Kapashera: Lives and Livelihoods of Informal Migrant Workers

Deepanshu Mohan
Associate Professor and Director, Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University
dmohan@jdu.edu.in
(Corresponding Author)

Richa Sekhani
Research Associate at ICRIER and a Senior Research Analyst for Centre for New Economics Studies
richasekhani@gmail.com

Jignesh Mistry
Senior Research Analyst with Centre for New Economics Studies and is the Visual Storyboard Team Lead
jignesh1104@gmail.com

Advaita Singh
Senior Research Analyst with Centre for New Economics Studies and is member of the Visual Storyboard Team
advaita.singh_ug22@ashoka.edu.in

and

Vanshika Mittal
Senior Research Analyst with Centre for New Economics Studies and is member of the Visual Storyboard Team
vanshika.mittal_ug21@ashoka.edu.in

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Abstract

Over time, informality has become an important element of the urban cities supporting the lives and livelihoods of millions of rural migrants. Kapashera, a ‘slum-like settlement’ located on the Delhi-Gurgaon border, provides a home to thousands of migrant workers. Most migrant workers residing in the settlements are either casual or daily wage workers lacking social security, access to credit facilities and are often forced to work in hazardous conditions and thereby, are unsecured. They are also deprived of basic amenities including safe drinking water, decent housing and sanitation. Pre-existing vulnerabilities of the workers have amplified and become more visible during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The little or no state support forced many to borrow extensively through informal channels to make ends meet, leaving most of them highly indebted. Through this paper we provide a temporal analysis of the impact of covid-19 on the nature of work, income and expenditure of the 113 daily wage and casual workers in Kapashera. The findings of the study argue for a need to inclusively study urban ecosystems while addressing the needs of the informal workers and their settlements which are deprived of basic amenities.

Keywords: Urban Informality, Migrant Workers, Covid-19 pandemic, Income and Expenditure Pattern, Borrowing

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, multiple views across social sciences have shaped a kaleidoscopic vision of what an ‘informal’ economy is. On one hand, many academics view the informal economy in isolation to the formal economy (Hart, 1973; Giddens, 1984; Santos, 1979; Jenkins, 2001). Others challenge this dualistic view and perceive ‘informality’ in a more inclusive way (Portes, 1983; Bhowmick, 2005; Roy, 2005; Daniels, 2004).

While there is no universally accepted definition for the concept of ‘informal economy’², it accommodates considerable diversity in terms of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs with identifiable characteristics. The notions of the informal sector in developing economies have oscillated from being treated as a backward sector stalling economic development to a sector that has helped it with relatively low demands for capital goods (Mazumdar, 1976; Weeks, 1975; Bromley, 1978; Gerxhani, 2004).

Roy coined this as ‘urban informality’ — “a state of exception from the formal order of urbanisation”. This conceptualisation involves activities and practices of urbanisation that fall outside the purview of the state and policies that moderate the urbanisation process. Geospatially, in many developing parts of Asia, this phenomenon is widely observed and accounts for more than

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² The term ‘informal economy’ is preferred to ‘informal sector’ since the workers and enterprises in question do not fall within any one sector of economic activity, but overspill in many sectors (ILO, 2002).
2 billion people, representing 60 per cent of workers and 80 per cent of enterprises (ILO, 2020). Amongst these developing nations, India is more of an outlier, wherein 90 per cent of the workforce is employed in the ‘informal economy’ alone (Mehrotra, 2019).

Over time, informality has become an important element of the urban cities supporting the lives and livelihoods of millions of rural migrants. The lack of support from the government in providing quality and well-paying jobs, social security and affordable housing to the migrants have resulted in the proliferation of ‘slums’ (also called bustees in India), ‘squatter’ and ‘informal settlements’. While there is high level congruence between the meanings of these terms, what is common between slums, squatter and informal settlements is that they lie largely outside the formal control of the state.

According to Jenkins (2006), most “informal settlements involve a range of rental, squatting and informal entitlements; tenure is often irregular and contested rather than strictly illegal”. A slum on the other hand is defined as “any dwelling with more than three people per room without access to clean water, sanitation, security or durable shelter” (UN-Habitat, 2006). In other words, the inhabitants residing in slums lack one or more of the following: durable housing, sufficient living space, easy access to safe water and adequate sanitation, and security of tenure (UN-Habitat, 2003). This implies that many dwellings in informal settlements are not slums. In summary, these informal settlements are often characterised by poor living conditions, having a negative impact on different aspects of life of the residents (Martinez et al., 2008).

