



Migration in the Digital Age: Rural-Urban Shifts in India's Gig Economy

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Abstract

The digital gig economy like ride-hailing services & food delivery apps is changing how people work and move in India. The rapid expansion of the digital gig economy is transforming labour markets, influencing migration patterns in unprecedented ways. The data shows that 33.5% of male migrants have migrated to urban areas, aligning with the growth of app-based service industries. In contrast 56.9% of female migrants have migrated from rural-to-rural areas in often linked to matrimonial and domestic reasons. This paper assesses the role of gig platforms in India through the drivers from rural-to-urban migration, using secondary data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020–21 and official statistics. Implications for policy include the need for skill development, social security, and inclusive urban planning.

Keywords: digital gig economy, migration patterns, rural-to-urban migration, gig work opportunities, labour mobility, PLFS, labour market

Introduction

Migration has been a long integral component of socioeconomic change in India. With the proliferation of digital platforms, a new wave of labour mobility is emerging that is driven by gig work opportunities. From delivery services to ride-hailing, the gig economy is providing flexible income sources for rural populations migrating to urban centers. This article explores the nexus between gig economy growth and migration, with a focus on gendered migration patterns.

Statement of the Problem

The rise of the digital gig economy in India has fundamentally altered the dynamics of labor mobility, particularly in urban migration patterns. While traditional migration drivers—such as industrial employment and agricultural distress—remain relevant, online platforms now offer flexible, task-based jobs that attract rural labor to cities. However, the integration of gig work into migration narratives is under-researched, leaving critical policy gaps. Understanding how gig work shapes migration streams, particularly rural urban movements, is essential for designing inclusive labor market



strategies. Without targeted interventions, the benefits of gig-driven migration risk being unevenly distributed, exacerbating urban inequality and labor market vulnerabilities.

Objectives

1. To analyze the role of the digital gig economy in influencing migration patterns in India.
2. To examine gender differences in migration streams associated with gig work opportunities.
3. To assess the implications of gig-driven migration for urban labor markets and policy formulation.

Literature Review

Migration theories traditionally emphasize economic differentials, employment opportunities, and push-pull dynamics (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Stark, 1991). Recent scholarship, however, points to the role of technology-mediated work in altering these dynamics (Kumar & Rani, 2021; World Bank, 2022). The gig economy's flexibility, low entry barriers, and urban market concentration make it a significant pull factor for rural migrants, especially younger male workers. Scholars have documented migration as a multi-faceted process influenced by economic, social, and demographic factors. The rise of the gig economy introduces a new dimension to labour mobility, characterized by on-demand, digitally mediated work. Existing literature emphasizes wage differentials, employment opportunities, and urban infrastructure as primary migration drivers (Kundu, 2021). However, limited research has directly linked the gig economy to specific migration streams in India.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes the relationship between the **digital gig economy** and **urban migration** within the *push-pull framework* of migration theory. **Push factors** such as rural underemployment, agricultural distress, and limited formal sector jobs, drive workers from rural areas, while **pull factors** including flexible earning opportunities, low entry barriers, and digital platform accessibility attract them to urban centers. The framework integrates

gender as a moderating variable, recognizing that societal norms, safety perceptions, and domestic responsibilities influence male and female migration differently. Intra-state and inter-state migration streams are analyzed to understand the geographical scope of gig-related labor mobility. The model also considers the role of technology penetration, urban infrastructure readiness, and labor regulations as enabling or constraining factors. By linking migration theory with digital economy literature, the framework provides a holistic lens for examining the socioeconomic transformations arising from gig-driven migration in India.

Methodology

This study relies exclusively on secondary data from the PLFS 2020–21 and official statistics released by the Government of India (Press Information Bureau, 2022). The data was analyzed to identify migration patterns by gender and stream (rural–rural, rural–urban, urban–rural, urban–urban). Visualizations were generated to highlight key findings relevant to the digital gig economy narrative.

Data and Interpretation

The PLFS 2020–21 data reveals distinct migration trends across genders. Table 1 presents the distribution of male and female migrants by migration stream. The results indicate that rural-to-urban migration accounts for 33.5% of male migrants, a significant figure in light of the growing urban gig economy. In contrast, female migration is predominantly rural-to-rural (56.9%), often linked to marriage and family-related reasons.

**Table 1 Migration Streams by Gender
(PLFS 2020–21)**

Migration Stream	Male (%)	Female (%)
Rural→Rural	18.0	56.9
Rural→Urban	33.5	17.6
Urban→Rural	20.8	7.2
Urban→Urban	27.6	18.3

Source:<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.m.aspx?PRID=1833854>

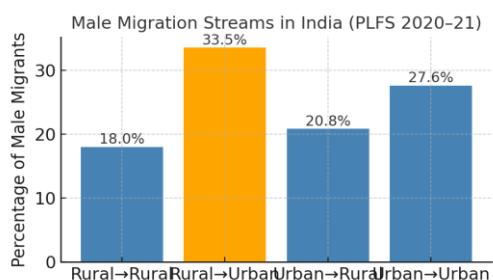


Figure 1 Male Migration Streams in India (PLFS 2020-21)

