

# Platformization and Collective Bargaining in India: A Mixed-Method Case Study of Ride-Hailing and Food Delivery Workers

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**Abstract-** The rapid expansion of platform-mediated work has significantly reconfigured the terrain of industrial relations (IR) in India. Ride-hailing and food delivery platforms such as Uber, Ola, Rapido, Zomato, and Swiggy have generated large-scale employment opportunities while simultaneously operating outside conventional employer–employee frameworks. This paper examines how platformization has reshaped collective bargaining, worker representation, and regulatory engagement within the Indian context. Drawing on a mixed-method research design that integrates policy analysis, review of judicial pronouncements, secondary statistical data, and qualitative interviews with platform workers and union representatives, the study investigates the evolving nature of employment relations, the scope of collective action, and the implications of the Labour Codes, 2020.

The findings reveal that although the Code on Social Security, 2020 formally recognizes gig and platform workers, substantive collective bargaining rights remain underdeveloped. Algorithmic management systems, unilateral incentive structures, and contractual classifications as “independent contractors” limit workers’ ability to negotiate wages and working conditions through institutionalized IR mechanisms. Judicial interventions and emerging state-level regulatory initiatives indicate a gradual shift toward formal oversight; however, enforcement gaps and ambiguities in employment status continue to constrain effective industrial dialogue. Strikes and collective protests demonstrate growing worker consciousness, yet the absence of statutory recognition of bargaining agents restricts durable outcomes.

From an industrial relations perspective, the study argues that India’s platform economy requires a reimagined regulatory framework that balances flexibility with social protection, institutionalizes collective representation, and strengthens tripartite engagement. The paper contributes to contemporary IR scholarship by situating platform work within broader debates on labour commodification, regulatory reform, and the future of collective bargaining in emerging economies.

**Keywords:** Platformization; Gig Economy; Platform Workers; Collective Bargaining; Industrial Relations; Algorithmic Management; Digital Labour; Employment Classification; Dependent Contracting; Industrial Relations Code, 2020; Code on Social Security, 2020; Trade Union Recognition; Strike Regulation; Labour Law Reform in India; Ride-Hailing Sector; Food Delivery Platforms; Algorithmic Governance; Worker Representation; Precarious Work; Tripartite Social Dialogue; Platform Industrial Relations Model (RPEC Model).

## I. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of digital labour platforms over the past decade has fundamentally altered the structure of work and employment relations across the globe. In India, the rapid growth of ride-hailing and food-delivery services particularly through platforms such as Uber, Ola, Rapido, Zomato, and Swiggy has created new income opportunities for millions of workers while simultaneously challenging established industrial relations (IR) institutions. These platforms operate through algorithmic management systems that mediate work allocation, pricing, performance evaluation, and disciplinary control, thereby reshaping traditional notions of supervision and managerial authority. Yet, despite exercising substantial control over work processes, platforms classify workers as independent contractors rather than employees, positioning themselves outside conventional employer–employee frameworks.

This transformation, often described as “platformization,” has profound implications for industrial relations in India. Historically, Indian IR has evolved around identifiable employers, collective bargaining structures, trade unions, and state-mediated dispute resolution mechanisms. However, platform-mediated work blurs these institutional boundaries. Workers engage

individually with digital interfaces rather than human supervisors; contractual terms are standardized and non-negotiable; and grievance redressal mechanisms are largely internal to the platform. As a result, traditional IR instruments collective bargaining agreements, conciliation proceedings, and strike regulations are difficult to operationalize within the gig economy.

The legal landscape in India has begun to respond to these developments. The Code on Social Security, 2020 recognizes gig and platform workers as a distinct category and mandates the creation of social security schemes funded partly by aggregators. While this legislative recognition marks a significant step toward formal inclusion, it does not resolve the fundamental question of employment status nor does it institutionalize collective bargaining rights. Judicial interventions and state-level initiatives have further highlighted the tensions between flexibility, regulation, and worker protection, underscoring the evolving nature of labour governance in the platform economy.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how platformization is reshaping collective bargaining and industrial relations in India's ride-hailing and food-delivery sectors. Focusing on Uber, Ola, Rapido, Zomato, and Swiggy, the paper explores three interrelated dimensions: (1) the nature of the worker–platform relationship and its implications for employment classification; (2) the emergence, limitations, and prospects of collective organization and strike action among platform workers; and (3) the effectiveness of recent labour reforms and judicial interventions in addressing industrial disputes within the gig economy.

