

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: February

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-4643

E-ISSN: 2581-9402

Citation:

Praveenkumar, S., and Chandrasekar, S “Gig Workers as Cultural Stewards: Empowering Independent Storytellers through Community-Based Tourism Platforms in Madurai and Kodaikanal.” *Shanlax International Journal of Management*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2026, pp. 236–42.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v13iS1-i1-Feb.10354>

Gig Workers as Cultural Stewards: Empowering Independent Storytellers through Community-Based Tourism Platforms in Madurai and Kodaikanal

Mr. S. Praveenkumar

*Ph.D., Part Time Scholar, PG & Research Department of Commerce
The Madura College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India*

Dr. S. Chandrasekar

*Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of Commerce
The Madura College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India*

Abstract

The gig economy is expanding rapidly and this has altered the mode of work in tourism industry. With this, people are no longer gravitating towards work but rather more flexible types of work which can only be utilized when required. Paper entails the concept of something referred to as Cultural Stewards. They are individuals on their own employment and online through internet facilitate establishment of tourism experiences. They facilitate these experiences by organizing them with the community in such places as Madurai and Kodaikanal. Madurai is a popular city and the Cultural Stewards must be attentive on the manner with which they narrate the story of the culture in the city. On the one hand, Kodaikanal is a specialised destination of the eco tourism and the freelance guides employed in the area attempt to mitigate against the ill impacts of excessive tourists that may have in the environment. The Cultural Stewards in these places cannot be ignored as they make people experience when they visit Madurai and Kodaikanal. This analysis is actually significant since it examines individuals who possess ability and deal with information not only those who undertake simple tasks that demand handwork. It bridges a gap in the research that is currently being conducted. Its research is based on knowledge workers and this is a huge contrast to the typical research that considers individuals in low-skilled manual jobs. It implies that the research is, of knowledge workers and their activity. This was conducted in such places where a group of 30 people were involved. Thematic Factor Analysis was used to observe the working of worker empowerment in the study. What was discovered in the study is of great interest. It discovered the so-called Platform Paradox. The individuals in the research used who are like leaders perceived that they had much control over their own narratives with an average of 4.65. Also, they rated 4.4 in believing that they had a lot of liberty in making money. Simultaneously the digital platforms influence worker empowerment. These platforms actually concerned the people in the study a lot in terms of their job security, as there was an average score of 2.25. The focus of this study is worker empowerment and it seems that online platforms are a substantial issue. Statistical tests indicate that stewards in Madurai are more dependent on apps ($p=0.025$) than the ones in Kodaikanal. The paper concludes

by encouraging the consideration of such independent contractors by the local decision-making. It also pushes the safeguarding of seasonal employees in tourism that is resilient in instating the 2026 code on social security. The tourist industry addresses the worldwide sustainability objectives by recognizing gig employees as new guardians.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Cultural Stewardship, Community-Led Tourism, Madurai, Kodaikanal

Introduction

Tourism and hospitality business is transforming a great deal in the world at present. It is occurring due to the existence of labor platforms and work based on projects. At one point the majority of jobs was bossed. However now the digital platforms have resulted in an experienced worker that the tourism and hospitality industry is experiencing a lot of these fractional workers. When individuals examine the gig economy they tend to think of employment options that do not require substantial capabilities such as driving to take up a ride service in the touring and hotel sector. A gap in research exists on Cultural Stewards who are actually good at their business. These Cultural Stewards are, such as storytellers and nature guides. They work on their own. Get people to use internet to provide people with thrilling experiences that unify people. Cultural Stewards ensure that people have some meaning in these experiences.

This paper will examine two regions through which one of the geographical significant tourism sites in south India Madurai and Kodaikanal. Madurai gig workers take people around the Living Heritage. They act as guides. There is something that gig workers in Kodaikanal do. They strive to conserve the environment. They attempt to cope with the issues that accompany the tourism of Kodaikanal. The paper interviews 30 stewards that work in various locations. It looks at what they do. The research reveals the effect of individuals leaving agencies and beginning to handle things themselves through use of digital tools. It draws on cases of Madurai and Kodaikanal to present its argument, regarding gig workers and self-management online. The primary objective of the study is to observe how gig companies can contribute to making the tourist business more just and ensure that origin communities receive the opportunity to receive the part of income that they raise. This is what TTS 2026 is also seeking where they want tourism to be sustainable and involve all. However, something is wrong with it, and this is referred to as the paradox of the platform. It implies that despite the freedom that is offered through gig platforms they are also accompanied by dangers such as the “Platform Precarity” where individuals have no actual idea of the manner in which the tourism industry. It is what this study is examining the ways gig platform can make a difference. Thematic Factor Analysis is a method employed in this paper to examine a problem. It attempts to seek a manner of narrating stories which the society can belong to. Such a narration can be effective with the Indian Social Security system that will exist in 2026. The paper believes that this is an effective way of addressing the community, and this can be done in the short run, using the India's 2026 Social Security system.