Table 2 Indicators of Gender – Wise Migrants

Indicator	Value
Overall migration rate	28.9%
Migration rate — Male	10.7%
Migration rate — Female	47.9%
Intra-state migration	88.0%
Inter-state migration	11.8%
Origin — Rural (all migrants)	73.4%
Origin — Urban (all migrants)	25.9%
Male origin — Rural	50.0%
Male origin — Urban	47.0%
Female origin — Rural	78.8%
Female origin — Urban	21.0%
Temporary visitors (<6 months)	0.7% overall (Rural: 0.8%, Urban: 0.6%)

Source:

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1833854>

Table 2 presents a comprehensive snapshot of migration patterns in India based on the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020–21. The **overall migration rate** was **28.9%**, with a stark gender disparity: only **10.7%** of males were classified as migrants compared to **47.9%** of females. This difference is consistent with established migration literature, which attributes higher female migration largely to marriage-related relocation in rural areas.

A substantial majority (**88.0%**) of migration occurred **within states** (intra-state), while only **11.8%** represented **inter-state** movement. Regarding origin, most migrants came from **rural areas** (**73.4%**), whereas **25.9%** originated from urban settings. However, gender differences were again

pronounced: half of male migrants (**50.0%**) originated from rural areas and **47.0%** from urban areas, whereas female migrants were overwhelmingly rural in origin (**78.8%**).

The male migration stream distribution reveals diverse movement patterns: **Rural→Urban migration (33.5%)** accounted for the largest share, reflecting the search for better employment opportunities, particularly in urban gig economy sectors. This was followed by **Urban→Urban (27.6%)**, **Urban→Rural (20.8%)**, and **Rural→Rural (18.0%)** migration. These patterns suggest that while rural–urban migration remains a strong driver, there is significant urban–urban movement likely linked to occupational mobility within cities.

Temporary migration was relatively rare, with **0.7%** of the population classified as temporary visitors (less than six months' residence), slightly higher in rural areas (0.8%) than in urban areas (0.6%).

Table 3 Key Migration Statistics (PLFS July 2020–June 2021)

Indicator	Value / Insight
Overall Migration Rate	28.9% of the population were migrants — defined as individuals whose “last usual place of residence” differed from where they were surveyed. (The Times of India)
Migration Rate by Gender	Male: 10.7%; Female: 47.9% (The Times of India)
Intra-State vs Inter-State Migration	88% of migrants moved within the same state; 11.8% moved to another state. (The Times of India)
Origin by Rural/Urban (All Migrants)	73.4% originated from rural areas; 25.9% from urban areas. (The Times of India)
Male Migrants: Rural/Urban Origin	50% from rural areas; 47% from urban centers. (The Times of India)
Female Migrants: Rural/Urban Origin	78.8% from rural areas; 21% from urban centers. (The Times of India)
Migration Streams by Gender (Male)	Rural-to-rural: 18%; Rural-to-urban: 33.5%; Urban-to-rural:



migrants)	20.8%; Urban-to-urban: 27.6% (The Times of India)
Temporary Visitors (arrived post-March 2020, <6 months)	Overall: 0.7%; Rural: 0.8%; Urban: 0.6%; Male: Rural 0.9% / Urban 0.6%; Female: Rural 0.5% / Urban 0.6%. (Advocatetanmoy Law Library)

Table 3 shows that nearly **one-third of India's population (28.9%)** were internal migrants in the PLFS-2020-21 survey. A **stark gender gap** shows **higher female migration (47.9%)**, though this likely reflects trends of marriage-related relocation, while **male migration (10.7%)** is more likely work-related.

The vast majority of migration is **intra-state** (88%), indicating local or regional mobility dominates over long-distance moves. Most migrants originate from **rural areas (73.4%)**, reinforcing rural-to-urban and rural-to-rural movement patterns. Male migration flows show a substantial **rural-to-urban component (33.5%)**, which is highly relevant when examining drivers like digital gig opportunities concentrated in cities.

Temporary visitors represent a small but notable segment (~0.7%) and may include pandemic-related mobility. Their inclusion helps capture short-term labour and circular migration dynamics.

Discussion & Policy Implications

The prominence of rural-to-urban male migration reflects the pull of urban-based gig work, such as delivery, ride-hailing, and freelance services. These jobs often require minimal entry qualifications but rely heavily on smartphone access and internet connectivity. Female migration patterns, dominated by rural-to-rural moves, underscore persistent gender disparities in labour mobility and access to gig opportunities.

To harness the potential of the gig economy for inclusive growth, policymakers must address digital literacy gaps, ensure portable social security benefits, and invest in affordable urban housing. Enhancing skill development programs tailored to gig work could further facilitate rural-to-urban transitions.

Conclusion

The digital gig economy is a growing driver of urban migration in India, particularly among men. As gig platforms continue to expand, their influence on labour mobility is likely to intensify, making it imperative for urban planning and labour policies to adapt accordingly.

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