Adopting a mixed-method research design, this study integrates policy analysis, legal review, secondary statistical data, and qualitative insights from worker narratives and union activities. By situating empirical evidence within broader IR theory, the paper seeks to contribute to scholarly debates on labour market transformation, regulatory adaptation, and the future of collective representation in emerging economies. Ultimately, it argues that while India's regulatory reforms acknowledge the existence of platform workers, a coherent industrial relations framework capable of reconciling flexibility with fairness remains underdeveloped.

In doing so, the study advances the proposition that the governance of platform work in India demands not merely incremental legal adjustments but a structural rethinking of collective bargaining institutions, tripartite dialogue, and the definition of employment itself in the digital age.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on platform work, industrial relations, and collective bargaining spans labour law, sociology, human resource management, public policy, and development studies. This section synthesises international and Indian academic scholarship, policy reports, judicial commentary, and media documentation to situate the present study within existing research.

### Conceptualising Platform Work and Industrial Relations (Global Context)

Platform work has been widely conceptualised as labour mediated through digital infrastructures that algorithmically allocate tasks, monitor performance, and regulate payment systems (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). The International Labour Organization (ILO) notes that digital labour platforms disrupt traditional employment relationships by blurring employer–employee distinctions and weakening collective bargaining institutions (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021).

De Stefano (2016) argues that gig work represents a “just-in-time workforce,” where workers are formally independent but functionally subordinated through economic dependency and digital control. Similarly, Veen, Barratt, and Goods (2020) demonstrate that algorithmic management often replicates managerial control mechanisms found in standard employment, thereby questioning the legitimacy of independent contractor classifications.

European scholarship highlights significant regulatory shifts. For instance, the UK Supreme Court ruling in *Uber BV v. Aslam* (2021) recognised Uber drivers as “workers” entitled to minimum wage and paid leave protections (UK Supreme Court, 2021). Spain's “Rider Law” mandated employment recognition for food delivery riders (European Commission, 2021). These developments illustrate an emerging global recognition of dependent platform labour.

### Platformisation and Labour Precarity in India

Indian scholarship situates platform work within the broader context of informality and precarious employment. Bhowmik (2019) argues that India's gig economy extends the logic of informalisation rather than formal employment expansion. Ghosh (2020) similarly notes that digitalisation in India often results in labour commodification without commensurate regulatory safeguards.

Legal analyses suggest that gig workers remain excluded from core labour protections such as minimum wages, provident fund, and industrial dispute mechanisms (Legal Service India, 2023). The National Law Institute University (NLIU) commentary describes gig workers' employment status as "legally unsettled," particularly in relation to the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 (Centre for Labour Laws, NLIU, 2023).

Empirical studies conducted among delivery workers in metropolitan cities reveal earnings volatility, opaque incentive structures, and limited grievance redressal (Sengupta & Jha, 2022). These findings are consistent with worker narratives reported in national media documenting income insecurity and arbitrary deactivations (Times of India, 2024).

#### Algorithmic Management and Power Imbalance

Algorithmic management is central to platformisation. Woodcock and Graham (2020) describe how digital control replaces direct supervision while maintaining tight managerial authority. Veen et al. (2020) argue that rating systems and incentive algorithms function as disciplinary tools.

In India, field-based studies show that ride-hailing drivers working with Uber and Ola experience declining fare structures and shifting bonus schemes, undermining economic predictability (Bhowmik, 2019). Workers report that algorithmic decisions lack transparency, reducing their capacity to contest wage calculations or deactivation decisions (Sengupta & Jha, 2022).

#### Collective Action and Emerging Worker Organisations

Despite legal ambiguities, platform workers in India have begun organising collectively. The Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT) and Telangana Gig and Platform Workers' Union (TGPWU) have mobilised strikes and filed petitions

seeking social security and regulatory intervention (Economic Times, 2023).

However, platforms largely refuse formal recognition of such bodies as bargaining agents (Deccan Chronicle, 2024). Academic commentary suggests that the absence of statutory recognition under the Industrial Relations Code weakens collective bargaining potential (Centre for Labour Laws, NLIU, 2023).

Internationally, ILO (2021) reports that while collective agreements involving platform workers are increasing globally, they remain limited and often dependent on judicial reclassification of employment status.

