims to study the diverse socio-demographic aspects of delivery riders. This will include their educational qualifications, background, age, and income, among other features.
- The second goal is to examine these respondents' challenges in their service. Various studies have tried to study this aspect, and this paper tries to build on the same, primarily in Delhi, India.
- This study further aims to evaluate the factors that make this job a viable option for prospective seekers. At the same time, we also seek to analyse why the job is unpopular amongst those already working as delivery riders.
- Towards the end, this study tries to gain insights into the future labour mobility of its respondents. Through this, we examine how these delivery riders envisage their future in the gig economy.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a primary survey conducted in different parts of Delhi, including Connaught Place, Kamala Nagar, GTB, Malka Ganj, Ashok Vihar and Hudson Lane. Individual interviews of 80 delivery riders, chosen through a random sampling method, were conducted over four months through a questionnaire divided into three parts. The first part was concerned with the socio-demographics of the respondents; the second segment catered to their job profile, while the last part examined the challenges faced by respondents in their jobs. The final

questionnaire was tailored after evaluating the pilot survey conducted over a smaller sample size.

Through the interviews, we tried to analyse the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of the respondents regarding their jobs in food delivery. To protect riders' confidentiality, names were not recorded at the time of the interview. Therefore, each rider was given a code as an identifier during data analysis. Visualisation techniques like bar plots and pie charts are used to analyse and interpret the primary survey data.

## 5. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

### 5.1. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHICS

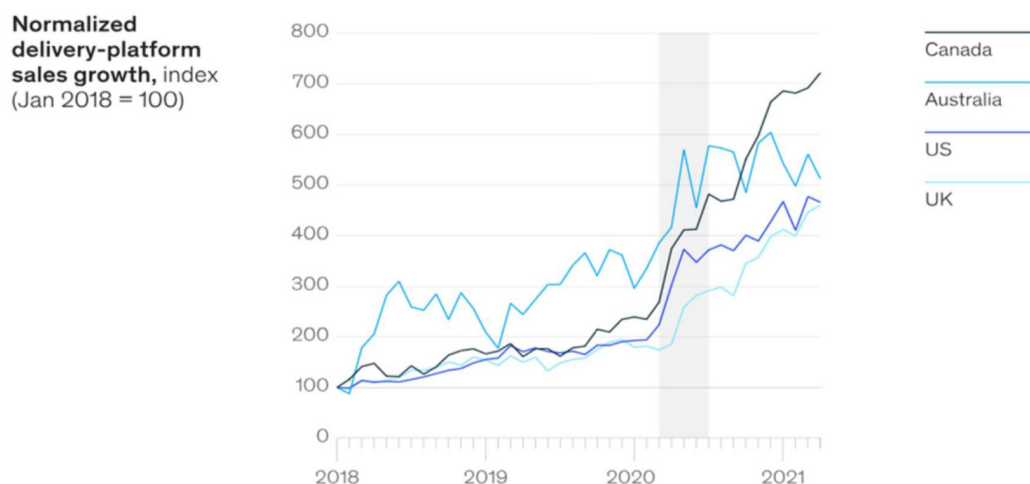
Our survey shows that food delivery jobs have successfully attracted young people with an average age of 26 years into the services. These young, motivated people are ardent about earning their livelihood with considerable freedom and flexibility. The riders are experienced in riding, with a mean riding experience of almost eight years. Due to this, the crash involvement of riders while commuting is rare. 2.5% of survey takers met with serious accidents, while another 5% reported petty crash involvement while on duty in the last one year. The respondents have been working as food delivery riders for an average of about two years. Food delivery services were categorised under essential services during the pandemic. At the same time, there was a surge in online food demand due to lockdown restrictions. These factors culminated in a

spike in the number of food delivery riders. However, the pandemic just paced up the process, which was already inevitable. Having noted that the follow-ups or the impact of changes in labour dynamics in the market would have remained the same in the long run, irrespective of the pandemic. Figure 5.1.1 shows the sharp spike in the food delivery market between 2020 and 2021 in various OECD countries.

