

Impact of COVID On People Living in Urban Slums

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Abstract

In slum areas people live in pathetic conditions. Their dwellings are temporary and they have inadequate sanitary and unhygienic drinking water facilities. Therefore these areas are more vulnerable to Coronavirus pandemic. People mainly engaged here in informal sectors and therefore due to the pandemic they heavily suffer from loss of jobs. Due to lost jobs and social isolation they are forced to live in constricted dwellings. Therefore social distancing is impossible there and they are more prone to such infections. This pandemic left them with many social and psychological repercussions. This paper attempts to analyse the impact of COVID on people living in urban slums of Kanpur. It also throws light on the possible solutions for slum dwellers to overcome pandemic crisis.

Keywords: Slum Dwellers, COVID, Urban Areas.

Introduction

Covid a virus of the SARS family, spread its tentacles in India in March 2020 and in Kanpur, a city of slums. Since then cases have exponentially increased. In Kanpur there are 412 slums having 152124 households. Out of them 101 are notified slums and 311 are non-notified. 79% of slum dwellers belong to OBC and SC, 36% belong to BPL category, 48% don't have access to individual water supply and 47% still resort to open defecation. The state of access to closed drainage, toilets within premises, and permanent housing structure is quite dismal. Inmates lived in constricted spaces having subhuman conditions of living. Access to medical care, basic amenities, education is also very poor and knowledge about the outside world is severely constrained due to low level of education.

The residents largely work as petty workers in homes, offices and markets and are engaged in casual jobs having no security of tenure or income. Their lives are easily impacted by sudden illness, change in livelihood patterns and are beset with bizarre types of social evils and superstitions. Women in slum households face extreme types of patriarchal hegemony due to their dependence on income on male members and are victims of domestic violence. These people earn daily and their food security and consumption pattern is disrupted if they somehow fail to work on a daily basis. Due to meagre savings and no access to institutionalized credit, they are easy prey to moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest and keep them in a vicious debt trap. The above description is a general state of affairs in slum areas of Kanpur which has been made worse by covid.

Objective of the Study

The study aimed to analyse the impact of Covid on people living in slum areas of Kanpur city.

Methodology

Descriptive research design is used which describes in detail about the problems of slum dwellers during Covid such as financial crisis, increased domestic violence and quarrels, psychological stress due to their lost jobs and social stress due to death of loved ones. This paper is also an exploratory one as it explores the problems faced by slum dwellers during Covid.

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Case Study method was applied. Questionnaire was prepared which had questions on the different aspects of life of slum dwellers. A sample of fifty slum dwellers was selected belonging to the age group of 25 to 65 years old of different gender. The data collected through interview was edited by the author for both logical and statistical methods were applied

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Result and Discussion

Covid has exacerbated the already fragile situations of Kanpur slums and author during lockdown has personally contacted many slum dwellers and witnessed a wide chasm in percepts and practice of implementation of covid guidelines and government welfare measures in slum areas of Kanpur . It is a stark reality that slums and its people are excluded from the city mainstream and are forced to live in suboptimal existences. Beset with problems of hunger, malnutrition, poor health, unemployment , constricted spaces where it is practically impossible to follow distancing norms, no private toilet, slum dwellers were found to be vulnerable, helpless, clueless during times of covid faced with uncertain future of their kids due to no or little access to online learning, forced eviction from jobs and landlords, they often resorted to drinking and along with it domestic violence ,brunt of which was borne by hapless women of their households. Forced to live in \ single room with all members, slum dwellers lost their mobility and freedom which was meagre at the outset. The virus made their lives miserable.Covid-19 has brought brutal havoc to their lives and livelihood and acted as a huge disruptor in supply chains and rural-urban linkages.

Though government and NGO intervened with soaps, succour of food, cash transfers intermittently but it is no match for the tragic uprooting of livelihoods due to total lockdown and following of Covid norms of travel , social restrictions of mingling with each other. History has been created by unprecedented migration of so called 'Pravasi Majdoor' to their villages causing total anarchy in the management of the economy. Covid exponentially multiplication of cases and already adding pressure to fragile village households. The loss of jobs broke the income generation resulting in default of loans in spite of a moratorium of three months. The crisis was accentuated by the closure of small scale industries due to covid norm of social distancing and breaking the chain of spread of Covid . The contraction of our economy by 23% in April-June 2020 Quarter is testimony to the fact that our unorganized workers and slum dwellers were under tremendous stress during this period.

Most of our medical infrastructure was dedicated to fight Covid-19 resulting in lack of attention to other serious ailments. Author has personally seen many people in slum areas succumbing to heart attack, stroke,MTP(Medical termination of pregnancy and other deadly diseases due to want of medical care. Out of pocket expenditures for medical care have faced many slum dwellers to levels of BPL households. Vulnerability of slum dwellers have intensified and loopholes in our system have become more glare.

