

## Are some gig platforms reviving colonial-era servitude?

**| GUEST VIEW**

# Are some gig platforms reviving colonial-era servitude?

**VANDANA VASUDEVAN**

 is a development sector researcher and author of *GTP Please!*

It is hard to find a railway porter (*coolie*) these days. The iconic helpers clad in red were relied upon to carry heavy luggage and expertly navigate the chaos of an Indian railway station. They have largely vanished since the arrival of wheeled trolleys and escalators. Technology packed them off. Ironically, last week, technology brought back a new kind of *coolie* to Delhi's Lajpat Nagar. A new service called Carry Men allows shoppers to book a man who will hold your shopping bags. Clad in orange T-shirts, they can carry up to 2kg for 30 minutes for payment of ₹79. Additional services include providing umbrellas, folding chairs and power banks so that consumers can shop and never drop. It is starkly reminiscent of the *pankhawallahs*, *bhishtis* and *coolies* of the British Raj—the invisible ‘natives’ who pulled fan strings for *mensuabs* in hot Indian summers, carried water in sheep-skin pouches while running along with the *sahib*'s entourage or transported luggage on their heads. In *Kin*, Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel, he writes

“...the coolies, earth-coloured and mute, crouched reverently some twenty or thirty yards away.”

Small mercies that the Carry Men walks straight and alongside the *mensuab* in 21st century India, according to the service's poster. However, the spirit of hyper-convenience for the privileged while the physical burden is passed on to a poorer person remains the same.

**Innovation as aggregation of the jobs:** Some direct-to-consumer (D2C) startups employ youngsters and teach them a skill that can set them on paths to sustainable livelihoods. To cite a few examples, home service platforms train people to become plumbers, electricians and beauticians. An eyewear startup that disrupted the market through omnichannel distribution runs optometry programmes and certifies them as ‘vision professionals’. A speciality coffee brand trains its employees to become expert roasters and baristas.

But there are various other startups in the D2C space that are creating a business model merely by organizing economically vulnerable workers for convenience services with low entry barriers. Thousands of young men are simply dropping off packets, and now, holding them for clients.

The argument that ‘at least these companies are creating some jobs,’ which I often see on social media, is hollow. There is a sharp distinction between skilling employees and using them as interchangeable warm bodies. When a person is taught a skill, her livelihood becomes sustainable and the worker generates more value over time. When we settle for an ‘at least they are able to earn’ scenario, we set the bar so low that it can justify all kinds of work, including tasks that are borderline exploitative.

**The pampered and pampering classes:** Historically, we have been a deeply feudalistic society. Our entrenched caste-class divisions continue to manifest in the way many middle-class folks treat those who serve them, such as their househelp. Against this background, when startups create newer ways in which lower-income groups can pamper the middle class, we normalize servitude. A startup founder said in a recent TV interview that his

company sends service providers to customers' homes within 10 minutes to do menial tasks like peeling peas or drying clothes. An entire generation will grow up thinking that any task requiring some physical effort (other than fitness) can be transferred to a poorer person who can be summoned at will.

When there is an app involved, ratings are never far behind. Small inconveniences like a delayed order can be seen as deserving of censure through a poor rating of the worker. A vast band of entitled citizens emerges in constant judgement of those who serve it.

Since servitude hides behind an app or a smart uniform and branding, it is couched as modern, but its kernel is feudal.

**A permanent stopgap:** Employers informally wonder if the existence of easy gig work is itself a disincentive to move to higher-skilled jobs. Spending months learning a manufacturing process seems like a drag when there is a quick and easy way to earn money. A 2026 survey of 1,500

gig workers by Primus Partners found that among gig workers in their 20s who had already been doing the job for four years, most saw it as a permanent career and not a stepping stone.

**Decent work?** According to the International Labour Organization, decent work is “productive employment that delivers a fair income, provides security, ensures social protection for families, offers prospects for personal development, and allows workers to organize and participate in decisions that affect their lives.” Gig work, which relies purely on physical labour, fails these standards as it is volatile and has few safety nets or perks. Even licensed railway porters were given annual complimentary tickets to any station and access to railway hospitals and schools. And they also formed unions to exercise their collective bargaining power.

It is worth asking whether ironing out wrinkles in middle-class life—fetching, carrying, queuing—is the best use of entrepreneurial capital and youthful energy for an aspiring *sahasagar* (global) leader. If every inconvenience of the affluent becomes a business opportunity, India's famed ‘demographic dividend’ risks yielding little more than an army of branded attendants—seemingly modern but feudal in spirit.

**QUICK READ**

A shopping porter service in Delhi highlights the risk of India's demographic dividend delivering an army of attendants in brand uniforms. Many of these jobs offer no upskilling prospects.

Is such work a throwback to the colonial era of water carriers and manual fan string pullers at the service of overlord? Many tasks on gig sale are poorly paid and seem borderline exploitative.