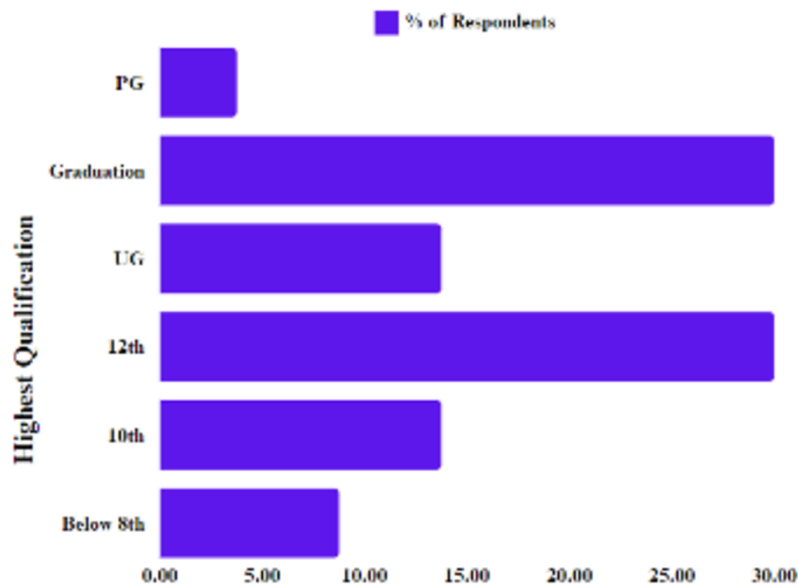
In the realm of scholastic attainments, it was found that all the respondents shared a common educational background of attaining at least primary education. Strikingly, as many as 30% of the respondents were graduates, and another 4% even held post-graduation degrees. However, these riders' degrees were primarily in non-technical fields, with sparing exceptions. The respondents reported that their qualifications do not provide adequate opportunity or incentive in the formal sector. Nearly one-third of respondents agreed that the delivery service offered them higher incomes than any other standard job with their current educational qualifications. The detailed breakdown of the academic qualifications of sample delivery riders is shown in Figure 5.1.2.

The delivery riders are also skilled to some degree. As high as 66% of the respondents affirmed a 'yes' when asked whether they possessed any skill other than driving. The majority of these were skilled in operating computers. Some even were enrolled in courses on digital marketing, coding, programming, data entry, and accounting. At the same time, others boasted of having a taste in vlogging, teaching, and a taste in vlogging, teaching, and cooking. Again

**Figure 5.1.1: Spike in Food Delivery Market Since March 2020**



Source: McKinsey (September 2021)

**Figure 5.1.2:** *Educational Background of Food Delivery Riders*

Source: Authors' visualisation from survey responses

the respondents suggested that enough opportunities paired with decent pay are not available in their respective fields of expertise, which barred them from pursuing their careers in such stated arenas.

## 5.2. WORKING CONDITIONS

The food delivery riders typically work as independent contractors, but their service conditions shed light on a multifaceted landscape. The riders benefit from the independent working hours and most minor restrictions. Nevertheless, these come at the cost of traditional job benefits, which include health insurance, social security coverage, and job security. They rely on their vehicles while keeping up with fuel and depreciation costs, which pulls back their net earnings. At the same time, their job is physically and mentally demanding since they are required to bear varying weather and traffic conditions while commuting. 93% of the respondents owned their vehicle. In comparison, the remaining 7% of the riders were tied with a company called 'Zypp' (which works in association with Zomato). The company rents an electric two-wheeler on nominal charges with its terms and conditions.

The delivery riders, on average, work for 9 hours a day. They receive payments on a per-delivery basis and additional incentives that companies may offer at their discretion. The riders earn an average monthly income of 18,000 rupees, and payments are made weekly.

