Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction
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Interpreting Vulnerability, Precarity of Work and Access Equality for Equal Opportunity - Part II

Alright, hello everyone. Welcome back. This is part two of the lecture series conducted as part of the "Interpreting Vulnerability and Precarity of Work" series. I was able to share with you a recording of the lecture one, which was discussing some of the key concepts and research questions around measuring and interpreting vulnerability and precarity when it comes to understanding India's unorganized informal workforce. We then went about in discussing some of the most fundamental areas or issues connected to the measurement of access equality. When we look at access, what does that mean? How does states across India perform on various pillars constructed as part of the design of the index? And we discussed some of the variations that you're able to recognize when you bring questions of spatiality, gender, position or the social position or representation of a community while measuring for access equality.

We were also discussing the difference between the opportunity of the means aspect of measuring inequality compared to the outcome or the end realization of measuring inequality, and how much of the work on AEI tries to develop the opportunity or the basic access to basic opportunities as the means to measuring the end. Part two of the lecture tends to look into interpreting vulnerability from the perspective of looking at specific case studies that we've been able to do at the center. There's some very interesting readings and visual anecdotal information provided for your reference. In the interest of time, it would be difficult to go deeper into each and every study, but what I'll try to do is to bring back to us the questions we were looking at in context to the research the center undertakes on the vulnerability and precarity of work.

But what I'll do is bring out two field-based ethnographic case studies as examples to looking at the need for developing a more capability-enhancing humanitarian model for workers across India to be able to understand what capability enhancement means as we've discussed earlier with access and quality index. It's only when you look into the day-to-day lived experiences or the day-to-day realizations and processes in the way of how communities work, how they approach work, how they spend time and the work

location, come back, meeting their daily chores, is that you're able to understand what precarity really means or vulnerability really means. So, we complement much of our work of the index with our field work that we're undertaking different parts of India and Cambodia. That's the other area we work in, but the case studies chosen here are much from our South Asia and India city-based examples. The two reading references shared also discuss the work from Kapashera and our work with daily wage workers during the pandemic   itself.

There are different shorter commentaries from our media dissemination spaces that tend to take a look at all this as well. So, without much, let me just share my screen and be able to bring out the reference to our second part of the lecture. So, as I mentioned earlier, when we talk about measuring vulnerabilities and precarity of work, one of the major questions conceptually that comes is when we define as part of thinking about the unorganized and secured workforce is what segment of workforce that they're a part of. So conceptually amongst economists and legal scholars, there are certain parameters in terms of safety of work, standardization regulation, incorporation of a particular business entity,   it's   ascertaining   whether   it   is   recognized   by   the   state.

All of that goes into the process of determining to what extent it is part of a formally recognized entity. And there are many entities which operate outside that formal recognition that we deem or call as informal entities where workers work. In India's context, as you know, more than 80% of our working landscape is part of the unorganized informal space, while only 20% of the entire workforce is represented by the formal organized space. And within that, there are different complexities on what we define as organized and formal and what we define as unorganized and informal. But that's a discussion for another time, given that much of our discussion around employment and the data around employment that's available in India is deeply marred and layered by the complexities of having working groups that do not necessarily fit into patterns that are recognized by conceptual frameworks, which is why we need microethnographies, which is why we need more visual art of storytelling by looking into the lives of working groups and communities, especially those which are working under exploitative contracts or unsecured or are part of the unsecured workforce.

 So for that reason, we look at ethnographic cases from the field studies that I was talking about. The questions of our research, as I mentioned earlier, are the same. I've walked you through each of these questions in lecture one. For those who want a quick recap, you might as well want to take a look at this one at a time where much of our questions in our research at the center tends to look at vulnerability from the lens of defining and conception, looking at informality, what does mobile insecurities mean. So, with the project and daily wage workers, we tend to look at how workers were mobile for

in search of work, in search of access to basic amenities, in search for livelihood, in some cases individually, but in some cases with family, what are the key motivations for them to just be the way they are? Imagine someone traveling daily, hours in search for going to a place where you may just look out for work and you might just come back after hours of travel realizing there was no work for that day and doing that day after day from a remote, rural town to traveling into the city and doing that as part of your daily practice.

