

Life and Work in Jeedimetla: a Montage

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Brij Kishore, belonging to a village in Samastipur, Bihar has settled in Hyderabad for the past six years. He lives along with other migrants in an apartment in Subhash Nagar area of Jeedimetla, which is an industrial hub of Hyderabad. He works in a factory which prints on packaging materials. And like others, he has also worked in quite a few factories in Jeedimetla and has explored other cities for work. He lived for a year and half in Delhi, before coming to Hyderabad. In Hyderabad, he worked for a year in a company which made pistons, after which he worked in another company which makes CFL holders for four years until he was sacked for joining the union and making demands for a temporary wage equal to that of permanent employees. Back in his village, he tried managing a kirana shop but could not sustain it as people didn't have money and bought things on credit. He has studied till the tenth class. His wife and son stay in the village. He now shares his one room with his own brother and a cousin. They work 12 hours a day and take one or two off in a month. They cook their food in a stove inside their small room.

Living in Cities

Most of the other eleven interviewed residents who work in small and large industries in Jeedimetla have similar life stories. They each share a single room, not more than 100 sq ft with two to three other tenants or in some cases, their entire family lives in one room.

Drinking water comes at a specific time on the ground floor and people stand in a queue to fill their pots and cans and carry them to their houses.

None of the people in the apartment have a gas connection. They rely on a single stove which takes a long time to cook a meal for the entire family. This has also brought in a change in their food habits, for instance, Sanga Reddy from Telangana, replaced jowari roti with wheat roti as the latter takes far lesser time and energy even though he does not like it. The men who stay by themselves also usually cook rice and one sabzi.

They have common bathrooms and toilets in the floor shared by up to ten houses. Many of the women bring water to their room and bathe there instead of using the common bathroom.

Lata who stays in a nearby house gets water once in three days, which she has to store. Their landlord has a bore well as a standby, but bathing in this

water leaves the skin itchy and so they prefer the municipal water.

The workers have to put up with poor housing and living conditions that cramp and disrupt their family lives. There is no government plan to house these workers when industrial areas like in Jeedimetla are planned. Workers are forced to stay close to industries exposed to hazardous gases and polluted water. With no check on the pollutants released by these industries in air, water and land the workers staying in the area have to suffer. Workers report that during night, especially summers when they sleep on the roof, they can smell foul odors as some industries release harmful gases in the dead of night.

In some of the bigger factories, the workers are provided accommodation inside the premises. A token sum of Rs. 150 is cut from their pay (one room in a tenement can be 1500 to 1800 rupees per month). The rooms are very small and five people may be accommodated in it. Since the workers have shift duties, at a given time there are not more than two or three people in the room. This allows the factories to maintain reserve labor to cover a shortfall in any shift or during strikes, since these resident workers are not allowed to join a union. When Pramod joined a plywood company, he used to stay outside and often was five to ten minutes late. He was then asked to stay within the premises so that he could be on time. Such workers are not allowed to go out even during evening. He resisted this curfew as he wanted to go out at least once a week. As penalty, his bicycle was impounded so that he did not have any means of going out. One day when he managed to get his bicycle and went out, he was caught, his services terminated and his belongings impounded!

What brings them to cities? Debt, agrarian distress, lack of opportunity and hope for a better future

These people have migrated to the city as they have no sustenance in their villages. In many cases, they or their family have incurred debt due to which they had to migrate. Pramod's family had to spend about two lakhs in the two and half year treatment for their son who was not able to walk, talk or speak. Their sole source of income was the Kirana shop which his brother also wanted partnership in. They realised they won't be able to meet their huge expenses and shifted to the city in search of work. Kusum's family incurred debt due to a prolonged court case followed by her sister-in-law's cancer

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treatment. Ashok Kumar used to be unwell as a child and his family had to spend a lot of money for the treatment. His father worked in Calcutta and later Ashok also had to leave his studies and join his father.

Debt in many poor households is a major reason which leads to migration as debts incurred due to ill health, a bad agricultural season, marriage, death, or any other catastrophic expenditure pushes the people out to the urban areas. Debts from formal sources in rural areas have declined after 1992 (Chavan, 2012). While the indebtedness of small & marginal farmers from formal institutional sources is lower than that of large farmers, the reverse is true of informal sources (Dev, 2012). Debt from formal sources as a percentage of total debt has seen more decline in Dalit households compared to non-dalit households. By 2002, moneylenders replaced commercial banks as the largest source of debt for Dalit households. And the share of debt at an interest rate of above 20% saw an increase for the same period (Chavan, 2012).