Literature Review

The World Economic Forum made a report for 2025 of Future Travel and Tourism. They desire Inclusive Growth around this region. According to the report, there is a thing known as the Fractional Labor, which is highly critical to the continued growth of the tourism industry. The growth rate of the tourism industry is estimated to increase by 7 percent per year. With regard to registration of the travel plans, the report asserts that digital platforms are not only applied in this regard. These online platforms have become an instrumentality of enabling the local professionals to perform their duties more effectively. They are Empowerment Ramping that enables the local specialists to deal with people, globally. These local professionals are still able to maintain the environment

at the time. The report that World Economic Forum wrote discusses the way Fractional Labor and these digital Empowerment Ramps can assist the tourism industry to develop in such a way.

The study Giddy from 2024 explores Digital Transformation in the changing tourism industry. It was written in Sustainability. This study is regarding the shifting of people out of performing minor duties to performing tasks that require a substantial amount of knowledge such as becoming a cultural narrator. The digital platforms are providing these storytellers with much freedom in the exercise of their work. But there exists an issue on the global stage that is referred to as the Social Protection Gap. It implies that the currently existing laws cannot be considered good enough to take care of individuals who are self-employed in the tourism business. These freelance employees are in need of laws to assist them in tourism especially the cultural narrators who are engaged in knowledge-based labour. Digital transformation of the tourism industry is a revolution and it tends to impact cultural storytellers and other individuals engaged in the tourism industry.

The Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review for the year 2024 discusses the novelties and trend in Tourism Storytelling. This review is very detailed. It discovers that a large recent trend in Tourism Storytelling is the so-called Narrative Sovereignty. The Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review observes that, even more so than tour companies, individual storytellers using the services of gig platforms are in the business of assisting the United Nations in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals or the SDGs. This is attributed to the fact that individual storytellers make the Intangible Cultural Heritage to be what it is. According to the Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review, the work of caretaking the Intangible Cultural Heritage is done by individual storytellers when they recount their stories, regarding Tourism. The Tourism industry and the Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review include a large contribution of Tourism Storytelling, which is concerned with its impact on the SDGs.

The NITI. 2024 Economic Survey of India discusses the way the work is transforming the world. According to the survey, the population of people doing gig jobs in India will grow to 23.5million by the year 2030. A significant portion of these jobs 22 percent will require special abilities. Gig jobs should become more professional; that is what it is saying in this report. The example tourism guides who are taking people around heritage sites are made to be very important to the Indias economy. It is also noteworthy that the NITI Aayog report is pointing out that such tourism guides are adding value to the GDP of the country, which is a big thing to India. This is a realization that is being demonstrated by the Economic Survey of India, which shows that the country is becoming a part of the gig jobs.

Sood and Singh (2023) wrote about the gig economy in India. They discussed the issues related to the gig market. This is not true of the gig economy in India. There are also many digitally skilled people in some cities that do gig work, such as Madurai.. It is very hard in the mountain regions such as Kodaikanal. These are quarters with communication facilities. This restricts the chances of the individuals who desire to become eco-guides. The India gig economy has numerous challenges. According to Sood and Singh, the market of Indian gigs also requires improvement. Indians have the potential to offer opportunities to the gig economy.

The Research Gap

While global literature (2024-2025) praises the independence of digital narrators, and local reports (2024) highlight the vastness of the gig economy, there is no particular research that contrasts the Urban-Heritage Gig Model (Madurai) with the Rural-Eco Gig Model (Kodaikanal). This paper addresses that lack by exploring how “Cultural Stewards” in these two different areas of Tamil Nadu handle the challenge of being visible online while also maintaining local traditions.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study uses a Qualitative Descriptive Research Design. This design is chosen because it helps us really understand the lives of gig workers and how they deal with money and social issues. We cannot get this information by looking at numbers. The research looks at gig workers and digital stewardship. Tries to figure out how and why they are changing the way they do things. The study of gig workers and digital stewardship is important to understand the lives of gig workers and digital stewardship.

