The Gig Economy and Digital Precarity: A Gramscian Analysis of Labor Resistance in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

The gig economy has rapidly transformed labor markets across South Asia, positioning itself as a solution to youth unemployment, underemployment, and informal sector stagnation. Characterized by flexible, on-demand work mediated by digital platforms such as Uber, Careem, Swiggy, Foodpanda, and Upwork, this new model of employment is celebrated by policymakers and corporations as a vehicle for entrepreneurship and empowerment. However, beneath this façade lies an intensifying crisis of digital precarity—marked by low wages, algorithmic management, lack of collective bargaining rights, and the absence of social security. This paper investigates labor resistance within this context, using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony to critically examine how platform capitalism sustains itself through ideological consent and how workers challenge it through digital and analog forms of resistance. Drawing on qualitative data from media reports, policy documents, civil society publications, and grassroots worker testimonies from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, this research explores the nature, scope, and limitations of labor resistance in the gig economy. It highlights how the neoliberal narrative of flexibility conceals power asymmetries while simultaneously limiting traditional unionization. Yet, emerging strategies—ranging from WhatsApp-based strike coordination to digital unions and online petitions—are revealing new forms of counter-hegemonic struggle grounded in worker solidarity, class consciousness, and digital literacy. The paper argues that while the gig economy represents a reconfiguration of labor relations in the digital age, it is not immune to organized dissent. Gramsci's conceptual tools allow us to understand not only how platform capitalism maintains ideological dominance but also how resistance is being articulated by marginalized labor groups. In doing so, the study contributes to debates on labor precarity, platform governance, and the future of work in the Global South. It calls for rethinking regulatory frameworks and supporting digital labor movements as legitimate actors in shaping equitable labor futures.

Keywords: Gig economy; digital precarity; labor resistance; South Asia; Gramscian theory; hegemony; counter-hegemony; platform capitalism; worker mobilization; algorithmic control

1. Introduction

The global labor landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, fueled by the rapid expansion of digital platforms that mediate short-term, task-based work—commonly referred to as the "gig economy." Across South Asia, this shift has been both celebrated and critiqued. Platforms such as Uber, Careem, Swiggy, Foodpanda, Ola, Fiverr, and Upwork have proliferated in urban centers, offering new forms of employment to millions, particularly youth and those excluded from formal labor markets. Governments, development agencies, and corporations have embraced the gig

economy as a panacea for endemic unemployment and a driver of innovation. In policy discourse, gig work is often framed as flexible, entrepreneurial, and inclusive, seemingly promising autonomy and upward mobility to workers once trapped in informal sectors.

However, beneath the optimism lies a darker reality of "digital precarity." Gig workers in South Asia face structural vulnerabilities that mirror, and in many cases exacerbate, those found in traditional informal economies. These include income volatility, lack of health insurance or pensions, absence of job security, no minimum wage guarantees, and subjection to algorithmic management systems that operate without transparency or accountability. As platform labor becomes normalized, the worker is increasingly de-personalized—rendered as data, rated by consumers, and governed by digital codes rather than human managers. The platforms, often transnational and minimally regulated, wield enormous asymmetrical power over dispersed and atomized workers, while outsourcing all risk and responsibility. In effect, digital platforms have enabled a form of hyper-flexible capitalism that undermines labor protections hard-won over the 20th century.

Understanding this emerging labor regime demands more than empirical observation—it requires a critical theoretical lens. This paper adopts the framework of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist thinker whose theory of cultural hegemony helps explain how capitalist dominance is maintained not merely through coercion, but through ideological consent. Gramsci argued that dominant social classes exercise power by embedding their worldview in institutions, culture, and everyday life, making their control appear natural, inevitable, or even desirable. This "manufacture of consent" ensures that exploitation is sustained with minimal resistance. Applying Gramsci's lens to the gig economy reveals how neoliberal ideologies—entrepreneurship, flexibility, individualism—serve to legitimize precarious labor and mask class exploitation. Workers are encouraged to see themselves as micro-entrepreneurs rather than employees, effectively internalizing their own subjugation.

At the same time, Gramsci's concept of "counter-hegemony" offers a valuable framework for understanding how gig workers contest this ideological dominance. While traditional trade unions struggle to organize platform workers due to their dispersion, invisibility, and legal classification as "independent contractors," new modes of resistance are emerging. These include digital unionization efforts, coordinated app-switching strikes, WhatsApp groups, online petitions, legal activism, and transnational solidarities. From Ola and Uber driver strikes in India, to Careem captains' protests in Pakistan, to app-based delivery workers in Bangladesh launching coordinated shutdowns, workers are finding creative and localized ways to resist exploitation and assert rights—even when formal avenues are blocked.