Sanga Reddy's parents spend a vast amount of money on their children's private education. Later they got their daughter married by mortgaging land. In two consecutive years his family tried digging bore well for his farm which failed. They spent Rs. 70,000 each time. He says that had the bore well succeeded, he wouldn't have been here. Sanga Reddy himself had an ear problem, even though it was covered under Aarogyasri, he had to spend a lot of money for travel from his village and for lodging in the city. His family grows cotton and onion. Production of cotton is highly influenced by weather. They sell off the onion produce immediately even though selling off later would fetch higher price. This is because they do not have government storages for onions nearby and the private ones are very expensive. These financial conditions and the lack of a successful farming enterprise led him to migrate to the city for work.

There has been a decline in public investments in irrigation and other related infrastructure. This inadequate investment in canals and other infrastructure has resulted in 'private investments in bore wells' (Mishra, 2009: 2). This difference in ability to invest also brought about a disparity in earnings between small and large farmers. Here again, the large farmers used canal water for 40% of their irrigated areas, whereas for the small farmers, this figure was only 25%. Effectively the small farmers could not capitalize on cheaper sources like canal and had to depend more on ground water

(NCEUS, 2008)' (Dev, 2012 pp 5).

Samayya's father had owned land but had to sell a third of it to meet the legal expenses for a land dispute. After splitting the land between his two sisters and brother, he retained only a small share. Hari's grandfather had land but some of it was lost to a river during a flood and the rest divided among his sons. Finally since Hari's family did not have land, they used to sharecrop and work in other's fields but the income was not sufficient. He tried working in rug weaving but that too did not work out. He initially started seasonal migration then later shifted permanently to Hyderabad seven years ago. Both Kusum and Lata followed their husbands to the city.

There is an increase in the share of small and marginal farmers in the last few decades. The area farmed by small and marginal operators has also increased from 19 percent in 1960-61 to 40 percent in 2002-03 (Dev, 2012). There is an increasing trend towards the more insecure casual labour rather than self employment or regular employment in rural labour. Casual labour is at its highest for rural men since 1970s (Chowdhury, 2011).

Raju was working under a tailor with the intention of learning the skill but the tailor asked him to do other odd jobs due to which he left. He worked under a mechanic but couldn't see himself doing this all his life so he ran away to Surat. Brij Mohan's village did not have any industries nearby. Ravinder's father used to make houses with 'lakdi' (bamboo and other kinds of wood) but as such materials are no longer used, he has shifted to share cropping. Ravinder who belongs to the chamar caste and has a stepmother at home says that his village has a factory nearby but he didn't want to stay in the village rather prefer to work in the city due to the isolation here.

Declining public investment, low institutional credit and changes in farming technology all result in high input cost and unavailability of credit at reasonable rates. This makes it difficult for the marginal and small farmers as well as farm labourers to sustain themselves (Reddy, 2009). Lack of alternate forms of income and disproportionate growth of industries leaves no choice other than to migrate.

Migratory Chains, Limits and Possibilities

People usually follow someone who is already there in a city. It can be a family member, friend or just fellow villagers. Pramod followed his in-laws to Delhi but did not like it there. Brij Kishore followed his cousin. Hari and Sanga Reddy followed their in-laws to Hyderabad. Of Raju's eight cousins, five

work in Hyderabad, one studies in Chennai and two remain in village.

Once out of the village, they also explore different cities and different kinds of work. Brij Kishore and Pramod have first worked in Delhi. Raju was earlier in Surat and Ashok in Calcutta. Ravinder went to Delhi at the age of ten and from there went to Calcutta, Patna and even tried working in his village before coming to Hyderabad.

Caste and class boundaries follow migrants to the cities. 'The upper and middle caste dominated the managerial and skilled labour whereas the lower castes and SCs ended up as semi skilled and unskilled permanent and temporary workers' (Qadeer and Roy). Also a large proportion of the casual and contract labourers are tribals, dalits and OBCs (Qadeer and Roy,). With limited skills and low education, these migrants have few choices other than joining this informal workforce.

Ashok Kumar has studied till class 11. He could not study further because of financial problems. He joined work in Calcutta after that. Ravinder has never been to school. When he was sent to school, he ran away. Then he started working at the age of 10 years as he went to Delhi with his cousin. Brij Kishore has studied till class 10. He says that when he was young he saw that there were not enough jobs. He thought that studying any more wouldn't make any difference. Also his family did not have money so he could not continue. But he comes across as someone who has an interest in study, and he keeps himself updated by reading newspapers.

Harsh Work Conditions

Informal sector employment has increased, especially after the 1990s as a way to reduce expenditure on workforce. Subcontracting which has resulted in the rise of informal labour is more visible in unskilled labour. Informal employment has seen an increase even in the public sector from 29.5% in 1999-00 to 33.6% in 2004-05 (Reddy, 2013). The rate of growth of formal employment in public sector has also turned negative (Reddy, 2013, pp- 65). Absence of labour regulation is one of the main attraction for the employers 'which allows for more intensive exploitation' (Ghosh, 2004). These workers get lower wages without any benefits and almost no job security.

