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The Mathadi Model and Gig Work Regulation:

Partial Replication of a Model that requires Strengthening Itself

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The Mathadi Model and Gig Work Regulation:

Partial Replication of a Model that requires Strengthening Itself

Abstract

Recent legal frameworks introduced in India to regulate gig and platform based gig work are said to be inspired by the Mathadi Model, established under the Maharashtra Mathadi and Hamal Workers Act, 1969. Emerging legislations in states such as Rajasthan, Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand and Telangana replicate selected elements of the Mathadi Model, especially its tripartite machinery to include the participation of relevant stakeholders. However, a closer examination is necessary to assess whether this replication is successful in principle. This paper provides a brief overview of the history and current status of the Mathadi Model, highlighting why it merits deserved yet cautious celebration. Mathadi workers have their fair share of similarities and differences with platform-based gig work. The conditions of work for both these categories of workers requires attention too. After outlining both, it examines what contemporary gig work legislations omit from the labour-rights-based framework that underpinned the Mathadi Act, raising questions about the depth and intent of using the model as a blueprint.

1. Introduction

Recent legal frameworks introduced in India to regulate gig and platform-based gig work are said to be inspired by the Mathadi Model as established under the Maharashtra Mathadi and Hamal Workers Act, 1969. Emerging legislations in states such as Rajasthan, Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand and Telangana replicate selected elements of the Mathadi Model, especially its tripartite machinery to include the participation of relevant stakeholders. However, a closer examination is necessary to assess whether this replication is successful in principle. It began to serve as a blueprint for several legislative frameworks (see Table 1).

Before we dive into the need for regulating platform-based gig work and then examining what the new frameworks offer and miss, it is important to understand: Who are Mathadi Workers? What are their conditions of work? What led to the birth of the Mathadi Model? What conditions gave rise to the Maharashtra Mathadi and Hamal Workers Act? What did the Act

offer to all the stakeholders? How is it roughly functioning decades after it has been passed? What makes the model a worthy candidate for replication?

Table 1. Present Legislative Framework

The Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023
The Jharkhand Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill, 2024 (yet to be passed)
The Karnataka Platform based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2025
Bihar Platform based Gig Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2025
The Telangana Gig and. Platform Workers (Registration, Social Security and. Welfare) Bill, 2025 (yet to be passed)

After engaging with these questions in Section 1.2, the next section (Section 1.3) addresses questions such as: Are there any commonalities between Mathadi work and platform-based gig work? What are the differences that this new form of work brings with it when compared to Mathadi work? Further, in Section 1.4, the nature of this replication is discussed: Whether it is partial? What elements are replicated? What is omitted? And finally, we move towards the conclusion.

2. The Mathadi Model: History, Merits and Current Status

Mathadis/ Mathadi Kamgaar/ Hamalis are workers involved in manually loading and unloading goods, as the word ‘*Matha*’ means head in Marathi and ‘*Hamal*’ means carrying weight on the back in Urdu (Jatav & Jajoria, 2020). The Mathadi Model emerged in post-independence Maharashtra as a response to the precarious and exploitative conditions faced by Mathadi workers. This was especially in urban markets such as Mumbai, Pune and other busy markets in Maharashtra, where trade was active. These workers were concentrated, as their nature of work suggests, in busy markets, ports, docks, etc. With a heavy presence of migrants (from other rural parts of Maharashtra), they operated outside formal employment arrangements and had no established employer-employee relationship with their labour users, be it traders, merchants, or companies that required workers for factory setup, etc (Khotkar, 2013). Workers were hired on a daily or gig/ task basis with no guaranteed wages, lifting goods that weighed around 100 kgs. Workers lived in cramped and unhygienic conditions

postmigration and faced isolation as they could not afford to migrate to cities with their families (Deshpande, 1999). Consequently, they faced a range of health issues owing to the physically draining nature of work and multiple instances of loss of life due to harsh working conditions and long hours, clubbed with exploitative contractors (*mukadams*), were also recorded.

