

“Internet Shutdowns and its impact on Gig and Platform Workers of India”: A case study of gig and platform workers of Rajasthan and Telangana

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For :



**TELANGANA
GIG AND
PLATFORM
WORKERS
UNION**

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Contents

Introduction.....	4
Rationale.....	6
Methodology.....	7
Sampling.....	8
Demography.....	8
Findings.....	8
Survey.....	9
Workshop.....	10
Observations.....	11
Solutions/Safeguards.....	11
Suggestions.....	12
Interviews.....	13
Limitations.....	14
Conclusion.....	14
Acknowledgement.....	16

Introduction

The internet is a vital resource for many workers in India, especially those who are part of the gig and platform economy. Gig and platform workers perform short-term or on-demand tasks through online platforms or apps; work such as food delivery, ride-hailing, domestic work, etc. Well-known examples of these platforms or apps are Uber and UberEATS that operate globally, and in India the dominant players and their competitors are Ola and Swiggy. These platforms or apps have grown exponentially since 2010 with ease in availability of affordable smartphones in India¹. These workers are often classified as independent contractors, own-account, or self-employed workers, and are not entitled to the same rights and benefits as regular employees. They also face various challenges such as low and irregular income, lack of social security, algorithmic management, and high competition.

Between 2016 and 2022, India accounted for about 60% of all internet shutdowns recorded worldwide². In 2022 alone, India imposed 84 internet shutdowns, more than any other country. According to a study by the Software Freedom Law Center, India, India has suffered a loss of 174.6 million dollars in the year 2022 alone due to internet shutdowns³. Internet shutdowns are a violation of the fundamental right to freedom of expression and information, as well as the right to work and livelihood. They also undermine the potential of the gig and platform economy to create employment opportunities and economic growth for millions of Indians. Therefore, it is imperative that internet shutdowns are avoided or minimized, and that gig and platform workers are protected from their adverse impacts.

However, gig and platform work also face challenges other than internet shutdown in urban settings, such as lack of reliable internet access, disruption of internet services and dead zones. Internet access is essential for gig and platform workers to find, accept, and complete tasks, as well as to communicate with clients, platforms or apps, and other workers. Without internet access, gig and platform workers cannot

1 "How India is shaping the global smartphone market - CNBC." 21 Sep. 2016,

<https://www.cnbcm.com/2016/09/21/how-india-is-shaping-the-global-smartphone-market.html>.

2 "India, world's largest democracy, leads global list of internet shutdowns- CNN." 1 Mar. 2023,

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/01/tech/internet-shutdowns-india-report-intl-hnk/index.html>.

3 "Internet Shutdowns in India 2022 - SFLC.in." 23 Dec. 2022, <https://sflc.in/internet-shutdowns-india-2022/>.

participate in the digital economy and earn their living. Gig and platform workers in metropolitan cities experience frequent cellular network disruptions or dead zones due to the poor cellular coverage, environmental, geographical, or infrastructural factors. These interruptions can affect the quality and promptness of their work, as well as their ratings and reputation on the platforms or apps. In some cases, workers may even lose their tasks, earnings or accounts due to connectivity issues.

Internet shutdowns and internet dead zones are two phenomena that affect the access and quality of online services in India. There has been consequential research work conducted on internet shutdown and internet dead zones in India. Both phenomena negatively impact the populace and cripple public mobility and limit access to information, education, health care, entertainment, work and other online based services and activities. The works of Rajat Kathuria et al⁴, articles in The Indian Express⁵ and Access Now⁶, on internet shutdown, examine the causes, consequences, and legality of internet shutdowns in India. Articles in The Economic Times⁷ and The Economist⁸, provide insights into the causes and consequences of internet dead zones in urban areas of India. These research papers and articles provide a macro understanding of the issues related to internet shutdown and internet dead zones in India. A targeted approach will help in contextual understanding of the concerns of the populace focused on, specifically the gig and platform workers w.r.t internet shutdown and internet dead zones.

