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How Workers are Forced to Cope with Heat

By: Swayambhu Sudyut

In summer, street vendors and gig workers in Hyderabad face searing heat during the day and restless nights in poorly cooled homes. Understanding how these vulnerable groups juggle relief from the heat with the need to earn a livelihood is crucial to learning how to support them.

Rising temperatures from global warming are a major problem around the world. Each summer, temperature records are shattered, and the heat people experience grows more intense. But not everyone is affected equally. Those who work outdoors during Hyderabad's scorching summers—like street vendors and gig workers—are hit the hardest. Already marginalised by low incomes and job insecurity, they face the greatest risks from the relentless heat.

India, like much of the world, is urbanising at a rapid pace, with both city populations and city boundaries on the rise. Urban areas feel the effects of heat more intensely, both because of urban heat islands and a lack of trees and green spaces (Veena et al. 2020). The most vulnerable workers continue their jobs despite these harsh conditions, but there is only so much they can endure as temperatures climb. To better protect them, especially as city heat worsens, more research is urgently needed. For this article, I draw on findings from a two-month study conducted in Hyderabad in 2024.

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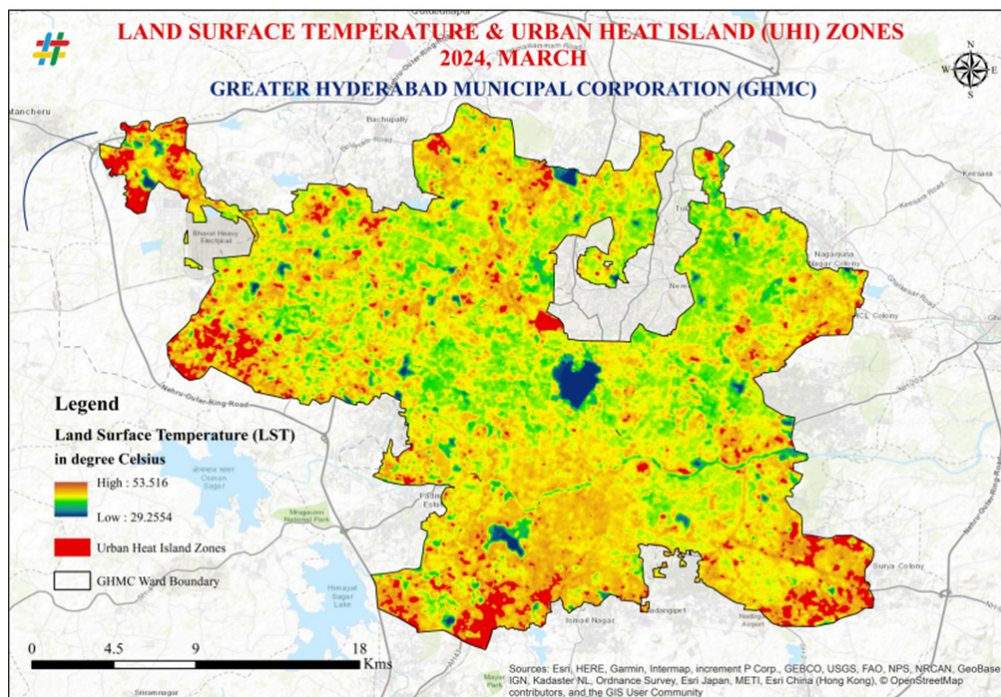
Suresh sells attachments to mount mobile phones on motorbikes on the road from Madhapur to Hitec City in Hyderabad. This side of the city, including Hitec City, Raidurg and Gachibowli, is relatively new, and it lacks the green cover of the capital's older parts. It is an area classified as an urban heat island on a map by Hyderabad Urban Lab, which shows that the temperature is significantly higher there.

The 22-year-old explains that he moves his makeshift stall to different parts of the city, depending on where the authorities allow him to set up. He arrived just after summer, so at first, he thought Hyderabad was cooler than his home in Uttar Pradesh. However, his current spot offers no shade—not even from nearby buildings—and with the next summer coming, he will have to think about how he will cope.

Mohammed, 36, a fruit seller near the Ameerpet Metro Station, has been in approximately the same spot for around 15 years. Despite Ameerpet being a relatively older part of the city with more greenery and shade, there are no trees or shade where he has set up. He says that the summers are really bad and the heat is difficult, but he is able to cope by resting in a nearby masjid during the afternoons.

The summers have become progressively hotter, he says—five years ago, he did not need to take a break in the afternoon. In 2024 when this study was conducted, the temperature in the city went up to 43.20 C in May. Like many other street vendors, Mohammed has a large umbrella that he uses during the worst of the summer heat. But for him and other sellers of perishable items, the heat affects not only their health and ability to work, but also their livelihoods—fruits and vegetables quickly spoil in the heat.