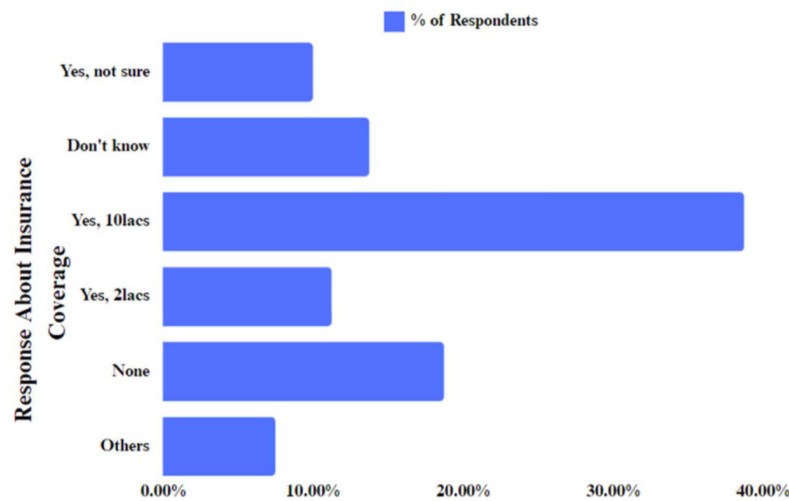
While companies like Swiggy and Zomato provide insurance, only 48 of 80 survey riders knew they received insurance. They, too, had differing opinions on the extent of insurance coverage provided. The insurance redemption rate was as low as 1.25% in our sample. The response of delivery riders varied significantly regarding insurance, as seen in Figure 3. The respondents were asked whether they received insurance and, if yes, what the extent of insurance coverage was.

A similar kind of asymmetric information is observed in the case of incentive structure, as the riders showcased a lack of information. As<sub>1</sub> reflected on the websites of companies like Swiggy and Zomato, workers may receive additional pecuniary benefits at the company's discretion. Incentives may be performance-based (for meeting daily targets or gigs) or situation-based (for instance, bonuses provided during adverse weather conditions). As many as 50% of the survey takers opined that they did not receive any incentive. However, those who have been engaged in food delivery services for a long time have been briefed that there have been a lot of modifications in the incentive system in the pre-and post-COVID era. The frequency and the type of impetus provided by the companies have refashioned, which has triggered a fall in additional income.

## 5.3 CHALLENGES

Papers like Ahmad and Omar (2023) highlight delivery riders' challenges. We try to gain insights



**Figure 5.3.1: Response of Food Delivery Riders About Insurance Coverage**

Source: Authors' visualisation from survey responses

into riders' perceptions of these elements as challenges they face. The exploration of the following five<sup>2</sup> selected arenas of challenges our respondents face underscores a need for a deeper understanding of what they consider strenuous. Figure 5.3.2 plots the crux of the below-mentioned information regarding challenges faced by riders.

The concern about road safety is persistent. 30 of the 80 food delivery riders expressed that they "always" are concerned about road safety, while another 35 respondents suggested this concern exists "often." A study in China about the last mile food deliveries by Zheng et al. (2019) establishes the relationship between the working conditions and the risky riding behaviour by the riders. "The study painted a gloomy picture of the heavy workload and stress experienced by this occupational group and found support for the significance of work-related traits in influencing their perception of fatigue, risky riding, and crash involvement crash involvement and violation of traffic rules."<sup>3</sup> This might be true to some extent, owing to the hassle meted out by the riders on the road while on duty. However, contrary to this result, our respondents exhibited a culture of road respect and abidance with traffic rules, eliminating the scope of risky riding behaviour. As previously noted, 2.5% of survey takers met with serious accidents, while another 5% reported petty crash involvement while commuting in the past year.