#### Legal Framework and Judicial Developments in India

India's Code on Social Security, 2020 formally recognises gig and platform workers as a separate category and mandates social security contributions from aggregators (Government of India, 2020a). However, the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 does not extend collective bargaining rights explicitly to gig workers (Government of India, 2020b).

Judicial interventions have begun addressing regulatory gaps. In 2025, the Rajasthan High Court directed mandatory registration of platform-based drivers, emphasising safety and compliance mechanisms (Rajasthan High Court, 2025). Public Interest Litigations before the Supreme Court have sought recognition of gig workers' entitlement to social security protections under constitutional guarantees of livelihood and dignity (Chambers & Partners, 2023).

At the state level, Telangana proposed dedicated legislation for gig and platform workers, signalling sub-national experimentation in labour governance (Times of India, 2025).

#### Media Reporting and Ground Realities:

Media investigations consistently highlight wage instability, rising fuel costs, incentive reductions, and limited insurance coverage among workers of Uber, Ola, Swiggy, Zomato, and Rapido (Economic Times, 2023; Times of India, 2024). News commentaries argue that while platform companies emphasise flexibility and entrepreneurship, workers experience economic dependence and limited bargaining capacity (AP News, 2020).

Such reporting complements academic findings, reinforcing that platform work in India exists in a regulatory grey zone—formally recognised yet institutionally weak in collective representation.

#### Research Gap

While global scholarship provides strong theoretical foundations on platform capitalism and algorithmic control, and Indian literature documents precariousness and legal ambiguity, there remains limited mixed-method, comparative case study research that integrates:

- Worker narratives across multiple platforms (Uber, Ola, Rapido, Swiggy, Zomato)
- Judicial developments and labour codes
- Industrial relations theory
- Collective bargaining practices

This study addresses that gap by situating Indian platform workers within a structured IR analytical framework.

### III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK UNDER THE NEW LABOUR CODES (INDIA)

India's recent labour law overhaul consolidated 29 pre-existing labour statutes into four comprehensive labour codes that came into effect from 21 November 2025. These reforms aim to expand social protection, simplify compliance, and incorporate previously excluded worker categories including *gig* and *platform workers* into the statutory ambit.

#### Code on Wages, 2019

The Code on Wages replaces multiple wage-related laws to establish:

- Universal Minimum Wage applicable to all workers irrespective of sector or employment category
- Timely payment of wages with prescribed limits on deductions
- Equal remuneration across gender and categories

**Relevance to Platform Workers:** Although the Code does not explicitly classify gig platform workers as employees, its minimum wage and payment safeguards could be extended to them depending on judicial review and regulatory rules, addressing a

major gap in previous frameworks where informal workers lacked statutory wage protections (ILO, 2021).

#### Industrial Relations Code, 2020

The Industrial Relations Code (IRC) unifies legislation on trade unions, industrial disputes, lay-offs, retrenchment conditions, and strikes.

Key aspects include:

- **Trade Union Recognition:** Establishes criteria for a “negotiating union” with majority support among workers.
- **Regulated Strikes and Lockouts:** Requires advance notice and defines permissible conditions and timelines.
- **Dispute Resolution Machinery:** Streamlines industrial tribunals and conciliation procedures

**Relevance to Platform Workers:** Platform workers are not categorised as employees under the IRC, which limits their direct access to its collective bargaining and dispute settlement mechanisms. However, evolving court interpretations may impact the applicability of IRC provisions to gig workers depending on legal challenges to employment status (ILO, 2021).

#### Code on Social Security, 2020

The Social Security Code is the most transformative for platform and gig workers, introducing:

##### a. Recognition of Gig and Platform Workers

The Code provides formal statutory definitions for:

- *Gig workers*
- *Platform workers*
- *Aggregators* (entities, e.g., Uber, Zomato, that engage these workers)

Formal recognition brings previously excluded worker categories within the scope of labour law protections.

##### b. Social Security Benefits and Portability

The Social Security Code enables:

- Portable social security benefits through the e-Shram portal with Aadhaar-linked Universal Account Numbers.

- Coverage for health insurance, accident cover, pensions, maternity benefits, skill training, and emergency support.
- A national worker database to inform policy and monitor coverage.

This is a major departure from prior laws where non-employees were often excluded from provident fund and other statutory welfare schemes (ILO, 2021).

#### c. Aggregator Contributions

The Code mandates aggregators to contribute a defined percentage (typically 1–2% of annual turnover) to a Social Security Fund for gig workers, with caps related to payments due to workers.

