

Accounting for the Unaccounted: Shadow Work, Invisible Labor, and the Unseen Backbone of India's Economy

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Abstract

India marching at a centennial, an equally unseen but crucial part about its economy has avoided being analyzed shadow work. Shadow work, unpaid and undervalued labor propelling both households and markets in nature, hits more women, informal workers, digitally included individuals. By using data from the 2019 Time Use Survey, workforce registry on digital platform labor and welfare delivery mechanisms, this paper empirically investigates how the time poverty of straddling digital systems management, emotional labor and unpaid gig-related chores are shaped by economic mismeasurement. Stemming from feminist and behavioral economics traditions, this critiqued engagement of India in its labor metrics imagines a revitalized inclusion framework that normalizes and values unpaid productivity. It's a call to transform digital governance based on the human, regular time-use audits and a whole new valuation of care and instrumental work in policy sciences. An initial cross-disciplinary explanation calls for a transition away from GDP-based development paradigms to more inclusive approaches that reflect the lived economic realities of India's invisible workforce.

Keywords: Shadow Work, Time Poverty, Unpaid Labor, Digital Governance.

Introduction: India's Uncounted Workforce

Then, there are the daily half-a-million Indians who work economy keeping jobs which are unrecorded and unappreciated. In the case of a woman in a rural part of Telangana, who spends hours on glitchy app navigating government forms that are meant give her entitlements. In Hyderabad a delivery guy spends half the day interacting with customers and rerouting through maps, work that doesn't get paid. A mother in slum urban area arranges for school fees, household budgeting and water collection while doing emotional labor all unpaid.

Shadow spin is the unpaid and largely invisible labor that holds up formal economic activity but is neither recorded nor counted in the official national accounts. Originally conceived by philosopher Ivan Illich, shadow work has so expanded to encompass intangible and digital labor at the borders of traditional employment, but still occupying time, energy or spiritual capital.

Shadow work aside, where over 90% of employment is informal in the Indian case; where gender and caste hierarchies that shape availability to labor markets matter most however shadow jobs are a big part. This paper then discusses shadow work in descriptive terms and illustrates how this vision manifests today in India before making an argument for it to be included in grounds for economic debate as India approaches India@100.

What is Shadow Work? Reframing Labor and Productivity

“Shadow work” refers to the unpaid labor that some people perform to support systems that once provided full-service support. For example, of previously commercially settled tasks: filling bank bills, booking travel online, troubleshooting app-employ services fare etc. Also, in India it means:

- Unpaid domestic and care work
- Time spent outside of system (with/to) the various digital government portals (Aadhar, DBT, PM-Kisan etc.)
- Gig worker uncompensated work — self developing, including conflict resolution, and commutes between gigs.
- Social reproduction, emotional labor: family units home maintenance health community care

This is work that stays off the GDP, but the economic and social benefits of this work are aided living is made for everyone. It favors the market economy as well as the household.

The Indian Landscape: A Time-Poor Majority

India first Time Use Survey (TUS 2019) more than a decade later exposed scarily stark gender gaps:

- 82.1% of women engage in unpaid domestic services daily vs. 26.1% of men.
- Women spend 7.2 hours per day on unpaid work, compared to 2.7 hours for men.
- If monetized, this labor could contribute up to 15.5% of India’s GDP, according to an ILO estimate.

However, these are also reflected in the oversimplification of shadow work in India and the post-COVID digital times after even last century. With welfare delivery moving online, the compliance burden (Aadhar updates, e-KYC, grievance redressal) directly flows back to citizens. Such a transition needs time, digital competence and strength mostly sore on women elderly Folsters the rural poor who operate sans smartphones or decent connectivity.

In India, a 2023 study by Aapti Institute discovered gig workers at that amount of time devoted 20–25% on unpaid digital admin the app alert checks, customer dispute resolutions and rating improvements they are responsible for are all a part of the job but not paid for.

So, workers suffer from time poverty the phenomenon where individuals show up as "unemployed" in time-based measurements but are prevented from engaging in paid work, education or rest because of additional unpaid duties.

Gender, Class and Digital Shadow Work

Shadow work (like most unpaid labor) is not gender- or class-neutral.

- The unpaid care, particularly on the domestic front is must balance by women (group disproportionately)
- Gig workers (especially Dalit or OBC/Adivasi) are subjected to precarious alignment of work in piece rates with hidden unpaid substructures
- And rural citizens, specifically the elderly and semi-literate need interface with elaborate digital systems in order to secure pensions or subsidies that is they are the new government employees, but not trained.

In the making of India the digital transformation is empowering as a book; turns up “burden transfer” in practice i.e. either the state or the market off-loads responsibilities onto individuals under the empowerment and transparency.

Economic Implications: Productivity Without Pay

From an economic perspective, ignoring shadow work leads to a serious mismeasurement of labor, productivity, and well-being.

Women's low labor force participation rate (LFPR) currently 23% (CMIE, 2024) may be less about withdrawal from work and more about mis categorization.

- Labor statistics don't capture gig workers' unpaid hours or rural women's administrative and care work.
- Welfare schemes often increase unpaid work for example, schemes requiring regular online updates or biometric checks shift logistical responsibilities to beneficiaries.

Furthermore, the financial consequences of time poverty stress, diminished learning, decreased productivity, and decreased labor mobility are felt deeply at the local level but are not visible in GDP.

Rethinking Labor, Inclusion, and India@100

In rethinking what we mean by and measure labor for the India that will be developed, inclusive and knowledge-based economy by 2047

We must:

- Integrate urban-rural and gender time use surveys annually recognize unpaid and shadow work as part of national productivity
- Build human-centric digital governance tools that take the pressure off the administrative system
Expand social protections to gig and informal sector workers including adoption of models for unpaid shadow work
- Narrating Feminist and behavioral economics midframes into Policy making Time (valuing time, care)

These reforms are not just economics reforms, but about dignity, inclusion and equitable recognition in a changing labor scene.

Conclusion: Making the Invisible Visible.

Shadow work is not a fringy topic it is that secret engine that propels Indian families, markets and governance. But it is unnamed and uncounted. To develop a genuine inclusive economy, India

needs to stop indulging in GDP fetishism and treat time as another resource and unpaid work, an economic activity and when possible, convert digital inclusion as a human challenge (and not a policy target)

This paper creates a fresh lens through which economic theory, digital labor and gender research can come together to illuminate an underappreciated, highly relevant policy-relevant puzzle. It calls on economists, planners and citizens to redefine resilience and productivity not merely markets but the mysterious beats of everyday life.

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