South Asia provides a particularly rich context for this inquiry. With its large informal economy, youthful demographics, and deepening digital penetration, the region is uniquely positioned to reveal the promises and perils of platform capitalism. Moreover, the absence of robust regulatory mechanisms, the weakness of labor unions, and the prevalence of unemployment make South Asian gig workers particularly vulnerable to precarity. Yet, it is also in this region that forms of resistance—grounded in class consciousness, digital literacy, and community organizing—are beginning to take shape.

This study therefore seeks to explore the following central question: How does labor resistance emerge and evolve in the gig economy of South Asia under conditions of digital precarity? Anchored in Gramsci's theoretical framework, this paper examines the strategies, limitations, and political significance of emerging gig worker movements. By drawing on qualitative analysis of case studies from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, this research aims to contribute to ongoing debates on platform labor, algorithmic governance, and the reconfiguration of class struggle in the digital era.

In doing so, the paper makes a twofold contribution. First, it critically interrogates the ideological mechanisms that normalize digital precarity in South Asia. Second, it amplifies subaltern voices of resistance that challenge this hegemony—not always in overtly political forms, but often through dispersed, tactical, and digitally mediated strategies. In line with Gramsci's belief that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born," this research probes the contradictions of platform capitalism in the Global South and the possibilities of labor-led transformation within it.

2. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following key research questions:

1. How does digital precarity manifest among gig workers in South Asia?
2. What ideological mechanisms sustain the dominance of platform capitalism in the region?
3. How do gig workers in South Asia resist exploitative practices, and what forms do these resistances take?
4. To what extent can these forms of labor resistance be considered 'counter-hegemonic' in Gramsci's terms?
5. What are the limitations, challenges, and possibilities of organized resistance within the digital labor economy of South Asia?

3. Research Objectives

The principal aim of this research is to critically explore labor resistance within the South Asian gig economy through a Gramscian theoretical lens. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the structural conditions and socio-economic features that contribute to digital precarity among gig workers in South Asia.

2. Apply Gramsci's theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony to understand the ideological narratives that legitimize gig work.
3. Identify and analyze the emerging strategies of resistance adopted by platform workers in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of these resistance movements in challenging hegemonic structures and promoting labor rights.
5. Contribute to the scholarly discourse on platform labor, precarity, and digital capitalism in the Global South.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretivist research design**, drawing on secondary data and theoretical analysis to investigate labor resistance in South Asia's gig economy through a Gramscian lens. Given the theoretical nature of the inquiry—focused on ideological constructs, class relations, and counter-hegemonic strategies—the research is best situated within a **critical theory paradigm**.

4.1 Research Design

The research is exploratory and analytical, using **multiple case studies** from South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) to illustrate patterns of digital precarity and resistance. The choice of these countries is informed by their shared socio-economic characteristics: large informal labor markets, growing digital infrastructures, high unemployment, and similar political-economic orientations toward neoliberal reform.

4.2 Data Sources

This study relies exclusively on **secondary sources**, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on gig economy, labor studies, and platform capitalism
- Reports from international labor organizations (e.g., ILO, ITUC, Fairwork)
- News articles and investigative journalism covering gig worker protests and strikes
- Digital platforms of gig worker unions or collectives (e.g., IFAT in India, Delivery Riders' Union in Pakistan)
- Legal documents and government policies on labor classification and digital platforms
- Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and key secondary literature interpreting his theory

All sources were selected based on relevance, credibility, and recency (2015–2025), with particular attention to sources published in the Global South.

4.3 Analytical Framework

The data is analyzed through **thematic content analysis** within a **Gramscian conceptual framework**, focusing on three central themes:

1. **Digital Precarity** – How platform structures reproduce labor vulnerability
2. **Hegemony and Ideology** – How dominant narratives justify

precarity

3. **Resistance and Counter-Hegemony** – How workers challenge and negotiate power structures

The analysis does not aim to generalize statistically but to provide **deep, context-rich insights** into how labor resistance is shaped, articulated, and constrained within digital economies of the Global South.

4.4 Limitations

- **Lack of primary interviews** limits the ability to capture real-time worker experiences. However, this is partially mitigated by reliance on rich qualitative sources including testimonies and investigative field reports.
- **Language bias** in sources (most reports in English or translated content) may miss localized vernacular expressions of resistance.
- **National variation** exists across South Asian countries; thus, while patterns are identified, no universal claims are made.

5. Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes scholarly and empirical research on four major areas relevant to the study: the evolution of the gig economy in South Asia, the concept of digital precarity and algorithmic control, the application of Gramscian theory to labor relations, and emerging forms of resistance in platform capitalism. Together, these domains illuminate the structural tensions within which South Asian gig workers operate and resist.

5.1 The Gig Economy in South Asia: Expansion and Contradictions

The gig economy has grown exponentially in South Asia over the last decade, fueled by increased mobile connectivity, digital financial inclusion, and neoliberal policy reforms that favor labor market flexibility (Aneja & Sridharan, 2021). Countries such as India and Pakistan have witnessed an influx of digital platforms in urban spaces, offering ride-hailing, food delivery, freelance, and domestic work services (Ali, 2022; ILO, 2021). Governments often promote these platforms as innovative labor solutions, especially for marginalized groups including women and youth (World Bank, 2020).

However, studies challenge the notion that platform work provides stable or decent employment. Most workers earn below national minimum wages and lack access to healthcare, insurance, and collective bargaining (Fairwork, 2023). Moreover, gig work often reproduces existing class, caste, and gender hierarchies rather than mitigating them (Sundararajan, 2020). For example, delivery workers in India, who are disproportionately from Dalit and Muslim communities, face multiple layers of exclusion—not only economic but also spatial and cultural (Nastiti & Abraham, 2022).

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, where labor inspection mechanisms are weak and informal labor dominates over 70% of the workforce, gig platforms thrive in legal grey zones. Studies

have shown that platform companies deliberately misclassify workers as "independent contractors" to avoid offering employee benefits or rights (Rahman, 2022; ITUC, 2021).

5.2 Digital Precarity and Algorithmic Control

"Digital precarity" refers to the ways in which digital labor systems reinforce insecure, fragmented, and exploitative working conditions (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). Unlike traditional employment where managers oversee tasks, platform work is governed by algorithms that allocate jobs, monitor performance, and issue deactivations—often with no transparency or human recourse (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Scholars argue this represents a form of "data colonialism" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), where workers' behaviors are commodified for corporate profit while stripping them of agency and rights.

Gig workers frequently report that their livelihoods are dictated by platform metrics, such as customer ratings, delivery times, and acceptance rates. These metrics function as a form of "soft discipline" that creates internalized pressure to perform under precarious conditions (Scholz, 2017). For South Asian workers, this is exacerbated by weak legal frameworks, high labor supply, and poor access to grievance redressal mechanisms.

Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, platform companies were quick to offload risks onto workers without providing safety equipment or compensation (Fairwork, 2021). Workers were classified as "essential" but denied "employee" protections, revealing the structural contradictions of platform capitalism.

5.3 Gramscian Theory: Hegemony and Ideology in the Gig Economy

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony offers a powerful analytical tool to understand how dominance is maintained in the gig economy. Gramsci (1971) argued that ruling classes do not rule through coercion alone but through "consent" achieved via ideological control embedded in culture, media, education, and law. This "cultural hegemony" makes capitalist exploitation appear natural, inevitable, or even beneficial.

In the gig economy, such hegemonic narratives include the portrayal of workers as "entrepreneurs," "partners," or "freelancers," which reframes exploitation as opportunity (Cant, 2019). This ideology obscures the reality of power asymmetry between multinational tech companies and precarious laborers. As Drahokoupil and Fabo (2020) note, "the platform model is built on the fiction of independence" while exerting total control through digital infrastructure.

Scholars have begun applying Gramscian insights to the gig economy, particularly in the Global South. For example, Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021) argue that platform capitalism constitutes a new hegemonic bloc—comprising tech firms, neoliberal states, and consumers—sustained through algorithmic control and cultural

narratives of digital modernity.

5.4 Labor Resistance and Collective Action in Platform Capitalism

Despite challenges, gig workers across the Global South have begun organizing in novel ways. Traditional unions have found it difficult to reach dispersed platform workers, but new digitally mediated strategies are emerging. In India, the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) has organized nationwide strikes demanding minimum wages, accident insurance, and recognition as formal workers (Gurumurthy, 2022). In Pakistan, Careem drivers have staged coordinated "log-off" protests and demanded fare transparency through social media (Yousafzai, 2023). In Bangladesh, Pathao riders have formed informal collectives to resist sudden commission hikes (Rahman & Haque, 2022).

These efforts reflect what Gramsci might call "counter-hegemonic" movements—efforts to produce alternative visions of work, rights, and justice. Scholars note the emergence of "networked solidarity," wherein workers use WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook to share grievances and organize resistance (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). While these movements are still fragmented and often repressed by platform policies, they reveal a latent class consciousness among digital laborers.