Those are what we call as mobile vendors. There is access and equality that I have spoken about, where the place of work, the location of your residence, where you position yourself, how does that relate to accessing basic opportunities for the enhancement of your capabilities and well-being. The measurement around this, as I said, during a macro economic analysis exercise can happen through an index, but in micro ethnographies, we do that by asking those questions intersubjectively to each and every person we interview, right? And that is interesting to know what the responses are, how do they navigate through the challenges that they face in terms of accessing drinking water, housing, social security, finance, a lot of those things that you would consider assume in the elite city or urban networks to be taken for granted, right? Nutrition. Much of this is something that we look at micro ethnographies more closely. On gender conditioning risk and vulnerabilities, I've mentioned earlier that as soon as you bring gender into the component of your analysis while talking to your respondents, your entire sort of study and scenario changes, the reality for women working within the informal sector of the unsecured vulnerable segment is extremely different from how it is for men.

Not that both do not suffer as part of the gender identities, but much of the informal economy in India are from a work representation perspective are involving women as the principal workers as compared to men in terms of the numbers. And we see that numbers more closely when we look at the employment data in the Access (In)Equality Index reported. As a result of that, a lot of the images that you see taken as part and the work that we've done with in Kapashera, as part of our Mazdur-Mandi's work with informal workers, as part of the daily wage working group, you see a lot of them being represented by women who are traveling in search for work along with men. These are the groups that I mentioned earlier that much of our center's work has focused on. So, we'll realize that much of that work happens through designing questionnaires, but one of the methodological innovations that we did as part of interactively engaging with our respondents was to use photography and videography as creating storyboards.

And these storyboards are storytelling exercises, which go beyond the academic exercise of conducting an interview, responding and putting the responses in form of questionnaire. While maybe we may stick to those academic principles as part of our analysis, we do also document by using other means and mediums of expression and

documentation for the work that we do. And with much of our work with visual storyboards, which involves students, so looking at from there on from the use of visual storyboards, some of the research axes from the center's work that has more or less revolved around looking at vulnerable working groups has involved on its work to focus on efforts of deunionization, informalization of work, asymmetric gender power dynamics. And in terms of looking at worker agency, intra household bargaining power, I've mentioned about some of these aspects in terms of the nature of research questions that has shaped much of our fieldwork. But it's important to realize that when you talk about the employment landscape in India, what we call as the unorganized unsecured workforce tends to find itself in many cases without any social security or state recognition.

So they do not have access to minimum wages, flexible labor contracts, the way many of those working in, let's say, organized sectors like banks, financial services, manufacturing would have, right? So, it's important to know some of these points of information before we look into the case studies. So, first case study as is explained in context to an area of Kapashera located at the border of Delhi and Gurgaon. It has a large community landscape of migrant, low-income migrant workers from across the north of India. Its sort of population in sort of unregistered capacity would be over 100,000 people or one lakh people   at   the   very   least.

Much of those who are living in this area find themselves to live without any access to state provided municipal or civic services like drinking water, housing. Much of these of what you see in front of you from houses to where the conditions in which people are staying is based on their own efforts to find ways to settle in. And these more interestingly are places which people have been able to construct as a part of their own communal living as against from any assistance provided by the state. The housing landscape of the area where these low-income migrant workers stay is extremely fascinating. We've in our project written extensively in collaboration with the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi about the way in which the housing infrastructure and landscape   is   organized   here.

You'd find that for someone who's willing to pay 2000 rupees a month to 6000 rupees a month for rent, that is housing made available for everyone. As I said, these are not housing projects constructed by state recognized companies. Much of this has been done by local, what you'd consider as private and non-state actors who developed housing landscape. Other services from electricity to drinking water, everything has been arranged for and applied for by the community itself, which has found a way to not just survive but thrive in this area. It's a fascinating study of non-state communal living, but at the   scale   at   which   which   is   unimaginable.

I mean, the other sort of example that comes to mind for those who might be well aware would be Dharavi in Mumbai, which is again, an urban slum landscape which has exploded in size and houses a lot of the low income migrant community networks. In Delhi's context, much of the low income migrant workers living in Kapashera are working in manufacturing factories close to the area, whether in Gurgaon or in Delhi, but are very well sort of connected in terms of their own solidarity networks and other forms of social institutions. There are non-state actors and as I said, NGOs which are working closely with these groups, but there's not much state support and state recognition. And one very good example of that is the way how, for example, very basic utilities like water or drinking water is organized. So what you see in front of you are images of water meters clapped with or logged with water taps.