A case study of gig and platform workers of Rajasthan and Telangana was proposed. The gig and platform workers describe their understanding about internet shutdowns and internet dead zones and then they are provided with additional information and tools to manage it. The research that would follow this exercise would not only articulate the comprehension and experience of the gig and platform workers w.r.t the phenomena but also evaluate the effectiveness of the information shared with them

4 "The Anatomy of an INTERNET BLACKOUT: Measuring the Economic Impact of Internet Shutdowns in India." <https://think-asia.org/handle/11540/8248>.

5 "India's Internet shutdowns explained - The Indian Express." 2 Jul. 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-the-frequency-reasons-and-controversy-over-internet-suspensions-by-the-government-8005450/>.

6 "Five years in a row: India is 2022's biggest internet shutdowns offender." 28 Feb. 2023, <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-india/>.

7 "Network effect: dead zones are breaking the back of India's new Internet-based service providers." 26 Jul. 2018, <https://m.economictimes.com/prime/technology-and-startups/network-effect-how-dead-zones-are-breaking-the-back-of-indias-new-internet-service-providers/primearticleshow/65131367.cms>.

8 "India's rocketing internet-user growth has stalled - The Economist." 12 Jan. 2023, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/01/12/indias-rocketing-internet-user-growth-has-stalled>.

w.r.t how to address their effects on their lives and livelihood. The report developed analyzes the initial response of the gig and platform workers of Rajasthan and Telangana to develop an understanding of what are the opinions and perceptions of the gig and platform workers w.r.t internet shutdown and internet dead zones in their cities. The subsequent session for the gig and platform workers provides them with information for understanding internet shutdown, the mechanics, and politics behind it. The factors that lead to internet dead zones will also be discussed with the participants. The session also focuses on what are the interventions that can be availed to address internet shutdown and countermeasures to circumvent internet shutdown in their respective areas. They will also be reassessed to examine how much information they have absorbed and what are the gaps that would need to be addressed so that they can effectively utilize the tools and resources they have been supplied with.

Rationale

Through this exercise and the subsequent research work it is expected that the perspective of the gig and platform workers w.r.t internet shutdown and internet dead zones can be presented. This exercise initially investigates the impact of the two phenomena on the lives and livelihood of the gig and platform workers. Then the workers are educated and informed through a workshop on how they can address the complications that are caused due to internet shutdown and internet dead zones and how they can equip themselves to safeguard their data rights and privacy. The subsequent report that has been developed chronicles these activities and the impact and the implications of this complete exercise on the lives and livelihood of the gig and platform workers. The existing research work provides valuable insights into the emerging phenomenon of gig and platform work in India and its implications for workers' rights, welfare, and empowerment. They also highlight the need for more research and dialogue on this topic, especially in light of the frequent internet shutdowns that disrupt gig and platform work and affect millions of lives and livelihoods.

The research that has been undertaken is expected to gather inputs on certain issues and educate the gig and platform workers in the process:

- Whether gig and platform workers have any notion on why the Govt. needs to shut down the internet and are there alternatives other than shutting down the internet to achieve those objectives.
- Understand the impact of internet shutdowns and internet dead zones on the lives of gig and platform workers and their family members through their accounts.
- Take an account of the lived experiences of female gig and platform workers, in terms of the financial, personal, physical, emotional, mental aspects of their lives being affected by internet shutdown and internet dead zones.
- *To provide an explanation for the sudden loss of internet connection in certain areas and regions, the reasons and factors behind internet dead zones.*

Methodology

There are three components of the exercise, the first part was an online survey where data was collected through Google forms from gig and platform workers in Jaipur and Hyderabad. In the second part participants from Jaipur and Hyderabad who were part of workers collectives initially reached out to, were educated, and informed by a legal expert and trainer in an online Zoom workshop. They were informed about the machinations and systems in place for shutting down the internet in a city. They were also educated about how internet dead zones occur in particular areas, the causes and factors that lead to it. The impact of internet shutdown and internet dead zones on their lives and livelihood was cataloged and they were made aware of processes and digital tools they can utilize to bypass internet shutdown in their respective cities. In the final portion of the exercise, the participants of the workshop were revisited to assess how much they have held onto the information they have been provided. What additional aid and resources they may require to apply successfully the information they have been shared in the event of an internet shutdown was also discussed with them. The report that has been developed thus uses primary quantitative data collected from the survey and analyzes the qualitative information collected from the online workshop and from the subsequent interviews with the participants of the workshop. The research work that has been undertaken here employs a mixed methodological approach.