Our survey also suggests that the riders do not have to deal with excessive pressure to deliver food on time. 39% of the respondents "never" felt pressured to deliver food on time. As suggested by the riders,

<sup>2</sup>These parameters are based on pilot survey conducted by the author

<sup>3</sup>Zheng et al. (2019)

the primary reason is the lenient policies and lack of penalties imposed by companies on such grounds.

Ramaswamy (2019) shows that the rating system has a considerable impact on riders' psychology as it impacts the number and type of orders allotted to them by the company. Increased stress and anxiety amongst the riders due to false reporting and customer ratings are also observed. However, we found that such a system has witnessed a shift since the pandemic period, wherein although the star or the badge system of rating remains, they do not significantly influence their job condition anymore. The sequel is that more than 80% of the riders are rarely or never concerned about the ratings they receive. They aim to maintain a minimum standard rating on their account to be far from noticeable to the company and avoid any possible<sup>1</sup>repercussions in the worst case.

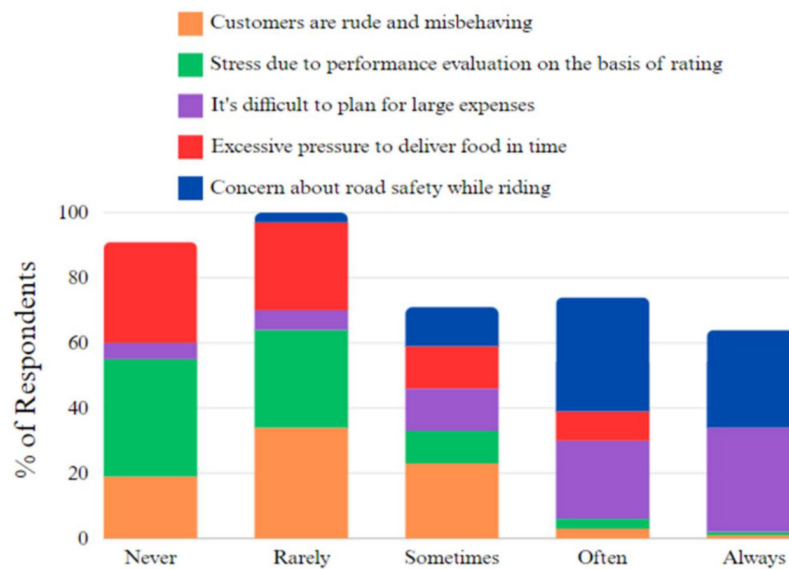
Since the delivery riders work on a contract basis, their earnings are highly volatile and fluctuate with the number of deliveries, incentives, and tips. Along with vehicle maintenance and fuel costs, the limited disposal income leaves them unguarded when any emergency expense or capital expenditure arises. 40% of the riders expressed their concern regarding their incapacity to save. Amongst the food delivery riders, only 39% were able to save. At the same time, the other 61% who could not save were characterised by large family sizes and bore an additional burden of external loans.

Literature also suggests that delivery riders are concerned about the rude behaviour of the customers.

customers. Any conduct of the customers that surpasses the standard expectations of considerate behaviour comes under the purview of misbehaviour while engaging with delivery riders. In our survey, as low as 5% of the riders reported that they "often" confronted the maltreatment by the customers. And that they need to compromise on their self-esteem in such cases. More than 66% of the respondents reported encountering rude customers in rare circumstances only. So, essentially most delivery riders do not consider this a challenge in their job.

In this section, we analyse what factors could be responsible for attracting the youth to become food delivery riders. The literature lacks such an analysis, and we try to fill this gap. Our survey found that 70% of the respondents engaged in other income-earning activities before becoming a delivery rider. Some factors were responsible for pushing them away from their previous job to their current job. Insufficient income was stated as one of the reasons for departing from the previous employment by 39% of the riders out of the sub-category. This category of riders includes factory workers or unprofitable

