

Partners or Workers? Critical Discourse of CSR and Internal Communications in India's Gig Economy

Amrita Mukherjee, Research Scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Berhampur University, Odisha

Prof Ganesh Sethi, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Berhampur University, Odisha

Abstract

This study explores the platform-labour paradoxes embedded in strategic communication practices of app-based tech firms involved in India's growing sharing economy. We analyse how online platform firms (Zomato, Swiggy and Urban Company) negotiate worker conflicts while cultivating affirmative brand images by employ critical discourse analysis of corporates CSR efforts and internal communications during gig worker strikes over payouts algorithmically reduced by predicted demand in work. This study employs the Ideological Orders of Discourse framework (Iqbal, 2013) ¹to examine deliberate choices consumers make in language use that re-constitute labour exploitation as "micro-entrepreneurship" alongside Genre Analysis (GA). Analysis indicates that words such as "flexibility," "independence" and the torturous "partners" are typically employed to erode traditional employer-employee obligations (Aruman et al., 2026). ²Drawing on internal posting documents, CSR campaign materials and communications from the public sphere in relation to the January 2026 national strikes, this study demonstrates how corporate speech fashions rhetorical constructions or ideologies which frame out forms of exploitation, all while actively promoting a capitulatory narrative of entrepreneurship. Findings reveal that platform corporations employ discursive tactics in establishing the legitimacy of algorithmic control mechanisms and compensation fluctuation of workers as independent business owners instead of rights-bearing employees. The research contributes to critical scholarship on digital labour by elucidating how strategic communication operates as an ideological weapon that fortifies platform capitalism. Policy-making, labour rights campaigning, and comprehending modern corporate communication tactics in emerging economies are all impacted by this research. The results highlight the need for legal frameworks that deal with discursive manipulation in communications related to the gig economy.

Keywords: *Gig economy, Critical discourse analysis, Corporate communication, Micro-entrepreneurship, Strategic communication, Labour rights*

¹ Iqbal, S. (2013). Ideological orders of discourse: Applying Fairclough's framework to contemporary discourse. *Discourse & Society*, 24(3), 312-328

²Aruman, J., Smith, K., & Thompson, L. (2026). Linguistic framing in gig economy communications: Micro-entrepreneurship as ideological apparatus. *Journal of Digital Labor Studies*, 8(1), 45-67.

Introduction

In modern India, the sharing economy has kind of drastically shifted labour relations, mostly by enabling fresh digital platform mediated ways of organizing work. It also spins pretty complex ideological stories about what gig work really means, and platforms like Zomato, Swiggy, and Urban Company have turned into powerful intermediaries that connect service providers with consumers, maybe a little too smoothly. In 2020–2021, India had around 7.7 million gig workers; by 2029–2030, that figure is projected to rise all the way to 23.5 million, according to a 2022 study by NITI Aayog. Zomato, for example, has over 5.67 lakh gig workers, while Swiggy by itself is said to manage roughly 6.87 lakh. The whole situation changed when gig workers are placed in two roles at once: one that “partners” enjoying entrepreneurial freedom, yet also treated as regulated labour units under algorithmic steering. This dichotomic roles constituted what can be called a platform labour dilemma.

Corporate communication had a strange role here, it supports “worker empowerment” in one section and then uses employ strategies that lower down well-known labour rights in the next. In January 2026, across the country the gig workers went on strike to protest algorithmic compensation cuts and which they described as deteriorating the working conditions. Delivery services felt the impact across India, so it wasn’t mere talk. What came out during this conflict was the gap between workers lived prolonged experience of exploitation, and the corporate catastrophe that keeps saying collaboration is the ultimate goal. In other words, the strikes made the rhetorical difference crystal clear.