One of the most unique characteristics about slums and informal settlements is their geospatial location. Given the low earnings of the migrant workers and inability to spend huge amounts on transportation, they are usually situated close to the places offering employment opportunities; either located as clusters in inner cities or close to industrial areas (Aggarwal, 2017). A strategic location is expensive and inhabitants are poor, the conflict of interest is solved by using those zones with physical disadvantages in a way that there is little interest for any other form of urban space use.

The Favelas of Rio de Janeiro, a low-income settlement in Brazil is one such example (“Favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Past and Present”). As Brazil continued to experience economic and political transitions, the community grew in size with as many as 11 million people currently living in 6000 favelas (Phillip, 2020). Similarly, Kibera is the biggest slum in Africa with approximately 2.5 million slum dwellers occupying 200 settlements in Nairobi (APHRC, 2014). Dharavi in Mumbai is yet another example of the informal settlement in India. With about 85 communities and 700,000 inhabitants, the self-created special economic zone for the poor contributes over US$ 1 billion per year to the overall economy (Sushmita et al, 2021).

Similar to these settlements, yet unique in its own way is Kapashera, a ‘slum-like settlement’ located on the Delhi-Gurgaon border, providing a home to thousands of migrant workers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. The rapid industrialization in the neighbouring area of Udyog Vihar (New Delhi) and the setting up of the Maruti Factory in
Gurgaon in late 90s led to the growth of migrant workers in Delhi who arrived there in search of better livelihood and employment. Providing an avenue for all necessary aspects of living, the area includes marketplaces, schools and other businesses.

The examples of these informal settlements and slums show that they differ in size, shape, pattern and population (Taubenbock & Kraff, 2014). However, there are several commonalities including vulnerabilities and deprivation that the residents have to face, which make these urban informal spaces an interesting area of study for policymakers and scholars.

Most migrant workers residing in these settlements are either casual or daily wage workers including garbage collectors, transport labour, street vendors, stall and market salespersons, painters, building structure cleaners, housekeeping and restaurant service persons, domestic and related helpers, construction labour etc., with the nature of their employment being informal. These workers lack social security, have limited access to credit facilities and are often forced to work in hazardous conditions and are thereby, unsecured. In addition, their habitation is deprived of basic amenities including safe drinking water, decent housing and sanitation.

Pre-existing vulnerabilities of the workers as discussed above were amplified and became more visible during the recent pandemic, the effects of which not only brought a humanitarian crisis but also impacted the income-earning capacity and supply of goods and services across the country. While many countries followed strict lockdowns, controlled mobility, economic and social activity, and enforced requirements of social distancing, India adopted a very stringent lockdown in early 2020, with only four hours of notice given to the entire population (Ghosh, 2020). However, the strategy adopted by India failed to take into account the socio-economic contexts and characteristics of life and work for most people in the country.

Amidst the closure of workplaces and avenues of employment, lack of clear and positive assurances from the political leadership exacerbated workers’ anxieties. This compelled them to make the long walk home from cities to hinterland as most of the informal workers only temporally relocate to their place of work unaccompanied by family, and circulate between cities and villages several times a year (Thachil, 2020).

According to a survey, more than 75% of the workforce in the informal sector lost their livelihood and access to essential services, including food consumption (Action Aid, 2020). For many workers, the working hours had dropped from 40-50 hours a week to zero hours a week. The loss of income was equally disastrous, with a study estimating a total wage loss amounting to Rs. 635.53 billion, which is almost equivalent to the annual union budget allotted for the employment guarantee scheme – Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Rural Guarantee Act (MNERGA) in 2020-2021 (Estupinan & Sharma, 2020).
While these studies have been successful in capturing the impact of the lockdowns on the informal workers, there is limited temporal assessment done in understanding the pre-, during and post-lockdown impact on workers in India. We had a unique opportunity to analyse the impact of “unlocking” on informal daily wage workers across three major cities in India. In a survey of over two hundred daily wage migrant workers in the Mazdoor Mandis of Surat, Lucknow and Pune, we found that the pandemic affected workers’ daily work prospects, thereby, impacting their incomes.

The little or no state support forced many to borrow extensively through informal channels to make ends meet, leaving most of them highly indebted (Mohan et al., 2021). We found that since August 2020 – when ‘unlocking’ allowed for some activity — the daily wage shramiks (workers) continued to suffer acute economic distress due to limited job prospects, travel restrictions and poor execution of government support policies, ultimately impacting their incomes and expenditure patterns (Mohan et al., 2021).