Sampling

Convenience sampling has been utilized in selecting the sample population and fixing the sample size for collecting data from the participants of this research. The participants were from Rajasthan and Telangana, two states selected based on the prerequisites of the exercise. The number of respondents partaking in the online survey was 103. They were reached out through the gatekeepers of the workers' collectives they are part of. The participants (10) in the online workshop had an optimum gender ratio of 50% male and 50% female participants. They were invited by the representatives of the workers' collectives and were approached arbitrarily.

Demography

The participants in the research were in the age group of 25 - 34 years of age. Most of the participants had completed their Class 12th education. The number of female participants was less, in the follow up assessment quite a few of them did not participate in the interviews. There was a larger participation observed from Jaipur, Rajasthan in the survey and the workshop. The participants were working as ride hailing, delivery, and on demand service providers. The larger section of the participants were bike taxi drivers and delivery service providers.

Findings

Data has been collected from the survey, workshop and interviews and they have been analyzed. The insights that can be gleaned from it provides a better understanding of how gig and platform workers perceive internet shutdowns and internet dead zones. The impact these phenomena have on their lives and livelihood and what are their opinions on the justifications provided for the necessity of an internet shutdown can be observed from their responses. Who do they hold accountable for it and how do they want these issues resolved? Their comments, suggestions and feedback on the information and training they have been provided build a narrative on the social, economic and mental impact internet shutdowns and internet dead zones have on them and their family.

Survey

The online survey was started in March 2023, and ended in April 2023. It has had 103 responses from two states Rajasthan and Telangana. It was observed that the largest section of the respondents were male (98.1%)⁹ in the age group of 25 - 34 (57.3%) driving motorcycles (75.7%) from Rajasthan (84.5%). From the responses it was also evident that most of the respondents worked on multiple apps providing ride hailing/sharing or delivery services on bike taxis (73.7%). Almost all the respondents (95.1%) are working full time, they are dependent on this work for their household survival.

The respondents (22.3%) informed that they had faced internet shutdown in their respective states more than 9 times this year itself, and these have been driven by the Govts. strategy to curb cheating in examinations (82.9%). These shutdowns have led to significant loss of income for the respondents. These shutdowns have also affected the daily lives of the respondents, 56.3% have informed about the negative impact of it. The respondents also informed how during the job or trip they were completing they lost internet connections, it was reported they lost connections at least 10-20 times (68%) last year which led to loss of payment or earnings (96.1%). From the responses the three major reasons for loss of earnings based on the inputs of the respondents can be listed as:

- Due to bad internet service (62.1%)
- Due to low network coverage (49.5%)
- Due to the location (42.1%)

The respondents were aware of the impact of internet shutdown and low connectivity (internet dead zones) (89.3%), they also expected the app-based companies they work for to resolve these issues. Overall, almost half of the respondents (49.5%) were not happy with the internet service and connectivity in their states. They expected solutions to be provided by the State and Central Govt. The internet service providers and their employers (app-based companies) were also expected to intervene in this matter to resolve their grievances. The respondents emphasized on the loss of income due to continuous and widespread

⁹ There have been only 2 female respondents, who were working for Urban Company and Swiggy on a part time basis.

internet shutdowns, they had some safeguards for areas where internet services are patchy or inaccessible; avoid those areas or ask the customer to resolve the online payment before entering these areas or ask for cash only payment.

Workshop

The online workshop was conducted with the gig and platform workers from Jaipur and Hyderabad. The participants were informed that they could provide a pseudonym for the Zoom call to protect their identity. There was a legal expert and trainers to educate and inform the workers about internet shutdown and internet dead zones, the mechanics, politics, and factors that drive and cause these phenomena. The trainer also worked with the participants of the workshop on tools, and strategies to circumvent internet shutdowns. The participants were encouraged to share their views on internet shutdown and suggest solutions they expected from agencies, authorities, service providers and their employers, the app-based companies.