This creates a shared funding architecture for worker welfare.

Relevance: These provisions formalise welfare obligations for platforms regardless of their employment status argument, helping bridge protections previously absent for the gig workforce (ILO, 2021; AP News, 2020).

#### Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020

This Code consolidates safety, health, and welfare laws across sectors. Key features include:

- Statutory standards for occupational safety
- Welfare measures such as health check-ups and rest periods

While it does not directly target platform work, it establishes basic protections that could apply broadly once enforcement rules are notified (ILO, 2021).

#### Implications for Industrial Relations and Worker Rights

##### a. Hybrid Legal Position of Platform Workers

The Social Security Code's formal recognition of gig workers creates a hybrid regulatory space where workers gain access to welfare entitlements but are not automatically granted full employee rights such as mandatory collective bargaining under the Industrial Relations Code (ILO, 2021).

##### b. Grievance Mechanisms and Institutional Channels

The Codes allow for grievance redressal frameworks, such as facilitating centres and helplines, for workers who previously lacked structured platforms for complaint resolution (Government of India, 2020). Such mechanisms could become important in future industrial disputes involving platform workers.

#### Debates, Critiques, and Judicial Developments

##### Worker Organisations and Trade Union Response

Major trade unions have criticised the new Codes, arguing that they dilute collective bargaining rights, favour employers, and insufficiently empower worker representation despite extending some social security protections (AP News, 2020).

##### Judicial Interpretations

Indian courts have started interpreting labour rights in platform contexts. For example:

- The Rajasthan High Court (2025) directed mandatory registration of platform-based drivers and emphasised worker safety standards, highlighting judiciary recognition of platform work issues (Rajasthan High Court, 2025).
- Petitions pending before the Supreme Court question the constitutional basis for providing social security, equal protection, and employment rights to gig workers, foreshadowing future legal clarifications (Chambers & Partners, 2023).

#### Critical Assessment

##### Strengths of the New Codes:

- Legal recognition of platform workers for welfare and insurance benefits.
- Portable social security through national databases.
- Mandatory aggregator contributions regardless of employer classification.

##### Limitations:

- Lack of explicit collective bargaining rights or union recognition (Government of India, 2020; AP News, 2020).
- Employment status ambiguity persists, potentially limiting access to certain IR mechanisms under the IRC (ILO, 2021).

- Enforcement and rule-making timelines vary across states, affecting uniform application (ILO, 2021).

#### IV. RESEARCH DESIGN OVERVIEW

This study adopts a mixed-method design, integrating quantitative survey analysis with qualitative interviews and embedded case studies of Zomato, Swiggy, Uber, Ola, and Rapido operating in metropolitan regions of India (Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Ranchi).

The study draws upon:

- Structured survey responses from platform workers (n ≈ 250–400)
- Semi-structured interviews with workers, union representatives, and labour lawyers (n ≈ 30–40)
- Secondary data from government reports and company disclosures
- Analysis of strike actions, media documentation, and judicial observations

#### V. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Demographic and Employment Profile:

Variable	Findings
Average Age	24–38 years
Education	60% Higher Secondary; 25% Graduate
Primary Source	Income 78% depend fully on platform work
Average Working Hours	9–12 hours/day
Employment Classification	100% categorized as “independent contractor”

The data suggests platform work is not merely supplementary employment; rather, it is the primary livelihood source for a majority of respondents.

Earnings and Incentive Volatility:

- 64% reported declining per-order incentives in last 2 years
- 72% indicated income unpredictability due to algorithmic changes
- 58% experienced penalties or account suspension
- 81% lacked written explanation for algorithmic decisions

Ride-hailing workers under Uber and Ola reported dynamic fare reductions and surge variability affecting monthly income stability.

Delivery workers from Zomato and Swiggy noted transition from “guaranteed minimum payout” models to “distance-based and performance-based incentives,” increasing uncertainty.

Social Security and Benefits Awareness:

Parameter	% of Workers Aware
Code on Social Security, 2020	18%
Registration as Gig Worker	9%
Insurance Coverage	47% (limited accident cover only)
Provident Fund / ESI	0%

Despite statutory recognition under the Code on Social Security, implementation remains limited at the ground level.