In Jeedimetla, overtime is a very important factor and people look for jobs which has overtime as this will supplement their meager earnings. Contrary to the legal regulations, workers do not get double wages for overtime. One of the workers said that no one has heard about double wages and no one

will ask for it. The first thing they want is work, if they get overtime, they are very happy with the extra income. Different companies have different policies for overtime. For example, in Pramod's company they have a 12 hour shift which means four hours of overtime. They cannot opt out of this overtime even though they work in a hazardous and physically draining work in a ferrous foundry. Brij Kishore's company also has a fixed 12 hour shift. For Hari's company, overtime means another eight hour shift, depending on the requirement. In this factory, overtime was designed to meet the shortage of manpower. Women like Kusum prefer to go to work on off days since she has to take care of the house and children and thus cannot do overtime in the factory on normal days.

These workers also look for an opportunity to work on their weekly offs. Even Pramod who works in a dangerous job takes off only twice in a month. Hari does not get any weekly offs. If he takes any leave, he does not get the money for that day. He is a helper (unskilled). The skilled operator on the other hand gets a weekly offs.

In case of piece rate wages, things are different. Sanga Reddy says that the management does not put any kind of pressure on them to work. But he feels a constant tension and pressure to work. He realizes that if he takes a break, he will lose the pay. Seeing his friends working, he feels that he should keep working.

Brij Kishore and Rajesh ask that since they have migrated so far for earning money, why miss an opportunity. They say that some factories prefer migrants from Bihar and UP for this precise reason: they work hard. The migrants also form the main workforce for dangerous jobs. Factories producing medicines, pesticides or chloride pay a little more, say Rs10000 per month, but working there is risky. The workers said that there are regular accidents and these factories emit gases which are harmful.

Employers also employ devious means to give the least amount of money possible. For example, in one of the worker's slips it was seen that in case of overtime, they calculate the wage per day by dividing total wages by 31 (maximum days in a month). However while deducting money for leave, they calculate the daily wage by dividing the total wage by 26 (working days excluding weekly offs). The companies give only a print out on plain paper and the worker does not have any official document for their wages. The companies do not follow the minimum wages, safety norms etc. Poor working conditions and non-existent safety norms

help to keep the production cost as low as possible (Gillespie, 1990). Cutting the expenses on safety is generally first on the list of the owners to lower their costs. Workers do not have the bargaining power to fight against this.

Unions have a very minimal presence in these small factories. Workers are wary and managements strongly dissuade unions. With no job security, the workers do not want to risk their job talking about unions. In Pramod's factory some workers tried to form a union but the person who was leading it was sacked and so no one dared to do it again.

Health and Health Care

The strenuous working condition and poor living conditions have serious effects on the health of the workers and their families. Not all workers get ESI cards and for various reasons, not everyone who gets it uses it. They are forced to go to the local RMPs who charge less and when serious, go to the private sector for treatment which pushes them into debt and thus the cycle continues. The doctors not trained to deal with the politics of occupational health, and routinely prefer to ignore the link between the workers' work and health. The workers can work as long as they are fit and they don't have any financial security if they get injured or get ill.

Pramod works in a ferrous foundry and is constantly exposed to high temperatures. He finds it very difficult to bear the summer sun and the even hotter air. He uses a lot of water to bathe as soon as he comes back from work. Sparks from the foundry routinely burn his skin. His wife says that a burn has barely healed when another is seen. He also has had some major injuries in the past few years. Other workers like Hari works in a chemical factory where chemicals cause itching. For Ashok, there is a lot of dust for which they are provided masks.

Kusum's husband has an ESI card and he goes to the clinic because he gets sick leave. However, Kusum does not prefer this as she has to stand in a queue till 3.00 pm and misses her wages for that day. Others like Ashok who do not have ESI go to a private provider. Pramod who works in a dangerous job of iron melting said that for any emergency, the company takes them to a hospital and for anything else they have to go to the ESI clinic which is far away from their place. Raju has developed a toothache and he has taken medicine from the pharmacy. It is the end of the month and he does not have any money so he is waiting for his wages. However, when I met him next, his toothache had increased and he went to a doctor who advised

him surgery. Raju would prefer to go back to his hometown where the expenses are less.

Hoping for a better life...

People work in these abysmal conditions, hoping for a better future for the next generation. They send their kids to English medium schools, which they can never access in their villages. Kusum believes that if her children get educated then all their effort will be worthwhile. Another worker says that they have moved out to provide a better environment to their children. Samaiya and Pramod want to work as long as they can and then go back to their respective villages and open a small ration shop. Raju thinks of going abroad to the Middle East and looks at this as a training period. Sanga wants to go back and work in his farm and secretly dreams of opening one small factory someday.

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