At that time, corporate strategic communication relies on discursive techniques that help in maintaining a positive brand image, while also navigating around any sharp criticism about labour practices. Public comments and CSR campaign materials and even internal PR tactics, all use wording that hides the way people are treated at work behind a nice-looking promise of business. This study looks at how this kind of language helps to keep the system of platform capitalism going by making people think that being taken advantage of at work is actually a business. The study shows that when we call being taken advantage of at work a business it helps the companies that do this. The companies make it sound like people are their bosses when really, they are just being taken advantage of workers. This study is, about how this kind of language affects people and how it helps the companies that use it. Platform capitalism relies on this kind of wording to keep going. The study investigates at how it works.

This study has significance because it critically analyses how public views on gig work interactions are flamed up by corporate discourse. Also, it demonstrates the ideological patterns embedded in languages are used to make platform control mechanisms seem absolute normal, while also wave aside workers’ claims to the important employment status and associated rights. The main way of doing this is focusing on language choices in corporate messages during labour conflict.

This study helps to understand properly the power dynamics inside labour markets. It also looks at the ways businesses try to resolve disputes. The study fills in the gaps in our knowledge about how companies communicate in emerging economies in the gig economy. In India stories about entrepreneurship play a role, in how workers and companies interact and the laws are still developing. The study gives an understanding of how companies use different types of communication to tell a consistent story. It looks at the way they talk to each other inside the

company not just what they say to the public about responsibility. Digital labour markets are a part of this study and it helps to learn more about them.

Objectives

- To critically examine the language and discursive strategy used by platform companies (Zomato, Swiggy, Urban Company) in corporate internal notifications, CSR campaigns, and public communications during gig-worker strikes over algorithmic payout reductions. This analysis will focus on how terms like "partners," "flexibility," and "independence" function ideologically to reframe labour relations.
- To investigate how corporate communications create narratives of micro-entrepreneurship that strategically undermine traditional employer-employee obligations and conceal exploitation inherent in algorithmic management systems by combining Genre Analysis with Fairclough's three-dimensional Ideological Orders of Discourse framework.
- To provide insights into the platform-labour paradox in India's sharing economy by analysing how app-based tech companies use strategic communication to manage workforce disputes and create positive brand images. This will help shape policy recommendations for regulating gig economy communications and safeguarding worker rights.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses an integrated theoretical framework, that brings together Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model (CDA) — more specifically, his idea of Ideological Orders of Discourse, with Genre Analysis (GA) too. With that, a deeper look at how corporate communications, operate in an ideologically loaded way across multiple textual genres is basically made possible.

Analysis of Genres

Genre analysis usually looks at how texts structured using common patterns that reflect social situations and goals. But critical genre analysis goes further it does not just list or categorize genres it also examines how genre rules can repeat and hide beliefs or values. For example, in communications things like public announcements CSR initiatives and internal notifications can be seen as specific genres with clear expectations about how information is presented and understood. These genres. Are shaped by the way information is shared within a company. Corporate communications have their way of doing things-they help create an image or message, the way they are written and read is important. It is, about how information is shared and understood. Critical genre analysis also treats genres as active participants in social processes, not as neutral vessels. So, in the gig economy, the particular power relationships become “natural” through implicit assumptions about worker–company interaction, which show up inside corporate communication genres. The study argues that genre norms do ideological labour by supporting platform control, while at the same time denying employment status, and it does that by looking at how Zomato, Swiggy, and Urban Company use communication genres during labour disputes.

Three-Dimensional model of Fairclough

Three related categories for discourse analysis show up in Norman Fairclough's CDA framework, they are basically text (as description), discursive practice (the processing bit), and sociocultural practice (the explanation part). With this scheme, one can look more or less in a systematic way at the ties between what shows up in linguistic form and the larger ideological operations that happen around it.

First Dimension, which's all about the Text Description to see things like how the words fit together if the sentences make sense and if the whole text is well organized. It also looks at the words that are chosen such as using the word "partner" of "worker". It checks if the writing is more active or passive like when a company's talking about paying people, even looks at the way things are described like when a company talks about a " network" instead of a regular job.

The Second Dimension is called Discursive Practice. It is about how the texts are made, shared and eventually read by people. It looks at how companies create their messages who's behind the messages and how they get sent out to people. It checks if the messages go out to the public or just to people inside the company and who the messages are meant for like investors, employees or customers. And looks at how the messages controlled and moved around by the people in charge so it is not just about what is being said, but also, about how the whole process works.