Collective Action Trends:

- 43% participated in at least one strike/protest
- 67% expressed interest in union representation
- 74% believe algorithmic transparency is necessary
- 82% favour minimum guaranteed earnings per hour

Quantitative findings demonstrate latent collective consciousness but absence of institutional bargaining structures.

#### VI. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The qualitative findings reveal that algorithmic management constitutes the core mechanism of labour control across platform-based enterprises such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber, Ola, and Rapido. Interview narratives consistently indicate the absence of transparent grievance redressal systems, automated deactivation of accounts without prior notice or human hearing, rating anxiety shaped by customer bias, and incentive gamification through dynamic performance-linked payouts. Workers repeatedly emphasized the opacity of algorithmic decision-making. As articulated by a delivery partner associated with Swiggy, “We don’t know the rules; the app changes them.” This statement encapsulates the asymmetrical power embedded in platform governance structures. From an industrial relations (IR) standpoint, algorithmic control functions as a digital substitute for managerial

supervision, consolidating unilateral rule-making authority within the firm while diffusing accountability.

Strike narratives further illuminate the emergent yet institutionally constrained nature of collective action. In the ride-hailing sector, drivers associated with Uber and Ola organized multiple strikes between 2017 and 2023 in metropolitan centres to protest fare reductions, rising commission percentages, and declining incentive guarantees. However, the absence of formal recognition as “workers” under the Industrial Relations Code has precluded the development of structured collective bargaining frameworks. Negotiations, where they occurred, were largely informal, mediated through media coverage or ad hoc meetings, rather than institutionalized dialogue. Participants also reported the risk of temporary account restrictions or indirect penalties following strike participation, which contributed to fragmented mobilization and weakened collective leverage.

A similar pattern is observed in the food delivery sector. Delivery partners of Zomato and Swiggy protested against batch-order systems, reduced base pay, and alterations in incentive slabs. Mobilization was frequently coordinated through informal digital networks, particularly WhatsApp groups, rather than recognized unions. The lack of statutory union recognition or collective bargaining rights resulted in episodic protests without durable negotiated settlements. Consequently, collective action remained reactive and decentralized, reflecting structural constraints embedded in the legal classification of platform workers as independent contractors.

The case study analysis reinforces these findings. In the delivery workforce of Zomato and Swiggy, employment relationships are constituted through digital contracts accepted via application interfaces. Workers receive no fixed wages and are compensated through task-based and performance-linked incentives, supplemented by conditional accident insurance coverage. Although the Code on Social Security, 2020 formally acknowledges gig and platform workers, recognition under the Industrial Relations Code remains absent, thereby limiting collective bargaining entitlements. Dispute resolution mechanisms are largely confined to in-app grievance systems, with no independent adjudicatory or tripartite forums specifically operational for platform labour. As a result, workers

remain economically dependent on platforms while legally positioned outside conventional employment protections.

In the ride-hailing segment, Uber and Ola deploy commission structures typically ranging between 20 and 30 percent, coupled with dynamic surge pricing algorithms and driver rating thresholds that directly influence ride allocation and account continuity. A significant number of drivers financed vehicles based on earlier high-incentive regimes; subsequent changes in fare structures and incentive policies have reportedly led to financial distress and indebtedness. Because drivers are not legally recognized as “workers” under existing industrial relations legislation, strike actions lack statutory protection. This regulatory gap raises critical questions regarding the legitimacy of collective protest and the enforceability of bargaining outcomes in platform-mediated employment.

The case of Rapido, representing the bike taxi segment, illustrates similar patterns with certain sector-specific characteristics. While initially offering relatively lower commission structures to attract workforce participation, the company has also exhibited volatility in incentive design. The workforce is comparatively younger, often viewing the platform as a flexible income opportunity. Nevertheless, interviews suggest that such flexibility coexists with income precarity and limited social protection, reinforcing broader patterns of contingent labour within the platform economy.

The integrated mixed-method analysis demonstrates convergence between quantitative and qualitative insights. Survey data reveal universal classification as independent contractors, declining earnings trends, high interest in collective representation, and low awareness of statutory entitlements. Qualitative findings deepen this understanding by exposing functional subordination, policy opacity, and regulatory confusion. While workers express willingness to engage in collective action, institutional support mechanisms remain underdeveloped.