These conditions led to severe vulnerability and precarity on the job and continued to be recorded in various forms of informal work. The decades following independence witnessed significant labour mobilisation across industrial sectors. However, much of the early labour legislation, including the Minimum Wages Act (1948) and the Industrial Disputes Act (1947), primarily benefited workers who had a formal employment relationship. While an enormous section of informal workers, such as Mathadi and Hamalis, remained unorganised and excluded from these protections (Marshall, 2014).

Worker leaders and unions played a central role in organising labour, negotiating with employers and demanding intentional state intervention driven by political will (Chikarmane & Narayanan, 2023). Towards the 1950s, massive and sustained mobilisation led by unions such as the Hamal Panchayat (formed in 1955) and Mumbai Mathadi Kamgaar Union took shape. Leaders such as Baba Adhav and Annabhai Patel, along with many others, emerged across Maharashtra. The state then witnesses collectivisation marked by the dignity of workers' lives at the forefront, with the slogan, '*I own my back*' becoming the overarching sentiment behind the movement. These struggles, as mentioned, were not merely about wage increases. With regulation of wages at the core, the movement insisted on restructuring the very nature of the relationship of informal workers with the state, the labour users and informal markets.

A key precursor to the Mathadi framework was the Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act, 1948. It introduced the idea of decasualisation and establishing a tripartite mechanism with workers, labour users and the state, all playing a crucial role in decision-making in an attempt to alter the pre-established power imbalances within the informal market. Building on the same foundation, the Mathadi Act institutionalised a similar model. With a welfare board that regulates employment, ensures worker and labour user registration, coordinates the process of regulation of wages for different types of manual work categorised under the Act, such as manual loading, unloading, stacking, storing, carrying, weighing and measuring work, etc, the boards also charge a levy on the labour users. Some of the features of the board that need to be highlighted are:

1. Across Maharashtra, the welfare levy set by the boards for the registered labour users is used for social security benefits for *Mathadi* Workers. Depending on the cost of living of the region, the levy ranges from around 30 to 40 per cent of the negotiated regulated wages due to workers. This levy is an additional cost borne by the labour users that further relieves them of providing any compensation, social security benefits such as a provident fund, maternity benefits, overtime payment, holiday bonuses, etc. A breakdown of the levy for the Pune Mathadi, Hamal and Other Manual Workers Board and the Aurangabad Mathadi and Unorganised Workers Board is provided in Table 2 and Figure 1.
2. The Board plays a crucial role not just in the regulation of wages but also in the revision of wages. One of the duties of the state boards is to conduct and facilitate meetings and discussions where each board, depending on their unique circumstances and dynamics, drafts basic rules and guidelines that need to be adhered to by all stakeholders. However, there are broad rules set by the Act that establish non-negotiables, such as revision of wages in each board every 3 years.
3. As the nature of work can and has resulted in instances of loss of life for workers, the Act underlines grievances of all forms. This means industrial disputes ranging from loss or discrepancy of wages to compensation for loss of life can be raised and will be addressed by the Board.

Table 2. Percentage of Levy allocated to different Social Security Provisions at the Pune & Aurangabad Board

Benefits	Pune Mathadi, Hamal and Other Manual Workers Board	Aurangabad Mathadi and Unprotected Labour Board
Provident Fund	12.00 %	12.00 %
Gratuity	5.00%	2.00%
Diwali Bonus/ Bonus	11.50%	8.33%
Paid Leave Wages	1.50%	0.67%
Leave Holiday	1.50%	
Compensation A/C	1.00%	1.00%
Administrative Cost	2.50%	6.00%
Total	35.00%	30.00%

Figure. 1 Breakdown of the Pune Mathadi, Hamal and Manual Workers Board and the Aurangabad Mathadi and Unorganised Workers Board

<u>PUNE MATHADI, HAMAL AND MANUAL WORKERS BOARD</u>		औरंगाबाद माथाडी व असंरक्षित कामगार मंडळाची लेकीची विगतवारी ↓ लेकीचा दर व विगतवारी			
Rates of Levy and bifurcation		अ.क्र.	शिर्षक	टक्केवारी	अ.क्र.
levy @35% of total earning by the workers, to be deposited to Board by every Employer excluding wages earned by the workers Bifurcation % of benefit distribution		०१	भविष्य निर्वाह निधी	१२%	१.
		०२	दिवाळी बोहणी शिर्षक	८.३३%	२.
		०३	उपदान	२%	३.
		०४	नुकसान भरपाई	१%	४.
		०५	भरपगारी सुट्ट्या व रजा	०.६७%	५.
		०६	प्रशासकीय खर्च	६%	६.
			एकुण	३०%	७.
					८.
					९.