As an extension to our previous study (Mohan et al., 2021), this paper analyses the impact of the lockdown and unlocking on migrant daily wage workers in Kapashera. Unlike Dharavi of Mumbai, migrant workers residing in Kapashera of Delhi-Gurgaon border area have received limited attention in ethnographic literature. Hence, our study is unique in describing and introducing the spatial profile of this settlement and in understanding the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers residing there.

The analytical findings from the random sample survey of 113 interviews from Kapashera provides a temporal analysis of the impact of covid-19 on the nature of work, income and expenditure of the daily wage and casual workers in Kapashera. The findings of the study argue for a need to inclusively study urban ecosystems while addressing the needs of the informal workers and their settlements which are deprived of basic amenities. Our findings not only increase our understanding of the impact of the pandemic but can also help inform the policy response of authorities, thereby mitigating some of the negative impacts of the crisis. We hope our findings will also be helpful for policymakers in other developing countries to inform their response.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a detailed description of the space — Kapashera. Section 3 details out the methodology and Section 4 reports the analytical findings on the impact of the pandemic on income and expenditure of the migrant daily wage workers in Kapashera. Section 5 concludes.
2. About Kapashera

About a mile north-east of the Delhi-Gurgaon border lies Kapashera, a slum-like settlement in Delhi that is home to migrant workers from Bihar and other northern states. From being an agrarian village, Kapashera has transformed to a tenementized settlement because of ‘formal’ industrial areas and gated communities that have emerged in the post 1990s period. The dense colonies or ‘Kalonies’ are not only home to people but also a colorful arrangement of stories, culture and tradition. The variation in the population, presence of various housing structures and lack of basic amenities, makes Kapashera distinguishable from other informal settlements and slums in India.

Figure 2.1 Kapashera Location

Population

The current local population of the area is estimated to be approximately 3 lakhs (it was approximately 7 lakhs before the lockdown in 2020). The lockdown, the uncertainties associated with employment and lack of support from the government led many migrants to shift back to their hometowns.

As per Ideal Youth for Revolutionary Change (IYRC), an NGO in Kapashera, there are
a) Permanent migrants who have been residing in Kapashera for more than 10-15 years, of which some have also built their own houses.
b) Temporary migrants who stay for a period of 6–12 months in search of employment
c) Locals which comprise of 5 per cent of the total population

**Nature of work**

‘Cotton’ is entangled with the destiny of Kapashera and most of the migrant workers are working in garment manufacturing industries/export companies in the nearby Udyog Vihar. Processed cotton arrives from various countries including China only to be spun and stitched into garments that then leave for western shores in exchange for capital. People work hard to make a paltry living in the factory and textile mills in the adjoining areas. There are also construction workers, balloon sellers, vegetable vendors, daily wage workers, domestic workers etc. In addition, some of the workers are also employed with IT companies as drivers, guards, helpers etc. The earnings are low and the nature of the employment is largely informal. Over the years, the real wages of the workers, particularly in the garment industry, have witnessed a decline as a result of the inflationary spiral (Srivastava, 2020). We also find some of the migrant workers owning or having a rented shop of rations, dairy products, shoes and general stores to cater to the needs of the local population.

**Housing in Kapashera**

Kapashera is also a symbol of affordable living for the low-earning migrant workers residing close to their workplace. Unlike the various slums in India, including Dharavi, that mainly consists of *jhuggis*, there are various housing patterns that can be seen in Kapashera. The same is summarized in table 2.1 below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Rental Range (in Rs)</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Occupation of Migrants</th>
<th>Sanitation/ Shelter Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jhuggis</td>
<td>No Rent</td>
<td>Periphery- ‘Theke wali Gali’</td>
<td>Waste-Pickers</td>
<td>Mud and corrugated iron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Permanent Rooms</td>
<td>Rs 1500-Rs 3000</td>
<td>Intermediate Zone also known as the village, near the Radha Krishna Mandir</td>
<td>Fruits and vegetable vendors, cleaners and rickshaw pullers etc.</td>
<td>Brick walls and semi-permanent roofing with tin or AC sheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Multi-Storey Pukka Tenement</td>
<td>Rs 1500-Rs 3000</td>
<td>High Tension area of Kapashera including Lane numbers 4-8. Located behind the Fairfield Institute of Management and Technology (FIMT)</td>
<td>Informal/semi-formal workers including drivers, security guards, construction workers and factory workers</td>
<td>Brick walls, roof slabs and kitchen with family or individuals. 8-10 families sharing the toilets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakka Room with shared toilets and Metertaps</td>
<td>Rs 3000-Rs 4500</td>
<td>High Tension area of Kapashera including Lane numbers 1-3. Located behind the Fairfield Institute of Management and Technology (FIMT)</td>
<td>Informal/ semi formal workers including drivers, security guards, construction workers and factory workers.</td>
<td>Poor lights and ventilation. Around 5-6 families share toilets and baths where the bathing area is often open.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 and 3BHK Room</td>
<td>1 BHK-INR 4,500</td>
<td>‘Extension-wali Gali’</td>
<td>Higher job security and those who have been staying in Kapashera for long</td>
<td>Ventilation, toilets and bathing area attached to the room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2BHK-INR 7,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3BHK-INR 8,000-10,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Compiled by authors from the field visits*
The permanent multi-storey *pukka* tenements towers upto five floors comprising of 8-10 rooms on each floor. These are located in lanes 1-3 with each floor equipped with 2 bathrooms and 2 toilets for the common use of the floormates.

