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PRIA

research paper

APRIL 2021

Urban Informality in India during COVID-19

An Analysis of Media Discourse

Participatory Research in Asia

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed nearly every aspect of our daily lives. Yet, evidence from around the world demonstrates that its effects have been disproportionately experienced by already marginalized members of society. As such, this paper works to identify how and to what extent Indian media outlets have discussed the difficulties of urban informal workers and settlers during India's COVID-19 lockdown, to what causes they attribute these difficulties, and how they discuss government schemes to address them. Overall, it was found that media outlets have discussed the difficulties of urban informal workers and settlers at length. Most outlets focus on difficulties related to unemployment, food insecurity, and living conditions. With this, several articles also focus on the particular problems faced by women informal workers and migrant workers. The articles locate the causes of these problems in the lockdown itself and the shortcomings of government policies in the wake of the lockdown. In discussing the government programs that have been implemented to address the difficulties informal workers and settlers face, most articles reference government policies intended to address food insecurity. Some further highlight state-level programs that have been implemented in light of the pandemic. Still, these articles overwhelmingly acknowledge the shortcomings of these policies, offering policy recommendations that center on employment guarantees, the expansion of social security benefits, and the broader expansion of legal rights and protections for informal workers and settlers in urban areas.

Methods

This paper offers a discourse analysis of the conversations surrounding urban informality and the COVID-19 pandemic in the Indian media. Accordingly, the sampling frame included four English-language Indian national dailies, including *The Hindu*, the *Hindustan Times*, *Times of India*, and *The Wire*. These articles were accessed using basic keyword search terms using the search tools on the outlets' respective websites, including terms like "urban informality," "informality," "informal work," "informal employment," and "urban poor," and "urban workers." Attention was then focused on articles published since March 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, to March 2021, when the research was being conducted and written, for a full year of coverage. Articles that focused on urban informal workers and settlers during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown were then identified by their headlines. If articles were later found to not include information that was pertinent to the research topics or questions, they were subsequently removed from the sample. This resulted in a sample with a total of 64 articles. These articles were then reviewed and analyzed to identify major themes relating to the experiences of urban informal workers and settlers during the COVID-19 lockdown, as well as the federal and state government's subsequent interventions.

Overview

In analyzing these news articles, this paper works to respond to three main questions. How has the Indian media:

1. Highlighted the hardships encountered by urban informal workers during the lockdown?
2. Analyzed the causes of difficulties that urban informal workers have faced during the lockdown?
3. Discussed the government programs meant to improve the situation of urban informal workers?

Section 1: Plight of Urban Informal Workers

All of the sampled news outlets had published articles that focused specifically on the experiences of urban informal workers or settlers during the pandemic and lockdown. Additionally, there were considerable similarities in the topics these articles discussed, and the main difficulties they highlighted were consistent. The most commonly discussed problem faced by informal workers and settlers was by far unemployment and subsequent lack of income. Several articles discussed how the lockdown had adversely affected the employment of informal and migrant workers, with many citing data from surveys that highlight the unemployment rates of informal workers. As such, the issue of unemployment and lack of income was by far the most significant and consistently cited concern in the articles and was also shown to precipitate many of the other insecurities articles further addressed.

Another significant topic that articles discussed was food insecurity and the problems local governments had encountered addressing it. In particular, these articles reference how unemployment and subsequent lack of income made it difficult to afford food. Further, many note the difficulties individuals have encountered in accessing food assistance from the government, as many informal workers and settlers do not have food ration cards, ration cards were not being honored, or workers were otherwise not able to access the rations to which they were ostensibly entitled. Several articles, referencing research conducted on the experiences of informal workers and settlers, noted that many had changed and decreased their food consumption and skipping meals as a result of food insecurity. As such, concerns about food insecurity, hunger, and starvation in light of the pandemic and restrictions put in place during the lockdown were significant in the sampled articles.

Several factors related to the living conditions of urban informal settlers were discussed as well. Some noted how the heat in these settlements became a particular hazard, as individuals were forbidden from leaving their residences or walking around to cool off during the initial lockdown. They further noted the crowded living conditions in many informal settlements and how this problem was also magnified during the lockdown, with several individuals stuck inside in cramped spaces. Additionally, articles also noted that the poor living conditions and crowding of many of the urban poor also put them at particular risk of contracting and becoming severely ill from COVID-19. In this way,

articles highlighted the living conditions of urban informal settlers as a particular concern during the lockdown and pandemic.

Importantly, many articles focused on or at least referenced the particular vulnerabilities of women informal workers and settlers in the wake of the lockdown and pandemic. In particular, these articles noted that women informal workers were hit harder by unemployment during the pandemic and lockdown than men, and how women have been slower to recover and to regain employment than men after the lockdown was lifted. Particular emphasis was placed on the vulnerabilities of women domestic workers and the difficulties they had experienced with unemployment as a result of and in the wake of the pandemic. With this, some articles noted the need for gender-specific policies to adequately address and respond to these problems, including policies that would increase women's participation in the labor force and provide them with increased legal and social security. Overall, these articles did note the gendered dimensions of the lockdown and pandemic, emphasizing how they have disproportionately affected women, informal workers.