Head	%
Provident Fund	12.00 %
Gratuity	5.00 %
Diwali Bohani/Bonus	11.50 %
Paid Leave wages	1.50 %
Leave Holiday	1.50 %
Compensation A/C	1.00 %
Administrative cost	2.50 %
Total	35 %

The tripartite structure of the board, to ensure a formal voice to union and worker representatives in decision-making processes, emphasises regulating the labour market rather than welfare and social security, arriving as an afterthought. The Board monitors allocation of work, standardises wages, collects and pays wages and reduces intermediaries, contributing to greater transparency and stability in employment conditions.

However, despite these strengths, the Mathadi Model has faced enormous challenges, and the experience of workers across Maharashtra has varied depending on the efficiency of the Board, its ability to be fiscally sound, its ability to encourage fruitful participation of all relevant stakeholders, and so on. Efficiency has varied across sectors, markets, and regions, with challenges in registration processes, enforcement of the levy upon registration, and overall coverage. Administrative strength of various boards also proves to determine strongly how the model will pan out for workers of that particular district/ region. Although the literature notes 34 Mathadi Boards in Maharashtra, reliable information is inconsistent (Jatav & Jajoria, 2020). Official records list only 26, with uneven distribution across districts. Several boards are concentrated in Mumbai, while others serve multiple districts. Some districts lack independent boards, and at least seven appear to have no clearly documented boards at all, highlighting gaps

in transparency and accessibility of information. Moreover, experiences from even the most successfully run boards, such as the Pune Mathadi Hamal and Other Unorganised Workers' Board, suggest that while the model improves working conditions, it does not eliminate informality or power asymmetries with labour markets. In fact, experiences from Pune reflect how the role of worker collectives, the spatial proximity of the relevant actors, as well as active and intentional participation of the 'tri' in the 'tripartite' become driving factors in establishing a Board that truly speaks to the spirit of the Mathadi Model (Shamir & Marshall, 2025).

Experiences from Pune also exhibit the crucial pillar that the Hamal Panchayat has been in shaping not just the dynamics of the labour market but the relationship that the state and the city share with informal workers (Mander & Jacob, 2010). Over the last five decades, the Hamal Panchayat has established a Hamal School meant for the education of the children of *Hamalis*. It has also negotiated a decent housing society, the Hamal Nagar, with one room and kitchen apartments (1RK) for workers to reside in the city with their families, with the government allocating land for the same near the Market area. Moreover, it opened 12 Kashtachi Bakhar Kitchen Canteens for nutritious meals for workers at minimal rates with the kitchens employing widows of *Hamalis*, establishing ties with hospitals and conducting health check-ups for *Hamalis* at Hamal Bhavan (the Union office) (Tambe & Dyahadroy, 2023). It even fought for the introduction of a scheme for women cleaners in the market areas for decent wages instead of the insufficient ration as the mode of payment being by traders and merchants. This brief summation of the Hamal Panchayat's involvement, its relations with stakeholders and the board, and its many contributions to establishing the model and the board in Pune is noteworthy for understanding why the Pune Mathadi board must indeed be considered a model.

More than five decades after its enactment, the model remains a significant landmark in integrating informal workers into a system of regulated employment with social protection. Replicating the model cannot be separated from the factors that led to its emergence and its ability to propose institutional mechanisms that combine labour rights, state intervention and collective representation.