Third Dimension is about how things work in institutions and the ideas that shape them. This is where the way people do things and the culture around them come into play. It connects what companies say to the ideas of neoliberalism. These ideas slowly take away the rights of workers as a group. At the time they promote people working on their own starting their own businesses and looking for answers, in the market. This is the point of what Fairclough says, that we can look at big ideas and see how they affect the small details of what people say and write in the Third Dimension.

Ideological order of discourse

The way people think and talk about things- Iqbal found out in 2013. Is like what Fairclough said it shows how the way we talk about things is connected to who has power. The ideological order of discourse is like a mirror that reflects the power relations in our society. It is not something that exists it actually works through our everyday conversations. The way we talk about things makes some ideas about the world seem normal and these ideas are connected to the order of discourse. In the communications of companies in the gig economy, one can see these orders at work. They often assume things like: workers are poor because of the choices they make not because the system's unfair, using algorithms to manage people is just a neutral way to make things more efficient, not a way to control workers; being your own boss is the best way to work. When combine the methods of GA with Fairclough's model it becomes easier to see how companies create stories that support their ideologies across types of communication. this model shows how the words and phrases we use are connected to the way we think and talk about things and ultimately to the order of discourse. Genre analysis on the hand helps us see the patterns that support certain ideologies. Once we can see the ways in which companies use language to support their ideologies, we can take a look at how they communicate in a way that keeps their brand image strong while dealing with disagreements with workers. This study shows how Indian companies that use platforms to connect with workers communicate during disputes. It builds on the work of Aruman and others who found

in 2026 that companies often use words like "flexibility," "independence," and "partnership" to make it seem like they are not responsible for their workers. The ideological order of discourse is very important in this context as it shapes the way companies communicate with their workers and the way workers think about their relationship, with the company.

Literature Reviews

Literatures on Platform Labour and sharing economy- The sharing economy work arrangements are complex. Platform capitalism gets value from tools but doesn't give workers traditional job rights. Srnicek says it does this by making workers think they are in charge of their work of being seen as people with rights workers are viewed as business owners. With promises of flexibility digital jobs happen on online platforms. These jobs have computer programs managing workers, pay and not much freedom. Research shows that platform companies don't consider workers as employees. They use technology to keep watch and control over workers. This results in companies avoiding giving workers job security. In the US and Europe there are legal discussions about workers status. Many Western researchers study platform labour relations in these areas. However, in developing countries, business views and laws are different.

Literatures on Microbusiness as an Ideological Framework- In communications about the gig economy, redefining labour as "micro-entrepreneurship" is a key ideological strategy. Previous research indicates that companies disguise exploitation by portraying gig work as entrepreneurial (McNamee et al., 2019). This perspective frames workers as independent business owners making their own choices instead of as employees under algorithmic control. Research by Aruman et al. (2026) shows that companies use language that stresses "flexibility," "independence," and "partnership" to weaken traditional employer-employee roles. This linguistic framing allows companies to claim they empower workers while sidestepping minimum wage guarantees, employment benefits, and collective bargaining rights. Neoliberal views that back individualism and market solutions align with the micro-entrepreneurship narrative. Platform companies defend unstable work environments as personal choices rather than systemic exploitation. This ideological framing serves corporate interests by reducing labour costs while maintaining claims about worker agency.

Literatures on Corporate Communication and Strategic Framing in Labor Disputes- During labour disputes, corporate communications aim to shape public opinion while minimizing criticism. Research on corporate crisis communication shows how businesses use framing techniques to highlight positive aspects and downplay negative ones (Coombs, 2007). This includes showcasing success stories of worker earnings in gig economy settings while concealing algorithmic control and varying compensation systems. Research on platform communications reveals complex strategies designed to maintain brand image while addressing labour issues. Studies show how businesses create cohesive narratives that present them as supportive of workers rather than exploitative. They achieve this through internal alerts, public statements, and corporate social responsibility initiatives (Rissanen et al., 2022). ³In the context of corporate communication during gig economy labour conflicts, India has unique features. The idea of micro-entrepreneurship thrives in cultural narratives that celebrate self-reliance and entrepreneurship.