Sampling Technique

The study uses Purposive and Snowball Sampling to find the participants. We picked thirty gig workers for the study. Fifteen of these gig workers are from Madurai. The other fifteen are from Kodaikanal.

Participant Profile and Demographics

The following table summarize the data of demographic of stewards under interviewed for this study. This data provides how factors such as influence their attributes in gig economy.

Table 1 Distribution of Demographic Data between Madurai and Kodaikanal

Demographic Data	Madurai (n=15)		Kodaikanal (n=15)		Test of Significance	P-Value
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)		
Age Group						
20–35 (Gen Z/Millennials)	9	60	7	46.7	X ² = 0.54	0.462
36–55 (Mid-career)	6	40	8	53.3		
Gender						
Male	10	66.7	11	73.3	X ² = 0.16	0.689
Female	5	33.3	4	26.7		
Education						
Secondary/Diploma	3	20	4	26.7	X ² = 0.81	0.667
Graduate	7	46.7	8	53.3		
Highly Educated (PG/Ph.D)	5	33.3	3	20		
Digital Platform Usage						
High (App-dependent)	12	80	6	40	X ² = 5.00	0.025*
Moderate (Mixed/Referral)	3	20	9	60		
Work Experience						
< 10 Years	8	53.3	10	66.7	X ² = 0.56	0.454
> 10 Years	7	46.7	5	33.3		

Source: Primary Data

Interpretation

- Really important to note about Digital Usage: We looked at thirty people and found something interesting. The people in charge in Madurai really like using apps. The people in charge in Kodaikanal do not use apps as much. They like to get work from people. This is a difference and it is not just a coincidence. The difference is statistically significant which means it is probably not an accident. We can see this because the number is 0.025 which is a small number. This

tells us that Digital Usage is different in these two places. Madurai stewards like Digital Usage in the form of apps but Kodaikanal stewards do not like Digital Usage much they like to get work from other people, which is a form of Digital Usage but not the same, as using apps.

- These gig workers have a lot of education: a big percentage of them are graduates and post graduates. For example in Madurai 80 percent of them have degrees and in Kodaikanal it is around 73.3 percent. This shows that these gig workers are really people, not just casual workers. They are, like the people who take care of knowledge which's why we can call them Knowledge Stewards or the people who look after knowledge. The fact that so many of them have degrees means that they are Knowledge Stewards, not people doing odd jobs.
- Gender Participation: While male-dominated, the ~30% female participation rate highlights the gig economy as a growing “empowerment ramp” for women in Tamil Nadu’s tourism sector.

Perception Analysis: The Five-Point Likert Scale

To measure the impact of gig platforms on cultural stewardship, respondents were asked to rate five key “Empowerment Factors” on a scale of 1 to 5 (1: Strongly Disagree, 5: Strongly Agree).

Table 2 Mean Score Analysis of Empowerment Factors

Factor Code	Empowerment Dimension	Madurai (Mean)	Kodaikanal (Mean)	Overall Mean
EF1	Economic Autonomy (Direct earnings vs. commissions)	4.6	4.2	4.4
EF2	Narrative Sovereignty (Freedom to tell local stories)	4.8	4.5	4.65
EF3	Digital Visibility (Global reach via platforms)	4.7	3.8	4.25
EF4	Work-Life Agility (Flexibility in working hours)	4.2	4.4	4.3
EF5	Algorithmic Security (Trust in platform fairness)	2.1	2.4	2.25

Source: Primary Data

Factor Analysis (Exploratory Approach)

Factor 1: Socio-Economic Empowerment (EF1, EF2, EF4)

The thing that really matters here is that people in Tamil Nadu do gig work because they want to be their boss and feel proud of who they are and where they come from which is basically, about independence and cultural pride and that is what drives gig work in Tamil Nadu.