3. Mathadi Work and Platform-Based Gig Work: Similarities and Differences

At first glance, the conditions of Mathadi workers and platform-based gig workers appear to be separated by time, sector and technology. However, at the heart of the Indian economy and its labour market, gig work has always existed. A closer examination of the history of the

conditions of work endured by Mathadi workers reveals important structural similarities with this new form of work. Precarity, vulnerability, and operations outside traditional employer-employee relationships are a few crucial similarities. Mathadi workers were historically hired on a task-to-task basis without any formal contracts. Today, literature around platform work indicates a lack of clear and transparent contracts offered by platform aggregators/ platform companies, where they are classified as “independent contractors” or “partners” with no fixed or regulated wages (Mondal et al., 2025). In both cases, this complex or often absent employee-employer relationship and this classification of workers shift all associated risks with the work performed from the labour users onto the workers. Precarity is shared not just in relation to wages or lack of ‘worker’ status. Moreover, Mathadis were often expected to perform labour beyond loading and unloading and remained unpaid for tasks such as stacking. Under the conditions that platform work presents, in all sectors, additional allocation of work remains unpaid. For instance, the doorstep delivery is calculated on the basis of kilometres travelled, but reaching the doorstep requires additional steps and that labour remains unrecognised despite recent on-ground reports suggesting intervention. Occupational safety and dignity become vital factors, too.

However, platform work brings with it a set of unique differences and challenges. Platform-based gig work is digitally mediated and monitored through technology, including allocation of work, payment of earnings, an algorithm-based ratings system and metrics that determine workers’ social security benefits. Platform work poses new challenges such as technological glitches, arbitrary commissions, spatial dispersion and limited interaction amongst workers, entry barriers such as heavy entry fees, as the home personnel sector especially highlights, etc. Reports highlight the uncertainty of work, lack of fair contracts, poor grievance redressal mechanisms, absence of upward mobility, and little to no social security benefits, with a restrictive definition of social security. New forms of control and power asymmetry have emerged that were absent in traditional informal labour markets; the design and force of algorithms govern a worker’s working day (Fairwork, 2024; Mondal et al., 2025; Sehgal & Yatharth, 2022; Vasudevan et al., 2024).

The claim that platform work is flexible has been investigated, too, revealing how workers engage in longer hours for incentives to earn their daily bread. Algorithmic management clubbed with an invisible employer heightens the insecurity, too. Moreover, the scale and fragmentation of platform work, with limited aggregators who continue to have a greater share

of the market and thereby control, also lead to a lack of viable alternatives for workers, except for the select platforms that control the market. With respect to collectivisation and mobilisation, workers moved towards using technology, social media and informal digital channels. However, heavy surveillance, data ownership and spatial fragmentation, despite digitally-connected worker groups, pose a challenge (Tandon & Sekharan, 2022). To gain bargaining power, instances of punitive measures such as ID blocking upon either forming a union or discussing collective action have been recorded. This actively discourages workers, both from unions and non-union affiliations, from participating in collective action such as strikes (including digital strikes) (Remesh, 2025).

Despite these differences and a new set of challenges faced by platform workers and thereby, hurdles in mobilising, the structural similarities make a strong case for state intervention. In terms of precarity, informality and lack of holistic legal protection, the Mathadi Model qualifies as a worthy framework in its ability to provide labour rights and negotiation power to worker groups. In the next section, the aim is to understand the replicability of the model in providing holistic legal protection, keeping in mind the new set of obstacles that platform-based gig work carries with it

4. What do the New Legal Frameworks Offer? What does it Omit?

The introduction of the four Labour Codes in 2020 included gig workers within the ambit of the Code on Social Security, 2020. However, despite the acknowledgement that gig and platform work arrangements lie outside traditional employer-employee relationships, the workers remained absent in the other three codes, and also the inclusion in the mentioned code remains conceptually limited. The absence of clarity on the nature of employment relationship and corresponding rights reflects a continued broader hesitation to deem platform workers as labour deserving of comprehensive protection (Singh & Surya, 2025).