The first item on the agenda of the workshop was *“to understand the impact of the internet shutdown”* on the personal lives of the participants and on the lives of their family members. Each participant shared their opinions and suggested some steps that the Govt. and the app-based companies could take which would allow them to work through an internet shutdown. The second item focused on the history of internet shutdown, the legal and legislative protocols in place for implementing it. The legal expert also informed about the current development w.r.t the legal recourse pursued by concerned citizens and organizations to dissuade the Govt. from taking advantage of their authority over internet shutdown. In the final section of the workshop the participants were educated on the systems and techniques the Govt. employs to implement internet shutdown.

The observations, of the participants w.r.t internet shutdown and internet dead zones, the solutions, and safeguards that the participants have developed to tackle these phenomena and the suggestions of the participants, experts, and trainers to address them can be detailed as:

Observations

- The participants were of the view that the foremost reason informed by the Govt. for internet shutdown, *“to stop exam paper leak and cheating in exam”* falls flat as cheating and paper leaks ^{[10][11]} are still being reported irrespective of the shutdown.
- There is also the issue of how internet access in shutdown is also dependent on the privilege position of the individual in the society, the association and affiliation with state run agencies and authorities, and the corporates. The marginalized and vulnerable section of the society, the gig and platform workers whose livelihood is dependent on internet access are left in the lurch.
- The participants also pointed to the fact that internet shutdown costs millions in revenue loss for the state and creates hardships for the candidates who are giving the exams for which the internet has been shut down. There are unscrupulous individuals literally taking these candidates for a ride. With no internet to run maps or book on demand ride hailing/sharing services these individuals who offer to provide transport made a killing, by demanding exorbitant fares. With no alternatives, candidates who come from far away cities to the exam centers are forced to bow to these swindlers.
- The participants also acknowledged the severe mental stress that they are under due to internet shutdown. The loss of earnings due to internet shutdown forces them to engage in multiple jobs; daily wage work, construction work, unskilled labor, housekeeping etc. This takes a toll on their bodies and on their mind as they try to scrape together money for their survival.

Solutions/Safeguards

- The participants also came up with ways to tackle internet shutdown, utilizing state resources and infrastructure. In the event of internet shutdown go to state run libraries and other institutions where internet services are kept operational.

10 "Telangana SSC question paper leaked by invigilator; 4 officials suspended" 4 Apr. 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/hyderabad/telangana-ssc-question-paper-leaked-invigilator-officials-8536774/>.

11 "Testing times: Rajasthan govt's failure to plug question paper leaks." 20 Feb. 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/jaipur/testing-times-rajasthan-govt-failure-to-plug-question-paper-leaks-8455665/>.

- The bike taxi operators informed that based on where exam centers are located, they ply in and around areas close to the exam center and at bus stands and railway stations to pick and drop candidates coming in from outside the city for the exam.
- The participants also informed that they negotiate with the customers in advance if they are traveling to parts of the city where the internet and communication services are unreliable, and request the customer to switch to cash only payment.

Suggestions

- *The state should be held accountable and compensate for the loss of earnings of the gig and platform workers due to internet shutdown.* The participants suggested that the State Govt. should provide a stipend for the gig and platform workers for each day the internet is shut down in the state proportional to the previous earnings of the workers. It was also suggested that the internet service providers should carry forward the data unutilized during shutdowns. With the rise in the price of internet packs this demand becomes necessary and prudent.
- The participants also suggested that the State Govt. could ensure that location-based services and payment portals remain functional during the internet shutdown. If it is imperative to shut down the internet the state agencies should allow on demand online services to remain operational as the gig and platform workers depend on their daily earnings for covering their EMI and running their household.
- The need for building collectives and collaborations with different organizations, and individuals who will provide the necessary support to ensure that “*internet as a fundamental right for all*” can be guaranteed by the law and legislation.