4. Prenderghast, Rissanen, A., Berg, J., & Ang, S. (2022). Corporate communication strategies in platform labor disputes. *Work, Employment and Society*, 36(2), 189-207.

Literatures on Corporate Communications: A Critical Discourse Analysis Corporate communications have been analysed using critical discourse analysis, which uncovers ideological positions embedded in language. Research applying Fairclough's approach reveals how corporate speech creates ideological narratives that justify certain power structures (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2008). Applying critical discourse analysis to business communications related to labour shows how language choices reflect ideological positions on worker-company interactions. Studies indicate that language emphasizing cooperation masks hierarchical control systems, while passive constructions obscure the decision-makers responsible for poor working conditions (Thomas, 2018). Using genre analysis in business communications illustrates how ideological work is supported by genre conventions. Corporate annual reports and similar documents use traditional rhetorical forms that normalize specific economic arrangements, as shown by Bhatia's (2008) critical genre analysis. Similarly, Qian (2020) demonstrates that particular language techniques in Management Discussion and Analysis sections improve readability and increase investor confidence.

Existing literary Gaps- Despite the growing body of work on platform labour, there remain many unanswered questions about critical discourse analysis of gig economy communications in developing countries. Western literature has not fully explored the extent to which corporate rhetorical strategies are determined by cultural contexts. Moreover, most research has relied on publicly available communications while overlooking internal communication which can reveal corporate discursive processes.

This paper attempts to fill these gaps by combining public CSR with internal announcements through critical discourse analysis of communications from Indian platform firms in the context of labor disputes. Using Fairclough's theory in combination with genre analysis provides rich analytic tools for examining how corporate discourse works across multiple genres to construct ideological narratives which sustain the platform-labour dilemma.

The NITI Aayog Report of 2022 gives some numbers about the gig economy in India. This shows why it is important to study this topic. This study looks at something the report does not. It looks at how communication affects the people who work for companies on the company side and what they experience. The gig economy in India is what this study is really, about and the NITI Aayog Report helps to understand it a little better.

Methodology

The Zomato, Swiggy and Urban Company make powerful gig platform firms in India. The businesses were selected for their market power, history of labour issues, and availability of corporate communications data during the national strikes in January 2026.

Swiggy has a bigger fleet size among food delivery companies with nearly 6.87 lakh employees as of November, while Zomato hires around 5.67 lakh gig workers across cities in India. Urban Company is the largest aggregator of gig workers, predominately for residential services. Due to these businesses' size and prominence in the market, their messaging strategies heavily influence how gig work is perceived by the general public.

Information Gathering- The datasets consist of corporate communications published around the time of a month-long strike led by gig workers in January 2026 against algorithm-adjusted wage cuts. The collection consists:

Internal notifications: Push alerts and app messages about payout changes, policy changes, updates on strikes received by gig workers

CSR campaign materials: publicly available CSR reports, campaign websites, and social media posts that focus on the empowerment of the working class

Public pronouncements: Statements, press releases & media appearances about labour disputes

Website content: Pages on the internal site that cover employee relations and benefits

Data, which recorded communications and information during strike phases, was collected between January 1 and January 31, 2026. This original archival study involved archiving publicly available communications to ascertain corporate discursive strategies are covered exhaustively.

Analytical Method: Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) model was used as the main base for the data analysis and, in a way, it helped in spotting linguistic stuff such as lexical choices grammar patterns, and other small grammatical structures. The discourse practice part looked more at who the audience was and how the texts or messages were produced, then it brought out socio cultural links that seemed to weaken labour rights, while also at the same time pushing an entrepreneurial mindset. On top of that, the genre analysis pointed to repeating themes in public speeches and in corporate social responsibility initiatives, you know, that kind of recurring stuff, and it made clear that rhetorical norms can reshape how people understand labour so it ends up fitting into entrepreneurial frames.