**Figure 5.3.2: Challenges Faced by Food Delivery Riders**



Source: Authors' visualisation from survey responses

#### 5.4. WHY DO PEOPLE CHOOSE TO BECOME DELIVERY RIDERS: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

In this section, we analyse what factors could be responsible for attracting the youth to become food delivery riders. The literature lacks such an analysis, and we try to fill this gap. Our survey found that 70% of the respondents engaged in other income-earning activities before becoming a delivery rider. Some factors were responsible for pushing them away from their previous job to their current job. Insufficient income was stated as one of the reasons for departing from the previous employment by 39% of the riders out of the sub-category. This category of riders includes factory workers or unprofitable business owners who found that food delivery services offered them comparatively higher pay. Another sub-category of workers contains 23% of the riders laid off during the pandemic from their previous employment. With an increase in the

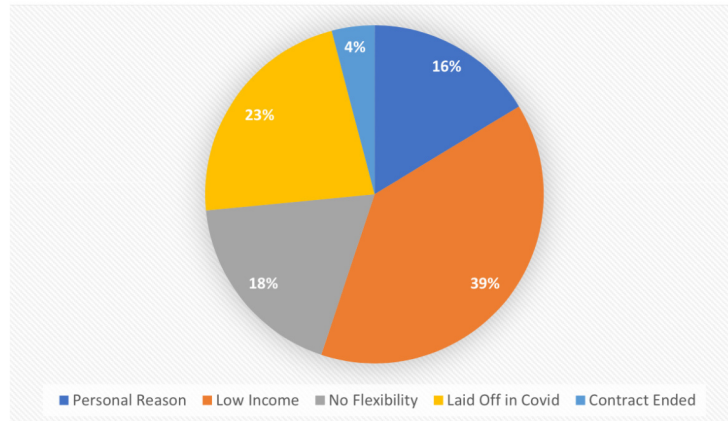
business owners who found that food delivery services offered them comparatively higher pay. Another sub-category of workers contains 23% of the riders laid off during the pandemic from their previous employment. With an increase in the culture of working independently, 18% of the respondents left their earlier jobs in search of flexibility and found a haven in food delivery services. Figure 5.4.1 concisely represents various reasons suggested by respondents for leaving their previous job.

The pulling factors are also responsible for attracting people to the job. Notably, the gig economy offers easy entry without any cumbersome requirements, as indicated by more than 80% of all the survey takers. Lengthy procedures for entering the job are absent, and the ability to ride a motorcycle is more than enough of a qualification. The flexibility aspect also comes with the prospect of working part-time. 26 out of the 80 food delivery riders work part-time. As acknowledged by the riders, since there is no

income stability in delivery services, half of the part-time workers are involved in other income-earning activities. Their prime aim is to diversify their income source. The other half were either engaged in studying and upskilling or doing nothing at all. The technical penetration across various segments of

workers with increasing knowledge about mobile apps and GPS technology has made the job more accessible for fresh entrants looking for livelihood. All the respondents were well-versed in mobile-based apps, and 70% could easily use GPS technology for navigation.