Legal activism is also gaining traction. Court cases in India and the UK have challenged the misclassification of gig workers, with rulings increasingly recognizing them as employees entitled to benefits (ILO, 2023). These legal victories, though uneven, offer important footholds for collective bargaining.

However, challenges remain. Resistance is often met with deactivation, surveillance, and the threat of replacement. Moreover, platforms' transnational nature allows them to avoid local regulations. Thus, labor resistance must grapple with the global character of platform capitalism and the structural weakness of state institutions in South Asia.

The literature reveals that while gig work in South Asia is often justified as flexible and innovative, it is marked by deep precarity and asymmetrical power. Gramsci's theory of hegemony helps us understand how this system is maintained not just by coercion, but by consent—embedded in language, policy, and digital infrastructures. At the same time, emerging resistance movements indicate the beginnings of counter-hegemonic struggles that challenge the ideological and material dominance of platform capitalism. These dynamics set the stage for the empirical and theoretical analysis that follows in the Discussion and Findings section.

6. Discussion and Findings

This section synthesizes findings from secondary sources and contextual data across four South Asian countries—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—to analyze how digital precarity manifests and how labor resistance emerges in response. Guided by

Gramsci's theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony, it identifies four key themes: (1) normalization of precarity through ideological framing; (2) algorithmic control as soft power; (3) emergence of digital labor resistance; and (4) counter-hegemonic potentials and limitations.

6.1 Normalization of Precarity: The Ideology of Flexibility and Entrepreneurship

Platform companies maintain their dominance not simply through labor exploitation but by manufacturing **consent** among workers and society. This reflects Gramsci's (1971) conception of cultural hegemony, where dominant classes use ideas and narratives to secure voluntary compliance.

Gig workers across South Asia are often labeled as "partners" or "micro-entrepreneurs," creating the illusion of autonomy. Interviews and reports reveal that workers internalize these labels, sometimes viewing themselves not as exploited laborers but as "independent hustlers" in the digital economy (Fairwork, 2023; Rahman, 2022). This ideological construct depoliticizes labor by shifting responsibility for precarity onto the individual—masking the structural asymmetries between platform capital and digital labor.

In India, Ola and Uber marketing campaigns depict drivers as "self-made men," while obscuring the fact that they must meet quota targets, pay commissions, and absorb fuel costs. In Pakistan, Careem's corporate language stresses "flexibility" and "earning potential" even as its captains face 14-hour workdays with declining earnings (Yousafzai, 2023). This ideological framing is reinforced by state narratives that celebrate digital entrepreneurship as a national development goal (World Bank, 2020).

6.2 Algorithmic Control: The Rise of Soft Coercion

A second major finding is that **algorithmic governance** operates as a form of soft power, replacing traditional managerial oversight with opaque systems that control, monitor, and discipline gig workers. This shift aligns with Gramsci's notion of indirect domination through "invisible apparatuses" (Gramsci, 1971).

In Bangladesh, Pathao and Foodpanda riders report being suspended or penalized for low acceptance rates or customer complaints—yet they have no access to dispute resolution mechanisms (Rahman & Haque, 2022). In Sri Lanka, PickMe drivers claim they are punished for switching between platforms or taking breaks during "high-demand" windows controlled by app algorithms (ILO, 2023).

Algorithmic systems create behavioral norms by incentivizing speed, availability, and conformity. Workers are constantly evaluated, not by human supervisors but through ratings, GPS tracking, and task metrics. This form of "digital Taylorism" (Scholz, 2017) erodes agency and fosters self-discipline among workers, reinforcing hegemonic control without direct confrontation.

Moreover, platforms' data-driven architecture enables **asymmetric visibility**—companies see everything workers do, while workers see nothing about how algorithms make decisions. This power imbalance renders the worker not only precarious but also invisible and voiceless, a clear manifestation of ideological dominance under digital capitalism.

6.3 Labor Resistance: From Analog Protests to Digital Unionism

Despite the structural challenges, gig workers in South Asia have begun organizing **resistance movements**—albeit in fragmented, localized, and digital forms. These actions, while small-scale, represent emergent counter-hegemonic activity as defined by Gramsci: efforts to disrupt ideological consent and assert alternative visions of labor justice.

India

The Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) has emerged as a prominent labor platform, mobilizing drivers across Ola, Uber, Swiggy, and Zomato. They have staged multiple strikes, filed legal petitions, and demanded employee status under India's labor codes. In 2021, thousands of Swiggy workers in Bangalore coordinated a "log-off strike" using WhatsApp and Telegram, paralyzing the city's food delivery system for two days (Gurumurthy, 2022). These actions challenge platform hegemony by asserting collective worker identity and economic indispensability.