![Figure 2.2a : Semi Permanent Room](https://jgu.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/jsbf/Kapashera.pdf)

*Figure 2.2b : Multi -Storey Pukka Tenements*  
(Source: https://jgu.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/jsbf/Kapashera.pdf)

One can also see compounds with rows of tiny 8x10 sq. feet or 10x10 sq. feet rooms (see figure 2c below). Each compound contains thirty to one hundred *pakka* rooms with shared toilets and meter-taps. In these compounds, there are only a handful of shared toilets that are either located near or away from the premises. It is located in lanes 4-8 where roughly 20 families share 1 bathroom and 3 toilets (Jignesh et al., 2021).
Rent of the house varies across the lanes. This is primarily because the structure of the rooms and location of certain lanes are better than the others. In particular, lanes 1–3 are quieter, making them a better location for workers to stay with their families. In contrast, lanes 4–8 comprise of mixed crowds and are noisier; these lanes are close to a canal and the buildings have poor structure. Moreover, the landlords in lanes 4–8 offer rooms (with corner kitchens) in each building. Hence, the rent for a room in these lanes is roughly Rs 1500–2000, while rents for rooms in lanes 1–3 can go up to Rs 3000–4500. The houses are identified as ‘Khasra’ numbers rather than the house numbers in these lanes.

Rental agreements between the landlords and the tenants are either oral or written on paper having no legal validity. Rental payments are mostly made in cash without being provided with any receipt to act as proof. “In absence of contracts, there have been several anecdotes of tenants being asked to vacate their room on short notice by landlords on account of tenants not maintaining the property or buying grocery from the shops owned by the landlords”, said Swati from IYRC.

The ‘Extension-Wali Gali’ of Kapashera has a formal structure with the building offering one, two and three BHK houses. The area is less crowded and migrants staying here have job security as compared to the workers staying in lanes 1-8 of Kapashera. Because of better earning, they are
able to afford the high rent. The landlord and the tenants sign a rental agreement and abide by the legalities of the agreement.

**Basic Amenities**

Apart from sanitation, as discussed above, water and electricity are also essential for a smooth functioning of life. The field visits to Kapashera reveal that there is peculiarity in how electricity and water are distributed to the residents.

Electricity costs are high in Kapashera where electricity is measured through meters for every house or shanty. It is chargeable based on per unit consumption (regardless of the condition in which power is distributed to each household). Hence, the presence of more electrical appliances leads to significant expenditure on electricity. In terms of utilities, we found every household to have fans and light bulbs. We also find television, LPG stoves, coolers and refrigerators in some of the rooms. Electricity is also available through illegal connections. On an average, a family pays a minimum of INR 600-1000 for electricity which increases to INR 1200-1500 in cases where families use coolers.

![Figure 2.4: A water cooler is fixed next to Electricity meters at a colony at Kapashera Village, New Delhi.](https://jgu.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/jsbf/Kapashera.pdf)

Water is also a rent-seeking source for the landlords. Both treated and untreated sources of water are available to the residents in Kapashera. Untreated water is supplied to households throughout the day. Landlords fix meters in each room that measure the amount of water consumption for
cleaning and washing purposes and accordingly charge money for the consumption of untreated water. The treated water, used for cooking and drinking, is supplied for a certain period of time. One bucket of drinking water is provided per room for free. The additional consumption of water is managed through the water jars distributed locally. Households, therefore, procure water in three different ways, depending on their needs and financial constraints. The treated tap water and untreated water tanks are available within the premises and water jars (costing Rs 10-20 each) are available near the premises for purchase. The details of expenses incurred on water are further provided in section 4.