**Figure 5.4.1: Reasons for Leaving Previous Job**



*Source: Authors' visualisation from survey responses*

## 5.5. NAVIGATING FUTURE LABOUR MOBILITY OF DELIVERY RIDERS

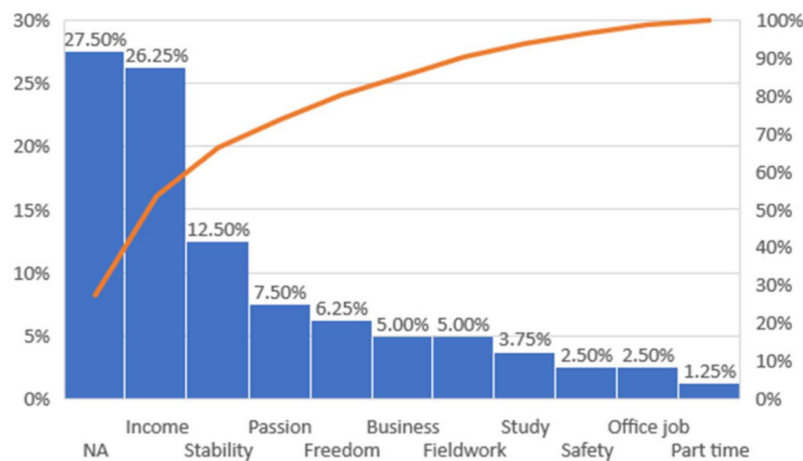
It is noteworthy that although prospective delivery riders find the job attractive in terms of income and flexibility, there is a massive chunk of riders who do not envisage their future in food delivery services. As high as 71.25% of the respondents said 'no' when asked if they wanted to continue being a delivery rider. Although they want to move out of this job, what has kept them in this job is the matter of the next segment. For now, we try to focus on why they want to opt-out.

Our survey found that ten respondents had a work experience of one or less than one month. Out of these, eight respondents envisioned moving out of this job as soon as some other opportunity came up. This shows the tendency of the newcomers to emigrate in the initial stages of the job. Ironically, 39% of the respondents became a delivery rider for higher income opportunities. On the other hand, about 26% of respondents from the same sample group want to leave their job as a delivery rider in search of even more significant income. To understand this irony, we must consider the labour market's demand and supply situation in this gig economy sector. We know from our survey that the average work experience of the riders is two years. We also found that there was no significant deviation from the mean as far as average work experience is

concerned. Quite evidently, different dynamics that have pushed the delivery riders into this job have all acted almost along the timeline of two years ago. The higher income prospects significantly drove this surge of delivery riders. However, since there was an increase in the supply of delivery riders, their net total income fell considerably and gradually. Incentive structures were modified in such a way that the real income of the riders declined (especially in the post-pandemic period). Thus, those seeking higher income did not get as much as expected.

In compliance with the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2021-22 study, the riders working in Swiggy and Zomato earn less than their peer group in nominal terms. According to this annual report, the peer group comprises workers in the 18 to 35 years of age group with at least higher secondary education. Delivery riders were working 23% more than their peers and earned 8% less than them. The decline in the income of the riders came from the change in the structure of the incentive system. As discussed in the prior segment, the riders face specific challenges which they did not foresee before entering the market. Road safety concerns are causing riders to rethink their decision to stay on the job. 12.5% looked for stability in income flow and their job in general. 5% of the survey takers planned to set up their businesses, while others were gearing up to complete their education to get into more stable and



**Figure 5.5.1: Future Mobility of Food Delivery Riders**

Source: Authors' visualisation from survey responses

formal jobs.

Figure 5.5.1 shows various parameters like income, passion, stability, etc. that food delivery riders seek in their future career if they leave the delivery service.

At the other end of the spectrum, almost 27.5% of the riders were not planning to shift to any other job. They expect the industry to offer them a steady flow of work because of the anticipated persistence of the demand for online food delivery services. At the same time, they believe they could not get a better job opportunity regarding income and flexibility with their current educational qualifications and skills.

## 5.6. ARE DELIVERY RIDERS STUCK?

71.25% of the riders are willing to shift to other jobs but are yet to make a move. If we could explain the situation of this category in a word, it would be apt to say that they are "stuck" in the job. They would have already grabbed the opportunity if they had a chance to move out of the job. There are a lot of factors that have caused them to stay. At the outset, it must be noted that food delivery service is a monotonous job that does not lead to human resource development unless riders are actively upskilling themselves. This set of workers is underqualified for any job requiring skill or experience. Even when 66% of our respondents reported that they possessed skills in computers, graphic designing, IT, etc, these were so basic that demand for such skills ceased to exist in the market. According to the riders, it did not offer adequate income even if work was available in their expertise. We also found that our sample delivery riders were financially burdened and could not risk their current job. The respondents could not even extract their

time from work hours to make themselves eligible for some other similar or formal jobs. Only 12% of the riders used their time to upskill or educate themselves to enhance their future job prospects.