Several articles also focused specifically on the experiences of migrant workers under lockdown and during the pandemic. In particular, these articles discussed how the lack of notice or preparation before the lockdown was implemented left many migrant workers stranded, or forced them to resort to dangerous methods of travel back to their home villages. Additionally, they discuss how migrant workers were at particular risk of food insecurity as they were not able to access rations offered by the government because of their lack of documentation. Additionally, many articles discussed the ways in which federal governments have addressed the difficulties that migrant workers have faced, noting their shortcomings and urging the need for policies that attend specifically to migrant workers. As such, the effects of the lockdown and pandemic on migrant workers, in particular, were another significant theme.

Section 2: Causes of Problems

The articles mentioned various causes of the problems faced by informal workers and settlers during the pandemic. However, the most widely cited by far was the lockdown itself. Articles consistently referenced the effects lockdown had on informal workers and settlers, primarily the fact that it left many informal workers unemployed and thus left them without a means of generating income for themselves or their families. Accordingly, several articles noted how the lockdown disproportionately affected informal workers and settlers. They recognized how the lockdown posed particular problems for informal workers in ways that it did not for other workers, classes, and groups in society. It was also noted that the lockdown and the difficulties it would produce would intensify existing inequalities and vulnerabilities experienced by informal workers. Additionally, it was demonstrated how many of the problems discussed above, like food insecurity, were also a result of the lockdown and subsequent lack of employment and income. As such, lockdown and the domino-effect of problems it produced were recognized as one of the significant causes of the difficulties experienced by informal workers.

Additionally, many articles also noted how these problems continued because of the lack of government intervention or the ways in which government agencies left informal workers out of existing programs. For instance, some articles referenced how as a result of an existing policy, migrant workers were excluded from receiving food rations that they should have been offered. Additionally, the lack of legal protections afforded to informal workers was also noted as a factor that contributed to the difficulties they experienced as a result of the lockdown. As such, the problems faced by informal workers were shown to be caused or maintained by the shortcomings of existing government policies.

Section 3: Government Programs

Several articles highlighted the federal and state programs that have been implemented to help informal workers, settlers, and the urban poor. The most widely referenced government programs were those targeted toward addressing food insecurity. Many articles discussed the ways in which informal workers and settlers relied on government food assistance during the lockdown and in the wake of the pandemic. In particular, they referenced workers' use of the Public Distribution System (PDS) and ration cards to access food during the lockdown. Still, articles noted the shortcomings of these policies and the fact that many were not able to access food under existing programs. In doing so, some articles also noted how many became reliant on community organizations and outreach to access food during the lockdown. As such, in line with the aforementioned concerns with food insecurity and hunger, many articles also discussed how informal workers and settlers used government programs to access food during the lockdown and pandemic.

Several articles also discussed state programs that have been implemented in the wake of the pandemic. For instance, some articles referred to a new employment initiative implemented in Odisha, known as the "Urban Wage Employment Initiative," which would offer wage employment to urban workers in the state. Another article discussed a similar initiative implemented in Jharkhand, which would offer 100 days of employment to urban workers in the state. Both programs were recognized for their similarity to the existing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). As such, state programs targeted toward urban informal workers and settlers affected by the lockdown and pandemic were also covered in the news cycle.

Still, most articles noted the shortcomings of federal and state government interventions, particularly the ways that they excluded informal workers and settlers. As such, many articles offered or noted relevant policy recommendations. Many articles noted the need for the aforementioned issues related to food insecurity to be addressed. These articles recommended the expansion of the Public Distribution System (PDS), or making the system universal for a set period, expanding the allocation of ration cards, or establishing more community kitchens. Thus, consistent with previously mentioned concerns, policy recommendations also centered on addressing food insecurity and hunger in light of the lockdown and pandemic.

Another recurring recommendation was the establishment of employment guarantees. Many articles noted the importance of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment

Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which, as the title suggests, guarantees employment to rural workers. In doing so, they argued for the expansion of this policy to include and guarantee employment to workers in urban areas in light of the effects of lockdown and the pandemic. As such, the expansion of employment guarantees to include urban workers was another significant policy recommendation offered by the sampled articles. Other policy recommendations that were offered called for more overarching and longer-term changes. Generally, these changes centered on the registration of migrant and informal workers, as well as the extension of greater social security benefits to these workers. Further, as noted previously, the need for policies and programs that addressed the specific hardships encountered by women informal workers and migrant workers was also noted. In the end, the various shortcomings of government programs for informal workers and settlers were widely noted, and many articles subsequently offered relevant policy recommendations.

Conclusion

As is evident, the media has highlighted the particular vulnerabilities of informal settlers and workers during the lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, in discussing the problems faced by informal workers and settlers, issues related to unemployment, food insecurity, and living conditions were referenced several times. Additionally, the particular difficulties faced by women and migrant workers were also highlighted. The causes of these problems are typically attributed to the lockdown itself and the shortcomings of the government programs implemented to address these concerns. In discussing government programs implemented to respond to these problems, articles reference government programs implemented to address food insecurity, as well as state-level programs introduced in the wake of lockdown and the pandemic. Still, the shortcomings of these policies and the need for greater intervention relative to food insecurity and employment were consistent.

Overall, these outlets draw attention to the effects of the lockdown and pandemic on various populations of informal workers and settlers and the ways in which the federal and state governments have variously tried and failed to assist them.

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