Figure 2.5a: untreated water and water meters                   Figure 2.5b: water jars

(Source: https://igu.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/jsbf/Kapashera.pdf)

The drainage system in Kapashera is also used as a source of revenue collection by the landlords. This wastewater goes through ‘nalas’ (sewage canals) and continues flowing within the lanes. Most of the time the drainage lines which carry this water get choked up. The presence of only one municipal vehicle responsible for sanitation is not enough to rectify the problem. On this premise, the landlords demand payments from the residents to get the choked drains cleaned.

The spatial description and defining characteristics of the slum-like settlement, Kapashera, as explained above makes it an interesting space to explore and study. The housing structures and basic amenities are sub-standard and the rent seeking mechanisms are unjustified. The crowded space and increasing density of population have degraded the living conditions over time. Women have no safe place to meet, socialise and there is no place for children to play in this “very dense colony”.

Figure 2.5a: untreated water and water meters                   Figure 2.5b: water jars

(Source: https://igu.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/jsbf/Kapashera.pdf)
The workers’ pre-existing adversities became all the more alarming during the pandemic that not only affected the income-earning capacities of the migrants but also had an impact on their living conditions. The cramped building and common toilets in Kapashera in a pandemic scenario are highly hazardous. There were several reports highlighting the huge number of people testing Covid-19 positive as a result of failure in social distancing (PTI, 2020).

Given this background and informality associated with the nature of work and living conditions of migrants, it is important to study the unexplored space from an academic and public policy point of view. The survey with the migrant workers provided various insights that can be useful in drafting policy responses particularly in the case of the pandemic. The methodology for the survey is described in the section below.

3. Methodology

During the months of February and March 2021, a total of 130 interviews of migrant workers were conducted using simple random selection. The study used ethnographical style of participatory-observation\(^4\) to interpret and examine the primary data collected through oral interviews, with respondents using a set of objective and subjective questions. The questions on income and expenditure were divided into three sections including

- **Pre-Lockdown Phase**: Before March, 2020
- **During the Strictest Lockdown**: March-May, 2020
- **Now**: the period when the interviews were conducted and the lockdown restrictions were loosened: February-March 2021

The interviews were conducted near Radha Krishna temple and behind FIMT college (Lane 1-8) in Kapashera. No interviews were conducted in jhuggis and extension-wali Gali.

We partnered with a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Kapashera – Ideal Youth for Revolutionary Changes (IYRC) which works with the youth of the weaker sections of society — to conduct the interviews with heads of the household/chief wage earners residing in Kapashera.

In cases where the chief wage earners were not available, researchers interviewed the member of the household who seemed to be informed and was willing to share the information. In our case, 11 respondents were not the head of the household, however, they responded from the perspective of the head. For instance, in a family where the chief wage earner was not available for the interview, we collected information from the child or wife who had fair knowledge about their

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\(^4\) Participatory observation refers to interacting freely with the subjects, building a personal rapport and observing them in their natural environment to gain an understanding of their behaviors and circumstances
father/husband’s age, earning, education status etc. The familiarity of the migrant workers with their families and with the NGO made our task of data collection and interviews easier.

Designing the actual questionnaire — which was used as the primary means of collecting information — involved a few preliminary visits prior to the actual field-work. The preliminary visits developed a consultative process for researchers with the migrant workers in Kapashera. We used personal observations, notes and recordings (with verbal consent from the respondent) to collect relevant data and draw inferences.

Due to some missing and unclear responses, the final sample size of 113 migrant workers has been used (out of the 130 initially collected) for an in-depth analysis provided in section 4 below. A crucial part of the interview involves the researcher disclosing their identity and research objectives at an early stage. While this technique was effective in drastically reducing the resistance and overcoming trust vacuums, it also brought into play a set of challenges, known as the ‘reactive effect’. The pandemic added new challenges in conducting interviews. There was a pervading sense of scepticism behind the intention of the interviews. A limitation of the study remains that the interviews and data provide the point-in-time analysis which may not be applicable to the situation at present, given the uncertainties associated with the pandemic and their impact.

The section below provides a detailed assessment of the data collected from the interviews and the observations drawn by the researchers who conducted the field visits and captured the narratives.