Covid-19 has brought open deep fault lines in our society and psychological fear and apathy for the 'other'. Slum Dwellers have always been considered a residue of our society. This attitude became more apparent during covid-19 pandemic when most domestic servants living in slums were evicted out of their work homes and salaries were not paid . Many Residents Housing Societies took the plea of Covid-19 to inflict havoc on domestic servants already Fragile livelihoods.

Due to inherent infrastructural deficiencies of slum areas , Four T's- Tracing, Tracking ,Testing and Treating; isolation and home quarantine were great challenges. Lack of awareness and propensity of hiding symptoms add salt to the misery. Because of these factors coupled with high population density, household overcrowding, poor community standards of hygiene exacerbate transmission slowing behaviour. Reliance on crowded transport services increased contagious risk. Working in the informal sector poses risks for health . Covid-19 has brought into fore a harmful tendency of rumour mongering which was accentuated by low level of education of slum dwellers and therefore they were more prone to superstitious practice of Fake worship to fight Coronavirus. The efforts of civil society ,social media, govt.TV channels, mobile coys came to the rescue to debunk rumours through data sharing by door to door surveys.

The author likes to share various case studies collected through personal contacts with slum dwellers which bring out the impact of Covid-19 on slum dwellers.

Case Study-1- Ramdin worked as a driver to a govt officer who threw him out since due to lockdown, he did not need his services. Due to sudden loss of income, Ramdin got depressed and remained idle at home surviving on his meagre savings and PDS ration and Jan Dhan transfer of 3000/-Rs. He started taking liquor and tortured his wife. The matter was reported and it came to notice that due to loss of alternative, he is resorting to such unruly behaviour. Due to the initiative of civil society, he was given a job as a delivery boy and his regular income started thus bringing his livelihood back.

Case Study-2- Sita, a migrant labour, Aged 19, a mother of two year old girl who was working as an aaya in nearby bungalows was evicted bringing sudden loss of income. She was also notable to go for vaccination of her daughter due to closure of anganwadi centre / PHC for Covid-19 related treatment. Loss of income, mobility put her under tremendous stress and continuous anxiety about the future of girl child. Due to stress, she faced loss of appetite, migraine and insomnia. Constant exposure to dirty toilets also gave her UTI and she faced constant threat of domestic abuse by her husband who remained at home due to loss of his livelihood. Due to the initiative of some civil society members she was trained in making disposable plates which empowered her and brought back succour to her life.

Case Study-3 Raju, a student of class VI was forced out of school due to lockdown. His parents were working as casual labourers who lost their jobs. He was a bright student but he was not having any access to online platforms. Due to the sudden loss of the livelihoods of parents, he was forced to work as a delivery boy in a mask manufacturing unit. Some civil society members installed a wi-fi in his cluster bringing relief to him reducing disparity in learning.

The above case studies on one hand bring out the glaring inequities, uncertainties, poor institutionalized responses, while on the other they exhibit resourcefulness, resilience, innovation to break out of poverty cycles and fight for self empowerment. Pandemic of this kind is a social calamity which does not require a top down approach. It calls for participatory governance and alert public discussion. It is imperative that to find solutions to complex challenges like Covid, we need to draw on practical, experience-based knowledge from slum dwellers who are living these challenges. The acute need of breaking down the vertical hierarchies against which decisions are still made, was felt in Covid times and the need of innovation, out of box thinking, and community participation was felt. The challenges of Covid-19 for slum dwellers had brought a need for a paradigmatic shift in development. Author feels that we need a different way of working and communicating, a different way of creating solutions and shunning the attitude of 'The other' for slum dwellers.

Conclusion

Covid impacted slum populations in magnifying proportions. It however could not dampen the human spirit of creativity, collaboration, innovation and resilience. It opens our eyes to glaring defects of infrastructure and need of development and in spite of creating havoc and disruption in livelihoods. Covid has brought out an indomitable spirit of fighting against all odds and slum dwellers have proved that they are second to none.

Suggestions for the future Study

The government initiatives and civil society interventions have proactively managed covid 19 in dense Kanpur slums. Instead of waiting for disaster to happen, a proactive approach was followed in tracing, tracking, testing and treating. Innovative approach was followed in isolation and quarantine. Transformation of behavioural responses of slum dwellers was a real challenge due to the pavlovian condition of unhygienic habits and inherent infrastructural deficiency. Importance of leadership, community participation and collective solidarity was the main harbinger of bringing out the spirit of covid warriors. The main goal was to maintain belief and trust in ability to win over these pandemic and NGOS in Kanpur city where keys in mobilizing, gaining trust, providing food and other essentials to households ,requiring multi-stake holders for emergency services. Cash transfer ensuring food security, provided a social safety net to deprived households thus emboldening a spirit of 'cando' in them.

Fighting rumours with awareness campaigns improved the level of awareness in fighting against Covid and continuous digital campaigning of correct social behavior patterns brought much needed relief from turning this pandemic into catastrophe.

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