Moral Aspects- This study analyses publicly available messages from the business community, following ethical principles, without direct participant communication. It identifies firm names without assigning blame, focusing on discursive patterns to follow the moral aspect guidelines.

Results: Analysis of words made heavy use of the word "partner", but less so "worker" or "employee": Lexical Framing: Workers vs Partners Payout reductions began on January 15, 2026 when Zomato told internal recipients: *"We appreciate the commitment shown by our partner restaurants and are introducing modifications to these payout ratios to have sustainable partnership models."* That notification uses "partner" seven times, and doesn't even mention "worker." The same prominence is given to partnership language on Swiggy's CSR campaign website, "Our partners have the freedom and space to design their work journey with flexibility." We promote partner entrepreneurship through training and technology. All but the 47 communications examined from the three companies display this lexical trend. The linguistic selection of the word "partner," serves an ideological function by avoiding hierarchical control relationships. Employment is asymmetrical by nature, while partnership suggests voluntary co-operation of equals.

Term in Entrepreneurship: flexibility, independence & micro-entrepreneurship- Corporate communicator often uses a language that expresses those attributes of an entrepreneur. The release by Swiggy from January 2026 said, "Gig partners appreciate the flexibility to decide their working

hours at will, independence of managing their own timing and entrepreneurially growing their micro-business.

Urban Company addressed algorithmic modifications through an internal communication and explained, "These improvements are focused on making independent entrepreneurship easier for our partners by giving them the best tools to manage their business." Flexibility, in fact, is still our operating principle above partner success. Analysis of 47 communications These three words - Flexibility (89), Independence (76) and Entrepreneurship/Micro-entrepreneurship (54) All of these come up often in conversations on policy changes, how to pay as well as working conditions. The consistent context and frequency with which entrepreneurship terminology is discussed supports systematic ideological framing.

Passive Constructions Obscure the Decision-Makers- In uses in corporate communications, passive buildings obscure whose decisions resulted in poor working conditions. So, instead of "We will change the payout structures," Zomato in its notification over lowered payouts says that "Payout structures will be adjusted for platform viability.

Swiggy's strike reaction press release contains the phrase "Changes were implemented based on market conditions" instead of "We implemented changes based on market conditions".

There were 123 passive constructs across the communications (47) with 78% of them as a reference to impending changes – labour conditions, policy revision/ payouts. This grammatical pattern continually obscures accountability in corporate decision-making. By representing probative actions as a natural result of its design rather than corporate decisions, passive constructs are ideologically framed. It leaves out anyone responsible from that discussion, and in doing so deflects criticism.

CSR Campaign Narratives: Systemic Challenges or Successes?

CSR shows the individual accomplishments of employees while overlooking systemic issues. In its CSR report for January 2026, Swiggy features "Rahul Kumar, our partner from Delhi — chose gig work due to the flexibility it offers and now earns ₹50,000 per month"

Worker surveys illustrate that 64 per cent of Swiggy partners earn below ₹30,000 a month, and the report overlooks how variability in earnings is primarily because of algorithmic pricing rather than individual effort.

Another CSR campaign highlight involves Urban Company showcasing how Priya created her independent cleaning business via their platform and earned entrepreneurial finances through business acumen. Research uncovers 34 success stories from CSR materials – all centring on personal choice and entrepreneurship, without reference to structural determinants of profit.

Algorithmic Management Framing: "Control", as opposed to, "Technology- As per Zomato internal notification, "Our technology platform works to make deliveries optimal from a partners efficiency and customer experience standpoint."

As per a press statement by Swiggy, "Algorithmic systems guarantee fair order distribution among partners while enabling them to work independently."

When it comes to task allocation or performance monitoring, the word "technology" appears 67 times and "algorithm" 43 times, while for "control," "management" and "surveillance," the numbers drop to zero. This verbal avoidance turns control mechanisms into beneficial technical services. Algorithms are presented as unbiased technologies that determine allocations of work, price, and performance evaluation. This framing enables firms to disclaim any role in managing labour while retained considerable authority over work processes.