The next aspect to consider is that the immediate shift of riders to other jobs will render them with almost no current disposable income. About 53% of the respondents who wanted to shift to any other job were under institutional or non-institutional debt, highlighting the need to sustain a constant flow of income. A job shift might break the flow. Moreover, large family sizes with an average of 6 members and a comparatively low number of earning members (which was found to be only 2) mandate the fact that they migrate only when the future job offers higher stability and income.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The study gathered insights on various objectives with which the research was undertaken. We found that food delivery services primarily accommodate young delivery riders, most of whom possess standard educational qualifications. They also possess some basic skills that do not offer job opportunities or a decent income.

Various push and pull factors drew the respondents towards the delivery service job. While some of the respondents were pushed out of their previous employment, others were attracted by the appealing job characteristics of the gig economy. Nevertheless as observed by the respondents, the job in the gig economy came with its own set of challenges. While there were challenges involved in the job structure, other more prominent issues like retardation of



human resource development and decline in income after the pandemic also posed difficulties. We encountered a set of workers who were almost stuck in this job. Although these respondents wanted to move out of this job, they were constrained by their financial needs due to loans, large family sizes, and lack of opportunities for skill development. Thus, we have observed that while the gig economy is gaining popularity in providing job opportunities with flexible terms and conditions, some structural deficiencies exist that need to be checked to enhance labour efficiency and stability. To maintain a stable workforce in the gig economy, it is crucial to ensure

some stability that the workers can expect from their jobs. At the same time, given the extent of asymmetric information about various policies, it is also essential to create awareness amongst the workers about the social security coverage that is already available to them.

The study holds scope for further research, particularly in areas concerning empirical work. Additionally, there is a possibility for further exploring other dimensions, such as the migration status and the trajectory of past migrations of gig workers to better understand their work dynamics.

## APPENDIX

The questionnaire followed by the authors for conducting the primary survey is scripted below.

### A.1 SOCIO- DEMOGRAPHICS:

1. Age (years) .....
2. Gender .....
3. Riding experience (years) .....
4. Work experience as a delivery rider (years) .....
5. Education (highest qualification) .....
6. Previous engagement (working/studying/unemployed etc) .....
7. Reason for leaving the previous job (for those who were working) .....
8. Family size .....
9. No. of other earners in the family .....
10. Family income (annual).....
11. Part-time or Full-time
12. What skill other than driving do you possess .....
13. What potential jobs can you get with your skill (if any) .....
14. Are you in any kind of debt? Institutional or non-institutional.....

### A.2 PRESENT WORK PROFILE

- 1.Monthly income .....
2. No. Of hours of work.....
3. Average no. of deliveries per day.....
4. Vehicle (owned or rented) .....
5. Max distance covered in single delivery .....
6. What incentive do you get? .....
7. Social security coverage (insurance- Body injury, Vehicle damage, Cell phone damage) .....
8. How did you get to know about this job .....
9. Annual vehicle repair or rent charges .....
10. Who pays when the food is destroyed while commuting? How frequently does this happen .....
11. How often do you receive tips? What is the approximate amount .....
12. Are you planning to switch to some other job .....
13. What factors would pull you to your future job? .....

14. If you are offered a job with equivalent income and incentives like EPF, paid leave, etc, but with time constraints, would you take up the job? .....
15. Are you able to save or invest for old age or any other huge expense  
.....
16. Where do you live in Delhi? Does that affect your work area?  
.....
17. How does the rating system affect your job .....

### A.3 CHALLENGES

Please rate how well the following situations characterise your feelings while at work.

[ Scale - 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (always) ]

1. Customers are rude and misbehaving [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
2. Stress due to performance evaluation based on rating [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
3. It's difficult to plan for large expenses [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
4. Excessive pressure to deliver food in time [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
5. Concern about road safety while riding [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

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