Applying Dunlop’s Industrial Relations System framework provides analytical clarity. The principal actors include platform companies, workers, and the state. The rules governing their interaction are constituted not only by formal Labour Codes but also by algorithmic contracts embedded within digital applications. The ideological conflict centers

on the platforms’ narrative of flexibility and entrepreneurship versus workers’ demands for security, transparency, and collective voice. In the absence of structured bargaining institutions, industrial conflict manifests through informal strikes, digital mobilization, and public protest rather than institutionalized negotiation.

The empirical findings lead to several key conclusions. First, platformization produces a condition of disguised wage dependency, wherein economic reliance coexists with contractual independence. Second, collective bargaining exists in embryonic and informal forms but lacks statutory recognition and enforceability. Third, while the Labour Codes extend limited social security acknowledgment to gig workers, they do not fully integrate them within the industrial relations architecture. Fourth, algorithmic governance effectively substitutes traditional managerial hierarchy, intensifying asymmetrical power relations. Finally, contemporary industrial relations mechanisms must evolve to address digital workplaces, algorithmic transparency, and new forms of worker representation to ensure equitable regulation of India’s expanding platform economy.

#### VII. A HYBRID INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR PLATFORM WORK IN INDIA

Drawing from the empirical findings of this study, it is evident that the central regulatory tension in platform-based enterprises such as Uber, Ola, Zomato, Swiggy, and Rapido lies in the absence of a legally recognized employer–employee relationship despite the presence of functional control. To avoid prolonged litigation, regulatory uncertainty, and industrial unrest, a Hybrid Employment–Collective Governance Model is proposed. This model enables lawful recognition of employment status while ensuring that the Industrial Relations Code (IRC), 2020 becomes applicable in situations of strike, dispute resolution, and collective bargaining.

##### Foundational Principle of the Model

The model rests on three pillars:

1. Statutory Clarity in Employment Classification
2. Structured Collective Bargaining Mechanism
3. Algorithmic Accountability with Legal Compliance

Rather than relying on “independent contractor” classification, platforms may adopt a Dependent Employee Model or Platform Employee Category, aligning operational control with legal responsibility. This reduces ambiguity and minimizes judicial risk under employment misclassification challenges.

##### Structural Design of the Model

###### 1. Tiered Employment Framework

A two-layer classification may be adopted:

###### A. Core Platform Employees

Workers who:

- Work beyond a defined threshold (e.g., 30+ hours per week)
- Derive majority income from the platform
- Are subject to rating thresholds and incentive control

These workers would be recognized as employees under IRC and other applicable Labour Codes.

###### B. Flexible/Occasional Workers

Workers operating below threshold levels may remain in a flexible contractual category but with mandatory social security contributions under the Code on Social Security.

This tiered framework allows operational flexibility without denying employment reality where economic dependency exists.

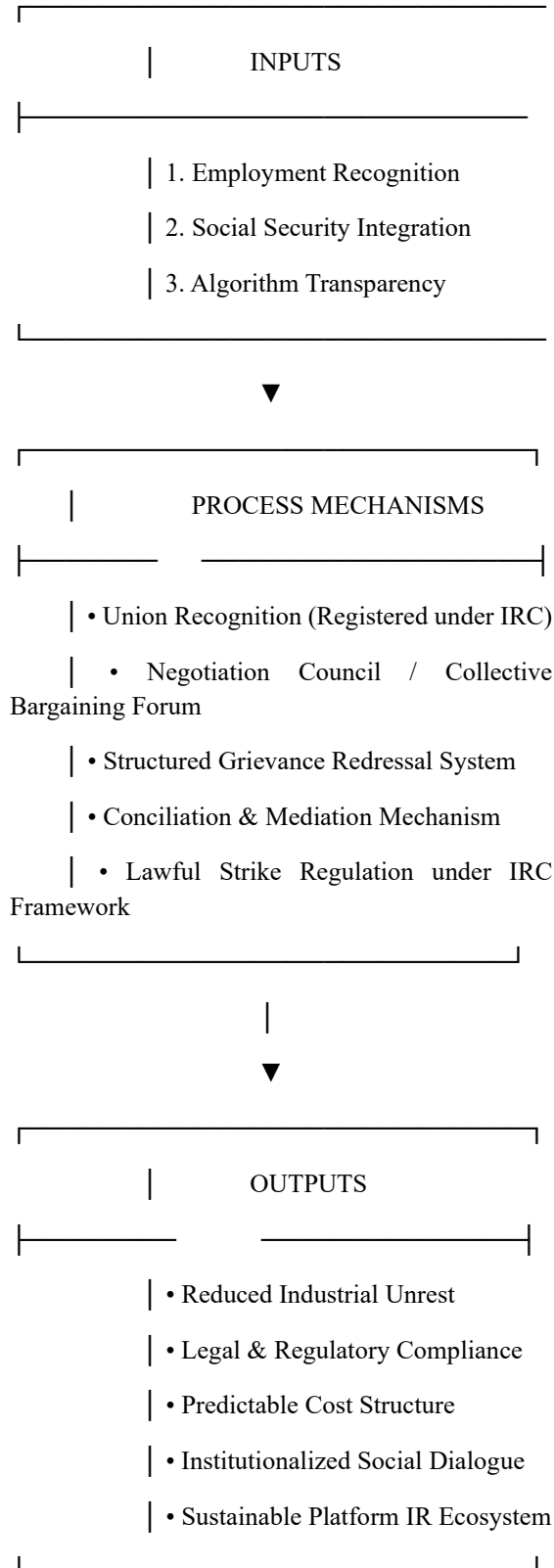
##### Formal Employer–Employee Relationship Structure:

To legally sustain the relationship and avoid disputes:

- Issuance of digital appointment letters
- Clear wage structure (Base Pay + Variable Incentive)
- Defined working hour bands
- Transparent performance metrics
- Written disciplinary and deactivation policy
- Grievance redressal officer with human review

This reduces litigation risk and strengthens compliance with natural justice principles.

Regulated Platform Employment & Collective Governance Model (RPEC Model)



VIII. CONCLUSION

The empirical and theoretical insights generated in this study ultimately converge on the necessity of institutional redesign within India’s platform economy. While ride-hailing and food delivery platforms such as Uber, Ola, Zomato, Swiggy, and Rapido have redefined the organization of work through digital intermediation, they have simultaneously exposed structural deficiencies in India’s industrial relations architecture. The persistence of economic dependency, algorithmic managerial control, and asymmetrical bargaining power under the guise of contractual independence underscores the inadequacy of existing regulatory frameworks to govern platform-mediated labour relations effectively.

In response to these systemic tensions, this research advances the Regulated Platform Employment & Collective Governance Model (RPEC Model) as a structured pathway toward reconciling flexibility with legal accountability. The RPEC Model is grounded in three foundational inputs: formal recognition of employment relationships where economic dependency is demonstrable; integration of social security protections consistent with statutory mandates; and algorithmic transparency to ensure procedural fairness and natural justice. These inputs serve not merely as compliance measures but as institutional anchors that convert unilateral digital control into regulated managerial authority.

At the process level, the RPEC Model operationalizes collective governance through legally recognized union structures, negotiation councils, and institutionalized grievance and conciliation mechanisms under the Industrial Relations Code (IRC), 2020. By embedding collective bargaining within a statutory framework, the model transforms informal and episodic worker mobilization into structured industrial dialogue. Lawful strike procedures, notice requirements, conciliation processes, and protections against victimization would become applicable, thereby reducing regulatory ambiguity and safeguarding both enterprise continuity and worker rights. Importantly, the model does not eliminate managerial prerogative; rather, it situates it within a rule-bound system of negotiated regulation, consistent with classical industrial relations theory.

The expected outputs of the RPEC Model include reduced industrial unrest, enhanced legal

compliance, predictable cost structures for firms, and the institutionalization of social dialogue in the platform sector. By clarifying employment status and aligning digital governance with statutory oversight, platforms can mitigate litigation risks related to misclassification while fostering workforce stability. Simultaneously, workers gain structured avenues for representation, dispute resolution, and collective voice, reducing reliance on spontaneous digital mobilization and informal protest.

The RPEC Model therefore represents a normative and practical recalibration of India's platform industrial relations system. It recognizes that algorithmic management has fundamentally altered the mode of labour control, yet it affirms that the core principles of industrial democracy, negotiated rule-making, and tripartite engagement remain indispensable. Rather than framing regulation as antagonistic to innovation, the model positions legal formalization as a stabilizing force that enhances long-term sustainability.

In essence, the future of platform labour governance in India depends not on preserving contractual fictions of independence, but on constructing a regulated framework that harmonizes digital efficiency with constitutional labour protections. The Regulated Platform Employment & Collective Governance Model offers a coherent blueprint for achieving this balance, ensuring that the evolution of the platform economy proceeds within a structured, lawful, and socially legitimate industrial relations regime.

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