Compared with emerging state-level legislation (see Table 1), those that draw inspiration from the Mathadi Model show roadblocks. Notably, these frameworks introduce provisions such as establishing welfare boards, registering workers and aggregators, and imposing a welfare cess. They also gesture towards transparency in algorithmic management, grievance redressal mechanisms, and fair contractual practices. While these elements signal an earnest attempt to replicate the Mathadi Model and engage with platform work and workers, they fall short of constructing a robust labour rights framework. Crucially, they do not mandate minimum wages,

any regulation of wages, and omit freedom of association altogether (Mondal et al., 2025). As a result, gig workers continue to remain outside the protective scope of foundational labour legislations concerning issues such as occupational safety, maternity benefits, protection against sexual harassment at the workplace and the ability to register industrial disputes as grievances with the board. A comparative analysis with the Mathadi Model reveals the depth of this gap.

Firstly, the nature and scale of the welfare levy illustrate a fundamental shift. Where under the Mathadi boards, levies range between 30 to 40 percent (determined by regional cost of living) and enable the creation of a financially prudent welfare infrastructure, here a massive reduction can be noted. Current platform-based legislations alter the levy from a redistributive mechanism into a largely symbolic contribution with a nominal levy ranging from 1 to 5 percent. Thereby, constraining the capacity of welfare boards to deliver substantial social security and hugely reducing the burden of the aggregators.

Secondly, wage regulation was central to the Mathadi framework. However, it remains absent in contemporary laws. The Mathadi boards not only standardised task-based/ gig-based wages clearly but also ensured their periodic revision and timely disbursal. This regulation directly addressed power asymmetries in the informal labour market and provided security to workers. Platform workers today continue to remain subject to algorithmic wage determination (ultimately set by aggregators), where opaque systems dictate earnings without negotiation. The absence of a guaranteed minimum or fair wage structure fundamentally undermines workers' bargaining power and economic security.

Thirdly, the role of collectivisation marks a critical divergence. The Mathadi Model emerged from sustained worker mobilisation and institutionalised the participation of unions within a tripartite governance structure. Organisations such as Hamal Panchayat exemplify how collective strength shaped both the legislation and its implementation. Contemporary frameworks, however, do not guarantee the right to freedom of association. In a context where platform workers are spatially dispersed and digitally managed, this omission is particularly consequential. Evidence of punitive actions by aggregators against workers engaging in collective action further exacerbates this fragmentation.

Relatedly, while both systems adopt a tripartite structure in principle, the balance of power differs substantially. The Mathadi boards function through sustained engagement between

workers, labour users, and the state, with mechanisms that actively reduce intermediaries and regulate labour markets. In contrast, platform economies are characterised by dominant aggregators, digital mediation, and asymmetrical access to data, resulting in skewed decision-making processes despite formal representation.

Finally, the contemporary frameworks inadequately address gendered dimensions of work. Unlike the broader ecosystem of support that evolved around the Mathadi Model (driven largely by union initiatives), current frameworks do not integrate provisions related to the prevention of sexual harassment, maternity entitlements, or childcare infrastructure. The absence of such measures reflects a limited understanding of the structural constraints faced by women workers, particularly in balancing paid work with unpaid care responsibilities.

5. Conclusion

The partial replication of the Mathadi Model in contemporary gig work legislation reflects selective guarantees and rights that prioritise administrative form over substantive labour rights. While welfare boards, cess-based financing, and stakeholder representation suggest an attempt to regulate platform work, the underlying framework remains narrowly confined to social security. This stands in contrast to the Mathadi Model's foundational emphasis on labour market regulation, wage standardisation, and collective bargaining. The effectiveness of any regulatory framework for gig work depends not merely on inclusion but on the depth of that inclusion. The Mathadi Model demonstrates that meaningful protection requires a combination of financial commitment, institutional capacity, and political will shaped by worker mobilisation. In the absence of wage regulation, enforceable rights, and mechanisms for collective representation, current legislation falls short of qualifying as a labour-rights framework.

If platform work is to be governed in a manner that ensures dignity, security, and equity, future legal frameworks must move beyond symbolic adaptation. Engagement with the structural realities of gig work, incorporating gender-responsive provisions, and foregrounding workers' rights as central rather than peripheral concerns becomes non-negotiable. Only then can the promise of using the Mathadi Model as a blueprint be realised in both principle and practice.

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