The rental accommodation that you have in Kapashwara would give you access to a certain quantum of water for which you have to pay as part of your rent and house owners and landlords will rent out their houses and rent to tenants tend to charge a certain price for these taps to be able to open up and have access to water. Much of the work that you find with Kapashera and you see in the projects of what we have looked upon has been undertaken during the pandemic, which is at the time when the lockdown was lifted and the community here, a lot of whom had chosen to stay as much of the migrant workers had gone back to their respective native towns. A lot of the people in Kapashera chosen to stay because they didn't have native village spaces to go to found through difficulty ways to survive and were getting back to work. And it's much of that is discussed in the way we've studied much of our case studies. But the other case study or as part of the micro ethnography is that of daily wage workers from a project in the cities of Pune and Lucknow.

This is more about how the role and relevance of informal labor markets are organized, what we call as Mazdur-Mandis in cities of Pune and Lucknow, but these are not restricted just to these cities. You can find in fact, a Mazdur-Mandi operating within the circumference of every five kilometers of city space. They would be a Mazdur-Mandi now operating very close to you somewhere where people on a daily basis would travel to from different parts of the satellite areas or rural spaces. These are places where Mazdur-Mandis are very closely related to bus *addas* or places where buses or interstate transport is happening. And people would get together here every morning where contractors would come or people would hire daily wage workers on a day-to-day basis on wage, the negotiation for that wage, the negotiation for the kind of work that's required almost happens daily from contractors.

And when you go to these sites, you can actually see that conversation discussion

happening. It's a crowded site. In Mazdur-Mandis, you see a lot of workers, largely mostly of whom are men, but there are women that you do find who are migrating with family and in some cases, their spouse and kids for in search of work to these Mazdur Mandis in places. As you see in the image in front of you, this is from Mazdur-Mandi image in Pune, which is close to a highway area where you'll have a busy space of people transporting and moving on the roadside. You'll have workers standing in and seen to be approached   by   contractors   in   search   for   work.

This is from a project which had taken, again, place during 2022, right after you had the severity of the Delta variant wrecking havoc in terms of impact on people on healthcare crisis, but it resulted in a severe shock in terms of employment where people could not find employment for months on end. So we were narrowing and surveying Mazdur-Mandis in the ability to understand what was happening. Much of the work of the Daily Wage Worker Project had looked upon studying the impact of the pandemic in terms of what kind of economic crises it imposed itself on workers and their households. In our work in Lucknow, we found many migrant workers took temporary shelters in open plots with their families due to financial constraint. They were able to not find much support from the government because the government did not have a lot of database around these migrant   workers.

 I mentioned earlier that the lockdown, in fact, the decision to have a lockdown the way we had in 2021 was as a decision was lacking any clear coherent insight of what kind of damage or impact it would have on the vulnerable to get us working groups who work on a day-to-day basis in order to get a daily wage based on which much of their living from paying for rent to access to, you've seen Kapashera's drinking water, food, nutrition, everything is organized. So if you don't get paid on daily wage, you're not able to afford the rent that you're paying on a daily basis. And as a result of which you cannot stay where you're staying. And as a result of that, many daily wage workers and families were not able to find ways to habitate and then move out in search for going back to the native village towns as well. So the pandemic was a very difficult period for daily wage workers as   well.

So the two studies that you're able to see and find in the case studies that I have provided, and there are findings that are discussed in media commentaries, which are shorter and concise. So I would most often suggest that you look into the media articles first and then go into the larger projection. In some cases, if you're flexible in sort of looking at the paper first and then going to the media commentaries, you can do that. But I would also suggest you to look at some of the video playlists, which help you explain or understand through the field, the voices of the workers themselves. Through those voices, you get a better   sense   of   what   they're   experiencing   at   the   time.

Ours could be just an interpretation of what they're saying through what they have, what we have documented from the field visits. But when you look and understand through the visual storyboard format, stories from locating the agency of workers from their own perspectives, you get a very different outlook. With that, keeping in mind, our work in terms of visual storyboards is extending to new geographical frontiers. We're working now extensively in Cambodia, partnering with local civil society actors, but developing more micro level interventions to develop micro ethnographies with community workers. The work is not restricted only to daily wage workers, low-income migrant workers.

We're also looking at other spaces of occupational patterns, which is where women, men are part of the unsecured workforce and the precarity in the nature of their work is explained through those occupational patterns and conditions of work. So, if you have any ideas, if you have any thoughts, feel free to share with us at cnes@jgu.edu.in and we'll be happy to take that into consideration for one of our projects going forward.

Thank you and I hope you find some of this here research material useful for your work. Thank you.