Factor 2: Digital Risk/Precarity (EF3, EF5)

This thing shows us the side of working on a gig basis. People can see what is going on but they do not really trust the computer system that runs it and that is a problem so the government needs to do something about it. The gig economy has a lot of issues and this is one of them the gig economy needs to be fixed.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The Thematic Factor Analysis and the high Empowerment Index that we saw in Madurai and Kodaikanal are really important. So we have some ideas that can help fix the problem between

people being in control of technology and not having jobs. The Thematic Factor Analysis tells us a lot about this issue. We need to look at the results of the Thematic Factor Analysis and the high Empowerment Index in Madurai and Kodaikanal to understand what to do. Here are some suggestions to help with the problem of autonomy and labor precarity in places like Madurai and Kodaikanal:

Policy Level: Refining the 90-Day Rule

The new rules that came out in 2026 for the Code on Social Security that was made in 2020 say that gig workers have to work for least 90 days to get benefits from the Code on Social Security. This 90-day rule is really important for gig workers who want to get benefits from the Code, on Social Security.

- Recommendation: For skilled Cultural Stewards in places like Kodaikanal that are busy at certain times of the year the minimum amount of money they need to make should add up from many different sources. Because people only visit these places at times of the year we should have a special kind of insurance called Parametric Insurance. This insurance would pay Cultural Stewards automatically when it is not busy or when bad weather forces them to close. Cultural Stewards in hubs, like Kodaikanal would really benefit from this kind of insurance.

Platform Level: Algorithmic Transparency

The score for Algorithmic Security is really low at 2.25. This means that platforms need to do something than just use Star Ratings. Algorithmic Security is not about giving a Star Rating. Platforms have to think of a way to deal with Algorithmic Security. They have to move beyond using Star Ratings, for Algorithmic Security.

- Recommendation: We should have a rating system that thinks about the situation. This means considering things like traffic in Madurai or the weather in the hills. The Contextual Rating System is an idea because it makes sure that a steward is not punished for things they cannot control. The stewards should not have their livelihood affected by things that're not their fault. We need to implement the Contextual Rating System to help the stewards. The Contextual Rating System will make things more fair, for the stewards.

Local Governance: Integration with Smart Cities

- Recommendation: The Madurai Smart City Project should create a “Verified Cultural Steward” database. By linking e-Shram IDs with local tourism boards, independent guides can gain official recognition, which increases their “Factor 1” (Autonomy) while providing a safety net.

Conclusion

This study has looked at how people who work in tourism in Madurai and Kodaikanal're changing from regular jobs to taking care of digital culture. The study found something called the “Platform Paradox”. Even though digital companies give tourism workers a lot of control over their money and the stories they tell about tourism these companies also create new problems for workers. Tourism labor is moving to Digital Cultural Stewardship. This is what the study is about. The people, in the study said they like being able to work on their terms but they do not like the new problems that come with it. Digital Cultural Stewardship is what this study is really looking at. It is happening in Madurai and Kodaikanal.

The Factor Analysis shows that gig workers in Tamil Nadu are mostly motivated by Self-Reliance. This means they like to work on their own.. The problem is that these Self-Reliance gig workers do not have any formal social security to protect them. As India gets ready to implement

its new labor codes in April 2026 it is very important that gig workers with special skills are not just called “delivery partners”. They should be seen as important people who take care of things that are not physical, like traditions and customs which is their intangible heritage and also their Self-Reliance.

In conclusion, the future of sustainable tourism in South India depends on a “Co-regulatory Model”—one where platforms provide the global reach, the government provides the social safety net, and the “Cultural Steward” remains the authentic voice of the destination.

References

1. Giddy, A. M. (2024). Digitalisation of the tourism industry and self-employment: The transition to knowledge-based gigging. *Sustainability*, 16(4), 1102-1120.
2. Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review. (2024). Tourism storytelling research progress and trends: The rise of narrative sovereignty in the digital age. *Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review*, 11(2), 45–62.
3. NITI Aayog. (2024). Transforming work in a changing world: The role of India’s gig workforce. Government of India. <https://niti.gov.in/reports/2024/gig-economy-india>
4. Sood, R., & Singh, V. (2023). The gig economy in India: Growth, challenges, and policy implications for regional tourism. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 66(1), 12-34.
5. World Economic Forum. (2025). Future of travel & tourism: Embracing sustainable and inclusive growth. WEF Insight Report. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/travel-tourism-2025>