

Informal Labour Blues: Effects of COVID-19 and beyond on women belonging to backward castes in India

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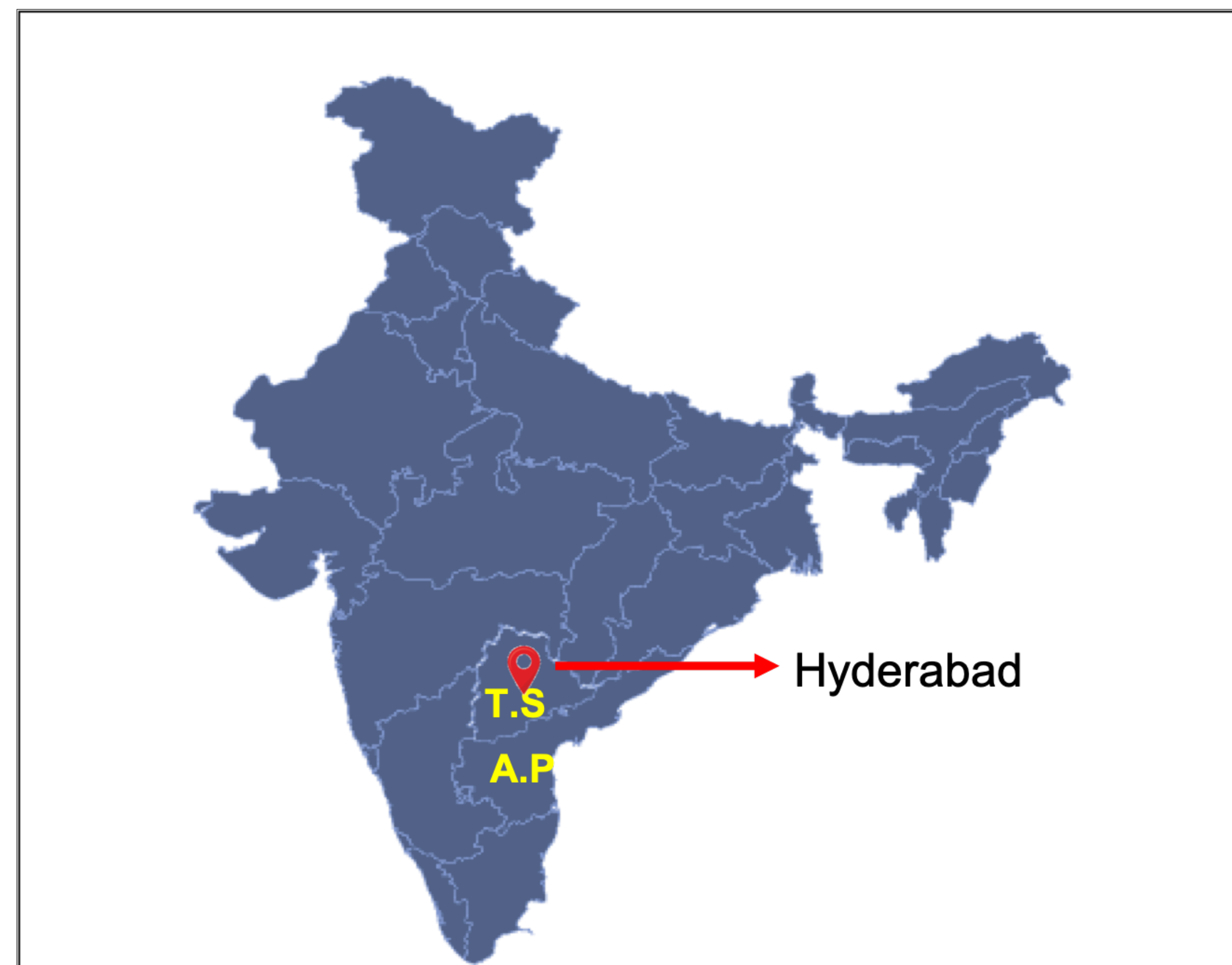
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Background

