

Speed at What Cost? Working Conditions in India's Quick-Commerce Industry

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Abstract— India's quick-commerce industry has witnessed rapid growth by promising ultra-fast delivery of groceries and daily essentials, often within 10–15 minutes. While this model offers high convenience to consumers, it has raised growing concerns regarding the working conditions of delivery partners who form the backbone of these platforms. This paper examines the impact of speed-driven operational models on worker earnings, safety, and wellbeing in India's quick-commerce sector. Using secondary data from news reports, policy documents, and industry studies, along with a focused case study of Blinkit, the study highlights how algorithmic management, incentive-based pay, and delivery pressure affect gig workers. The findings indicate that excessive emphasis on speed shifts operational risk onto workers. The paper concludes with recommendations for platforms and policymakers to balance efficiency with labour welfare.

Keywords— Quick commerce, Gig economy, Delivery partners, Working conditions, Blinkit, India

I. INTRODUCTION

Quick-commerce (q-commerce) refers to the hyperlocal delivery of groceries and essential goods within extremely short timeframes, usually ranging from 10 to 15 minutes. In India, this sector has grown rapidly due to rising urbanization, smartphone penetration, and changing consumer preferences for instant services. Platforms such as Blinkit, Zepto, and Swiggy Instamart have expanded aggressively across metropolitan and tier-1 cities. The operational success of quick-commerce depends heavily on a large workforce of delivery partners operating under gig-based arrangements. These workers are responsible for meeting strict delivery timelines while navigating traffic congestion, weather conditions, and fluctuating demand. While customers benefit from speed and convenience, delivery partners often face intense work pressure, income instability, and limited social protection. Recent public discussions and worker protests have brought attention to the human cost of ultra-fast delivery models. This paper explores whether the promise of speed in quick-commerce comes at the expense of fair and safe working conditions.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE QUICK-COMMERCE BUSINESS MODEL

A. Dark Store-Based Operations

Quick-commerce platforms operate through small fulfilment centres known as dark stores. These stores are strategically located near residential areas to reduce delivery time. Inventory is limited to high-demand products, enabling faster order picking and dispatch.

B. Gig Worker Dependency

Delivery partners are typically classified as independent contractors rather than full-time employees. This classification allows platforms flexibility and cost efficiency but limits workers' access to benefits such as fixed wages, paid leave, and long-term job security. Earnings are largely performance-based and vary depending on incentives and demand.

III. WORKING CONDITIONS IN QUICK-COMMERCE

A. Earnings and Incentive Structures

Delivery partner earnings usually consist of base pay per order, distance-based payments, and performance incentives. While platforms advertise high earning potential, actual income often depends on peak-hour availability and incentive schemes. Changes in incentive structures can significantly affect daily earnings, leading to financial uncertainty.

B. Time Pressure and Safety Risks

Ultra-fast delivery promises create indirect pressure on delivery partners to complete orders quickly. Although platforms emphasize safety guidelines, tight delivery windows and customer ratings can influence rider behavior, increasing the risk of accidents. Long working hours further contribute to physical and mental fatigue.

C. Algorithmic Management

Quick-commerce platforms rely on algorithmic systems to allocate orders, monitor performance, and calculate payouts. Limited transparency in these systems reduces worker autonomy and creates uncertainty regarding penalties, suspensions, or reduced incentives.

IV. CASE STUDY: BLINKIT

Blinkit, formerly known as Grofers, is one of India's leading quick-commerce platforms. The company shifted its focus to ultra-fast delivery around 2021, promising deliveries within minutes through an extensive network of dark stores.

A. Earnings Model at Blinkit

Blinkit delivery partners are paid per order, with additional incentives during peak demand periods. While promotional messaging highlights attractive earnings, worker experiences suggest that income is highly variable and dependent on incentive availability. Reduced incentives during non-peak hours can lower effective hourly earnings.

B. Delivery Pressure and Work Environment

Blinkit's emphasis on rapid delivery creates perceived urgency among delivery partners. Riders often wait near dark stores that lack basic facilities such as seating, shade, or drinking water. During extreme weather conditions, these challenges intensify, affecting worker wellbeing.

C. Worker Concerns

Delivery partners have raised concerns regarding declining payouts, safety risks, and limited grievance redressal mechanisms. These issues reflect broader challenges faced by gig workers across the quick-commerce industry.

V. POLICY AND REGULATORY CONTEXT

India has taken initial steps to recognize gig and platform workers through the Code on Social Security, 2020. The Code provides a framework for welfare schemes, including insurance and social security benefits. However, implementation remains limited, and awareness among workers is low. Stronger enforcement and clearer guidelines are required to ensure meaningful protection for gig workers in the quick-commerce sector.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis indicates that quick-commerce platforms prioritize speed and efficiency, often transferring operational risk to delivery partners. Key findings include income instability due to incentive dependence, increased safety risks from delivery pressure, inadequate workplace facilities, and limited regulatory enforcement. The Blinkit case study illustrates how these issues manifest in real-world operations.

VII. CONCLUSION

India's quick-commerce industry has reshaped urban consumption by offering unmatched speed and convenience. However, this study finds that the cost of speed is frequently borne by delivery partners through financial uncertainty, safety risks, and challenging working conditions. For the sector to grow sustainably, platforms must integrate worker welfare into their business strategies, and policymakers must ensure effective labour protections. Balancing innovation with fairness is essential for ethical and inclusive growth.

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