Interviews

In person interviews were conducted at location, Hyderabad, and Jaipur, with the participants, only 7 participants agreed to be part of the reassessment. Informative content on internet shutdown, rights w.r.t access to internet services, how to circumvent internet shutdowns etc. were also shared with the participants, these contents were in Hindi for easy comprehension.

The interviews were informal, and the questions open ended, prior to the interview the written consent was taken from the participants for recording the interviews. The participants were in the age group of 25-50 years, most of the participants were graduates and quite few of them have been working with app-based companies for more than 5 years. The women participants informed that they had just joined in with their app-based companies, only 1 year into their work. All the participants contributed significantly to their household income, and most of them were working for multiple platforms or apps.

They were also of the view that any solution to internet shutdown and internet dead zones should come from the State Govt. The Govt. should be held answerable for the hardships caused to gig and platform workers due to these phenomena. The workers collectives should lead the discussion and negotiation with state agencies and authorities to ensure genuine representation of the gig and platform workers. The participants were open to similar workshops but recommended that there needs to be practical physical sessions where the application of the processes and digital tools in real life situations is possible.

Limitations

The limitations or shortcomings of this exercise and the subsequent research work on gig and platform workers and internet shutdown and internet dead zones can be listed as:

- Lack of participants, the sample size was very small, and the number of workers part of the workshop was also restricted. The information thus collected cannot be generalized, the analysis does provide a rudimentary understanding of the issues and concerns of gig and platform workers w.r.t to the phenomena.
- Limited time frame for the implementation of the workshop and to conduct subsequent interviews. Due to the nature of the work and schedule of gig and platform workers, they are always on the clock or job; this also led to some of the workers not being able to participate in the workshop and interviews.

Conclusion

The overall outcome of the exercise, the survey, the workshop, and the interviews has been to establish that access to the internet is a fundamental right in this day and age. The state actions claiming the need for upholding law and order and public harmony does not allow it to deprive the gig and platform workers of their income, voice and agency. The Govt., internet service providers, and app-based companies all have a role to play in addressing the challenges faced by gig and platform workers due to internet shutdowns. The major issues that can be assessed to be of concern for the gig and platform workers due to the phenomena are:

- **Loss of income:** When the internet is shut down, the gig and platform workers are unable to work. This leads to a loss of income, which can be devastating for these workers, who often rely on their income to support their families.
- **Increased stress:** The uncertainty of when and where internet shutdowns will occur can cause a great deal of stress for the gig and platform workers. They worry about being able to make ends meet, and they also worry about their safety.

- **Reduced access to essential services:** When the internet is shut down, the gig and platform workers have reduced access to essential services such as banking, healthcare, and education. This can have a significant impact on their lives.

It was also observed that most of the participants in this exercise held the Govt. responsible for internet shutdown and expected solutions from them. The recommendations to the Govt. to address the challenges faced by the gig and platform workers can be listed as:

- The Govt. should develop clear and transparent guidelines for when internet shutdowns can be used, and these guidelines should be strictly adhered to.
- The Govt. should provide financial assistance to gig and platform workers who are affected by internet shutdowns.
- The Govt. should work with internet service providers to ensure that gig and platform workers have access to the internet, even during internet shutdowns.
- The Govt. should work with app-based companies to develop policies that protect the rights of gig and platform workers, including the right to access the internet.

The research work has highlighted the need for further investigation on the impact of internet shutdowns and internet dead zones on gig and platform workers. Future research should focus on understanding the long-term impacts of internet shutdowns and internet dead zones on the lives and livelihood of gig and platform workers, as well as on developing effective strategies to mitigate these impacts. Moving forward this exercise has also helped connect gig and platform workers with a legal expert, a trainer working on establishing free access to the internet, worker collectives operating in different cities and organizations that can provide knowledge-based support. The worker collectives and the workers at this point need to discuss amongst themselves how they will move forward with the information they have. What recourse they can use and what are the resources and support they would require to accomplish their undertakings. Gig and platform workers should be organized and empowered to advocate for their rights and to demand that the Govt. and app-based companies take steps to protect them from the negative impacts of internet shutdowns and internet dead zones.

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