COVID-19 struck people all over the world, indiscriminately, altering human living conditions. India was the third worst hit country in 2020, comprising the largest number of confirmed cases in Asia. In 2021, India broke world records with its massive second wave registering highest official daily infection rates while the unofficial rates are understood to be soaring. Preliminary data and evidence from several parts of the world indicate that the incidence of the disease is not class-neutral and gender-neutral, suggesting that socially marginalized groups are at higher risk of mortality due to COVID-19. India's phased lockdown, imposed in the last week of March 2020, was among the strictest in the world. With little to no income, these socially marginalized sections face challenges to their livelihoods, health, familial and socioeconomic conditions. The effects of COVID-19 on women belonging to backward caste communities in India are a case in point to investigate the multi-fold effects of the pandemic at the intersection of gender, class and labour conditions. The sister states of Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Telangana (TS) in South India face interstate migration and share business and information technology partnerships along with several natural resources, at Hyderabad city. This has aggravated the burden on infrastructural resources, COVID-19 testing centres and available hospital beds in Hyderabad, including the disastrous effect on migrant and non-migrant informal labourers. Hyderabad is also known to be consistently spending the nation's highest on populations that face poor socio-economic conditions. To fill gaps in understanding the gravity of the crisis and in the absence of nuanced quantitative data, anecdotal information is vital to bring to fore the condition of informal labourers in urban India. This research is positioned to investigate long term effects of shocks such as COVID-19 on low income and socio-economically backward populations in parts of India and other comparable communities.



Map not to scale. For illustration purpose only

Figure 1. Map of India with state boundaries only



Illustrator: Niharika Alahari

Figure 2. Lady in Pink: Engaged in multiple forms of care-taking for her family members before heading to work as domestic help in households

About

This research encompasses primary field work from September 2020, leading up to March 2021 in two regions of Hyderabad. Rooted in grounded theory, the research employs participatory and qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, visual aids and participant observation. Informal semi-structured interviews were conducted with women from 5 families belonging to backward castes working as household help and when possible, open ended interviews were conducted with their children. These women are aged mid 20s-late 50s, receiving a monthly salary ranging from INR 1000-4000 (\$13.2-\$54) per household per month. Their children are pursuing education ranging from middle school to under-graduation. Few of these families are migrants from AP, whereas TS is the native state of others. On average, each woman works in three to four households per month. Some of the women are educated either until middle school or high school. They juggle a multitude of responsibilities ranging from their own household chores, cooking, taking care of the elderly and stepping out to work in households. The findings include direct quotes from participants.

Findings

The lockdown has caused the participants' job insecurity, with finances and access to healthcare taking a large hit. Since the lockdown, most women have been asked to not work as household help by their employers owing to the fear of spread of the disease and government restrictions on public mobility.

'We have not heard of COVID-19 or of its spread from government sources but received some money and rice grain from our local government for a couple of months. Ever since we returned to the city, we haven't received anything.' - 35 yrs

Husbands of these women primarily work either as watchmen or as daily wage labourers. With their husbands losing their low paying jobs, the onus of supporting their households has fallen on women.

The efforts of the government and civil societies in supporting informal labourers has been met with varied outcomes. Government information campaigns have not reached most locations and migrant families had to travel long distances by foot to their hometowns.

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These participants' informal jobs are now their salvation, providing a safety net for their families. They have been highly stressed for their children's education and future. The lack of technology, internet and smart mobile phones has been a huge barrier for their children to attend online classes.

'My eldest girl is going to get married in December 2020. I have taken several loans required for dowry and other wedding expenses. I don't know how to repay and recuperate since my husband is unemployed. It is all on me.' - 45 yrs

While a couple of participants reported that lack of income and loss of jobs meant less alcohol consumption and less domestic violence, others mentioned that nation-wide lockdown induced irritation and mental stress led to their husbands' higher alcohol consumption and desperate alcohol purchase with savings. All participants felt the need for social protection and welfare assurance measures since there is no uniform agency that addresses the grievances of informal labour. The participants and their networks feel a sense of abandonment and isolation. They stated to have been incapable in developing functional coping mechanisms in their day-to-day stressful situations. There is moderate trust on vaccines but due to the wide shortage of essential supplies and medication, they feel dejected and uncertain about access.

'We cannot kill ourselves by staying stuck at home without income. I do not care about my health and safety anymore. I need to work so I can put food on our plates. Whatever will happen, will happen.' - 36 yrs

Next Steps

The research will incorporate a larger sample and further explore questions surrounding gendered effects of the pandemic on informal labour and unravel multiplicities of vulnerabilities. The research will turn to marginalized communities in other parts of India to deeply understand their conditions owing to the pandemic and the overall impact on their status. There will be an emphasised focus on women empowerment, gender equality, development aspirations and health outcomes.

References

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