4. Analytical Observation

4.1 Profile of the respondents

A. Age and Education

Of the 113 workers interviewed, 99 were male and 14 were female. This is not surprising given that the head of the household or the chief wage earners in India are mostly male. The respondents' age-wise distribution, depicted in Figure 4.1, shows that the maximum number of respondents belong to the age group of 31–40 years, with the mean age of the respondents being 34 years. Around 12% of the respondents did not receive formal schooling, while 31% have had schooling for 5-9 years. Around 26 per cent of the respondents had passed the 10th standard and 14 per cent had completed their senior secondary education. 15 per cent of the respondents were graduates and only 2 respondents had completed their post-graduation, as can be seen in figure 4.2 below. Female heads of the households were comparatively less educated than their male counterparts.
Figure 4.1 Age wise distribution of respondents in Number of Respondents

Figure 4.2 Highest Education of the Chief Wage Earner (Head of the Households) (in %)

B. Marital Status, Family Size and Domicile Place
Around 99 respondents were married, 12 were single and 2 were widowers. 87 per cent of the respondents that were married or widowers had children (see figure 4.3). On an average the family size comprised a minimum of 4 members. Some of the households also had 10 members staying in a room.

![Figure 4.3: Marital Status of respondents](chart)

Most of the respondents were from the neighbouring less developed states. About 78 per cent of them were migrants from Bihar and 20 per cent were from Uttar Pradesh as can be seen in figure 4.4 below. Munna Kumar Singh, a resident of Kapashera, pointed out that he had migrated to Delhi 6 years ago from a small town in Bihar. He is the sole breadwinner in the family of four.
As discussed in section 2, there are migrants who have been staying in Kapashera for 15 years. Some of them are also temporary migrants who come for a period of 6-12 months in search of employment.

### 4.2 Nature of Work and Income of the Migrant Workers

Given the close proximity to Udyog Vihar in Gurgaon, most of the migrant workers are primarily employed in the industrial sector with the textile export industry or in the IT companies providing their services as drivers and guards. Some of them are the daily wage workers engaged in construction, masonry, painting, tile and marble work etc. as can be seen in figure 4.5 below. About 77 per cent of the respondents belonged to service category and 12 per cent were involved in elementary occupations\(^5\). The others include shop workers, sales workers, plant and machinery operators etc.

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\(^5\) Elementary occupation means any occupation involving unskilled or semi-skilled work; elementary occupation means any occupation involving unskilled or semi-skilled work.
Findings indicate that the recent pandemic impacted the income and employment of these workers. Many workers reported ‘no work’ during the pandemic phase. About 85 per cent of the migrant workers involved in elementary occupation lost work. Similarly, 77 per cent of the service workers had no work during the pandemic (see figure 4.6 below).
On income, field data indicated that pre-COVID-19 mean monthly income for households in Kapashera was Rs 11,800 per month which fell by a staggering 80% during the government-imposed lockdown for the months of March-May 2020. The lockdown restricted the border movement, the IT companies were shut and the shortage of raw material hampered the manufacturing industry. For instance, the garment industry in Udyog vihar was hit due to lean demand, supply chain issues and unavailability of raw material. This severely impacted the employment prospects of Kapashera migrant workers.

Ashish, a resident of Kapashera, explains: “We get orders primarily from countries like the US. When no one orders anything, how will we get work? It is no one's fault.”

With no income to support their livelihood and limited aid received from the state and central government, 31 per cent of the respondents migrated back to their hometown.

Sanjay Kumar, a 40-year-old worker in a garment export unit, recalls: “As soon as the lockdown was announced everyone knew that companies would shut down. With no work, everyone in Kapashera was contemplating running back to their hometowns on foot... A lot of families we know did that. We couldn’t...”

With lockdown restrictions being moderated in the cities, many workers returned back to their employers to seek re-employment in their old jobs from July 2020 onwards. The average monthly income for these workers at the time of the interview (around March, 2021) was reported to be Rs 10500. Therefore, wages and incomes for restored economic activity have not risen to their pre-lockdown/pandemic levels but are much better than what we observed during the lockdown months when most respondents were without work.

The pandemic also had an impact on the household income which is estimated using the income of the other working members of the family. Of 113 members, 39 respondents had more than 1 working member. The average monthly household income of these 39 respondents declined from Rs 23205 to Rs 5518.

We also tried categorising the respondents (migrant workers) based on their occupations6. Our findings revealed that the service workers, shop workers and elementary occupation workers faced a decline of 83 per cent in their income during the lockdown. The income of professional workers and craft and related trades workers declined by 59 per cent and 24 per cent respectively as can be seen in Table 4.1 below.