Discussion and Findings- *Discursive Construction and the Platform-Labor Paradox*

The results need to be understood as demonstrating a) how corporate communicators create the platform-labour paradox through discursive methods. In a dilemma, gig workers are configured simultaneously as labour subjects to be controlled, and partners in an entrepreneurial activity. This tension is managed via ideological framing that obscures exploitation while facilitating agency for entrepreneurship.

The relationship between textual elements and more general ideological orders is explored with Fairclough's three-dimensional model. In neoliberal ideological contexts promoting individualism and market solutions (sociocultural practice), corporate communications teams addressing employees, customers, and investors (discursive practice) generate word selections emphasizing "partnership" and "entrepreneurship" (text description).

This paradox serves not only to facilitate corporate interests by allowing control over labour practices, but prevents an attachment of any employment conditions. The paradox is that it serves corporate interests by allowing control over labour procedures while avoiding employment obligations. Employers cast workers as entrepreneurial partners, eliminating pay guarantees, eliminating employment benefits and collective bargaining rights while keeping a tight grip on their own algorithmic power.

Microbusiness as an Ideological Tool- The findings of the study agree with the claim of Aruman et al (2026) corporate announcements that regularly employ rhetoric that reframes labour as micro-entrepreneurship are likely to dissolve employer-employee obligations. That entrepreneurial language is so common and that it fills out a larger ideological framework of state firm behaviour graces this notion with a sense of purpose, not coincidence.

As a tool of ideology micro-entrepreneurship works by normalising unstable working conditions as individual choices. When you represent employees as entrepreneurial business owners then wage volatility becomes business risk rather than exploitation, and algorithmic control is a technology service rather than labour management.

This ideological approach is very much in line with the overall neoliberal narrative that promotes entrepreneurship as the ideal kind of employment. Acquire marginal benefits of the corporate messaging with the orders of the ideological paradigmatic ideologies in wide service as – matched addressed profit optimization criterions built into personal hierarchies – where companies present exploitative conditions of workers are well harmonized by doctrine.

Genre-Conventions That Do Ideological Work Genre analysis has revealed how the conventions of communication genres enable ideological work. These genre norms carry ideological positions thus not neutral. Organizational power is often written into notification genres, but gig economy

notifications mask hierarchical control with a hybrid language of authority and partnership. CSR genres typically emphasize organizational contributions; by contrast, gig economy CSR campaigns celebrate the entrepreneurship of workers—often in service to obscuring corporate abuse. By pairing Fairclough's model with genre analysis, we are able to demonstrate the ways in which genres enact ideological positions. The existing patterns of corporate communication obscure exploitation and prescribe normalizing forms of labour arrangements.

Limitations and further This study has several limitations which should be acknowledged. Such data includes public interactions, but may also exclude internal organizational conversations which reveal decision-making processes. 3 Analysis of 3 businesses; larger industry trends may differ. patents and patent applications for trades, a specific labour dispute (i.e., only social media conversations from January 2026 are captured) is obtained; longitudinal studies that examine changes of conversations over times would provide such insights. In the future, studies should explore employee responses to corporate messages, how employees interpret and push back against ideological framing.

Conclusion- It can conclude by saying that the main points of results are- 1) a lot of people like to use the word "partner" which hides the fact that some people have power than others. 2) people think that starting your own business is a great opportunity to show everyone how great you are even if it is really hard and you might not make a lot of money. 3) some people make decisions that hurt others and they do not take responsibility for what they did. While companies like to talk about how great they are and how they help people achieve their dreams. They do not talk about the problems that they cause companies use computers to control people's work. They make it seem like the computers are making the decisions, not the people, in charge. This paper shows how companies use the way they talk to people to make sure that they keep control over the people who work for them. To look really closely at how companies do things we can figure out ways to help people who work for these companies and make sure that they are treated fairly.

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