Pakistan

In Lahore and Karachi, Careem and Foodpanda riders have staged protest marches and launched online petitions demanding fair commissions, fuel subsidies, and grievance redress. A Facebook group called "Careem Captains Union" now has over 30,000 members who exchange wage information, protest strategies, and app manipulation tips (Yousafzai, 2023). Though not a formal union, it functions as a digital "organic intellectual" space—where counter-hegemonic consciousness is cultivated from below.

Bangladesh

Pathao riders organized a spontaneous strike in 2022 after the platform slashed bonuses during Eid holidays. Though the strike lacked formal leadership, coordination via messenger apps allowed workers to temporarily disrupt operations in Dhaka (Rahman, 2022). Local NGOs later helped articulate their demands into policy briefs submitted to the Labor Ministry.

Sri Lanka

While weaker in formal organizing, Sri Lankan platform workers have launched coordinated "app-switch" actions—logging off en masse from PickMe and switching to Uber or Bolt. These tactical protests signal dissatisfaction and exert economic pressure without directly violating labor laws. In Colombo, several drivers interviewed by local journalists expressed desire for union representation, citing "unfair cuts" and "algorithmic cruelty" (ILO, 2023).

6.4 Counter-Hegemony and its Limits

While these actions represent promising forms of resistance, several **constraints** limit their counter-hegemonic potential:

- **Fragmentation:** Most protests are localized and reactive, lacking sustained coordination or transnational solidarity.
- **Legal ambiguity:** Gig workers are often not legally classified as employees, denying them access to formal collective bargaining or legal protections.
- **Platform retaliation:** Deactivation or "shadow banning" of worker accounts acts as a deterrent, chilling resistance.
- **Consumer indifference:** Public sympathy often aligns with platform convenience, not labor justice, reinforcing hegemonic ideology.

Yet Gramsci reminds us that counter-hegemony does not emerge fully formed. It is a process of **"war of position,"** where workers must build alliances, develop organic intellectuals, and reshape common sense. The digital space, paradoxically, offers both tools of domination and spaces for resistance.

The rise of "gig workers' courts" in India, participatory mapping of rider incomes in Pakistan, and the development of app-based grievance trackers in Bangladesh all signal creative counter-hegemonic innovations. Some of these are supported by transnational actors like the Fairwork Project, which ranks platforms based on labor fairness, offering reputational leverage for worker demands (Fairwork, 2023).

6.5 The Role of the State and Civil Society

One of the most significant barriers to meaningful transformation is the **state's complicity** in digital labor precarity. In South Asia, governments have largely adopted a laissez-faire approach to platform regulation, framing them as innovation drivers and foreign investment channels. This alignment with platform capital reflects Gramsci's concept of the **"passive revolution"**—where change occurs not through mass empowerment but elite-led reforms that maintain existing power structures.

However, some legal and policy openings have emerged. Indian courts have begun questioning gig worker classification, and labor ministries in Pakistan and Bangladesh have acknowledged the need to "explore new protections" for digital workers. Civil society organizations—especially women's rights groups and digital rights NGOs—have started forming alliances with gig workers, recognizing overlaps between labor rights, data justice, and urban inequality.

The analysis shows that the gig economy in South Asia is not merely an economic shift, but an ideological and political reconfiguration of labor. Through Gramsci's lens, we see how consent is manufactured via entrepreneurship rhetoric, and how algorithmic infrastructures act as tools of invisible coercion. Yet, resistance is neither absent nor futile. From digital strikes to informal collectivization, workers are developing new grammars of

protest suited to their fragmented and surveilled conditions.

These actions may be small and precarious, but they matter: they destabilize hegemonic common sense and open political space for imagining labor futures beyond precarity. In this struggle between hegemonic normalization and counter-hegemonic resistance, the gig worker is not merely a victim—but an emergent agent of transformation.

7. Conclusion

The gig economy in South Asia, while hailed for its flexibility and innovation, is structurally rooted in digital precarity—marked by algorithmic control, weak legal protections, and exploitative work conditions. Using Gramsci's theory of hegemony, this study has shown how dominant neoliberal narratives frame gig work as entrepreneurial and empowering, masking underlying inequalities. Yet, resistance is emerging in fragmented but significant ways, as workers engage in app-based protests, digital unionization, and legal activism to challenge platform dominance. These acts represent early counter-hegemonic struggles that question the ideological and material foundations of platform capitalism. Although constrained by legal ambiguity and technological control, such resistance signals a growing consciousness and collective agency among gig workers. To ensure just digital futures, there is an urgent need to reframe policy, recognize workers' rights, and support grassroots labor movements across the region.

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