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6 The occupation category is based on the Division of NCO 2004. [http://www.mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/KI-68th-E%26U-PDF.pdf]
Table 4.1. Occupation Wise Categorisation of worker in Kapashera and Impact of Pandemic on Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Category</th>
<th>Number of Workers</th>
<th>Income Pre-covid (Before March 2020) (In Rs)</th>
<th>Income During the severest lockdown (March-May 2020) (In Rs)</th>
<th>Income Now (Feb-March 2021) (In Rs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Craft and related trades workers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20666.67</td>
<td>15666.67</td>
<td>18333.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary occupations(^7)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10653.85</td>
<td>1884.615</td>
<td>9908.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant and machine operators and assemblers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12750</td>
<td>5250</td>
<td>12750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service workers and shop &amp; market sales workers</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>11,636</td>
<td>1,886</td>
<td>10,213</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, interviews with the workers revealed that, on paper, they are classified as salaried employees, whereas in reality, the workers work on a piece-rate system such that their income is directly tied to the output they produce. An average of 9 plus working hours per day were reported in the pre-lockdown period which would fetch these workers ample work and subsequent earnings. During unlocking, when workers returned to their respective factories, there was limited work due to supply-side constraints and depressed demand leading to a fall in the working hours.

As Munna Singh accurately summarises: “Earlier we were able to earn Rs 12000-13000, but post-lockdown there is not enough work. We cannot even keep ourselves occupied for 8 hours and end up getting more holidays and fewer working days and therefore, lower earnings.”

### 4.3 Household Expenditure

The drastic fall in incomes during the lockdown inflicted significant financial distress for workers and their families. Pre-pandemic, most incomes were spent by respondents on basic expenses (rent, food, medical costs etc.) rendering negligible savings to fall back on. As per calculations, the average Pre-Covid total monthly expenditure was Rs 10,877 which was barely covered with the income being earned as can be seen in figure 4.7 below. While expenditure did fall by

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\(^7\) Elementary Occupation includes - Sales and Service Elementary Occupations, Agricultural, Fishery and Related Laborer’s and Laborer’s in Mining, Construction, Manufacturing and Transport
approximately 14% during the lockdown phase, the greater fall in income left a vacuum that had to be filled with borrowing.

**Figure 4.7: Average Monthly Income and Expenditure (in INR)**

The chart below shows a breakdown of all the components of household spending pre- and during lockdown for the Kapashera migrant workers.
Figure 4.8: Average Monthly Expenditure Pre-Lockdown and During lockdown (in percentage)\(^8\)

- **Ration**: With only one earning member (mostly a male), earnings are directed towards feeding the family with roughly Rs 4,200 per month spent on ration alone (during Pre-Covid times). The expenditure on ration increased during lockdown.

- **Rent**: The rent for rooms range from as low as Rs 1500 to as high as Rs 4500 depending upon the location and the room size the workers stay in. Due to the financial crisis experienced by migrant workers during the lockdown, in rare cases, respondents mentioned that their landlords decided to let them live rent-free for two to three months. In some cases, landlords simply postponed the rent by a few months.

- **Expenditure on Water**: The minimum monthly expenditure on drinking water was found to be approximately Rs 450–500 per month. Water used for other (non-drinking) purposes such as washing, bathing and sanitary needs — also known as “gandaa paani” in local language — remains billed through a metric-system reporting an average expenditure of Rs 360 per month. Hence, on average, almost Rs 860 per month is spent on solely procuring water. The expenditure on water too increased during the lockdown.

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\(^8\) The average monthly expenditure for all the three phases has been used as an expenditure to calculate the share for each of the heads.
Given the limited availability of drinking water, some of the families also locally source large water jars to meet their water needs. However, in such cases they are forced by their landlords to buy water from the same distributors who supply to all the residents in their building, thereby creating a monopoly. The cost of each jar ranges between Rs 10–12.

Nirmala said, “There are no issues surrounding water supply here. We get water all day; the motor starts running at 6. We also get a bucket of drinking water free of charge. Most residents fetch drinking water from treated sources near the premises at Rs. 15 - 20 per jar.”

- **Children’s Education and Tuition Fees**: A drastic fall in the average monthly expenditure on children’s school and tuition fees were observed from pre-lockdown phase to during lockdown phase. Most of the children of migrant workers were enrolled in the government school located in Kapashera. Since the lockdown resulted in closing down of the schools, the expenditure on the schools’ fees also decreased. Furthermore, the lack of fixed line internet, WiFi and gadgets (laptop and desktop) in the house led to limited children receiving online education and regular classes during the lockdown. However, 52 workers reported owning smartphones which allowed their children to receive some school assignments on WhatsApp. In cases where internet access was not available, some of them also shared WiFi and smart devices with their neighbours to ensure that their children were not deprived of receiving education during the lockdown. Besides regular school, the children also went to tuitions provided mainly by the NGOs and tuition centres in Kapashera, with IYRC being one of them. The lockdown also resulted in the decline in the tuition fees because of the tuition centres being shut down.