Land Surface Temperature and Urban Heat Island Zones in Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation, March 2024

**LAND SURFACE TEMPERATURE & URBAN HEAT ISLAND (UHI) ZONES
2024, MARCH
GREATER HYDERABAD MUNICIPAL CORPORATION (GHMC)**

Legend

**Land Surface Temperature (LST)
in degree Celsius**

High : 53.516

Low : 29.2554

Urban Heat Island Zones

GHMC Ward Boundary

0   4.5   9   18 Kms

Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

A report on the impact of extreme heat on gig workers by the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union (2024) shows that they are at the receiving end during summers, given that their work involves many hours on the road. In addition to the sun, the heat from their vehicle, other vehicles, and the road add to their misery. In a congested city like Hyderabad, they are exposed to all these sources of heat while waiting at traffic signals. It is particularly debilitating for those on two-wheelers, but even for drivers of Uber and Ola taxis, who cannot afford to run the AC all the time.

The need to earn a livelihood means that they must continue to work through the heat despite the negative effects of being out in the sun. Not working these long hours would mean that they lose out on income. Vendors like Mohammed are an exception because they are not the sole breadwinners in their households and can afford to take a break. In the case of gig workers, their income is effectively piece rate and they cannot afford to take breaks—the system forces them to work long hours to make enough.

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While shaded areas exist in many parts of the city, they often offer little real relief from the heat for informal workers. Parks, though available, are not a practical option—these workers simply cannot spare the time to visit them, even if entry is free. Similarly, roadside greenery is patchy—tree cover tends to be concentrated in residential neighbourhoods. The street vendors I spoke with said they chose their stalls' locations based on business prospects, not on where the weather was most comfortable. As a result, many rely on makeshift umbrellas or the shade of buildings—whatever is at hand—to cope with the heat, always prioritising earning a living over comfort.

However, climate modelling and predictions suggest that summers all over the world are likely to get far worse as the years go by. Cities will be particularity hard hit with the intensification of the urban heat island effect. There is evidence to suggest that the overall green cover of a city could be effective in countering urban heat islands and making temperatures more bearable (Govindarajulu 2014). But as cities grow and expand, their green cover is lost, and newer parts of the city have fewer green spaces. The consequences of this are seen in the spread of urban heat islands, with a city's peripheries showing more intensified heat.

Though in Hyderabad's interior, Ameerpet is an urban heat island on the map. Yet it is still greener than many other heat-trapping areas. Older neighbourhoods with larger parks or water bodies tend to be cooler overall. Since the outskirts of the city were once green, it is important to reconsider how cities expand—and what types of greenery are being added as they grow.

India's workforce is still primarily informal. While this does not necessarily mean that they all work outdoors, it is more likely that they will have less access to relief from the heat. This is more so the case of those who work outdoors. Although my study focused on street vendors and gig workers, other groups—like construction workers—are often even worse off, as they usually have neither shade nor regular breaks.

> The 2024 report on gig workers in Telangana recommended steps such as providing drinking water and toilets, shaded rest areas, and afternoon breaks during summer—without docking pay, for example, by instituting a minimum wage.

As cities in India continue to grow and expand, and the urban population rises, a far greater number of people will be exposed to the heat and become vulnerable to it. While this article addresses the effects of heat during the day at work, its effects at home have also to be studied and addressed, especially given that it may have direct consequences on the safety of people at work.

In the current situation, vendors and gig workers view being in the shade as ideal, but not essential. It is the same with taking a break during the day in summer. The important question to ask is how far this will continue to be the case as temperatures keep rising and the heat becomes progressively more unbearable. As cities change and "develop", the question of what shade will be available, and how this is accessed and negotiated becomes increasingly important (Macktoom et al. 2023).

At present, many workers report dehydration and headaches from the heat, yet they manage to keep working. Still, there is a limit to what the human body can handle, and those most exposed to the heat will feel the impact first. As average temperatures and heat intensify, homes may offer little relief, making sleep difficult. This, in turn, makes each workday more exhausting, and for gig workers—whose safety relies on staying alert in traffic—this lack of rest may pose real dangers.

We need a deeper understanding of how heat affects these vulnerable groups and how they can balance relief from the heat with the need to earn a living. The 2024 report on gig workers in Telangana recommended steps such as providing drinking water and toilets, shaded rest areas, and afternoon breaks during summer—without docking pay, for example, by instituting a minimum wage. More research is needed on how heat affects different communities and city neighbourhoods, and what solutions might help protect the wide range of people working outdoors. More broadly, as cities expand, we must consider whether urban planning can offer more effective ways of providing relief from the heat.

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This study was done in 2024 when the author was doing his MA at Azim Premji University.

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