- **Medicine**: The increase in expenditure on medicine was on account of the pandemic that inflicted cases of illnesses and made some of the workers increase their expenditure on medicines.

- **Conveyance**: The fall in average monthly expenditure on conveyance was because of the travel restriction imposed by the lockdown which curbed the workers’ mobility to the workplace. The average expenditure declined from Rs 115 per day in pre-lockdown period to Rs 34 per day during the lockdown.

During the unlocking phase, the expenditure on ration, medicine, gas and electricity decreased slightly, as compared to the lockdown months. It was still high as compared to the pre-lockdown phase. Interestingly, with unlocking, the operations of tuition centres and NGOs started. As a

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9 Note we have collected the information of up to 3 children in cases where the number of children where more than 3. This was because of the discrepancies in the information provided by the workers. There were 12 workers who reported having more than 3 children in their house.
result, the average monthly expenditure on tuition fees increased from 1.52 per cent to 4.29 per cent.

The high autonomous consumption leading to heavy expenditure for most low-income and middle-income families in Kapashera induced a strong need for households to borrow in a time of crisis.

4.4 Aid, Borrowings and Debt

Institutional borrowing from formal institutions such as banks and credit companies is an expensive option, and often not available to residents of Kapashera due to lack of collateralized assets. Only 6.2% of the households possess any form of fixed assets like agricultural land or consumer durables like two-wheelers on which banks may provide some credit (after documentation work). Respondents mentioned how they had no option but to resort to intra-community borrowing, sourcing money primarily from family, friends and landlords living in Kapashera.

We found that 24% of the respondents borrowed money from family and friends during the pandemic.

As Munna’s wife puts it: “We have our parents and my brother, they are supporting and helping us right now. It is with their support that we are able to make it through this.”

65.5% of the residents said they did not receive any Covid-specific aid during the entire period of the lockdown. For 39 migrant workers who received aid, it was provided either in the form of cash, kind or both. The state government had announced Rs 5,000 cash to be provided to the daily wage and informal workers working in Delhi.

Of the 38 workers who received aid, 20 received cash transfers from the state government, 11 received in kind transfers in the form of free ration. The remaining 7 received the bank transfers of Rs 5,000 in their Jan Dhan Account under the central government Pradhan Mantri Yojna. NGOs like IYRC distributed packed cooked food and milk to the workers and their families during the lockdown.

5. Conclusion

An ethnographic assessment of 113 migrant workers in Kapashera provides a microcosmic prism into the impact of the pandemic-induced lockdown on the ‘informal spatial topographies’ of areas like Kapashera, where most migrant workers from the National Capital Region reside. The analytical findings and the description of the space highlight that the informality is not only limited to the nature of their work but is also embedded in the space and the settlement of these workers.
The pandemic’s wrath has wreaked havoc on the lives and livelihoods of families living in Kapashera.

Reminiscent of better times in the pre-pandemic period, Ashok Singh, a resident of Kapashera for the past 30 years, said, “We have never witnessed anything like this before. The pandemic and the lockdown caused many problems and inflicted a lot of misery. Before this, people were earning well, living their life in a peaceful co-existence. Since the lockdown was enforced, the community at Kapashera has been crushed by the crumbling weight of all problems: joblessness, debt-burden etc.”

The sharp fall in employment followed by the decline in income and daily wages altered the expenditure pattern of the daily wage workers in India. Various costs including rent, children’s education, tuition fees, conveyance and water costs added burden to the pocket of these workers. The ‘aam’ worker (ordinary worker) during a pandemic-struck catastrophe was forced to become more and more ‘nirbhar’ (dependent) on the debts which only made their living condition worse over time.

Further adding to the miseries especially in the pandemic situation is the cramped building and sanitation facilities which are shared between various families in Kapashera. The sub-standard water and sanitation facilities and lack of decent housing available to these workers is the reflection of many knotty issues intertwined in the urban slums and informal settlements of India.

Given the adversities and the fact that these workers find limited or no mention in the policy, it becomes important in integrating slum-like clusters — Kapashera — into the city’s formal settlement system and ensuring that these settlements and the residents have access to basic services. Creating better access to institutional credit, incorporating the use of tech-based mobile financing options and offering direct income support channelised through the government for low-income groups (such as daily-wage earners) are immediate measures needed to blunt the economic impact of this colossal crisis-in-the-making (Mohan et al. 2021).
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